

After *the* War

The ugly global consequences.

BY SIMON SERFATY

Whether the war in Ukraine will last several more weeks, months, or even years—and how it will end, if ever—is hard to tell. That it is still going on was widely unexpected; that absent a cease-fire to which neither side is yet willing to agree, the war is steadily escalating should be feared. Who knows what will come next? As sanctions talk increasingly loudly and weapons kill increasingly visibly, calls to do more are heard increasingly dangerously, thus deepening what is arguably the worst existential world crisis since 1945. Now the West—and especially its Euro-Atlantic core—is more united than it has been in decades, but whether that unity will last is not clear either, depending on the war’s duration and outcome. What is clear, however, is that the war will have system-changing consequences, including the repositioning of Europe relative to the United States in the West, as well as a recasting of China relative to Russia, and both relative to the Rest and the West.

For one, the states of Europe, which welcomed America’s restored leadership during the war, will question its pre-war reliability, as happened after the Cuban missile crisis some sixty years ago when the Gaullist challenge to the United States opened a moment of West-West obfuscation and intra-European confusion. Notwithstanding U.S. President Joe Biden’s unprecedented level of

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consultation within NATO and with the European Union, the war exposed Europe's vulnerability—what used to be called the risks of annihilation without representation. The war over, or at least put on hold, a newly re-elected French president will enlist a newly willing post-Merkel Germany to co-lead a drive toward strategic autonomy for a post-Brexit European Union. That means that the capabilities gap within NATO will narrow, which is a good thing, while the policy gaps between its members will widen, which may not be as good as the European Union engages in separate dialogues on issues over which even our interests often remain unevenly shared.

Regarding Russia specifically, as Putin is held accountable for the war and its atrocities, Western insufficiencies and misjudgments will also be on trial. For more than ten years, the United States and its twenty-nine NATO partners did not do enough to deter Russia in Ukraine, admittedly a non-NATO member, while the European Union, including its six non-NATO members, did not do enough to anchor Ukraine in Europe with a credible path to EU membership. Differences will also re-emerge quickly on the scope and duration of economic sanctions on Russia and the most effective path to a new European security system that accounts for Ukraine and other non-NATO countries. With NATO taken off the table by Kyiv for the indefinite future, the European Union will have to place Ukraine on an accelerated road to membership by a date made certain with a massive Marshall-like commitment to its reconstruction, which could partly draw, for well-earned war reparations, on Russian assets currently frozen in the West.

Biden's aversion to using military force pre-dates Ukraine, but where are the red lines, assuming any? In 1948, Truman was equally averse to the risks of another world war, but he nonetheless took the calculated risks of a

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military confrontation with the Soviet Union in Berlin and, two years later, of a war with China in Korea. However, where Truman remained nonetheless prudent, Biden remained exceedingly timid until the growing evidence of failure and mounting public pressures forced him into a

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strategic U-turn of the too-little-too-late variety, likely to be questioned with the blessed benefit of hindsight. Moreover, the allies' concern with U.S. leadership will next turn to the midterm elections which Biden's party seems destined to lose, followed by a presidential election in which he is less likely to run than his predecessor or one of his political disciples. To be sure, such concern has accompanied nearly every presidential election since November 1948, when Truman's triumph set the stage for the North Atlantic Treaty six months later. But Europe's sensitivity to such elections has understandably increased after thirty years of erratic and relatively mediocre U.S. leadership, including the Trump presidency that declared the European Union "a rival" and NATO "obsolete."

What has been seen thus far, and deserves to be applauded, is the reaffirmation of America's and Europe's vital need for their alliance, including the deployment of additional U.S. forces in Europe and the historic reversal of such NATO-skeptic states as Sweden and Finland. But these limited deployments alone will not make the European security system more stable and either of these two countries much safer, pending a re-normalization of relations with Russia. With or without a new round of NATO enlargement, what the Euro-Atlantic partnership needs most urgently is a reassessment of its main institutional dimensions—meaning America and Europe in NATO as an alliance of equals, as well as NATO and America with the European Union as an integrated community of the thirty-six countries that belong to either or both of these institutions.

Can we count on the United States—for what, how, and when? However offensive the question may sound, it concerns all U.S. allies and partners who will demand additional security guarantees even as they look for alternatives, especially for countries in Asia and in the Middle East near hostile nuclear powers. For them but also for their adversaries, there is a lesson that may prove irresistible: if you have nuclear weapons, keep them (unlike Ukraine but like North Korea), but if you don't have any, get them (like Iran, and others likely to follow)—unless

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you can borrow or rent them from a willing donor or needy provider like Pakistan and even Russia. With the taboo on nuclear first use now openly challenged by the Kremlin and others, the risks of nuclear proliferation loom larger than they have in sixty years, as confirmed by the diplomatic stall in ongoing negotiations with Iran. With the never-again of another world war seemingly forgotten, preparing for a failure of deterrence is an urgent priority—as with Germany’s dramatic turnaround on defense issues, a surge in defense spending in Japan, India, and all over Asia, and, pre-Ukraine, the multiple strategic dialogues which Trump’s Abraham Accords started in the Middle East. Specifically focused on China, the U.S. would-be pivot with the Quad (including Australia, India, and Japan) and Aukus (with Australia and Britain) will not end, but it needs better integration among, and more muscle from, other capable partners, as happened between April 1949, when the North Atlantic Treaty was signed, and May 1955, when the Federal Republic of Germany joined NATO as a prerequisite to the launch of the European Economic Community a year later.

Regarding the Rest, Russia stands out as the main loser, irrespective of what comes next. Countries that played the Russian card—like Mali for security or Algeria for weapons, and many others in Africa and even Latin America for food, energy, and mercenaries—will also be on the look-

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out for new sponsors. That search will likely proceed away from the West, with China often given a right of first refusal and, absent China, an enhanced role for new regional influentials like Turkey and India, both members of a G20 where the lines of cleavage between the West and the Rest are also likely to sharpen.

We do not know yet what will become of Putin (remember, though, what became of Khrushchev after his Caribbean fiasco) or whether it would make a difference anyway (remember, too, that Putin is who he is because Russia is what it is). What is known, however, is that Russia’s strategic and economic recovery will take time, during which Europe’s dependence on Russia for energy will fall gradually while Russia’s reliance on China for markets and even shelter will increase accordingly. In the short term at least, a preemptive (let alone exclusive) partnership with the Kremlin is not China’s best path to strategic dominance: although a convenient gas station and an ample arms warehouse, Moscow will remain a dangerous

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agent of global instability which China can ill afford at this time. Yet China needs allies, and Russia will now be available on the cheap—not only a willing but also a militarily capable partner that is generally compatible and strategically relevant.

That on March 2, 2022, the UN Resolution on Ukraine had only a handful of states siding with Russia may provide some diplomatic comfort, but no less significant are the fifty-two countries which abstained or did not vote on a benign text that merely “deplored” rather than “condemned” Moscow’s invasion. A few weeks later, its symbolic exclusion from the Human Rights Council met with the opposition or abstention of eighty-two countries representing nearly three-fourths of the world’s population (including China and India but also Indonesia and Pakistan). These votes confirm that we should not expect the selective outrage caused by the Kremlin and its leader will resurrect an American-led Western world after a war for which we were prepared neither psychologically nor institutionally—at least *chez nous* in the West, as compared to the more customary wars *chez eux*, about which there was relative Western indifference: remember the reported 900,000 deaths caused by the wars of 9/11, or the 600,000 civilians killed during the Syrian war, and even the estimated four million victims of the pandemic in India—but who is counting anyway?

Back to the jungle then—me Tarzan, you Jane? Not so fast: what is coming up is not the bifurcation of post-1815 Europe, when its better democratic half in the West was kept away from a Holy Alliance of autocratic Empires in the East; nor is it the post-1919 zero-polar world, when a fatally wounded Europe was left at the mercy of revanchist states eager to re-adjudicate the wars they had lost; nor is it the bipolar world of post-1945, when nine U.S. presidents from Truman to Bush-41 built a Pax Americana that seemed to have defeated History itself with the unipolar world that emerged thirty years ago. Like former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson used to say, none of this is proven yet—and lying ahead may be any or all of these, as we recover from a series of systemic shocks that launched, on September 11, 2001, a century that started on time and poorly, but has been getting worse and promises to be long before it hopefully begins to get better. ◆