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**Resetting the US - EU Defense Relationship: How the War in
Ukraine is Affecting the Transatlantic Bond**

by

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine brought the harsh reality of a hot war back to the European continent. This event produced unexpected levels of balancing behavior of the US and the EU, vindicating the neorealist theory of acts of balancing in response to threats. Against the imminent and real threat of the Russian aggression, the EU once again yielded to the NATO alliance, abandoning any level of autonomy in its defense domain. The Biden administration, tied to Ukraine policy, would not let a newly assertive Russia challenge US's influence in Europe. However, while the second year of the war is coming to an end, signs of war fatigue and political division in the US are making the ending of the Russian war in Ukraine, at least in favor of the West, seem like an almost impossible task.

Keywords: war, Ukraine, Russia, US, EU, transatlantic, defense, neorealism

Introduction

Few if any among the academic scholars of international relations or other pundits would doubt that, in recent years, the international rules-based order is faced with unparalleled global challenges: terrorism, the revival of nationalism, an emerging China, war in Gaza, Iran's growing influence and the climate, health, food and energy crises, to name but a few. However, it was the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine of February 24, 2022 that dramatically altered the security environment in the European continent and brought Europe and its defense to the epicenter of global attention.

Undoubtedly, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Alliance and the United States of America (US) are integral to European defense: up until April 2023, six hundred million Europeans were already living in a NATO country, as NATO and the European Union (EU) - at the time - had twenty-one members in common. In addition to that, at the outbreak of the Russian war in Ukraine, Sweden and Finland abandoned their traditional neutrality and applied for membership of the Alliance. Having gone through the fastest ratification process in NATO's history (well under a year), since April 2023 Finland is already a member of the Alliance and, if Sweden gets accepted, NATO will be protecting ninety-six percent of the EU population (NATO, 2022a).

However, a change of mentality had preceded the shock of the Russian aggression in Europe's eastern neighborhood. Amidst former US President Trump's expressed will to pull the US out of the Alliance and UK's decision to withdraw itself from the EU, European leaders thought it was time for "Europe to take (its) fate into (its) own hands" and make decisive steps towards a more advanced role in security and defense (Paravicini, 2017). Against this backdrop, the 2016 declaration of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) was followed by the 2017 initiatives for promoting the structural integration of the EU's national armed forces, such as the European Defense Fund (EDF) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty of 2009. Furthermore, the EU's Strategic Compass (SC), which was declared in March 2022, only a month after Russia invaded Ukraine, officially defined EU's partners and threats. At the very start of the Russian - Ukrainian war, in an international environment of rapidly growing instability, the EU, as a largely international economic organization, was trying hard to change its role into one of a hard security provider.

Waves of scholarly literature had previously forcibly argued that such moves represented an attempt on the part of the EU to "balance" against the US. After all, "strategic autonomy", EU's motto for its Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), was a strong term. Even though skeptical about this strong term, both the Biden administration and NATO have been mostly approving of an EU eager to share the

burden of the common transatlantic defense. However, this has not always been the case as “in the past, Washington strove to maintain leadership over the process. On the other hand, the EU, while keen to develop significant military capacity, feared taking this too far, thus triggering US abandonment” (Howorth et Menon, 2009). However, in the context of the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, where, in the foreseeable future, no end is yet visible, EU’s quest for any sense of “autonomy” seems to be seriously put under question.

In this light, the goal of this study is to assess the present status of the US-EU defense relationship, within the transatlantic partnership, and discover its dynamics. Effort will be made to define how the harsh geopolitical developments in eastern Europe that are reshaping the world are testing both the transatlantic bond and the EU’s political determination to move forward in its cooperative defense. To this end, this paper will try to answer the following question: does the US believe that enhanced EU defense capabilities would act as a power multiplier within NATO, thus transforming the EU into a valuable partner for European and global security?

Being the first major interstate war in Europe in almost eighty years, the Russian war in Ukraine has brought back to the front of the international stage the importance of hard power in the international system, especially in the era of a multipolar world. Therefore, it has underscored the urgency to understand the dynamics of the US-EU defense relationship, within the context of NATO, as these dynamics have never been put to a similar test in their recent history. Therefore, this study seeks to shed light on how these entities (the US, the EU and NATO) are responding to this evolving security crisis that the Russian war has brought to Europe and the international order as a whole, where lessons are constantly being learnt since day one of this war.

To examine the above research question, this dissertation adopts the qualitative research methodology that includes a systematic review of the relevant literature and policy documents, as well as key actors’ official statements.

1. What do Scholars Say about the Russia – Ukraine War

1.1. Common Threat Strengthens Alliances

The wake of the Russian war in Ukraine has placed the US-EU defense relationship, within the context of NATO, under significant stress, forcing it to face numerous challenges. To provide a nuanced understanding of its complex dynamics, the perspectives of various scholars on the subject are examined within the following lines.

In this light, Stephen Walt (2022) argues that the neorealist theory of the “balance of power” has undoubtedly been vindicated in Ukraine, as its full-scale invasion from Russia has produced unprecedented levels of unity among the US, NATO and the EU. For the first time, Russia has been identified by these entities as an emerging aggressive power that challenges the Western-led rules-based order. In addition, Walt’s (1987) “balance of threat” theory, namely the hypothesis that states balance, in other words they unite or make alliances, not against mere power but against threat, has also found fertile ground in Ukraine. According to Walt, a state’s behaviour is determined not simply by the magnitude of power projected by another state but by the magnitude of threat projected by that state or alliance of states, coupled with aggregate power, geographic proximity and offensive intentions, a theory that came to reality through the US’s immense amount of aid to Ukraine, united with that of the EU’s, within the context of the NATO alliance.

However, Shiffrinson (2022) argues that broadly defined US interests in Ukraine, namely deterring future Russian aggression and protecting the “liberal order”, do not stand up to scrutiny as the main motivating forces as the distribution of power in Europe underlines that there are multiple states that, singly or collectively, are more than capable of influencing Russian calculations (e.g. Germany’s growing defense budget, Sweden and Finland joining NATO, renewed interest in European military autonomy). Moreover, he argues that although the US has sought to promote democracy abroad, it balanced this impulse with careful consideration of geopolitical imperatives, which, in the case of Ukraine, is preventing further escalation or spillover of the conflict and limiting a wholesale collapse in US-Russian relations.

1.2. EU's Military Capabilities

Furthermore, Jolyon Howorth (2023) argues that the Russian invasion of Ukraine of 24 February 2022 has upended many aspects of Europe's arrangements for its collective security and defense, owing to the shocking fact of the renewal of interstate war on European soil after a decades-long lasting peace. After the full-scale Russian invasion, EU member states, responding to the urgent need to balance the Russian aggression and its imminent threat to Ukraine's national security and sovereignty, not excluding a possible spillover to its neighboring NATO member states, have abandoned the prior push for EU's "strategic autonomy" and given space to NATO's reemergence to Europe's security as the 'defender of last resort'. Matthew Karnitschnig (2023) also emphasizes the crucial role of US aid in preventing further Russian advances in Ukraine, while Jacopo Barigazzi (2023) highlights the EU's transformation from a primarily economic power into one with burgeoning military capabilities in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

However, skepticism persists regarding the adequacy of the EU's military spending and its ability to significantly impact the regional balance of power. The Federal Government of Germany (2023), EU's largest economy (Rao, 2023), is indicative: in its first ever issued National Security Strategy, it acknowledges the fundamental challenge posed by Russia's aggression, prompting a focus on NATO's capability targets and the urgent need to address structural deficits in Bundeswehr, Germany's armed forces. EU's evolving role and military capabilities are also addressed by Edward Luce (2022), who, arguing on the impact of the Russian war in Europe, posits that Vladimir Putin's actions have inadvertently united the West and solidified a lasting sense of Ukrainian nationhood. However, Isaac Chotiner (2022) draws attention to the increasing political polarization in the US, suggesting that this may pose a threat to Ukraine as temptation to freeze aid could grow amid domestic political turmoil, especially in the face of the upcoming 2024 Presidential elections.

1.3. What About Russia's Perspective?

Moreover, Kimberly Marten (2023), discussing NATO enlargement in the lens of the Russian national security perspective, challenges the commonly held belief that NATO's post-Cold War enlargement directly threatened Russian security interests. She contends that Russia's negative reaction to a possible NATO acceptance of Ukraine was manipulated by both nationalist opposition and Vladimir Putin's regime for domestic

political gains. Felix Rösch (2022) also suggests that the attack on Ukraine by Russia is imperialistic. Contrastingly, though, John Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato (2023) forcibly argue against the notion of Russian imperialism in Ukraine, asserting that there is "no evidence" up to the present day to support such claims. Adding to this, Mearsheimer has repeatedly insisted that the US and its European allies, by expanding NATO eastward, played a role in escalating tensions and contributed to Russia's aggressive stance (Mearsheimer, 2015).

1.4. The US's Perspective

Various scholarly works have referred to the dramatic change of Europe's security environment and the end of the era of the unipolar moment, when the US was the world's sole dominant power. Mohammed Soliman (2023) has argued that "the Russian invasion of Ukraine sent a clear message that the United States could no longer prevent revisionist powers from challenging the global order that Washington had established and committed to uphold after World War II."

However, not enough scholarly literature has focused on how domestic factors and especially polarization in the US can generate the country's strategy on Ukraine and affect its threat perception of Russia, as an emerging aggressive power. To deal with this gap, this paper examines how US official policymakers perceive the Russian threat and explores the extent of divergence of these perceptions among members of both parties of US Congress as, under neoclassical realism, the different foreign policy responses to the stimuli of the international order are explained by domestic factors (Boš et al, 2023). The present work finds that Congress, especially after the 2022 midterm elections, when the Republicans gained the majority in the House of Representatives, has acted as an intervening variable in the Biden Administration's policy over Ukraine. Moreover, the paper delves into US official government's expectations from its EU allies, within the context of NATO, in a time when, according to President Biden, "our world is at an inflection point. How we respond to the tremendous challenges and the unprecedented opportunities we face today will determine the direction of our world." (US National Security Strategy, 2022).

2. Where does the EU Stand within NATO?

2.1. A Brief NATO's History in Europe

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was created in 1949, was the product of the end of the Second World War. The original idea of the “transatlantic bargain” was that of a deal between the US, Canada and their European partners that the US would contribute to the defense of Europe and its economic recovery from World War II, provided that the Europeans would help the Americans defend against the Soviet threat and make efficient use of the economic aid of the Marshall Plan (Cleveland, 1970). At the time, European cooperation in the security field was perceived by the US as a fair military contribution to the transatlantic bargain. France had proposed the creation of a European Defense Community (EDC) but eventually that initiative failed in 1954.

However, over the past years, there have once again been persistent calls for greater strategic autonomy on the part of the EU (Fiott, 2018). France in particular has championed the concept (Carpenter, 2019). “The EU is not a military alliance and it was even built against the very idea of power politics. But it was done so in a very different world”, HR / VP of the EU Commission Josep Borrell had stated in an interview in 2020 (European External Action Service, 2020).

Even though some experts think that “no such strategic autonomy will be achieved before NATO's 100th anniversary in 2049” (Howorth, 2019, p.35), Charles Michel, President of the EU Council, has declared that “European strategic autonomy is goal number one of our generation” (European Council, 2020). But what does this term mean? European strategic autonomy which first emerged in 2013 in the context of defense, came to be defined as “the ability to cooperate with international and regional partners wherever possible, while being able to operate autonomously when and where necessary” (Clingendael Institute, 2021). This included the development of the EU's military capabilities, as well as the strengthening of its diplomatic and economic instruments.

Up until Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US has largely resisted calls for European strategic autonomy, viewing it as a challenge to NATO, likely to create military redundancy and actually being an impractical ambition. Joseph Nye, former US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and contributor to developing the international relations theory of neoliberalism, has stated that: “Europe still shares a border with a large amoral Russia which it cannot deter alone without an

American alliance. And Europe has begun to discover that Asia is about geopolitics and not just a matter of export markets.” (Brix, 2021).

Moreover, during the last decades, the EU has been suffering from severe under-investment and fragmentation in its defense domain. On the contrary, strategic competitors such as Russia and China have increased their defense budgets by almost 300% and 600% respectively over the last decade, compared to an approximate 20% increase collectively by EU member states in the same period.

2.2. How the War Changed Defense in the EU

However, “the return of war to Europe”, as the actual phrasing reads in the EU’s Strategic Compass of March 2022, has considerably changed attitudes among the EU member states. Many of them, notably Germany, announced major increases in their defense expenditures amounting to €200 billion over the coming years. They also expressed the need to boost the development of the European defense technological and industrial base (EDTIB). Moreover, the acquired experience from “the return of interstate conflict to Europe’s doorstep” has led the French government to a proposal to double the country’s annual budget of the armed forces by 2030 compared to 2017, or, in other words, spend 16 billion on ammunition by 2030 (Pugnet, 2023). Addressing the shortfalls, boosting ammunition production across the EU and supporting the replenishment of member states’ own stocks was another proposal, initiated in an urgent manner by the EU’s chief diplomat, Josep Borrell (Brzozowski, 2023b), followed by EU member-states reaching in May 2023 a preliminary agreement to spend €1 billion on joint procurement of ammunition and missiles over the next year, with a prioritization to EU defence industry, thus reenforcing EU common defense (Brzozowski et Pugnet, 2023).

Defense experts around the world have expressed their views on the “division of labour” between NATO and the EU, in the context of the war in Ukraine. According to a specific perspective “the two organisations are working to defend Europe against Russia through their respective comparative advantage. While NATO focuses on the operational dimension, the EU relies on financial and industrial policies” (Haroche, 2022). Nonetheless, the EU should adopt a military investment plan designed for the medium term. A good illustration would be the \$40 billion aid package to Ukraine voted by the US Congress in May 2022 (Zengerle, 2022). Taking the above into account, it seems that new defense spending should be directed towards European cooperation. Not doing so, would leave the momentum of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the

radical change in the threat environment having no positive impact on European defense (Monaghan, 2023, p.13).

Undoubtedly, there is increasing debate within the US about whether Washington should embrace a militarily stronger Europe, even given the scope of challenges the US faces, especially the concurrent challenge from Russia and the US's strategic necessity to "pivot" to Asia.

In that context, one of the key challenges for EU - NATO cooperation has always been the lack of investment in defense by many European countries. Thus, in 2014, during the Wales Summit, NATO members pledged to work towards spending 2% of their annual Growth Domestic Product (GDP) on defense by 2024, but progress towards this goal had been slow, with only a few countries, such as Greece, Poland and the UK meeting the target. While the US spends around 3.7% of its annual GDP on defense, namely \$816.7 billion (US DoD, 2023), most European NATO members, up until the war in Ukraine, were spending less than 2%, with some countries spending as little as 1%. This has led to a situation where the US has been increasingly bearing the burden of NATO's collective defense, both in terms of military capabilities and financial contributions. This lack of investment in defense by many European countries has also resulted in a significant capability gap between the US and its NATO allies. This capability gap is particularly concerning given the radically changed security environment in Europe, with Russia's brutal aggression against Ukraine in violation of international law continuing for more than a year. While NATO has taken steps to enhance its collective defense, such as by increasing its presence in Eastern Europe and conducting large-scale military exercises, these efforts have been limited by the lack of investment in defense by many European countries.

During his time as President of the US, Donald Trump had expressed mixed views on the EU's efforts towards strategic autonomy, as well as the PESCO framework. Although he was critical of the EU's push towards greater strategic autonomy, arguing that it was a sign of the bloc's reluctance to contribute to NATO and its defense obligations, Trump expressed support for the PESCO framework, which he saw as a way to increase defense spending among European allies and strengthen NATO. In a 2018 tweet, he stated that "NATO benefits Europe far more than it does the U.S. By some accounts, the US is paying for 90% of NATO, with many countries nowhere close to their 2% commitment." To a large extent, Trump's views on PESCO and the EU strategic autonomy were mixed, reflecting his broader skepticism of the EU and his "America First" approach to foreign policy. While he saw the potential benefits of PESCO for NATO and the US, he nevertheless was critical of the EU's broader push towards greater strategic autonomy.

With the stark exception of former President Trump, while the official US view had not been publicly critical of PESCO, it had nevertheless expressed concerns about the potential implications of greater European defense integration. Nevertheless, the fact that the growing threat of China is forcing the US to devote more resources to the Indo-Pacific region causes numerous thinkers and national security officials to applaud PESCO.

As China expands its military capabilities and asserts its influence in the region, the US sees the need to bolster its own military presence and alliances in the Indo-Pacific. In this context, some US officials may view PESCO as a positive development if it leads to greater defense capabilities and burden-sharing among European countries. A more capable and integrated European defense system could potentially ease the burden on the US in the region and help to counterbalance China's rising influence. However, other US officials may be more skeptical of PESCO, viewing it as a potential challenge to NATO and transatlantic unity. There are concerns that increased European defense integration could lead to duplication of effort and a weakening of the NATO alliance, which is seen as the cornerstone of US-European security cooperation. Nonetheless, EU Council President, Charles Michel, commenting on the issue in 2023, has stated that “strong Alliances are made of strong allies”, while President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has stated that “strategic autonomy does not mean that you cannot cooperate with like-minded partners”.

Moreover, the Strategic Compass of the EU, a strategic document which was issued in March 2022, only a month after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, was making a clear reference to “the return of war to Europe” (EU, 2022, p. 10, 14). Another grand strategy document, NATO's Strategic Concept, was issued in June 2022 at NATO's Madrid Summit, acknowledging the need to ensure coherence and complementarity between the two institutions (NATO and the EU). The new NATO strategy document did not differentiate from its previous doctrine of retaining a “single set of forces.” This means that NATO – EU common members do not have one armed force for NATO and another for the EU. Therefore, efficiency must be ensured and duplication avoided. Both in NATO's Strategic Concept and the EU's Strategic Compass it is declared that the two institutions face common threats. “The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area” (NATO, 2022, p.4). In addition to that, it is declared that authoritarian actors around the world, persistent conflict, fragility and instability in the European common neighbourhood and terrorist groups are threatening the global peace and stability (NATO, 2022b).

2.3. US's Views on EU's Strategic Autonomy

Public opinion in the US may not necessarily be on the same page as the European Parliament or the NATO and EU official statements. On the contrary, there are voices that shout aloud that Washington must hand off European security to the Europeans as “Russia does not pose a threat to Europe that implicates US security. Europe can contribute to little of value to efforts to deal with China. The Biden administration’s failure to hand European security off to the Europeans just consigned another generation of taxpayers to foot the bill for the U.S. project in Europe.” (Logan, 2023). Moreover, the very clause of the third NATO - EU joint declaration that “NATO remains the foundation of collective defence for its allies and essential for Euro-Atlantic security” is seen by some critics as a “pretty painful reading for those who want less America in European defense.” (Foy, 2023).

The Biden administration, however, is staying the course with the Transatlantic Alliance. Jake Sullivan, US National Security Advisor to President Biden commented in 2021, on the occasion of President Biden visiting Brussels and making a joint statement with the French President Macron, that “capabilities is the key here. From our perspective, key European countries working to develop enhanced capabilities that are interoperable and can be deployed in service of a larger common mission — this is fundamentally a positive thing from the United States’ perspective.” As for the term “strategic autonomy”, which is often used to describe efforts to build capabilities independent of the US, Sullivan tried to clarify matter: “It is not to talk in terms of the theology of particular terms or the philosophy of particular structures. It is to talk about the what, the how, and the when.” (Herszenhorn, 2021a). Similarly, other experts believe that “it’s important to get out of the theoretical realm, the think tank of strategic autonomy ... and to talk about pragmatic, practical solutions” (Herszenhorn, 2021b).

According to some analysts, President Biden has applauded the EU’s push for “strategic autonomy” just to make up with France, which was infuriated by the US announcing a surprise Indo-Pacific security partnership with the UK and Australia (the AUKUS agreement) in September 2021 (Armstrong et al, 2023).

2.4. Complementarity of NATO and the EU

Irrespectively of the theoretical debate about EU’s strategic autonomy and place in the transatlantic relationship, the sudden crisis in Ukraine has sparked an unprecedented, organized response on the part of the EU and NATO that has stressed

the complementarity or, in other words, the effective role of the division of labour between the two organisations. The EU is offering Ukraine what NATO cannot: lethal equipment [through the European Peace Facility (European Commission, 2023)], humanitarian assistance, waves of sanctions on Russia and, more importantly, a future in a shared political community, through granting Ukraine and Moldova EU candidate status and Georgia an EU perspective: Ukraine applied for EU membership in February 2022 and was granted EU candidate status in June 2022 (European Council, 2023). On the other hand, NATO provides to exposed eastern flank allies what the EU cannot: defense, deterrence and reassurances (Droin, 2023). These contributions are not to be ignored as defense, crisis management and, most critically, deterrence, would need to be addressed by the European defense capabilities alone in case the United States decided to lower its level of commitment, through NATO, to the EU (Major, 2019).

Some critics of the US-EU defense relationship within NATO argue that Russia's aggression in Ukraine marks both the consolidation of the West and the emergence of the long-heralded post-Western international order (Ash, T. G., et al., 2023, p. 16-17). Ukraine's victory or defeat in the war will be critical for the shape of the next European order. But it is highly unlikely to restore a US-led global liberal order. Instead, the West will have to live, as one pole of a multipolar world, with hostile dictatorships such as China and Russia, but also with independent major powers such as India. This may end up being the biggest geopolitical turning point revealed by the war: that the consolidation of the West is taking place in an increasingly divided post-Western world. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine confirmed the renewed centrality of American power to Europe – with billions of dollars spent maintaining the war effort, which has sustained unity across the Atlantic on sanctions and diplomatic positions towards Russia and given a new lease on life for Western-led institutions such as NATO (Ash, T. G., et al., 2023, p. 14-15).

Strengthening the partnership between NATO and the European Union and further strengthening support to Ukraine is the primary goal of the third joint EU-NATO Declaration, which was signed at Brussels in January 2023 (NATO, 2023d). However, tensions between Türkiye, a NATO member and certain EU member states, such as Greece and Cyprus have often rendered close cooperation between the two organizations not an easy task (Bayer, 2023). Some experts see the third joint EU-NATO declaration as a public statement on cooperation between NATO and the EU (Brzozowski, 2023a).

Others believe that it reaffirms NATO's primacy as European security provider, hence raising concerns and doubts about the EU's strategic autonomy (Simonet, 2023). Moreover, some experts think that under the joint declaration lies Washington's

successful manipulation of the EU and NATO and that the Ukrainian crisis will eventually establish, via NATO, what the EU wants to end: outsourcing its security to the US (China Daily, 2023). However, French President Macron, the main advocate of European strategic autonomy, sees in the declaration a reaffirmation of the importance of a stronger, more operational European defense (France Diplomacy, 2023). Additionally, even though, prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was talk about the primarily political significance of EU-NATO relations, with little space for concrete operational improvements (Giuglietti, 2022), more than one year after the invasion has proved that EU-NATO cooperation has been a main source of protecting critical infrastructure (Reuters, 2023).

2.5. US's Views on NATO Allies and Partners

As security eras change, NATO has been constantly changing too, adapting to each one of them. The security emergency it is currently responding to is Russia's effort to overthrow the rules-based international order that has kept major wars away from the European continent for a long period of almost eighty years, until February 24, 2022, a day that Europe felt as its own 9/11. After that development, strategic competition in the global environment was no longer a theoretical concern but a very concrete fact and practically the most violent act of aggression in Europe since the end of World War II.

Jake Sullivan characterized the ongoing war in Ukraine as "one of the most pressing geopolitical issues facing the world today", noting how the war illustrates the interconnected nature of geopolitics and transnational issues through its disruption of global food and energy supply chains (Ekmeçic et Shepherd, 2022).

Against this context, US President Biden has stated that "the world is now at an inflection point, facing tremendous challenges and unprecedented opportunities" (US National Security Strategy, 2022). While the word "threat" is repeated in the latest US National Security Strategy (NSS) document sixty-nine times, it is clearly stated, at the same time, that "Russia poses an immediate and ongoing threat to the regional security order in Europe and it is a source of disruption and instability globally". The US wants its "Indo-Pacific allies to be engaged cooperatively with [its] European allies ... by standing up to Russia ... This is not a favor to the United States. [Its] allies recognize that a collapse of the international order in one region will ultimately endanger it in others" (US National Security Strategy, 2022).

In addition to that, both US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Celeste Wallander have been

stressing the importance of US NATO Allies and partners as far as deterrence is concerned. According to US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, “the United States’ network of allies is the country’s main advantage over any potential challenger”, while, according to Wallander, “each and every ally brings capabilities to deterrence” (Garamone, 2023). Moreover, location and diplomatic experience with Russia are further points of appreciation: for example, allies like Finland, NATO’s newest member, bring added value to the Alliance, as the country has fought a war against Russia in the past – the Winter War of 1939 -1940 (Blumberg, 2011) – and is expected to augment NATO’s capacity to defend critical infrastructure, operate in the cyber domain and strengthen individual and collective resilience.

Incredible combat power that comes from combined armed forces stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean to the North Atlantic is what NATO Allies have brought to the Alliance. However, according to Wallander, binding the various Allies’ defense bases more closely together to produce military capabilities more quickly and efficiently is a much-needed step forward that was highlighted by the conflict in Ukraine (Garamone, 2023). This declaration seems to align with the EU’s urge to its member states to cooperate in their defense domains, implemented through institutions and policy initiatives, such as the European Defence Agency (European Defence Agency, 2023a) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (European Defence Agency, 2023b).

Allies’ contribution to intelligence and information is equally important. To this end, an Administrative Arrangement was signed in April 2023 between the US Department of Defense (DoD) and the European Defense Agency (EDA). However, areas of capability development, as well as research and technology were not included in the fields of cooperation but were left open for future considerations (European Defence Agency, 2023c), thus marking the start of a turning point to the previous mistrust and careful considerations between the two entities on delicate issues of their defense domains.

2.6. The Global South

Given the Russian war against Ukraine, US - Russian relations have never been in a worse state than they currently are, at least since Kennedy was President and Khrushchev had nuclear missiles pointed at the US from Cuba, back in 1962 (Menendez, 2023). The US Embassy in Moscow is working on a skeleton staff, facing restrictions from the Russian government. No different is Russia’s view on the issue: “Russian-American relations are struggling through their most difficult period since the end of the Cold war” (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the U.S.A., 2023). Within this context,

Russia's attempt to shore up support for its war in Ukraine from the countries of the Global South has been quite successful. Numbers are indicative: in February 2023, on the eve of the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 7 UN member states voted against a resolution to end the war in Ukraine and 32 member states abstained from condemning Russia's invasion, compared to 141 who did (United Nations, 2023). However, those 32 member states represented more than half of the world's population, as they included Asian heavyweights China and India. Moreover, states belonging to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) face a strong political and economic dilemma: abstaining from UN votes on the war in Ukraine or not showing up to vote at all is the result of a more-or-less forced strategy of neutrality, as they are caught in a geostrategic rivalry between East and West (Menendez, 2023).

As the US engages more and more seriously in its trial of strength with the People's Republic of China (PRC), the need for support from its allies and partners becomes more crucial than during either the Cold War or its unipolar moment. Even though Ukraine is not a member of NATO and the national security of the US is not directly threatened by a war not taking place on the American continent, the Russian war against Ukraine represents a dangerous violation of US's interests in Eastern Europe. Russia has defied the sacredly kept – for almost 80 years – rules-based international order and has transformed itself into a terrorist state, thus threatening American hegemony in the world. In this context, the Biden administration, fully supportive – economically, militarily and politically – of Ukraine, is following a foreign policy that is far from the isolationist view of certain members of the GOP, especially the two most prominent Republican nominees for Presidency in 2024, former US President Donald Trump and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

Europe's armies are excellent but small: there would be nothing in reserve to absorb any sort of attrition or sustain the fight for very long. However, a strong Europe would make it easier for Americans to deter Russia as the U.S. would not have to commit as much of its own force and Moscow would know it has to contend with more than one major power. After all, NATO exists partly to ensure that collectively the Alliance makes the most of what it has.

Under this context the US, even though having the lead role in the rapidly changing global geostrategic environment, is in need of a support system. EU, with its 22 out of its 27 member states being part of the Transatlantic Alliance (NATO, 2023a) is in a place to provide that support to the US, being itself a stakeholder of the values that are being threatened: sovereignty, territorial integrity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law. Moreover, further enlargement of the Alliance, with the inclusion of two Nordic countries (Finland, which has already joined the Alliance and Sweden, whose addition is currently

pending) is seen with great enthusiasm by the US as such additions would only bring to the Alliance more defense capabilities and strong democratic values, without asking from the US to bear a considerably further economic burden (US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2022).

2.7. Republicans vs Democrats

Mitch McConnell, the Republican minority leader in the US Senate and one of the longest-serving Senate leaders, referring to the war in Ukraine, has commented that, according to Bob Gates, a former US Secretary of Defense, having served under both the Bush and the Obama administrations, “after the Cold War we all took a holiday from history. We thought we would never see evil in full display again... Well, evil is back... Imagine how much it would cost all of us, if Russia won” (McConnell, 2023a). The Republican minority leader has also addressed criticism on the issue of Ukraine: “Let me be clear: this assistance [to Ukraine] means more jobs for American workers and newer weapons for American servicemembers... Senate Republicans will continue our efforts to invest in America’s own national security” (McConnell, 2023b). However, two opponents of new Ukraine aid in the US Senate, J.D. Vance (R-Ohio) and Josh Hawley (R-Mo.), have commented that McConnell’s remarks hadn’t changed their minds while US Senate Armed Services Chair Jack Reed (D-R.I.) has stated that Vance argued the aid was fueling “an indefinite ... war,” which is against America’s interests, while Trump’s and Ron DeSantis’ approach is ignoring Ukraine as not important” (Gould, 2023).

NATO’s renewed vitality for the US’s security priorities can also be seen through the re-establishment of the US Senate NATO Observer Group by Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and Thom Tillis (R-NC). The two co-chairs, having re-established the Group in 2018, prior to the war in Ukraine but following the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea of 2014, attend the Alliance’s Summits, along with a bipartisan congressional delegation, the latest one having taken place in Vilnius, Lithuania in July 2023. According to them, “today, the bonds shared by allies are stronger than ever before. The 2023 NATO Summit is a special opportunity for the United States to join with our allies and recommit to preserving freedom and independence in Europe at this crucial time. It is significant that this historic summit is being held in Vilnius since the Baltic states kept the flame of liberty alive during 50 years of Soviet occupation and are now leaders in Europe in defending our shared principles.” Moreover, the Group members prior to the Summit asked President Biden to “encourage other Allies to also make meaningful commitments to support Ukraine’s ability to defend itself. Robust security commitments should be on the table to reassure Ukraine of our collective commitment to defend their

sovereignty. The Vilnius Summit should secure a firm commitment from Allies for an increase in defense spending. All Allies must recognize the urgency needed to prepare the Alliance to address the current and emerging challenges at hand” (Shaheen et al, 2023).

In addition to that, in June 2023, 35 US Senators asked the US President to make defense spending on the part of NATO Allies a top priority issue at the 2023 Vilnius Summit, arguing that “not meeting the target has immediate implications in Ukraine where our allies could be a force multiplier in helping bring this conflict to a successful end” (United States Senate, 2023). In fact, the US has so far provided \$76.8 billion to Ukraine’s effort (Masters et Merrow, 2023), while, in 2023 alone, it has provided \$9.7 billion (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

2% of national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defense (the Wales Pledge) is what the US Senate is asking from its European NATO Allies (NATO, 2014). In fact, this is a floor target. According to US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, “We look forward to working with our valued allies to ensure that we all do even more to invest in our shared security” (Gould et Sprenger, 2023). Moreover, NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué has declared that members “commit to invest at least 20% of our defence budgets on major equipment, including related Research and Development” (NATO, 2023b).

This target of minimum 2% is covered by some European Allies, while others, such as Norway, are planning to meet the target in the near future (Norwegian Government, 2023). Going back to February 2022, Norway has provided more than \$2.3 billion in support of Ukraine – including air defenses and other weapons – and has pledged \$7.5 billion in aid over the next five years. As Europe’s leading supplier of natural gas, Norway has been instrumental in helping Europe transition away from Russian energy, which the United States remains committed to supporting. And the people of Norway have welcomed some 43,000 Ukrainian refugees. (Blinken, 2023).

However, the 2% floor target was not enough for former US President Trump, as in 2018 he had asked from NATO’s European Allies to provide 4% of their national GDP for the Alliance’s defense spending (De Carbonnel et al, 2018).

3. Research Methodology and Limitations

The main research question of this study is to understand the state and dynamics of the U.S.-EU defense relationship within the institutional framework of NATO, in light of the Russian war in Ukraine. Does the US believe that enhanced EU defense

capabilities would act as a power multiplier within NATO, thus transforming the EU into a valuable partner for European and global security?

The independent variable of this study is the "war between Russia and Ukraine". This is the factor that allegedly has an impact or influence on the dependent variable which, in this case, are the shapes and dynamics of the US-EU defense relationship within the framework of NATO. This study is essentially trying to determine whether and how the occurrence of the war between Russia and Ukraine is related to changes or developments in the US-EU defense relationship within the NATO framework. In research, the independent variable is the factor that is hypothesized to have an effect on the dependent variable. In other words, changes or variations in the independent variable are expected to lead to changes or variations in the dependent variable. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate how the occurrence of the war might impact the collaboration, decision-making, priorities, and policies within the US-EU defense relationship within the NATO context. What this study actually seeks is to establish a causal relationship between the war as the independent variable and changes in the US-EU defense relationship as the dependent variable. In fact, the relationship between the war in Ukraine and the support provided by the US and the EU can create a complex dynamic where causality is not unidirectional. This situation introduces a level of reciprocity and interdependence between the independent and dependent variables.

To examine its research question, this study adopts the qualitative research methodology that includes a systematic review of the relevant literature and a comparative analysis of the relevant policy documents and key actors' official statements. Document analysis as a qualitative research methodology is a systematic procedure for examining or evaluating government reports (Bowen 2009, p.28) while documents published by states have been a key element in qualitative research for many years. Moreover, documents can offer critical data for the research context and help understand changes in the system (Bowen 2009, p.30). Document analysis has also served as a valuable approach method in order to gain insights into the complex phenomena of this study through the exploration of existing records. In particular, it helped to contextualize and understand policy changes and the perspectives of different stakeholders. In this context, this study has adopted the qualitative document analysis method by examining U.S.'s national security documents in light of international relations' theories of neorealism and neoclassical realism.

Analyzing complex and key policy documents, such as the US National Security Strategy (NSS) is important as it can provide the researcher with some outlines of the US government's approach to perceptions of national threats, national security and

international engagement but can be quite challenging at the same time. These challenges may for example include intricate policy frameworks, multifaceted content, technical language and even the very length of the document. However, iterative reading and cross-referencing of documents have been used as a strategy to address these issues.

Additional perspectives to ensure a well-rounded understanding of the US's national security strategy have been sought, such as official statements and relevant press releases from trustworthy press sources. Undoubtedly, NSS documents, like any policy document, can be subject to various biases that might influence their content. These biases may result from various factors, such as political, strategic or institutional. As a product of the current administration, NSS's content may reflect the political priorities, ideologies and views of the ruling party. Furthermore, it might emphasize certain issues while downplaying or omitting others to align with the government's agenda. Such potential biases were addressed by research done through various perspectives, such as the official statements of members of the US Senate.

Collection of primary data, such as the conduction of interviews with key stakeholders, including government officials, diplomats, military personnel or experts from both the US and the EU has not been applied as there has been no access to such stakeholders. Instead, this research paper has been based on secondary data, that have been exported through the gathering of relevant documents, policy papers, speeches and news articles that discuss the US-EU defense relationship, through the context of NATO and their corresponding responses to the Russian War in Ukraine.

4. Neorealism and Neoclassical Realism

4.1. Neorealism

In order to develop a theoretical framework that will help analyze the plenty and often interacting factors that influence the state and dynamics of the U.S.-EU defence relationship, within the institutional context of NATO, in light of the Russian war in Ukraine, this study draws on the international relations (IR) theories and, more specifically, on neorealism as well as on neoclassical realism, as these two realist theories lie among the most prominent IR theories that have attempted to interpret international relations of contemporary era. The use of these two theories will offer complementary perspectives and different insights into international relations, thus giving a more holistic understanding of how states interact in the international arena.

More specifically, this study leans towards a structural realist position to interpret how international systemic conditions shape U.S. foreign policy, whilst being in line with social constructivism in its emphasis on the importance of perceptions of core foreign policy decision-makers. Therefore, the task of this study will be to put these theories to test and try to use them in order to address its main question.

Prior to the war in Ukraine, NATO had been declared as “brain-dead” by the French President Emmanuel Macron (Erlanger, 2019) while former U.S. President Donald Trump had threatened to pull America out of the Transatlantic Alliance, due to US’s burden-sharing issues with its European allies (Stracqualursi et al, 2019). The EU was intensively flirting with strategic autonomy in its defense domain, in an effort to become a valuable security provider for its member states and allegedly trying to balance the US. However, the Russia-Ukraine war was a catalyst to the pre-existing security environment in the European continent as well as to the notions of national security and threat perception of the Biden administration.

According to realism, sovereign states are considered as the main actors in the international environment. Leaders or international institutions affect it much less (Wohlforth, 2008). Unlike classical realism, which suggests that inherent flaws of human nature, such as competitiveness and urge for conflict are the main drives behind states’ constant search for power (Machiavelli, 1532/2003), neorealism or structural realism claims that states operate within a structure, namely a system that is far more measurable than the vague traits of human nature. Moreover, this system is anarchic, as it inherently lacks a higher authority that states can turn to in case they are threatened. Anarchy is the fundamental “ordering principle” of the international political system which is defined by the presence of “functionally undifferentiated” individual state actors that are distinguished only by their varying capabilities (Waltz, 1979). States also tend to behave in similar ways because of system-level processes of socialization and competition (Waltz, 1979). In the anarchic structure, the behavior of the states is determined by the relative power distribution because there is no supreme authority above states to solve problems in the international system (Waltz, 1979, p.97). Within this framework, neorealism claims that one should first examine the structure of the international system in which states interact to understand international politics (Waltz, 1979, p.80).

Undoubtedly, the principal goal of any state is survival. However, because the structure of the international system is anarchic and states can never know the intentions of other states, they constantly compete with each other for power and pay great attention to the balance of power (Mearsheimer, 2023). In other words, states which live in an anarchic system and have to deal with other states that possibly have malign

intentions while, at the same time, possess high military capabilities, tend to believe that the best way to survive is to be the most powerful state in the system. Thus, owing to this necessity, states are willing to go to great lengths to make sure they are more powerful than others (Mearsheimer, 2023). Therefore, states tend to form powerful alliances in the international system, in order to balance against power and deter other states from attacking them. "External balancing" occurs when states take external measures to increase their security by forming alliances (Waltz, 1979). In this context, neorealism provides a solid foundation for explaining great power balancing behavior (Parent et Rosato, 2015). Some scholars also argue that bipolarity, namely the presence of two great powers in the international system is much more probable to produce stability than multipolarity, namely the presence of three or more great powers (Waltz, 1979).

Moreover, Walt (1985) has claimed that alliances are formed as a response to threats. In specific, they are built according to the balance of threat rather than the balance of power, while threat is a set of offensive intentions, geographical proximity, aggregate power and offensive capabilities. Walt (1991, p.212) also claims that security studies intend to find out the conditions that cause war, and policies that states pursue to prevent and prepare for it.

4.2. Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realism goes one step further to focus on the constantly changing systemic structures of the international environment, which, along with the domestic environment of the core foreign policy decision-makers, finally lead to foreign policy decisions (Rose, 1998). Furthermore, for neoclassical realism, "the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. ... [Yet] the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level" (Rose, 1998, p.146). Therefore, to understand the relationship between power and foreign policy, it would be useful to examine both internal dynamics and international structure (Rose, 1998, p.152). Thus, it is crucial in the neoclassical realist understanding that the international systemic conditions are filtered and interpreted via a limited number of domestic intervening variables and then turned into foreign policy decisions (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 58–79; Rose, 1998, pp. 157–160).

Thus, from a realist perspective, the US-EU defense relationship, that has been developed through the NATO Alliance, can be seen as a 'balancing act' against Russian

power. Realists would argue that both the US and the EU have a common interest in containing Russian aggression in Ukraine and establishing stability in Europe. That is why both the US and the EU keep providing Ukraine with amplified military and political support, combined with considerable economic sanctions on Russia, while the US in particular has provided enormous economic support to the country since the start of the Russian invasion. Realists would also emphasize the role of power politics in shaping this relationship, as the US and the EU seek to maintain a favorable balance of power vis-à-vis Russia. Russia represents a great power that threatens the very backyard of the EU, posing an existential threat to countries of Eastern Europe and creating multiple effects for the rest of the world, such as the energy and food crises and a rising inflation. Moreover, it has been estimated that, within the first two months of the invasion, 8,1 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded across Europe while the 6 million crossings both out of and into Ukraine that were recorded on the first two months of the conflict probably constitute the most intensive conflict-induced migration wave on record at a global scale during a two-months period (Novotny, 2023). At the same time, by challenging the integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, which shares land borders with four member-states of NATO (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania), Russia seems to be defying the Western-led global balance of power that has existed since the end of the Cold War.

Regarding the transatlantic defense relationship, realist theorists also believe that it is essential for the US to keep providing Ukraine with military, economic and political support, in order to prevent the emergence of a new regional hegemon on the European continent, which, if not contained, would seek to expand its aggression to even more of its neighboring countries, especially the ex-Soviet states which do not belong to the NATO Alliance, thus lacking the security coverage of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Finland, with its 1,340 km (or 830 miles) long common land borders with Russia, although not an ex-Soviet state, has known a bitter military defeat from Russia in the past and, for as long as it was not a member of the Alliance, was falling into this category.

Furthermore, from a constructivist realist perspective, the US-EU defense relationship can be seen as a product of shared identities and beliefs. Constructivists argue that the US and the EU, apart from their membership of the NATO Alliance, share a common identity as liberal democracies, which shapes their perceptions of the conflict in Ukraine and their responses to it, when an autocratic regime, such as that of Russian President Putin, is putting that identity under question. The US and the EU have also worked to promote democratic norms and institutions in Ukraine, which reflects their shared beliefs about the importance of democracy and human rights.

Moreover, each member of the transatlantic community practices strategy. Accordingly, each member of the EU or NATO follows its own balance between focusing on challenges posed by other states, such as Russia and threats emanating from the Middle East and North Africa (NATO, 2014). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in December 1991 and up until the breakout of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, strategy and defence planning in the transatlantic community responded less to external geostrategic dynamics than to dynamics of the community itself. However, the empowering of the transatlantic relationship, through the prominent response of NATO to the war in Ukraine, has led to a mitigation of the European security gap. The US has currently returned to Europe, sheltering it with its traditional security umbrella. However, this puts into challenge EU's own role as a defender and a peer security provider and poses new challenges to CSDP. By developing its ability to act in security and defence, the EU has sought to influence the international environment, including the possible change of the transatlantic relationship (Saeter, 1998, p. 38). The creation of PESCO, an initiative aimed at deepening defense cooperation among the EU member states, is an externalization of grand strategy, based on article 42.6 of the Lisbon Treaty, that has, even belatedly, changed and reshaped the transatlantic relationship. However, the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 has accelerated changes in the Transatlantic dynamics. "PESCO has been seen as toxic until today. It seems that the combination of three powerful agents, Putin, Brexit and Trump have started the decontamination process" (Biscop, 2017, p.3).

In light of these theories and in order to put theory into practice, while the state and dynamics of the US-EU defense relationship, within the institutional framework of NATO, is this study's object of analysis, namely the dependent variable of the study, there are important international systemic conditions that form its independent variables, namely concepts or phenomena that affect the dependent variable, without being affected by it. Against this context, the most important independent variable that has been allegedly affecting this study's object of analysis is Russia's continuing aggression towards Ukraine with its – for the most part unpredicted - full-scale invasion of the country in February 2022.

Moreover, the domestic factors that can affect core foreign policy executives and their decisions can be those executives' personal beliefs and perceptions of the international political environment, including even personal bias or misunderstandings, as well as state-society relations, such as public opinion and / or polarization of domestic politics. At the same time, US's, EU's and wider Europe's foreign policy initiatives also act as the intervening variables of the study, namely factors that impact the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable.

Although some scholars argue that the U.S. no longer possesses the role of the international hegemon that it had acquired during its “unipolar moment” (Ikenberry, 2018; Smith, 2018), it is widely accepted that it is still a powerful and prominent international actor that shapes the international system as it possesses the world’s both largest economy (India Forbes, 2023) and most powerful military power (Baker, 2023). On the other hand, the modern rules-based international order is based on rules and institutions that were created by the great powers that won World War II (US, the Soviet Union, Great Britain). Undoubtedly, the US is the principal architect of the post-war international order. Within this international order, institutions are “persistent rule structures that prescribe appropriate behaviour, and enable or constrain behaviour” (Risse, 2016, p. 24) and can be formal (such as NATO) or informal (such as established patterns of cooperation within multilateral institutions). Within such institutions, policy-makers act based on existing path-dependent habits and internalized norms of behavior (March et Olsen, 1998).

Mearsheimer (2023) argues that institutions are the building blocks of the existing international order while NATO is included in the list of institutions that the current western-led post-war international order is largely based on, although he has argued (Mearsheimer, 1994, p.7) that institutions had little promise for stability in post-Cold War security architecture. In particular, NATO was created in 1949 by the US, Canada and several Western European nations as a defensive alliance to provide collective security against the Soviet Union (NATO, 2023c). However, defensive alliances often serve as offensive alliances as powerful military capabilities joined together can be perceived as a threat from third states (Mearsheimer, 2023). NATO as an international institution is a force multiplier for the US as well as for the EU. However, joining – or attempting to join – powerful alliances tends to make other states less secure and can even lead them to respond in kind, a concept known in the academic study of international relations as the “security dilemma” (Walt, 2022a).

Because there are no institutions or authorities that can make and enforce international laws, the policies of cooperation that will bring mutual rewards if others cooperate may bring disaster if they do not (Jervis, 1978). Alliance Theory of IR is about the concept of the “security dilemma”, a theory which explores how actions taken by one member of an alliance to enhance its security can inadvertently lead to increased insecurity for others, potentially affecting trust, cooperation and the overall stability of the alliance. Within this framework, “the theory of alliance politics can be seen here. The level of balancing behavior from NATO as well as the EU has been so unexpectedly high and unprecedented exactly because these alliances feel a common threat. Threat is defined as the level of power, proximity and aggressive intentions. The United States

and its NATO allies share a set of political values that are now being challenged in an especially vivid and cruel way” (Walt, 2022b).

Neorealism, as well as neoclassical realism, argue that states greatly care about the balance of power. Russia’s illegal war against Ukraine has posed a serious threat on European states’ national security, especially in Eastern Europe. Russia, with its nuclear power capabilities is pursuing regional hegemony in Eurasia. Its attempt to stop the US’s augmenting sphere of influence in Eastern Europe through the future expansion of NATO to include its “near abroad” state of Ukraine is an act of power balancing against the US and the West. Furthermore, after illegally annexing Crimea in 2014, Russia has full-scale invaded Ukraine in 2022, thus seeking to put it under its sphere of influence or destroy it by turning it into a failed state. “The theory of anarchy in international relations has been vindicated by the war in Ukraine. A state can never be sure that another state won’t invade it, if its more powerful and there’s no higher authority that can protect any state against that” (Walt, 2022b).

Even though defying the existing rules-based international order, Russia, holding a seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, vetoes the Council’s decisions. The Russian President is even facing an arrest warrant in the Hauge International Criminal Court for the mass abduction of Ukrainian children (International Criminal Court, 2023). This is ‘absurdity to a new level’, as the Russia-Ukraine war has left unaffected the UN’s operation as an international body, which was created and designed in order to promote peace and security (Borger, 2023). However, while the UN, among other international organizations, plays a significant role in international affairs, it does not possess overarching authority to enforce rules or prevent conflicts among states. As a result, states, such as the US, its European allies and most notably Ukraine, have no higher authority to turn to. Instead, they are forced to operate in a self-help system, where they must rely on their own capabilities and strategies to secure their interests and protect their sovereignty.

A possible victory of Russia, of whatever content, would undoubtedly change the balance of power in the European continent. In this context, the US, as a major global power and security provider, seeks to support its European allies within NATO, in order to balance against Russia’s aggressive war in the region. This support is aimed at preventing the emergence of Russia as a more dominant regional power in Eurasia that could challenge the interests of the US and the national security and sovereignty of its European allies and partners. As the US President marks “Our allies recognize that a collapse of the international order in one region will ultimately endanger it in others” (U.S. National Security Strategy, 2022).

Realists argue that states act in their own self-interest and seek to maximize their security and power. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, European states have placed much greater emphasis on the Transatlantic Alliance, considering it as a critical mechanism for their collective defense against Russian aggression as the war in Ukraine has been perceived as a direct security threat for the European member countries of the Alliance. NATO, a defensive alliance created in the early years of the Cold War, still plays a crucial role in providing a security framework for European member states. The war in Ukraine has reinforced the perception of Russia as a serious security threat to Europe, leading NATO members to reaffirm their commitment to collective defense, corresponding to the neorealist balance of threat theory, which argues that states often balance not against a rising hegemon but against a rising security threat instead (Walt, 1985).

US leader's and core US official policy executives' perceptions should also be examined, in order to test the neoclassical realist theory, according to which, the international systemic conditions are filtered and interpreted via a limited number of domestic intervening variables (Rose, 1998). Under this context, the response of the US President to this – unpredicted for its most part – security emergency in Europe, namely a total support for NATO and its European allies and an unprecedented support for Ukraine seems to have been shaped by his non-isolationist perception of foreign policy and his familiarization with the Ukraine issue: during his time as vice-President in the second Obama administration era (2013-2017), President Biden was in charge of the Ukraine portfolio and to a great extent responsible and vulnerable to criticism for the outcome of the Crimea Crisis in 2014. “He’s tied to Ukraine policy”, was the -at the time- comment of Shirley Anne Warshaw, a presidential scholar at Gettysburg College (Spetalnick, 2014). Furthermore, President Biden “is a creature of the Cold War era. The old Soviet Union was a superpower rival of the United States for the first half of his 36-year Senate tenure until it collapsed in December 1991” (Thornberry, 2023). Russia’s invasion of Ukraine would not go unanswered under his watch, especially after having “failed” in his first crisis as a President, the deadly and chaotic withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 (The White House, 2023). “He [President Putin] thought he’d get the Finlandization of NATO. Instead, he got the NATOization of Finland — and Sweden” was his comment on the one-year anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, in February 2023 (Biden, 2023).

4.3. Russia as the Third Pole of Global Power

On the other hand, Russia, as the rival pole of power, is not easy to analyze because of the increased closedness of the Russian political system (Götz, 2022, p.1758). However, a neoclassical realist approach would focus on the domestic factors that shape a state's foreign policy behavior. Neoclassical realists argue that states' external behavior is shaped not only by systemic factors, such as the balance of power and international norms, but also by internal factors such as regime type, bureaucratic politics and public opinion. In the case of Russia, neoclassical realists would argue that Russia's foreign policy behavior is shaped by a combination of external and internal factors. On the external side, Russia is motivated by a desire to maintain its Soviet-Era status as a great power and to secure its borders against perceived threats from the West, especially the expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe (Safranchuk, 2022). Russia is also influenced by the balance of power in the region and by international norms regarding sovereignty and territorial integrity. On the internal side, neoclassical realists would argue that Russia's foreign policy behavior is shaped by its domestic politics. Russia's authoritarian regime, led by President Vladimir Putin since the early 2000's, seeks to maintain control over the country's political system and to suppress dissent. The regime also relies on the security services, particularly the Federal Security Service (FSB), to maintain internal order and to suppress potential opposition. The FSB has a strong influence over Russia's foreign policy, particularly in areas such as Ukraine and the Caucasus region. "The West failed to integrate Russia into a post-Cold War security structure, while, at the same time, Russia took aggressive actions against neighbors such as Chechnya and Georgia, inciting states in the region to look to the West and NATO" (Yoak, 2023). In the long term, US's and EU's support to Ukraine may come at lower or zero levels. That can be the case if the result of the US Presidential elections in 2024 end up with a President less or not at all interested in helping Ukraine or if energy and inflation levels in Europe render support to Ukraine unfavorable for the public opinion. From a classical realist point of view, such outcome is possible because neither the US nor the countries of Western Europe face a direct existential threat from the war in Ukraine. At the same time, the war has already set the Russian military back many years, so their security objectives have been achieved. However, Poland and the Baltic States, sharing land borders with Russia and/or its ally Belarus, will not stop supporting Ukraine, as their direct security is much more at stake (Yoak, 2023).

5. The Future of the US-EU Defense Relationship

5.1. Solidarity or War Weariness?

The Russian war in Ukraine has caused the US-EU defense relationship, within the context of NATO, to evolve, as its stakeholders reacted with unexpected and unprecedented levels of balancing behavior towards the common threat of Russian aggression. However, as the war itself is evolving in unexpected ways, levels of threat perception among the stakeholders are also subject to change, thus creating the conditions for the relationship to become either even more solid, or, on the contrary, prone to war fatigue. Balancing collective defense with individual member states' interests will be an ongoing challenge for the future of the relationship.

Undoubtedly, the Russia – Ukraine war has acted as a catalyst for change in the US-EU defense relationship, within the context of NATO. This conflict, which seems to have caught both the US and the EU by surprise when it first broke out in February 2022, has also put significant pressure on NATO members to respond collectively towards Russian aggression. NATO members' balancing behavior underlined their effort for collectively adjusting their military and strategic posture in response to the perceived threat from Russia. This is evident in the vast economic aid and weapons supplies sent to Ukraine by the US and the EU, the increased presence of NATO forces in Eastern Europe and in efforts to bolster the Alliance's European member states' defense capabilities, through joint procurement and elevated budgets in their defense domain.

The war in Ukraine, with its ongoing instability and changing dynamics, as well as its significant spillover to global food security, energy, economy and, moreover, its undermining effect to global efforts to tackle the climate crisis, has become a focal point of international concern (Paddison, 2023; Wallace, 2022). However, the war's changing dynamics can influence how members of the US-EU defense relationship in NATO perceive threat and may require continual adaptation of strategies and responses. In fact, the possibility of threat perception within members of NATO shifting over time is a key aspect of the relative discussion as it underscores the need for ongoing assessment and adaptation of defense policies. For example, some NATO members, especially in Eastern Europe, may perceive Russian threat as becoming more acute, while others, mainly in Western Europe, may see it as stabilizing or diminishing, depending on how the war unfolds. Some scholars, especially the neorealist ones, may argue that the real and shared threat will strengthen the Alliance's cohesion, while others, mainly from the field of neoclassical realism, may contend that prolonged involvement in a conflict can

strain resources and political will, potentially leading to war fatigue and disagreements in the Alliance. Moreover, intervening variables, such as the upcoming elections in the US and in some EU member states (e.g. Poland), may affect core policy makers' perceptions of how the war is interfering with their states' economic strength and defense capabilities, e.g. in weapons stocks, thus affecting foreign policy decisions towards the war in Ukraine (Charlish et Pikulicka-Wilczewska, 2023). This is because, in neoclassical realism, leaders' perceptions and beliefs about their country's role in the international system play a crucial role. If US and EU leaders perceive that help to Ukraine (e.g. in the form of economic and military aid) aligns with their country's national interests and enhances its position in the international system, they may continue to provide it. Conversely, if they believe that focusing on domestic security and prosperity is more important, they may stop providing that aid.

5.2. The Case of France and What Could Go Wrong

France could make a good case of neoclassical realism, in the sense that core policy makers are led to foreign policy decisions driven not only by changes in the international environment but by personal perceptions as well. Even though France has often expressed ambivalence toward NATO and has previously blocked plans to bring more countries into the EU, on the second year of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it strongly supports Ukrainian membership in NATO and stands among the leaders in the conversation on EU enlargement. Critics have called these positions a "U-turn" or a French "zeitenwende", underlining their relevance to Germany's major shift on defense spending after the invasion. Faced with a big geostrategic change in the European continent, French President Macron has repositioned himself on NATO. In his May 2023 speech in Bratislava, Slovakia, he took back his NATO "brain-death" remark saying that Putin has brought NATO back to life. Macron confessed that he had never been naive about Russia, but Western Europe had indeed failed to heed warnings from the east. He also acknowledged US's central role in providing materiel and intelligence to Ukraine (Rauhala, 2023).

No matter how the war unfolds in the future, the strength of the US-EU defense relationship will play a pivotal role in NATO's response to it, even in the form of not immediate involvement with the conflict. The US and the EU must coordinate closely on their military efforts. Their ability to bridge any differences in threat perception and strategic priorities will be vital for maintaining NATO's effectiveness. How the Alliance manages this crisis could shape its future role and cohesion. Additionally, it may

influence broader European security dynamics, including relationships with non-NATO members, as well as the very role of Russia in the region.

Overall, an interest-driven foreign policy in line with power considerations within the structure of the international system is what policymakers should look for. However, unit-level intervening variables may generate different responses. A faltering Ukrainian defense, or a costly dragged-out war, could erode European solidarity. As the economic situation in some EU member states, such as Hungary, is projected to get worse, generating authoritarian responses to domestic dissent, continued resistance to assisting Ukraine will be all the more likely. Such moves will, in turn, increase tensions with the rest of Europe and within the NATO alliance (Jenkins, 2023). While the existence of such intervening variables is clear, the threat of a long war is far from over: Russian President's conditions for peace describe what is essentially a Finlandized Ukraine: strictly neutral, limited in its military power, forced to recognize Russia's annexation of all occupied territories, and only following policies that Russia approves (Jenkins, 2023). Ukraine could never accept any of these conditions in the foreseeable future. As leading US political scientist John Mearsheimer argues, "there is no way you can square that circle" (Lo, 2023).

5.3. Documents of Strategy and Putin's "Special Military Operation"

Both NATO and the EU have recently completed their strategic reflection processes: the EU released its Strategic Compass in March 2022 while NATO published its latest Strategic Concept at June 2022 Madrid Summit. When these ideas of strategy were first put into words, Europe's defense and security environment was dominated by the rise of China, a renewed assertiveness on the part of Russia and an increasing instability in the European neighborhood. However, both documents had to be hastily adapted to Vladimir Putin's latest invasion of Ukraine in February of that year. Putin's war of aggression, inflicting mass casualties, devastating cities and driving millions of civilians far from their homes, has fundamentally altered the European security environment. Europeans are shedding most of the illusions they harbored about Putin's foreign policy.

Mearsheimer insists that there is no credible evidence that Russia has revisionist ambitions in much of Eastern Europe and that President Putin didn't just take an irrational decision born out of a megalomaniac tendency in some (maybe Covid19-induced) isolation (Mearsheimer et Rosato, 2023). The 190.000 mostly young and unexperienced soldiers that Russia used in its "special military operation" ("spetsialnaya voennaya operatsiya" in the Russian language) against Ukraine in February 2022 were a military power too insufficient to occupy Ukraine, let alone Eastern Europe. President

Putin used the term “special military operation” in order not to call his war against Ukraine a war, just as former US President John Kennedy had in 1962 called his naval blockade of Cuba a “quarantine”, as this term was giving his blockade less of a military connotation (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, 2023). Moreover, the Russian President tried to sell the idea that what was about to unfold would not drastically affect the lives of ordinary Russians and that it would be a limited-time operation conducted by a small number of professional soldiers instead. Russia just tried to repeat the Georgia playbook in Ukraine to block its NATO and EU membership: just as it created Russia-friendly puppet states (e.g. in Abkhazia), it would do the same in Donbass and then march on Kyiv. That worked well in Georgia but failed in Ukraine. Ironically, however, even if Russia were to fail militarily, it might still succeed in its goals because, as long as the war goes on, even on a much smaller scale or as a frozen conflict, even though NATO and EU memberships are on the table for Ukraine, accession, if it actually happens, is years away. Russia is not reconquering Eastern Europe but it has made quite clear that NATO and / or EU expansion would result in terrible conflicts.

In this light, the key challenge in European security over the coming years will be strengthening deterrence against Russia while retaining the ability to tackle other threats. However, the war in Ukraine highlights how lack of standardized equipment could be a problem in a conflict for Western forces. Different allies and partners not being able to work together seamlessly would be an asset for potential adversaries. Moreover, any tensions between the US and the EU would increase if former President Trump (or a Trump-like President) were to be elected in 2024, as they would most probably react to any protectionism coming from the European defense market or find the war in Ukraine irrelevant to the national security of the US. More threats to European security still exist and the economic impact of the war in Ukraine is likely to exacerbate instability among Europe’s southern neighbors, unleashing vast waves of desperate immigrants towards the EU. The Union can provide significant military support and draw on its extensive trade, development and financial assistance measures, helping partners become more resilient. Europe can no longer afford to take its own security for granted: Putin’s war of aggression against Ukraine has shown that defending European values and interests is a matter of life and death.

5.4. The Possibility of a Long War

In a long war inevitably the goals of both sides gradually evolve. Georges Clemenceau, the prime minister of France at the end of World War I, once said that “for

all the horrors and hardships of waging war, making peace can be even harder.” Ukraine immensely depends on the Western powers to survive from this war and, undoubtedly, those Western powers are led by the US which, according to the US Congressional Research Service, has actually spent a total of \$113 billion in security, economic and humanitarian aid to Ukraine since February 2022 (Zengerle, 2023). However, if the war is destined to last long, allies and partners, as well as resources, will become more and more precious. Much of the final outcome will depend on whether the West continues to provide economic and military aid. At the end of World War I, collapsing wartime alliances, revolutionary outbreaks, territorial conflicts and a shift in the international balance of power were among the challenges peacemakers faced when they met in Paris in 1919 to create stability in a world in turmoil.

Since the Russian forces have been pushed back from Kyiv, because of the small number of forces initially engaged by Putin and Ukrainian military’s effectiveness due to previous NATO training, European governments have been showing signs of complacency. However, under both neorealist and neoclassical realist perspectives, caution against underestimating Russia’s military capabilities and stressing the importance of adapting and maintaining Western defenses is vital. Neorealists would emphasize that Russia remains a major military power with, contrary to Ukraine, armed forces highly capable of replenishing their ammunition stocks and human resources. Even though the Russian armed forces may have faced initial setbacks, these should not lead to underestimation, as Moscow has the resources and the ability to adapt. Neorealists would also acknowledge that states learn from their mistakes and adapt. Russia’s tactics in Donbas may have been brutal, but they have achieved objectives in terms of territorial gains. It’s expected that Moscow will continue to refine its strategies. Under the neorealist perspective, it is vital that the US-EU defense system within NATO focused on maintaining and enhancing its own military capabilities to deter the Russian aggression and address potential spillover to more Eastern European countries. This includes replenishing stockpiles and procuring weapons and munitions for a prolonged conflict, if necessary, as identified by the European Commission, which, in only two months’ time, agreed on a historic program called Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) to finance the ramp-up of its defense industrial base to support Ukraine and the security of Europe (Tidey, 2023). This decision is extraordinary as the EU is essentially an intergovernmental organization comprising of twenty-seven sovereign member states each one of which prioritizes their own national interests when responding to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In this light, the fact that ASAP, apart from being a mechanism for helping Ukraine is actually an instrument that bolsters the resilience of European industry, helps address the dissident voices in the EU, such as

Marc Botenga, a Belgian MEP from The Left group who has been very critical of the outcome, describing it as a "historical error that violates Article 41.2 of the EU Treaty, which prohibits expenditure arising from operations having military or defense implication from being charged to the EU budget." (Genovese, 2023). Even though they have limited central authority compared to individual member states, the EU's supranational institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, have come to prove that, under the neorealist perspective and against a common threat, they can acquire the power and capability to formulate and implement a unified and forceful response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. As EU member states have different economic, historical and geopolitical ties to both Russia and Ukraine, this diversity could have made it challenging for the EU to adopt a uniform stance on the conflict. Constraints and complexities in international politics, especially within regional organizations, like the EU, are always present, with member states prioritizing their national interests and possibly acting cautiously to avoid provoking Russia by creating a security dilemma, or taking actions that have unfavorable consequences, such as imposing heavy economic sanctions on Russia that ultimately harm their own economies.

5.5. Neoclassical Realism in the EU

Under the neoclassical realist perspective, the role of domestic politics and economic constraints in shaping foreign policy decisions and defense priorities should also be considered. Neoclassical realists would agree with the European Commission's assessment that replenishing stockpiles is a priority. At the same time, they might also consider the domestic economic and political implications of defense spending for Western countries and the need for them to balance their national interests with collective security concerns. This could involve a nuanced approach to arms procurement, considering both the need for immediate defense priorities and the long-term economic implications. Moreover, major global events, such as international health or climate crises or the Israeli-Palestinian war could also influence foreign policy decisions by altering priorities and strategies. Perceived threats or opportunities in the international system can always drive changes in defense cooperation.

The ongoing Russian war in Ukraine has triggered a significant transformation in the US-EU defense relationship, particularly within the framework of NATO. This transformation has been marked by an unanticipated and unprecedented surge in balancing behavior among the stakeholders, all united in response to the common and imminent threat posed by the Russian aggression. However, it is crucial to recognize

that the evolving nature of the conflict itself introduces a dynamic element into the equation. As the war takes unexpected twists and turns, the levels of threat perception among the stakeholders are subject to continuous change.

This fluidity in threat perception sets the stage for two potential outcomes. On the one hand, it could solidify the US-EU defense relationship even further as the stakeholders respond collectively and adaptively to emerging challenges. This could lead to a stronger and more cohesive front against the Russian aggression, enhancing the security of the entire NATO alliance. On the other hand, there is a risk that prolonged conflict and shifting perceptions of the existing threat may give rise to war fatigue among some member states. As the war persists, individual nations may begin to prioritize their own interests over collective defense efforts. This shift in focus could undermine the unity of NATO and potentially weaken its effectiveness in countering the Russian aggression.

Balancing the imperative of collective defense with the diverse and evolving interests of individual member states will undoubtedly pose an ongoing and complex challenge for the future of the US-EU defense relationship in NATO. The ability to strike this balance will be pivotal in determining whether the alliance emerges from this crisis even more solidified or faces the risk of internal divisions due to the pressures of a possibly protracted conflict.

6. Inside the US's Political System

6.1. Increased Polarization in the US Congress and Society

While the international system is subject to constant changes, highly affecting the world's balance of power, other variables, such as economy and public opinion never cease to flow and alter, impacting core policy decision makers to a great extent. Economic effects of the war on NATO members themselves, including the potential impact of runaway inflation on American policy, are of particular concern. The domestic foundations of US foreign policy are much more fragile than they once were. The cross-party center that prevailed during the Cold War is long gone, giving way not just to polarization but to a strong kind of neo-isolationist sentiment on the right. Former President Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy was a symptom of this inward turn. Current US President Biden's "foreign policy for the middle class" has signaled that Democrats too are receptive to the electorate's desire for Washington to spend more time and resources solving problems at home rather than abroad. Biden's withdrawal

from Afghanistan in August 2021 succeeded on this front. His ambitious agenda for domestic investment and renewal also aimed to improve the lives of Americans, get the middle class back on its feet and rebuild the nation's political center.

However, war in Ukraine, along with a perpetual gridlock in the US Congress, have sidelined this critical domestic correction agenda. The provision of military and economic aid to Ukraine may have enjoyed an unusual level of cross-party support when the war first broke out. However, this kind of support is poised to fizzle out as 2024 elections approach. The war, which has added to the supply-chain disruptions previously caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, is contributing to economic conditions that favor the Republicans' "America First" fraction. Inflation in the US is at 40-year highs while prices of gas, food and other essentials continue to climb. While the stock market appears strong, there are still fears of an impending recession. War in Ukraine is not the sole cause of these economic trials but it definitely plays an important role. It also absorbs the political capital and valuable time of the Biden administration.

Against this backdrop, making a prediction about the stance of the Republican group that would make the decisions in Congress after 2024 is unsafe. However, the party is likely to lean further in the "America first" direction. For example, J.D. Vance, a Republican from Ohio, emboldened by Trump's support, won a highly lopsided Ohio Senate primary in November 2022. His views on the war in Ukraine were indicative: "I think it's ridiculous that we're focusing on this border of Ukraine. I have to be honest with you, I don't really care what happens in Ukraine one way or the other." Moreover, in February 2023, US House Representative Matt Gaetz, a Republican from Florida, introduced a bill to cut off all US military and economic aid to Ukraine. Later that month, Republicans of the House Oversight Committee decided to mark the anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine by launching an investigation into Washington's financial aid to Kyiv, arguing that "it's time for the White House to deliver the evidence to assure that American taxpayer dollars are not lost to waste, fraud or abuse." Gaetz called his legislative action a "Ukraine Fatigue" resolution and Republicans of the House Oversight Committee have been encouraging the idea that such fatigue is widespread among Americans (Gaetz, 2023). However, it is not American taxpayers who will gain from these Republican efforts to limit support to Ukraine: Russia is counting on the West to get tired of helping the Ukrainians in their struggle and members of the anti-Ukraine faction of the Republican Party have been helping Russia achieve its goal.

6.2. Ukraine's War Overshadowed by New Crises

Outside Ukraine, other crises are now dominant, such as that of the war between Israel and Palestine, which is highly destabilizing the Middle East region and driving attention away from Ukraine's cause. Following the Hamas-led horrific terrorist attack on Israel, on October 7, 2023, the Biden administration has asked Congress to approve a \$106 billion package of emergency aid for Israel and Ukraine, as well as for the southern US border and other humanitarian needs (Garrity, 2023). However, Mike Johnson, the conservative US Speaker of the House, which was elected in October 2023, promised that the first bill he would introduce in the House would be in support of Israel, one of the few areas of bipartisan agreement (Debusmann et al, 2023).

Moreover, among the most predominant presidential candidates of the US Republican Party, except from former President Donald Trump, the ones with the highest poll numbers, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and the entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, are the most rejective of the Ukrainian case. Conservatives and social conservatives of the GOP—which support a robust defense of allied democracies in the context of the NATO Alliance and include figures such as former Vice President Mike Pence and US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell—remain well represented on Capitol Hill and in Washington think tanks. However, among the Republican electorate, that vision is falling flat. The GOP base sees China as a far greater threat than Russia and many Republicans see a tradeoff between supporting Ukraine and addressing domestic problems. In fact, in June 2023, 50 percent of Republicans believed that Washington was overdoing its support for Ukraine, up from the 43 percent recorded when the war began. In addition to this, 49 percent of Republicans preferred to end the conflict quickly, even if doing so would allow Russia to keep captured territory (Younis, 2023).

6.3. EU Withdrawing its Support from Ukraine?

Against this context, the right-wing, Trump-aligned faction of the Republican Party, is pushing back against the US budget and, in particular, against more assistance to Ukraine, while, in Europe, Poland has suspended the transfer of arms to Ukraine, due to a disagreement over imports of Ukrainian grain. United Nation's annual meeting in September 2023 was a critical moment for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in order for him to reach out to publics and governments alike and to shore up support for continuing assistance to Ukraine. Since Ukraine's initial military successes, the dynamic on the battlefield has shifted in Russia's favor, which is one of the reasons France, Germany, Italy and other US allies are pushing for a turnaround to diplomacy. However, so far, Washington has resisted. As President Biden put it in June 2022, "I will not pressure the Ukrainian government — privately or publicly — to make any territorial

concessions." However, continuing the war might mean more loss of life, treasure and territory and no gains on the battlefield for Kyiv. Moreover, the longer the war continues, the greater the risk of escalation might be, whether by design or by accident, while, at the same time, the more prolonged and severe its disruptions will become to the world economy and food supplies. Furthermore, NATO members in Eastern Europe which have reduced their own stockpiles of weapons will need continuous resupply. Owing to these necessities, the containment of Russia and the preservation of Ukrainian sovereignty should be first-order interests, for the US as well as for the EU. These strategic goals should not depend on the charisma of any Ukrainian politician or on the constant presentation of images of horrific violence through the media. Western indifference or impatience would serve as Russia's ultimate weapons: were the US and NATO members to lose interest in Ukraine, Russia might well declare the war a strategic triumph, even if it remained mired in its conflict with Ukraine. Moreover, such a development might be seen globally as a triumph for Moscow.

Overall, a feeling of detachment could take hold in the West, especially if the war shifts increasingly to Russian territory through drone strikes or other kinds of attacks. Even though they may be necessary for Ukrainian self-defense and morale, such attacks could become politically costly as, in some cases, they may contribute to "both-sides-ism" in Western debates, namely a tendency to treat all policy debates as if the opposing sides present equally strong arguments or are equally valid or dangerous. Italy's government is already dominated by internal disputes over arms supplies to Ukraine and German leaders continue to disagree over the delivery of heavy weapons. French President Emmanuel Macron may have been re-elected in France in April 2022 but around 40% of the electorate has voted for Marine Le Pen, a far-right candidate who supports Russian President Putin and has promised to withdraw France from NATO military command, a possibility that should be taken seriously into consideration given the fact that Le Pen's party, the National Rally, has actually jumped from eight to eighty-nine seats. Undoubtedly, French President Macron's loss of an absolute majority in the lower house of parliament is nothing less but another sign of popular discontent. Moreover, in the EU, Hungary, an EU and NATO member that is clearly unenthusiastic about Ukraine's cause, remains an outlier, openly arguing that EU's strategy on Ukraine "has failed" (Than et al, 2023).

6.4. Is NATO at War with Russia?

As a military Alliance, NATO is charged with carrying out the common will of its member states. However, with a current number of 31 members, quick consensus is not

an easy task. Individual member states can act much more quickly outside the confines of NATO decision-making. This is one reason the US-led coordination effort on Ukraine has been effective in the short term, proceeding without the need to reach agreement from all allies. This way arms deliveries have been more responsive to immediate needs on the battlefield. NATO allies have also been careful not to walk the fine line between supporting Ukraine and appearing to be in direct confrontation with Russia. It is one thing for a member state to provide weapons and another for the alliance to do so. However, with every member of the NATO alliance providing some form of aid to Ukraine (military, financial or humanitarian), NATO is practically engaged in the war without actually having "NATO boots on the ground" but through coordinating support between its member states.

NATO was created to prevent a major war in Europe, a task accomplished for almost eight decades. However - except from the 1999 brief Kosovo war in the Balkans - until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its members never had to fight together or coordinate a joint response to aggression. NATO's response thus offers new and real evidence of how modern alliances work in practice. Moreover, in the case of war in Ukraine, the neorealist theory that states form alliances not to hedge against forces but to hedge against threats has been vindicated (Walt, 2023).

Furthermore, so far public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic has been supportive on the cause of Ukraine to an overwhelming degree. There has been very impressive transatlantic unity on this issue from the very beginning of the full-scale invasion. Several factors have contributed to maintaining strong public support for Ukraine. One of them is an undeniable truth: people across the EU and the US have felt a greater kinship and closeness - both cultural and geographical - with Ukraine, the Ukrainians and their struggle for freedom than with other countries and peoples in crisis. Ukrainian refugees have arguably been more welcomed in Europe than those fleeing conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. This is partly because Ukraine is a predominantly white, Christian country and attracts more sympathy from the predominantly white, Christian public than countries involved in conflict in the global South. Simply put, Ukrainians do not have to deal with the racism that other refugees usually face. Furthermore, many Europeans see Ukraine as the bulwark against further Russian aggression in Europe (Jankowicz et Southern, 2023).

Notwithstanding the above, it seems that softening can already be seen on both sides of the Atlantic: this is not inconceivable because, as the world nears the election cycle in the US as well as in some of the EU capitals, with Republicans deeply divided over the whole question of Ukraine, keeping as much domestic support for Ukraine might not be as easy looking forward as it has been looking back. There is an isolationist strain

that has always existed in the Republican base. According to US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, "Republicans are increasingly divided over American support for Ukraine: the party's traditional hawkish voices face a loud array of anti-war voices from the MAGA (i.e. Make America Great Again) wing of the party led by former President Trump. After 18 months of grinding conflict, reports about the death of Republican support for strong American leadership in the world have been greatly exaggerated" (Shaw, 2023). However, McConnell argues that "My party's leaders overwhelmingly support a strong, involved America and a robust trans-Atlantic alliance. Don't look at Twitter, look at people in power" (Kraushaar, 2023).

6.5. A War with Dangerous Possibilities

Ukrainians remain deeply committed to winning the war with Russia -- although slightly less so than they were in the early months of the war. Three in five (60 percent) Ukrainians interviewed in July and August 2023 said they want Ukraine to keep fighting until it wins, twice as many as those who want Ukraine to negotiate to end the war as soon as possible (31 percent). Ukrainians' commitment is slightly muted from what it was in September 2022, when 70 percent of Ukrainians said they wanted their country to keep fighting but the majority still staunchly support the war. Among them, 91 percent believe that victory means regaining all territory lost between 2014 and now, including Crimea. This percentage hasn't changed since 2022 (Vigers, 2023).

However, support for Ukraine in the US and in the EU cannot come as "carte blanche". All foreign policy choices should be put to the test of elections, although priorities should be safeguarded. Legislation and far-sighted budgets should include, if possible, financial support and security guarantees for Ukraine. For example, in the EU, the European Commission has proposed allocating for 2024–27 more than \$50 billion to Ukraine's recovery, reconstruction and modernization (Baczynska, 2023).

The war in Ukraine has transformative effects on the international order as it has the power to shape the future of NATO and the EU. The neorealist theory of international anarchy has proved itself in Ukraine: states which don't have a respect for other states' sovereignty and territorial integrity can invade their neighbor and claim what is allegedly theirs through historical grievances, without any overarching authority powerful enough to punish this behavior, even though this reality renders the international environment highly unstable.

Moreover, the war has direct implications on the security and economy in the broader Europe and in the US as well, even though US and EU forces are not directly

engaged with the war as these entities are simply providing the Ukrainian military the means to defend itself, at the same time strengthening the defensive posture along NATO's Eastern flank. However, if Ukraine were to prove itself unsuccessful, this would consolidate the existing fear that the US and the EU would be bound to face a long and catastrophic stalemate that would cause the Western-led international order to cease to exist, leading to European and global instability.

Against this context, the US and the EU have a vested interest in helping Ukraine recover as much as possible of its territory and, ideally, restore full territorial integrity. At the same time, the West has to have democratic support for its military and economic assistance to Ukraine and it should not set expectations that are unrealistic. The Biden administration's mantra is that it's going to support Ukraine "for as long as it takes". However, Ukraine does not have time "for as long as it takes." The US and the EU should attempt to pivot Russia and Ukraine to the negotiating table. The threat that populism poses to the US, as well as to the EU, namely Paris, Berlin and other EU capitals, is of almost equal importance to the threat Russia poses to the world order. A long war, apart from working to the advantage of the far-right, could open up a lot of dangerous possibilities. The threat of using nuclear weapons on the part of Russia - even just for demonstrating purposes - being one of them (Faulconbridge, 2022). Above all, there are events that underscore that this is a dangerous war: possibilities for the war to become direct between Russia and NATO are not insubstantial (Frederick et al, 2023).

7. More Takeaways from the War

7.1. Vegetarians in a World of Carnivores

Not too often in the recent history of Europe has a full-scale war broken out, openly defying the borders of a state. In fact, after the end of World War II, Europe has gone through a long period of stability of almost eighty years where its security architecture, mainly based on the NATO alliance and the indisputable leadership of the US, has resulted in a reduced European defense industrial base and low levels of European ammunition stocks. "Europe wasn't built for our era of hard power and war. Europeans are vegetarians in a world of carnivores, from Russia and China to the US." (Kluth, 2023). The idea of a hot war in Europe was being either totally irrelevant or unthinkable until Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukraine, a geostrategic development that occurred on February 24, 2022. However, by the time this paper is written, having already been assimilated by the structure of the global security environment, it dramatically brought

back to light the importance of military and economic power in the international system, altering Europe's security architecture needs and making clear that the world is drastically moving towards a new balance of power. This sudden turn of events found the EU trying, amidst former US President Trump's threats to withdraw the US from NATO and Great Britain's "divorce" from the EU, to strengthen its capability of protecting its citizens by changing its role from a soft into a hard security provider and achieving its own minimum level of strategic autonomy. "Europe", according to EU's High Representative, Jozep Borrell, had to "quickly learn to speak the language of power" (European External Action Service (2020).

Intrigued by these profound geostrategic developments, the author of this paper has tried to deal with the novel issue of what a hot war at the heart of Eastern Europe could signify in the era of a multipolar world, where not only the US but China and Russia also seek to increase their own weight in the global balance of power. It has also tried to answer the following questions: is there a causal relationship between the war in Ukraine and changes happening in the transatlantic relationship? How is war affecting this relationship's future dynamics? Is Europe poised to permanently follow the, within NATO, US-led security architecture?

The importance and contribution of this research paper lies in the fact that it delves into both the US's and the EU's short and long-term responses to the Russian war in Ukraine, within the context of the NATO alliance and brings into light answers on how and to what extent this major event at the heart of Eastern Europe has impacted (or failed to impact) the current dynamic of the transatlantic relationship, as well as its potential for the years to come. In fact, the paper shows how war in Ukraine and the changes in the transatlantic relationship can create a complex dynamic where causality between the two variables (war and the transatlantic relationship) is not unidirectional as the transatlantic relationship itself has played a crucial role to the war in Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2015; Mearsheimer et Rosato, 2023). Furthermore, the paper suggests further issues that should be discussed, such as whether the changes in the EU's security architecture are of permanent nature or what are the most appropriate policies that the US should follow in order to lower the level of threat that the Russian aggression poses to the European continent, at a time when our world is at an "inflection point" (US National Security Strategy, 2022).

To address these issues, this paper has adopted the qualitative research methodology, which includes a systematic review of the relevant official statements of the US, NATO and the EU's key representatives and officials. It also includes the review and analysis of relevant literature, published in official websites of online press of known credibility. More specifically, through the qualitative document analysis method, this

paper has delved into national security documents, such as the US's National Security Strategy, the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO 's Strategic Concept, in order to find common ground and / or a minimum denominator.

The findings of the above research were interpreted through the prism of the international relations theories of neorealism and neoclassical realism as, especially in the context of a multipolar world, both these theories can offer meaningful insights on how states interact in the international environment, based on the assumption that states are forced to exist in an inherently anarchic international system where, in the absence of a higher authority that can protect them, the balance of power - economic and military - among them plays an extremely important role. More specifically, this paper takes into account the further nuanced neorealist theory of the balance of threat, according to which, states tend to form alliances in order to balance not against mere power but against threat, if this threat is imminent and possesses offensive capabilities and intentions (Walt, 2022a).

7.2. Findings of This Research Paper – on the EU

The first and most prominent finding of the research conducted was that the “special military operation” of the Russian offensive was perceived as an imminent, real and major threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty not only of Ukraine but of all European countries, especially those neighboring Ukraine (e.g. Poland). The renewed, after the weakness of the 1990's, and aggregate power of the Russian state, coupled with its nuclear capabilities and offensive intentions, brought together almost all member states of the EU in an unexpected balancing behavior against the threat of the Russian aggression. Europe found itself in agony whether Kyiv or some other European capital would be Moscow's new Berlin, that is to say, what would be the limit of the Russian aggression. US's immense amount of economic, military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, that exceeded \$113 billion (US Government, 2023), and without which Ukraine could not contain the Russian aggression, has made the European defense, however powerful, seem inadequate.

This realization has mitigated the European squeamishness about following the US lead when necessary. After the breaking out of the invasion, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has stated that “strategic autonomy does not mean that you cannot cooperate with like-minded partners” while the EU Council President, Charles Michel, commenting on the issue in 2023, has stated that “strong Alliances are made of strong allies”. The term “autonomy” was no longer used by the

EU in the sense of a “self-sufficient” organization but in the sense of a - slightly - more self-confident member of a broader strong alliance.

Key member states of the European defense community, such as France, have acknowledged US’s central role in providing materiel and intelligence to Ukraine (Rauhala, 2023). Germany, EU’s largest economy (Rao, 2023), has also acknowledged the fundamental challenge posed by Russia’s aggression, prompting a focus on NATO’s capability targets and the urgent need to address structural deficits in Bundeswehr, Germany’s armed forces (the Federal Government of Germany, 2023). Finland’s direct proximity and Sweden’s neighboring with the Russian state have also resulted to their immediate bids to join the transatlantic alliance, abandoning decades of traditional neutrality and defying Russian threats for retaliation, thus vindicating Walt’s balance of threat theory (Walt, 2022a). This resulted to a renewed lease on life for the transatlantic alliance. NATO, which was on the verge of decline, as part of Europe’s basic security architecture, has reassumed a heightened role as the leading factor of European security and its 'defender of last resort' (Howorth, 2023). If crises create opportunities, then the Russian invasion of Ukraine was NATO’s opportunity for a renewed existence in Europe, a development that does not lack complexity as Ukraine’s bid to join NATO and abandon neutrality, had allegedly been the primary cause of the Russian aggression (Mearsheimer, 2015; Mearsheimer et Rosato, 2023).

7.3. Findings of This Research Paper – on the US

Russia’s war on Ukraine did not represent a direct existential threat for the US’s national security. Therefore, the US’s response to this geostrategic development was seen in light of the neoclassical realist theory, according to which, the international systemic conditions are filtered and interpreted via a limited number of domestic intervening variables (Rose, 1998). Through this prism, war in Ukraine had to be interpreted for the US via the personal perceptions and beliefs of its core policymakers. Research conducted under this theory has found that US President Biden “is a creature of the Cold War era. The old Soviet Union was a superpower rival of the United States for the first half of his 36-year Senate tenure until it collapsed in December 1991” (Thornberry, 2023). Furthermore, President Biden, during its time of Vice Presidency in the Obama administration (2009-2017), was in charge of the Ukraine portfolio and to a great extent responsible and vulnerable to criticism for the outcome of the Crimea Crisis in 2014. Thus, in a wide sense, he is “tied to Ukraine policy” (Spetalnick, 2014). These features of President Biden, together with the need of the US to confirm its place in the international system as the indisputable hegemon, whose sphere of influence in eastern

Europe is being challenged, have driven the US administration to provide immense support to the Ukrainians. Research has also shown that some US core policymakers advocate for a more assertive stance against Russia (McConnell, 2023a), while others emphasize the need to avoid conflicts with major powers (Gaetz, 2023).

It is worth noting, however, that, according to research, there has been no credible evidence that Russia started its war with the intention to conquer the whole of Ukraine, much less any other European country, but tried instead to stop it from entering NATO and the EU. This had to be done either by ousting the government of Kyiv or by transforming Ukraine into a dysfunctional rump state (Mearsheimer et Rosato, 2023). In addition, according to the balance of power theory, the US should seek to make the third pole of power in the existing international system, namely Russia, an ally, in order to be able to pivot to Asia and balance its only peer competitor, China.

However, as the war is gradually being assimilated by the global security environment, signs of war fatigue have begun to show. In the US, the war is revealing long-term fractures within the political class, particularly regarding support for Ukraine, while potential shifts in policy should be anticipated as the war further unfolds in Russia's favor. Total commitments from all major European donors, including non-EU countries, such as Germany, the Nordic countries, Canada and Great Britain, have now nearly doubled those of the US, with a notable shift compared to the early stages of the war when the US led in aid contributions (Trebesch, 2023).

As the US aid cannot be permanent nor adequate to defeat the Russian aggression, the EU will have to resort once again to “autonomy”, this time in the sense of “self-sufficiency”. Resolving the Russia-Ukraine war will not be an easy task. Russian President's conditions for peace describe what is essentially a Finlandized Ukraine: strictly neutral, limited in its military power, forced to recognize Russia's annexation of all occupied territories, and only following policies that Russia approves (Jenkins, 2023). Ukraine could never accept any of these conditions in the foreseeable future. As leading US political scientist John Mearsheimer argues, “there is no way you can square that circle” (Lo, 2023).

As this paper is coming to its end, it would be worth noting that future researchers could complement a qualitative study such as this one with quantitative analysis: it would be valuable to see the amount of defense purchases made by the EU countries from the US over the past 20 years - and how trends may have changed as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as a proxy for either greater EU commitment to NATO or more interoperability in the EU's defense.

Conclusion

Several fronts will define the future of our world in 2024: the war in Ukraine and how it unfolds on the battlefield, the upcoming elections in the EU Parliament and in Russia, crises such as the war in Gaza, but, most importantly, the domestic US scene. Should Donald Trump return to the White House, his approach on Ukraine as “not important” would not leave both the transatlantic relationship and European security unaffected. The EU may have to reset its response to the war, surpass the US in aid to Ukraine and in essence test its plans for strategic autonomy once more. After all, it’s the European security environment that has been put in harm’s way. It already has to balance between collective security in Europe and the contrasting national interests of its member states. Furthermore, any Republican candidate for the US Presidential elections will not be able to escape the need to secure the endorsement of Trump or the leaders of his MAGA movement. This could strengthen neo-isolationism in the US.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has unexpectedly brought back to the international scene ghosts of the past: a long, hot war in Europe. However, it has done so in a quite novel way: at no other time in NATO’s history has the alliance been tested in such a war between Russia and the West, even if it’s a proxy one, so far not having asked for NATO boots on the ground. Being in a virtual new ‘cold war’, this time with China, the US should have Russia on its side. Instead, through its bid for NATO’s eastward expansion, the US and its NATO allies failed to foresee Russia’s response to this security dilemma and are now facing a serious test in their economy and military resources - joining the West in balancing China would understandably not make any sense for Putin or his immediate successor.

The future will show for how long this war will last and in what ways it is going to alter the borders of Ukraine and the security environment of the European continent as a whole – it could possibly end up as a frozen conflict and a serious source of continuous instability in Europe. Well past the US’s unipolar moment in history, the new reality of the international environment is tenacious and cannot be overlooked. The US and the EU cannot afford not to adapt to this new reality.

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