

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has united much of the West in response to a perceived threat to common values and interests. But previous cultural, political, and economic fault lines between among Western allies and partners have not disappeared. To what extent have they been reduced? Precisely how committed are NATO's members be to upholding a common defense? How durable is cooperation in the face of the Russian threat? And will the challenge of right-wing populism in France, Hungary, Poland, and Italy further undermine the cohesion of the European Union as well as democratic norms and institutions?

Europe and the United States: Maintaining Common Values and Interests

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Executive Summary

- The Transatlantic relationship is arguably being tested to a greater degree than at any point since the end of the Second World War. Nevertheless, in the face of unprecedented economic, political, and security pressures it has held together – and surprisingly, these challenges may yet drive the democracies of North America and Europe closer together. But the potential for disagreement over Ukraine, driven by the pressures of domestic politics, remains.
- Policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic will need to work together to meet the many challenges facing the international community today, while still upholding their values as democratic societies. Most pressing now is the threat posed by Russia, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and other state actors to the rules-based international order; however, the West must also confront more amorphous transnational issues – among them climate change, rising authoritarianism in much of the world, energy (in)security, migration, and violent extremism – that will continue to have salience over the long term.

Introduction

Nearly 20 years ago, during the lead-up and aftermath of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in the eyes of many observers the U.S. relationship with many of its European allies was at a nadir. "It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world, or even that they occupy the same world ... [O]n major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus[.]" wrote Robert Kagan that year.ⁱ Writing in 2002, Charles Kupchan posited that "[a] once united West appears well on its way to separating into competing halves ... As Byzantium did with Rome when it separated from its former overseer, the EU is making a run at the United States. And just as the Byzantines and the Romans parted ways over values and interests, so have the Europeans and the Americans."ⁱⁱ

Over the past decade the geostrategic environment has changed to such an extent that this narrative is rarely expressed in such stark terms, and developments in Europe and beyond have reaffirmed the critical importance of the U.S.-European relationship. The U.S. National Security

Strategy released earlier this month states, “With a relationship rooted in shared democratic values, common interests, and historic ties, the transatlantic relationship is a vital platform on which many other elements of our foreign policy are built. Europe has been, and will continue to be, our foundational partner in addressing the full range of global challenges.”ⁱⁱⁱ The rise of ISIL in the Levant, Africa, and Central Asia; the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014; the COVID-19 pandemic; and now Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – among other developments around the world – have underscored the extent to which interests and values are still shared on both sides of the Atlantic.

At the same time, many knowledgeable observers are alarmed by the challenges facing Western democracy not just from without but from within.^{iv} The rise of illiberalism and democratic backsliding in the West over the past decade is the primary source of this concern. To contain this threat to democracy will require concerted effort on both sides of the Atlantic to bolster democratic norms, values, and institutions.^v

Challenges in Europe

The most pressing security concern for the United States and Europe currently is, of course, Russia’s continued aggression in Ukraine. While the European Continent has enjoyed a relative peace in the 21st century, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine this February (and it is important not to forget that Russia has annexed Crimea and destabilized Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region since 2014) arguably represents the most significant challenge in Europe since the end of the Cold War.

While there are certainly differences between Washington and European capitals (and among states in Europe themselves) over how best to address the war in Ukraine, the West has largely stood united in confronting Russia’s aggression toward its sovereign and democratic neighbor. Between January and October of this year, the United States, the European Union, and individual European countries have dedicated over \$90 billion in aid to Ukraine – including non-NATO members Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, and Finland.^{vi} Meanwhile, NATO countries have provided so much military aid to Ukraine that they are reportedly running low on munitions to send,^{vii} and European leaders recently announced their intention to launch a “new Marshall Plan” to help Ukraine rebuild after the end of the conflict.^{viii} The war has even driven neutral Sweden and Finland – both members of the EU but not of NATO – to request to join the alliance.^{ix}

Still, fissures remain. Recent public polling has found that “[a] majority of Germans don’t consider Russia a significant military threat to Germany, oppose a military leadership role in Europe for their country and prefer restraint on the world stage.”^x Moreover, Germany has recently come under criticism by several prominent European leaders for what they describe as a slow and insufficient response to the war – speaking in Berlin, the Latvian defense minister asked “Can we trust Germany? ... ‘You say ‘We are there for you.’ But do you have the political will?’”^{xi}

Beyond Ukraine, tensions in Southern and Eastern Europe will continue to pose a challenge. The government of Serbia still refuses to recognize the independence of neighboring Kosovo, and recent frictions in northern Kosovo led NATO and European leaders to attempt to

deescalate the situation.^{xii} The long-simmering disagreement between NATO members Turkey and Greece over territorial rights in the Aegean Sea demonstrates that conflicting interests can serve as a wedge within the alliance itself.^{xiii} Farther afield, another round of fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region caused the deaths of over 100 people.^{xiv} Perhaps most important, the United States and Europe must grapple with how to respond to China, perhaps the most pressing challenge to transatlantic values and interests since World War II.

Ukraine, the EU, and NATO:

Vladimir Putin's likely expectation that his invasion of Ukraine would produce an outcome similar to the military and political collapse of France in 1940 was not entirely illogical but nevertheless profoundly mistaken. Much like France before the German invasion, Ukraine in the decades after the Soviet demise in 1991 was hobbled by ideological, political, social, and cultural divisions, particularly between different "eastern" and "western" identities. And while France was fatally undermined by the weak legitimacy of the Third Republic, in Ukraine both the regime and the state often seemed to lack sufficient coherence and authority among key segments of elites and mass publics to maintain a stable national identity. In 2012, over twenty years after Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991, only 36% of respondents stated they would "definitely" support the declaration "today."

Halting processes of democratization as well as state- and nation-building reduced these divides somewhat in the years after independence in 1991. But, as a leading Russian historian observed, it was the trauma of Putin's invasion of 2022 that fundamentally accelerated the formation of a unified Ukrainian identity with opposition to Russia as its core element. In March 2021, about a year before the invasion, only 55% of respondents in a survey responded negatively to the question: "Do you agree that Russians and Ukrainians are one people?" Less than two months (April 2022) after the invasion, 91% of respondents now disagreed with Putin's assertion that Russians and Ukrainians were "the same people." 97% in the West of Ukraine felt this way and 70% in the Russophone East. Similarly, in August 2021, only 49% of respondents held strong feelings of being a Ukrainian citizen. Two months after the invasion, 90% felt this way. For most Ukrainians, citizenship and national identity are now closely linked to the West. 54% of Ukrainians wanted to join the European Union during the Maidan Revolution in 2014. By September 2022, 86% expressed this opinion. 83% overall also supported entry into NATO, including a remarkable 69% in the East. According to a prominent Ukrainian sociologist: "the war has accomplished what Ukraine was unable to do in the course of thirty years of independence."

A central question is whether most Ukrainians will continue to exhibit high levels of wartime resilience and pro-Western attitudes. Much will depend not just on continued public revulsion to Russian brutality and Putin's threat to Ukrainian sovereignty. Ukrainian perceptions of the durability of support from the West are vitally important – the hope and expectation that Ukraine will be admitted to the EU and NATO is now a fundamental component of Ukrainian national identity. But as winter approaches, political and economic protests in Europe against the war, or at least against declining economic conditions associated

with the war, are on the rise. Despite widespread sympathy for Ukraine in Europe, experts expect this tension between “peace” and “justice” to sharpen in coming months.^{xv}

The United States is not immune from these pressures. Calls for direct U.S. negotiations with Russia and a reduction of U.S. military and economic aid to Ukraine are now heard from both political parties. These are still minority voices, but they could increase over time on both the right and left sides of the political spectrum.^{xvi} Inevitably, mounting civilian and military casualties as well as increasing economic distress will also test Ukrainian resolve, particularly if Russia’s Putin escalates, destroying even more vital infrastructure for Ukraine’s towns and cities, and perhaps contemplating the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Under such conditions, the pressure for diplomatic negotiations with Russia is likely to mount in both Ukraine and the West.

In part to address such pressures, the EU and the United States are devising strategies to support reconstruction in Ukraine while the conflict is still underway. One important initiative of the European Commission is to determine how to legally use frozen Russian assets in EU countries to support measures ranging from the resettlement of refugees to the restoration of damaged or destroyed industrial and commercial property. Some 17.4 billion euros (\$17.2 billion) worth of seized assets, in large part from Russian oligarchs, is at stake.

Yet this amount, even if it can be legally channeled to Ukraine, will fall short of Ukraine’s needs now and in the future. The government in Kyiv has estimated that it will need \$3.5 billion a month in 2023 to meet its budget requirement. The Biden administration has pledged \$1.5 billion per month in response, but it is unclear whether the EU will provide the remaining funds. A conference of experts supported by the European Commission meets in late October 2022 to hammer out a proposed blueprint for the reconstruction and modernization of Ukraine. When they emerge, the details of this blueprint for “macro-financial assistance” will provide only an imprecise indication of the extent and duration of the EU commitment to Ukraine.^{xvii} The evidence for this commitment is mixed at this point, reflecting in part the political landscapes noted above. While the EU committed 9 billion euros in assistance to Kyiv in May 2022, only 3 billion euros has reached Ukraine as of late October. And while Brussels is now preparing for a ninth package of restrictive sanctions against Russia as well as Belarus, potential spoilers in the EU, like Hungary under Viktor Orban, are mobilizing domestic political forces to lobby for EU moderation in its policies toward Russia.

The Question of China

Looming in the background of the war in Ukraine is the cautious but undeniable support that China provides Russia. As autocratic and revisionist states, China and Russia are opposed to the international leadership of the American and European democracies. While many Western observers in the past believed that the economic interdependence of Russia and China with the West would moderate their regional and global ambitions (if not liberalize and perhaps democratize their domestic political systems) such expectations were deeply flawed. Much of Europe is now paying a steep economic and political price for its dependence on Russian energy. As the EU develops policies that will eliminate much of this dependence, it is still uncertain whether Europe and the United States can forge coherent, complementary strategies.

The question also remains whether the EU and the United States will apply lessons learned with Russia to the management of their relationship with China. If they do, this would require the transatlantic partners to reduce their economic interdependence with China to the point that the West's political will to respond to any Chinese aggression, particularly against Taiwan, would not be paralyzed by fear of the economic consequences of confronting Beijing. Finding the political determination to engage in such "economic distancing" ^{xviii} with China would likely be significantly more difficult than maintaining the current common front against Russia. China doesn't present the same clear and present danger to Europe and the United States that Russia does, a fact that robs the West of a coherent and pressing threat that would help mobilize political action. China is also much more embedded in Western economies than Russia, making selective de-coupling of the respective economic systems extremely complex. Nevertheless, the United States has already taken a number of steps, across multiple domains, to reduce China's economic footprint.

The EU and Democracy

Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine may also serve as a stress test of European democracy, either reducing or aggravating pre-existing political and socio-cultural pressures and strains. Indeed, in a recent speech Vladimir Putin returned to his common theme that there are "two Europes." ^{xix} For Putin, elites in the West, including the United States, often comprise radical progressives, pro-democracy advocates, and globalists who advance neo-colonial policies (read Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya) and extreme cultural initiatives that attack values rooted in sovereignty, family and religion. Arrayed against these forces, according to Putin, are large parts of the West that adhere to traditional values and are uninterested in interfering in the affairs of other states. This argument is part of a larger effort by Putin to undermine the international position of the United States and the EU by fomenting internal divisions in that bloc and by mobilizing the "global South" against the liberal democratic international order.

Putin's narrative is not entirely fictitious. Putin is attempting to appeal to populism, a powerful political force that threatens the quality and perhaps the stability of democracy in several Western countries, including the United States. Briefly, populism, particularly in its radical form, is rooted in ethnonationalism, cultural traditionalism, economic uncertainty and inequality, authoritarian political culture, and xenophobia. Above all, populism is hostile to incumbent elites and established political institutions as sources of corruption, socio-economic inequality, and the exclusion of mass publics from political power. Driven by voters with deep-seated economic and cultural grievances, populist movements in the West, from the UK, Italy, and Hungary to the United States, have diluted democratic norms and weakened political institutions. The EU itself has long been under attack by populist forces in Europe as an institution run by elites who have forsaken the interests of their respective countries in favor of allegiances to globalization and supra-national organizations -- like the European Union. For years, Putin has supported populist parties in the West in order to foment political division and national disunity.

The war in Ukraine has strengthened mainstream politicians and parties in Europe, demonstrating that populist support for Putin is now a significant political liability. Yet it is unlikely that populism in Europe or the United States is no longer a threat to robust democracy.

Indeed, populism is only one, albeit important, element of the declining strength of democracy in the West as reflected in the long-term erosion of popular trust in political parties and of democratic engagement in political participation. Objective observers in the United States routinely voice concern about the decay of democratic norms and the potential instability of American democratic institutions. In Europe, remarkably, a 2018 German survey found that 42% of respondents held authoritarian views.^{xx}

Despite this evidence, some knowledgeable observers maintain that European democracy remains robust. They point to an explosion in non-traditional forms of political participation, rooted in the virtual world, that enables participants to shed much of the organizational hierarchy and privilege of traditional parties and civic groups. Other experts underscore that existing multi-party systems have the ability to rejuvenate themselves, as in the creation of En Marche! in France. Even established institutions, often excoriated for corruption and elitism, can display a greater commitment to ensuring their members abide by democratic principles. The EU itself is a case in point as it moves with greater deliberation to sanction both Hungary and Poland for violating the democratic norms of the organization and its rules of the game. Conditions may be more intractable in the United States where much of the electorate remains convinced that the 2020 presidential election was stolen.^{xxi}

Conclusion

The silver lining in the tragedy of Ukraine may be that Europe and the United States acquire a renewed appreciation for the bond of democracy. Yet it is too early to say whether such a turn would fully arrest the erosion of the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the democratic process itself in the West. It seems more likely that democratic renewal in the West will remain a work in progress, relying on the determined efforts of citizens to foster, renew, and protect the democratic center from extremist elements. Such determination will rely on the realization that stable, authentic democracy safeguards both the values and interests of citizens.

Questions for Discussion by topic:

NATO

- How united are NATO members in Europe on increasing their contribution to NATO's budget and meeting long-missed targets?
- While the proposed accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO will likely strengthen the alliance, can we expect destabilizing counter-measures on the part of Russia? And will Turkey eventually remove its objections to accepting these new members?

Ukraine

- The EU is committed to "fast-track" membership for Ukraine. What exactly does that mean? What are the prospects that Ukraine might meet EU membership requirements, even in amended form?
- Under what conditions, if at all, should Ukraine be willing to engage in negotiations with Russia to end the conflict?

- What are the prospects for Ukraine's entry into NATO at some point in the future? Would Ukraine's entry into NATO strengthen European security as a whole?
- Given the stakes of the conflict over Ukraine, what are the costs and benefits of a decision by the U.S. and Europe to engage in direct negotiations with Moscow on ending the war?
- What is the best strategy for mobilizing more international support for Ukraine? Is it better for the U.S. to stress that the war is a struggle over territorial integrity and less over democratic values? Is this approach likely to be more appealing to many non-democracies or illiberal democracies in the world?

The EU, the US, and China

- Will the EU and the U.S. forge a common position on responding to an attack by China on Taiwan? What are the obstacles and incentives to such an agreement?
- Do the U.S. and the EU have the political will to reduce their interdependence with the Chinese economy?

Democracy

- How might Europe and the EU work to forge stronger democratic institutions and greater support for democratic norms and values?

Suggested Readings

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- The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of West Point, the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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