

The New Euro-Atlantic Order: NATO, the EU, and the Return of Hard Security

Finja Ullrich

School of Politics, Economics, and Global Affairs , IE University, Madrid, Spain.
International Relations.

E-mail: fullrich.ieu2023@student.ie.edu

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Abstract

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reshaped the Euro-Atlantic Order, redefining NATO's fundamentals, focusing on hard security and collective defence. It undoubtedly united the transatlantic community as the war exposed major shortcomings in Western deterrence, Europe's dependence on U.S. military power, and blind spots toward Russian ambitions. The changing circumstances have led the European allies to increase their defence spending, repositioning themselves on the eastern flank, and evaluating their approach to both Russia and China. These developments have been beneficial for NATO as it revived its relevance on the global stage. Nevertheless, the abrupt changes have also led to consequences that NATO needs to address, for instance differing regional threat perceptions, growing concerns on U.S. commitment, and challenges faced by "Ukraine fatigue". Moreover, the ongoing conflict has also shed light on the limits of Western influence, specifically in the Global South, where reactions have been ambivalent toward Russian aggression. The next steps for NATO would be to secure long-term stability through strengthening deterrence, continuing with diplomatic channels, and improving soft power in the Global South. In sum, how NATO and its alliance proceed will shape the future of international security for decades to come.

Keywords: NATO, European Union, transatlantic alliance, Russia, Ukraine, security policy, burden sharing

1. Introduction

On February 24, 2022, the post-Cold War international order was profoundly disrupted when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹ The war not only undermined Western norms such as respect for sovereignty

and the peaceful resolution of disputes but also marked the most serious security crisis in Europe since World War II.² Nevertheless, it also provoked a positive change in dynamics for the transatlantic alliance. The conflict pushed NATO back towards its core purpose, essentially a return to preparing, training, and arming for the possibility of major war rather than assuming a stable and peaceful

¹ Alina Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance: The Future of European Security, the United States, and the World Order after Russia's War in Ukraine" (Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2023), 3.

² Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 3–5.

international environment.³ It is apparent that the Western nations were shocked by the disturbance caused by Russia and ended years of ambivalence about the post-Soviet threat.⁴ The Russian attack re-strengthened the transatlantic alliance as their shared solidarity over Ukraine has brought them closer together again after the United States and Europe had been progressively dividing over strategic priorities.⁵

The war also highlighted several hard truths for the allies, mainly that deterrence had failed to prevent Russian aggression and exposed the high cost of Western complacency, like underinvestment in European defense,⁶ the high dependency of Russian energy supply,⁷ and the missed possibility of confronting Putin in earlier years (for example, after Crimea 2014).⁸ Adding on by the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA): “Europe is not secure if Ukraine is not secure, and the United States is not secure if Europe is not secure”, indicating the inseparability of

Ukraine’s fate to the U.S. and Europe.⁹

To examine this shift more deeply, this essay asks: How did the Russian invasion of Ukraine reshape the transatlantic alliance? To understand the dimensions of this crisis, this paper will provide a nuanced background on pre-war challenges, NATO and EU dynamics after the war, and possible policy suggestions to ensure security in the West. Ultimately, the transformations set in motion by the Russian war in Ukraine will, without a doubt, reshape Euro-Atlantic security for decades.¹⁰

2. Background Analysis

Before the 2020 Russian invasion, the transatlantic alliance faced widening gaps in strategic interests between the U.S. and Europe.¹¹ As seen after the Cold War, NATO entered a period of uncertainty marked by a continuing shrinkage of defence spending¹². Additionally, conflicts arose between its members when questions arose on Europe’s periphery, for example, during the Balkan wars, when many opposed involvement as it was seen to fall outside NATO’s core area.¹³ The Trump administration further strained relations by questioning U.S. commitment

³ Jana Puglierin and Jeremy Shapiro, “The Art of Vassalisation: How Russia’s War on Ukraine Has Transformed Transatlantic Relations” *ECFR Policy Brief* (April 2023), 3–4; see also Niklas Helwig, “EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 61, no. 5 (2023): 1–3.

⁴ Puglierin and Shapiro, “The Art of Vassalisation”, 2–3.

⁵ Polyakova et al., “A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance”, 3; Puglierin and Shapiro, “Art of Vassalisation”, 4–5.

⁶ Helwig, “EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” 2–3.

⁷ Daniel Dăianu, “The Security of Europe (EU) and Real Politik – The Transatlantic Relationship Is in Great Danger,” *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2025): 6–8.

⁸ Mercedes Sapuppo, “Putin’s Unpunished Crimean Crime Set the Stage for Russia’s 2022 Invasion,” *Atlantic Council*, February 22, 2024.

⁹ Polyakova et al., “A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance”, 3.

¹⁰ Puglierin and Shapiro, “Art of Vassalisation”, 14–15.

¹¹ Marianne Riddervold, “Changing Transatlantic Relations – and What It Means for Europe,” *European Policy Analysis* no. 21 (Stockholm: Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, Oct. 2024), 6.

¹² Jan Techau, “The Politics of 2 Percent: NATO and the Security Vacuum in Europe”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2015), 4.

¹³ F. Stephen Larrabee, “Implications of the Yugoslav Crisis for Transatlantic Relations,” *Chaillot Paper* no. 17 (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2000), 18.

to NATO, urging Europe to start promoting talks of "strategic autonomy".¹⁴ This led to many European leaders, like Angela Merkel at the time, warning about the U.S., quote: "We Europeans have to take our destiny in our own hands."¹⁵ Yet, despite this political rhetoric, Europe remained heavily dependent on U.S. military power, and by early 2022, this reliance had remained unchanged.¹⁶

The consequences of this dependence became clear after Russia's attack, as Western deterrence had been unsuccessful in preventing the war.¹⁷ It had shown that efforts made by NATO through providing support to Ukraine since 2014 and the warning of severe sanctions failed to deter Moscow, resulting in the largest conflict and humanitarian catastrophe in Europe since 1945.¹⁸ It was evident that the alliance had misinterpreted the Kremlin's objectives and prior efforts to defuse tensions, such as the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, were proven ineffective. The war also revealed Western blind spots when many countries in the Global South (India, Brazil, South Africa, and China) reacted with relative indifference to Russia's aggression due to historical grievances, scepticism towards, and alienation from Western priorities.¹⁹

¹⁴ Margriet Drent, "European Strategic Autonomy: Going It Alone?" *Clingendael Institute* (Aug. 2018), 3.

¹⁵ Marcin Grajewski, "The EU Strategic Autonomy Debate", Briefing 2021 (Brussels: European Parliament Research Service, 2021), 1.

¹⁶ Puglierin and Shapiro, "The Art of Vassalisation", 1.

¹⁷ Bettina Renz, "Was the Russian Invasion of Ukraine a Failure of Western Deterrence?," *Parameters* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2023).

¹⁸ Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (University of Alberta), *Historians and the War: Rethinking the Future* (2022), 1.

¹⁹ John R. Deni, "The NATO-Russia Founding Act: A Dead Letter," *Strategic Europe* (Carnegie Endowment for

The transatlantic alliance, paradoxically, led to immediate unity as the crisis made many matters clear for the members.²⁰ It addressed questions like NATO's relevance, as it unanimously recognized that Russia is a present threat to Europe's future and to the international security order.²¹ This was seen clearly in states like Germany, France, and Italy, which were traditionally hesitant about NATO's collective defence mandate, but after the start of the war, deployed forces to the eastern flank and coordinated sanctions.²² The biggest player, the U.S., also reaffirmed its interest in backing Europe after initial fears of different strategic interests (pivot to Asia) as it sent massive military aid to Ukraine (over \$75 billion in total by 2024) and deployed around 100,000 troops to Europe (up from ~65,000 before the war).²³ However, this was under the Biden administration, and while Trump has formally remained largely in its military posture, renewed uncertainty persists.²⁴ Furthermore, neutral-positioned countries that previously opposed joining NATO, such as Finland and Sweden, have joined as members. Even Switzerland and Ireland, which historically stay

International Peace, June 2017); Bettina Renz, "Was the Russian Invasion of Ukraine a Failure of Western Deterrence?," *Parameters* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2023).

²⁰ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 46.

²¹ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 46.

²² Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "NATO Launches 'Eastern Sentry' To Bolster Defenses Near Russia," September 13, 2025.

²³ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 46; Ron Gurantz, "Pretexts for War and the Preinvasion Crisis in Ukraine" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2024), 7; John Vandiver, "US has 100,000 troops in Europe for first time since 2005," *Stars and Stripes*, March 15, 2022.

²⁴ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 46.

uninvolved, have incorporated EU-style sanctions against Russia and provided financial aid to Ukraine.²⁵ The swift change in attitudes of the transatlantic alliance has shown NATO as a strong player against Russian threats. However, it has exposed a continued reliance on the U.S. and insecurities stemming from its imbalance.²⁶

The initial goal of Angela Merkel to pursue efforts towards strategic autonomy gained momentum in 2020 and 2021, notably in France and Belgium, with continued discussion on Europe's capability to defend itself without the help of the U.S.²⁷ It became clear Europe would continue to stay dependent on the U.S. and that Angela's idea was premature with the ongoing conflict.²⁸ Analysts at CEPA noted: "Russia's war in Ukraine underscored Europe's humbling dependence on the United States for defense and security," making it evident that only the U.S. has the military capability to deter Russia.²⁹ After the start of the war, a consensus emerged between European states that, in place of strategic autonomy, the allies should focus on strategic responsibility. Meaning Europe must do more for its own defense while maintaining its partnership with the U.S. close, not apart.³⁰ For instance, in the figure below,

²⁵ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 46.

²⁶ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 45, 49.

²⁷ Niklas Helwig, "EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Europe's Capacity to Act in Times of War," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 61, no. 5 (2023): 39–40.

²⁸ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 45.

²⁹ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 45.

³⁰ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 45.

we see the efforts of European allies increasing their defense spending as a share of real GDP (%). We can see a decrease in U.S. spending as European allies began contributing a larger share towards NATO.

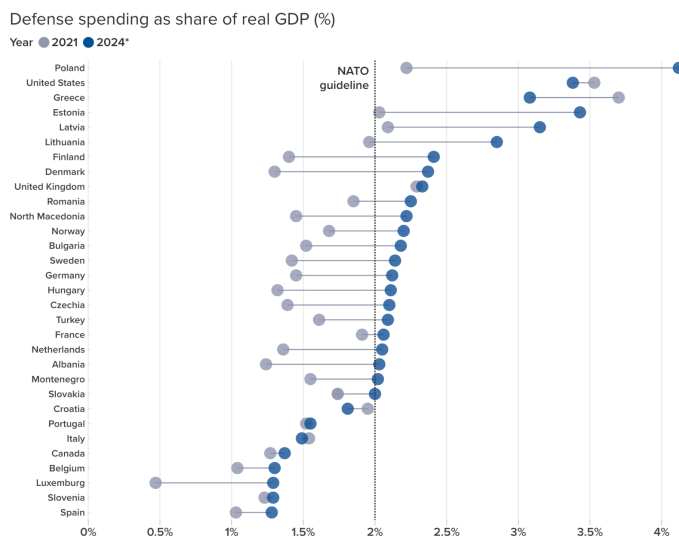


Figure 1: Defense Spending as Share of Real GDP (%)

Source: Falkenek 2024.

In short, the conflict compelled Europe to acknowledge both the necessity of the American security guarantee and the immediate need to strengthen its own contributions within the alliance framework.

3. Discussion of Findings

The Russian invasion of Ukraine most notably reshaped the transatlantic alliance by confronting European allies on their burden-sharing gap, as briefly touched upon. NATO member states are advised to spend 2% of their GDP on defense spending.³¹ Although this is not a legally binding commitment, it is a political one, and it reflects the importance of fair burden sharing. Before the war, the U.S. accounted for the largest expenditure share of

³¹ These Countries Are Actually Making Good on Their NATO Promises, 24/7 Wall St. (Aug. 14, 2024).

military spending in NATO, leading with 3.38% in 2021. Meanwhile, European allies often underfunded the programme, including the Netherlands (1.36%), Germany (1.45%), and Denmark (1.3%).³² The frustration of the U.S. covering the unequal burden was heard during Trump's speech at the NATO leaders meeting in Brussels on May 25, 2017: "NATO members must finally contribute their fair share and meet their financial obligations."³³ But 23 out of 28 member nations are still not paying what they should be paying... This is not fair to the people and taxpayers of the United States."³⁴ The crisis in Europe altered this dynamic; for instance, the alliance's center of gravity shifted eastward with Poland, reaching above 4% of GDP on defense and becoming Europe's largest land army. This eastward shift implies a greater influence for Eastern flank countries in alliance decisions, altering internal dynamics that Western Europe has long dominated. Moreover, in 2024, a record number of countries have stepped up, with 23 out of 32 countries now meeting the 2% target, up from 6 countries in 2021. In sum, the surge in defense spending follows Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It has prompted an unprecedented 18% increase in defense spending among NATO allies across Europe in 2024, and collectively, NATO countries now meet the 2% target, spending a total of 2.71% of their GDP on defense.

³² Erik Brattberg, "The Impact of Evolving Threat Perceptions on the Transatlantic Alliance," *RUSI Insights* (Oct. 2023).

³³ "Trump blasts NATO allies for not paying fair share", *ABC News* (May 25, 2017).

³⁴ Clara Falkenek, "Who's at 2 percent? Look how NATO allies have increased their defense spending since Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *Atlantic Council* (Aug. 8, 2024).

However, friction between the members remains regarding burden sharing, as the allies have differing threat perceptions. The Eastern members, for example, prioritize Russia, while Southern European countries remain more concerned with instability in the Middle East and North Africa. Additionally, the U.S. global strategy seeks to address China; such differing priorities risk fracturing cohesion if not managed.³⁵ Moreover, tension continues to persist surrounding fair contributions even after the start of the war and the increase in European expenditure on military, especially with the differing strategic interests between the transatlantic alliances, as mentioned. This has raised concerns for European leaders, who are worried about the reliability of U.S. political support, which has continued to grow amid the polarising political climate in the U.S., since Trump's presidency began in early 2025.³⁶ Thus, the many directions the U.S. currently pursues have skeptics growing in Europe about the largest member and the extent to which they will cherish open-ended security commitments abroad. Another complication that is straining how the transatlantic alliance works together is the war's economic costs (energy prices, inflation). It has led to "Ukraine fatigue" – a term used to describe war-weariness, shifting priorities, and declining optimism about the conflict's outcome, which is evident both within Ukraine and among its Western backers. Political factions in some European states argue for pragmatism or peace deals with Russia, potentially undercutting the united

³⁵ Clara Falkenek, "Who's at 2 percent?"

³⁶ Brattberg, "The Impact of Evolving Threat Perceptions".

front.³⁷ The alliance's cohesion will "either strengthen or erode" based on the war's outcome and the perceived burdens borne by each country. Alliance unity could fray if members disagree on war aims or the acceptable terms of ending the conflict. So far, NATO has remained largely aligned on key goals: a Russian defeat, the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, and eventual Ukrainian NATO membership; however, maintaining that alignment is a strategic priority.³⁸

The transatlantic alliance has also been reshaped following the Russian invasion, as thinking about great-power competition has led its members, particularly the U.S., to reconfigure their forces, shifting from Russia to China. As mentioned, before the war, there were ongoing concerns that the U.S. was diverting its attention away from Europe's security and began prioritising other strategic interests, mainly in the Indo-Pacific. However, when Russian aggression started, it became clear that the U.S. could no longer ignore the challenges NATO was facing.³⁹ As of now, it views Ukraine's success as integral to signal its strength to China, and a failure would severely damage U.S. global prestige and further undermine its deterrence on the international stage. Thus, rather than a trade-off, supporting Ukraine is seen as complementary to

countering China. The war has cemented the understanding that an underlying contest between democratic and autocratic models links aggression in Europe and challenges in Asia. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept for the first time mentioned China as a factor, and alliance members (especially the U.S., the U.K., and Japan) have intensified discussions on how NATO can coordinate with Indo-Pacific partners.⁴⁰

Simultaneously, European allies have recalibrated their own policies towards China since the war began due to the ongoing support China demonstrates to Russia in diplomatic and economic forms. This has accelerated the debate on Europe's current dependency on China and the question of reducing it. While European partners such as France, Germany, and the Baltics lead the shift, Hungary, Greece, and Spain are more skeptical about jeopardising lucrative economic ties with China. However, the transatlantic allies have come closer together to assess the challenges posed by Russia and China. Whether the threat is there or not is arguable, as fears of a full-fledged Moscow–Beijing alliance have not materialized. Western analysts, such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), have assessed that while Russia's aggression drives with tactical cooperation with China, Russia has increasingly become the junior partner in their relationship. Thus, it limits the extent to which they can jointly coordinate challenges to the West. This again reinforces the NATO approach in treating both Russian

³⁷ Alina Polyakova, Edward Lucas, and Mathieu Boulègue, "The Future of European Security, the United States, and the World Order after Russia's War in Ukraine", *Atlantic Council* (2022), 83.

³⁸ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 55 [00].

³⁹ Bill Hayton, "NATO knows Asia is vital to protecting global security," *Chatham House* (28 June 2022); NATO, "Relations with Partners in the Indo-Pacific Region," updated 23 June 2025.

⁴⁰ Polyakova et al., "A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance", 60.

military threats in the short term and preparing to deter China's global ambitions in the long term. As the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept (adopted at the Madrid Summit, 29–30 June 2022) defined its approach to Russia and China side by side, quote: “The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security... The People’s Republic of China’s stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security, and values...China is not an adversary, but we must remain vigilant.” It showcases NATO’s approaches to handling two systemic adversaries simultaneously, and abandoning the Ukraine focus would challenge its failure to address China. In sum, the invasion of Ukraine has prompted the transatlantic alliance to agree on the key vision, whilst sometimes disagreeing with the details of how to approach it.⁴¹

4. Policy Recommendations

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine demonstrated to the West that deterrence has failed. More recently, Russian aggression has been escalating beyond Ukraine's territory, with Russian firefighters breaching Estonian airspaces and drones trespassing on the sovereignty of Poland and Denmark. The question arises as to how NATO can respond to the rising conflict in Europe and how its policies can prevent unnecessary escalations, whilst also responding to Russian provocations. In light of these developments, transatlantic policymakers should pursue a coordinated strategy to reinforce alliance gains and address remaining weaknesses. Key recommendations are included in the next sections.

⁴¹ NATO, Strategic Concept, adopted 29–30 June 2022, paras. 8, 13.

3.1 Strengthen NATO’s Deterrence led by the U.S. with diplomacy

NATO must enhance its deterrence and defense capabilities to counter the potential threat Russia could pose if it were to attack a member of the alliance. The U.S. could maximize NATO’s defense in the Baltics. This could entail military measures such as the immediate deployment of U.S. rapid-reaction forces to the Baltic states, building on the existing German brigade in Lithuania.⁴² Moreover, it would be advisable to secure airspace as well, given the recent breaches in the sovereignty of allied territory via firefighters and drones. To guarantee air security, NATO could modernise its military capabilities with the help of the U.S through advanced air and missile defenses, and it should include backup fuel stocks to support these technologies in the long term.⁴³ It is imperative that the strongest member of NATO demonstrates leadership to foster unity among the members and credibility among the weaker ones.⁴⁴ Additionally, signalling to the rest of the world its commitment to Article 5: “an armed attack against one member is an attack against all, obligating other members to assist”.⁴⁵ This approach would both reassure its allies and dissuade Russia from further aggression by concluding that it is too dangerous to continue its provocations.

Nevertheless, it is important to incorporate diplomacy

⁴² Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), “The Future of European Security: A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance” (2023), 22 [online].

⁴³ CEPA, “The Future of European Security”, 27.

⁴⁴ CEPA, “The Future of European Security”, 28.

⁴⁵ Shapiro and Puglierin, “The Art of Vassalisation”, 12.

and dialogue while increasing NATO's deterrence, as it may reinforce Putin's propaganda that NATO is a threat to Russia and escalate the conflict further between the two sides, postponing the possibility of peace. While we have seen in the past that negotiations and sanctions have proven unsuccessful, diplomacy in this case would aid in creating open communication with Russia, thereby diminishing the hostile environment of "us versus them".⁴⁶ In summary, maximizing NATO defense aligns with Western objectives to defend its allies and maintain the post-World War II international order. Conversely, the increased military expenditure can also accelerate the moment in Ukraine fatigue as expenses become burdensome, which can further hinder the mission to achieve peace and unity between Russia, Ukraine, and the West.

4.2 Bolster Alliance Cohesion and Public Support

Secondly, it is strongly recommended that the alliance bolster its cohesion and public support. This is especially important with the prolonged nature of the conflict and the increase in NATO military expenditure, resulting in further Ukraine fatigue. To implement the policy recommendation, the alliances could start by addressing their difference in threat perceptions, especially over Russia and China. The North Atlantic and European partners have conflicting interests in these regions, so open communication would ensure that partners are heard on their concerns. This could be discussed at the North Atlantic Council (NAC) to consult the challenges in

China to demonstrate that U.S. attention to the Indo-Pacific will not come at Europe's expense, and vice versa. Moving on, members of the government could intensify their communications strategies, especially domestic engagement on the stakes of the war. An open communication flow between the government and the public in regard to the high stakes of supporting Ukraine will significantly help sustain unity; topics on defence investment and national security will not only bring the people closer but also their leaders. It is also important to simultaneously address disinformation on the war that could influence and divide public opinion.

4.3 Global Outreach and Alliance Expansion

In the sphere of the current political climate, it is important to advance with caution to ensure the international order is continued to be preserved. Hence, the alliance should seek the last policy recommendation, global outreach, as an important natural step in securing peace. The importance of broader global support is a necessary step to take, especially with efforts to isolate Russia as it goes further than just Western influence. To enhance soft power, the U.S. and the EU need to launch a more serious approach to the Global South in diplomatic and economic terms, specifically to China, India, Brazil, and African nations, as their stance on Russia is meaningful. To implement this policy approach, Western powers should first address pending grievances by increasing engagement with said countries, ranging from trading agreements, climate finance and debt relief. This is inherently of value as the U.S. and EU have taken

⁴⁶ CEPA, "The Future of European Security", 16 [2021].

unfriendly measures towards China as a trading partner, and the U.S. has withdrawn from foreign aid, ultimately weakening its influence across the globe. Reversing this process will not be easy, as Russia and China have increased their influence in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, so the West must be competitive enough by providing its attention and investment to regain the global South.

5. Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has indisputably alarmed the EU, alone the close proximity of the conflict and violations of the sovereignty of Estonia, Germany, and Denmark have put NATO security into question. The chaotic shifts on the international stage have led to the transatlantic alliance rediscovering its mission together – defending Ukraine is key to upholding the international order and democratic values. To successfully deter Russia and fight against revanchism, the transatlantic alliance has a lot of work to progress. First, the EU must deal with the harsh truth that it is dependent on the U.S., and past strategic interests to become more autonomous were proven premature. Whilst the EU has increased military expenditure and is working towards 5% of its total GDP by 2035, it has to deal with its co-dependency. Second, the alliance must continuously bolster its cohesion and public support, especially with the longevity of the conflict and dealing with Ukraine fatigue. It is crucial for public opinion in the West to be on board with continuing to support the conflict, especially with the global South being impartial to Ukraine and Russia. Lastly, global outreach is

a necessary step to take to isolate Russia, as it goes further than just Western influence. Here, the global South's importance is highlighted again, which is often undermined by the Western powers but needs to be reassessed, especially with Russian and Chinese influence growing in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. In sum, the decisions made now will shape the future of NATO, the EU, and global security for decades to come, determining whether this pivotal crisis becomes “the end of the West” or the start of a new chapter of Western resolve.

Figures and/or Tables

Figure 1. Defense spending as share of real GDP (%)

Source: Clara Falkenek, “Who’s at 2 Percent? Look How NATO Allies Have Increased Their Defense Spending since Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” Atlantic Council, August 8, 2024.

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