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Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa

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War in Ukraine, Year III: Geopolitical Equations Resolved

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Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa

Geopolitics Analyst in EU-Asia Relations, AsiaGlobal Fellow at The University of Hong Kong

The ongoing war in Ukraine stands as the paramount geopolitical clash of the 21st century, heralding a definitive return to realpolitik in global governance.

Each significant phase of the war has unleashed seismic ramifications, even impacting the complex triangle of relations between the United States, China, and the European Union. Russia's invasion has also unmasked their hidden agendas and covert strategies, leading to several unforeseen consequences that have unfolded on the battlefield.

1. The Decline of Pax Americana

Perhaps the most dramatic development amidst Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been the U.S.' departure from a traditional global policing role to a new paradigm wherein America diminishes its interventionist posture within an increasingly multipolar and potentially fragmented world order, inaugurated by the histrionic 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal. This abrupt shift enabled a Taliban resurgence, undoing two decades of counterterrorism efforts. Putin interpreted this weakness as a green light to invade Ukraine. Indeed, Washington failed to deter Russia, opting to broadcast the invasion rather than take action.

Afghanistan left the European coalition partners in the dark, dealing another blow to NATO. Behind this decision was Washington's chief concern: the geopolitical rivalry with China, which continues to consume all efforts as it could determine the next global hegemon and reshape the world order. This competition has fostered stronger political and security alliances; BRICS+ has expanded and there have been increased U.S.-led partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.

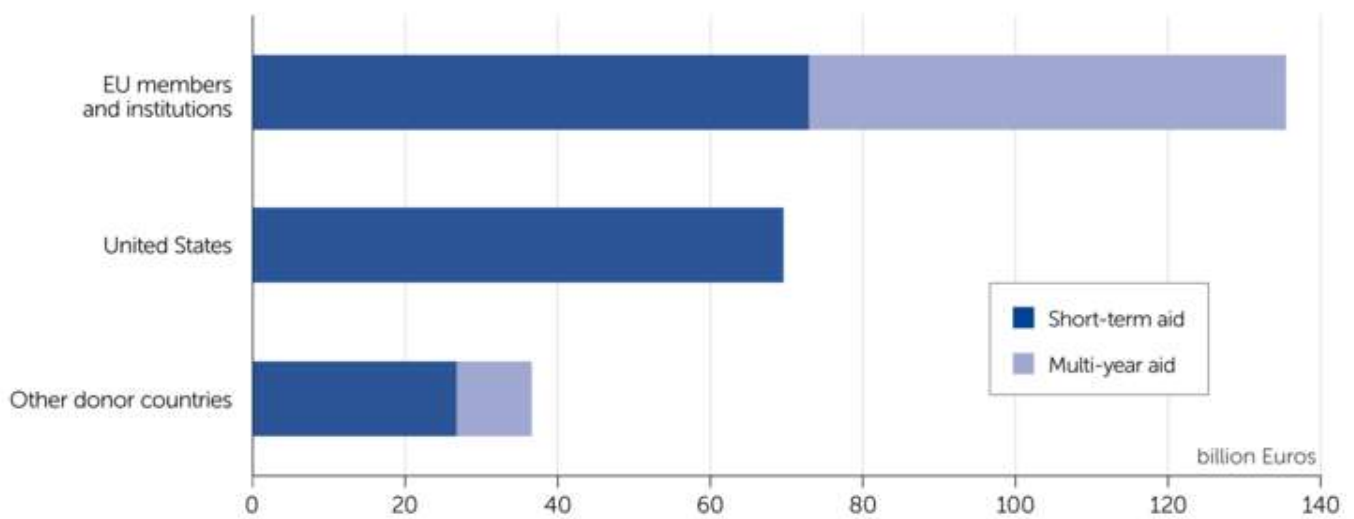
Subsequently, the U.S. became more unreliable as Ukraine witnessed Biden's initial commitment to endorse the war effort until "[whatever it takes](#)," shifting afterward to a somewhat tempered position of "[as long as we can](#)," reflecting evident "[war fatigue](#)" and diminished support. This underscores the rejection of a prolonged Pax Americana. Additionally, Biden's aid initiatives face obstacles from partisan and polarized politics, and the looming possibility of Trump's return adding anxiety.

Ukraine has received enough means to avoid defeat but insufficient to secure victory, with U.S. military aid dwindling, and likely ending if Trump wins. His past statements on [terminating](#) NATO and pro-Putin stances could drastically alter American policy. Currently, he [claims](#) Washington provided "\$200 billion" support while Europe "\$20 billion." As of September 2023, European aid [surpasses](#) American, totaling €156 billion compared to €70 billion—without factoring the costs

of hosting and providing free services to over 4 million Ukrainian refugees. This disparity is expected to widen even further.

Aid commitments to Ukraine across donor groups

January 24, 2022 to July 31, 2023 incl. multi-year commitments, billion Euros



Other donor countries include the Anglo-Saxon countries (except the US), as well as China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, and India. For information on data quality and transparency see 'Data Transparency Index' in the data set.

Ukraine Support Tracker, Update September 2023.

ifw-kiel.de/ukrainetracker

2. China's Calculated Neutrality

While the U.S. spearheaded sanctions and aid to Ukraine, China seized the opportunity to exacerbate the division between two opposing camps.

Beijing swiftly embraced the Kremlin's narrative portraying Washington as the instigator, disregarding any [substantiation](#). Echoing Russian state-controlled media, it [propagated](#) the justification of alleged "legitimate security concerns." However, the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO, akin to Georgia's situation, was never realistic. Even if valid, could such concerns justify violence and invasion? This crucial question remains unaddressed in China.

China's alignment with Russia largely stems from a shared fear of Western interference in their political systems, threatening their internal control mechanisms. China strategically interprets Moscow's offensive as an opening of hostilities against the West—serving its geopolitical interests—rather than upholding the territorial sovereignty principle, blatantly violated in Ukraine. Despite depicting the war as a complex "crisis," the reality seems more straightforward; Beijing prefers U.S. engagement in Europe rather than the Indo-Pacific, where it pursues assertive policies in the South China Sea.

A year ago, China's stance sparked optimism with agreements between Saudi Arabia and Iran and a [peace plan](#) for Ukraine. Nevertheless, it has since declined to further mediate between Ukraine and Russia. Throughout 2023, this Security Council-permanent member has grappled to assert itself as a reliable peacebuilder. In October, Putin [vowed](#) to "fight for five years" in Ukraine; not long after this, Xi [hailed](#) their "deep friendship." Then, the BRI summit favored Putin

over other leaders. By January 2024, Beijing's reluctance was definitive in Davos, [rejecting](#) Kyiv's meeting request in a stance [framed](#) by Zelenskyy as "pro-Russian neutrality."

Despite the potential economic gains from promoting peace and future reconstruction, including agreements on trade, investment, access to resources and infrastructure development, advancing a vital corridor for the BRI to expand on the region, China opts solely for geopolitics and skyrocketed business with Russia, accounting for [half](#) of their imports, doubling from pre-war levels.

In sum, Xuetong's subtle [plea](#) to Chinese leaders has gone unheard: "we need to prevent from using history to incite antagonistic sentiments," and "focus on the motivations of those responsible."

3. Sino-European Relations, the War's Main Impact

The war is a wake-up call to Europe, hindering growth, stalling development goals, and impeding geopolitical ambitions. It has revealed the continent's insecurity and a recognition of military unpreparedness beyond NATO's umbrella—an organization paradoxically resurrected by Putin's war.

Russia's persistent intimidation of neighboring states within the range of its [missiles](#)—including the [Baltic states](#), Czech Republic, [Finland](#), Germany, Norway, [Poland](#), Romania, Slovakia, and Sweden— has fostered a heightened sense of unity among nations as they collectively confront the aggression.

Pro-Kremlin Orban's recent [antics](#) underscore the EU's resolve in addressing the war. Finland and Sweden's NATO accession, along with the UK's closer ties to Europe post-Brexit, reinforce this reality. Decisions about seizing Russia's frozen assets are pending, deemed crucial by [Stiglitz](#) for "deterring other bad actors from violating international law."

Still, grave concerns rise over the specter of intensified war in Europe, prompting the imperative to enhance security and recalibrate strategic approaches. Despite the EU boasting the world's third-largest military budget, inefficiencies arise from 27 separate armies, incurring needless expenses. While increased defense spending and collaboration improve geopolitical cohesion, achieving military superpower status eludes the EU, requiring additional spending—potentially jeopardizing the sacrosanct welfare state.

In recent weeks, prominent figures have sounded [alarms](#) about potential clashes with Russia. While the UK and Sweden recommend [national mobilization](#) to "[prepare for war](#)," [Estonia](#), [Norway](#) and [Poland](#) envision a timeframe of about three years. A [German](#) military planning scenario anticipates the year 2025. Consequently, the June 2024 European Parliament elections will unlikely alter the current trajectory, reinforcing efforts towards an autonomous EU common defense and further "strategic autonomy."

The war has significantly impacted Sino-European relations. Remarkably, U.S.-Europe ties have strengthened while distancing Brussels from Beijing, though initial hopes for improved bonds following China's peace initiative have vanished. Europe has designed more [economic security](#) measures targeting Beijing, emphasizing the EU's characterization of China as a "systemic rival."

Europe finds China's inaction inexplicable for several reasons. Firstly, the war in Ukraine remains Europe's top concern, with repeated requests for China's assistance. Secondly, China is the best-positioned to promote peace, buttressed by Putin's friendship and Russia's dependencies on Beijing. Thirdly, China has proved their knack for diplomatic breakthroughs when they wish, as seen with Saudi-Iran and [Myanmar](#). While there was abundant potential to reshape EU-China relations, efforts to end the war continue stalled.

Geopolitical Realities

Geopolitical interests overshadow diplomatic peace efforts. As the U.S. abdicates its leadership role and China refrains from filling the void, coupled with the EU's limitations, multilateral associations (United Nations, G7, G20) prove ineffective in addressing geopolitical challenges. The global order needs reconfiguration, with major powers assuming their rightful responsibilities.

Emerging powers and developing countries, including ASEAN, Middle East, and India, may view Ukraine with indifference. For the so-called global South, Western affairs seem distant, as they grapple with their own historical challenges. Conflicts in diverse regions persist, fueled by ambitions for territory and resources. New spheres of influence, like Putin's expansion into Africa, presents paradoxes as local leaders transition from liberation to a new dependency on Russia.

Putin surfaces, therefore, as the primary beneficiary of his war of attrition, partially achieving goals. He has quashed potential alternative leadership, using expansionist ambitions rooted in past imperial glory to obscure domestic political deficits. With nuclear capabilities and vast territory, he aims to reintegrate roughly 20% of Ukrainian land into the post-Soviet sphere, diverging significantly from [initial projections](#).

For Ukraine, addressing the unjust, unjustified, and horrendous human tragedy is existential. However, without Washington and Beijing's support, Ukraine faces the tumultuous tempest precariously. Furthermore, empty promises offer no solace; corruption, governance issues, economic inconsistencies and territorial disputes present formidable barriers to EU integration. How could any country facing such challenges realistically join the EU, meeting stringent entry requirements?

Though justice may be delayed, its denial is unacceptable. In the meanwhile, history reminds conquerors that today's victories always turn to dust in tomorrow's winds.