

The impacts of the war in Europe and the global governance system

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As a historian, when discussing the impact of the war on the current European or Transatlantic system of governments, it is worth taking a few steps back to try and think about the system of governance in the space that emerged at the end of the Cold War. When this era came to an end, there were certainly some voices, among them Mikhail Gorbachev or then French President Francois Mitterrand, who suggested that the lessening of that conflict between East and West, might be an opportunity to create entirely new structures of governance for the continent and for the transatlantic space. Mitterrand proposed an idea of a European Confederation that would include all states on the continent, plus the United States if necessary. Those ideas did not, as we know, pass. What essentially happened was, the existing alliances, the existing institutions of the Western alliance, were essentially widened and repurposed in the 30 years after the end of the cold war. One obvious example is that NATO, on the security front and the European Union on the political and economic front, took on new members and took on new tasks and responsibilities.

In that sense, the idea of enlargement, if trying to oversimplify, was meant to embody the notion that then American president George H.W. Bush, put forward in 1989 of trying, after decades of a divided continent, to have a Europe that would be whole, free and at peace. It was also based on several assumptions among the leaders of the Western alliance, whether in Brussels, Washington, or in major European capitals, that enlargement would be a way to spread stability, democracy, and prosperity across the European continent.

This was the idea and assumption behind this policy. What happened in practice was different. Enlargement was a timely and complicated process; economic or rule of law gaps between states that were formally part of the communist bloc and the western part of the continent were more significant than anticipated. Therefore, what we have today is more of a system of concentric circles of institutions: 27 members of the European Union, and several states that have gravitated around the EU and want to join, the candidate countries. Then there are the countries of the neighborhood or countries that are on the periphery. This is particularly relevant because one can view the crisis of the war in Ukraine as a tension over this country's orientation. Would it follow a path towards the Euro Atlantic community, or would it gravitate towards an alternative model that was represented by Russia, which was largely kept out of this European system of governance.

It was also a system that was meant to be built around not only institutions of governance but also around a certain number of norms and values. These followed the Helsinki Accords of the 1970s, which really embodied a couple of key ideas. Amongst these: borders should not be violated, or reshaped by force, there should be broad respect for human rights, the preservation of freedom, and economic and scientific cooperation should be encouraged.

Additionally, there was also a system of governance that was – at least nominally – to be built around increased trade and the reduction of barriers to mobility and economic cooperation. That was the assumption, the idea, when thinking about the European system of governance that emerged in the post-cold war decades. It is fair to indicate that even before the 24th of February 2022, even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that system of governance had been facing several challenges and push backs, Brexit being an example. The idea of enlargement losing momentum and the principles of inviolability of borders, being also undermined by the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and still many frozen conflicts that remain in Europe to this day, are also examples. So, this was a system, whether in Europe or on a broader global level, that was definitely facing a number of challenges, both from within and from without. That being mentioned, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a more fundamental frontal attack, with already known major impacts on the European system of governments and possibly even more significant consequences down the line that cannot quite yet be anticipated.

In that sense, it's fair to argue that the conflict is leading to a profound realignment for several countries beyond the immediate cases of Ukraine and Russia. The most obvious example of this, the rapid reaction of Sweden and Finland wanting to join NATO and the Atlantic Alliance. It's quite remarkable when thinking about, not only the pace at which this has happened, but also in terms of how much of a break with the past it represents, especially for Sweden. This country had been mostly neutral, arguably since 1812 and the Napoleonic Wars. This idea of neutrality had been deeply ingrained in the Swedish collective mind and to be able to undo that, really speaks to the severe shock that was caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That mentioned, geography matters as well, considering Sweden and Finland are significantly closer, and in the case of Finland, share history and a long border with Russia.

Nonetheless, the idea of neutrality, the idea of non-alignment, has been shocked by this conflict. And the number of countries in Europe that believe that they could stay away from these institutions, stay away from these principles of alignment, are now reconsidering. It's true for states like Ireland who have been historically neutral and for the first time are in conversations about whether that is sustainable. We've seen this even in Switzerland -in different ways- and in Austria. Consequently, there is a profound rearranging of the European security picture which goes well beyond the battlefield.

A second important element when looking at the dynamics and the power balance and governance within the European Union in particular, is the fact that the project of integration was one that was largely cemented in Western Europe, mostly because of its history. There was the core number of countries where that process started in the 1950s

context marked by the Cold War, and that was particularly symbolized by the partnership between France and Germany. Currently, the question that must be asked is whether that center of gravity within the European Union is now going to move more to the east. Partly because countries like Poland, the Baltic States and others had been warning Western European allies about the danger posed by Russia for years. There was definitely a sense of being vindicated and a “I told you so” sentiment that has come across in the last few years. So, in terms of the general future direction of the European Union, it's going to be interesting to see whether the power balance is going to shift to a greater equilibrium and not so much a reliance on traditional leaders of that process of integration.

For Germany, this war was a profound shock for several reasons. Germany's economic and political importance in Europe means that developments that happen there are particularly impactful and need to be given special attention. For many decades, and specifically under the leadership of Angela Merkel, there was an assumption that through trade and through dialogue good relations could be fostered. It was important to maintain the channels of communication with Russia, and arguably with China. This would be a way to try and help them to modify their behavior. That approach, the change through trade and dialogue, has been dealt a significant blow in the last few months.

We saw that three days after Russia launched its invasion, Chancellor Olaf Scholz went in front of the German Bundestag, in front of the German parliament, conveying the idea that this was the time for a major turning point in German history, a major turning point insofar as a significant investment in defense spending. A subject which, for understandable reasons, Germany had been somewhat reticent to do in the post 1945 period. Now, it remains to be seen, to what extent are some of the changes seen in the last few months, sustainable. Is there going to be political resilience and political will to maintain the commitment to increasing defense spending, in the case of Germany, for instance?

A fourth additional element to consider for the impact of the war in Ukraine on European governance is how it will affect the idea of enlargement, which had frozen or stalled in the last few years for a variety of reasons, whether internal to the EU, or because of what was happening amongst candidate states, especially in the Western Balkans. There was a sense of democratic backsliding, of economic stagnation and corruption. That being mentioned, this new geopolitical context marked by major conflict on European soil, has given a new shot in the arm of the process of enlargement. We've seen the EU at least commit to giving candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. We have seen new talks of the EU being more involved in the Western Balkans. In previous years, the neglect of that region had allowed opportunities for other actors like Russia, China and Turkey to be more involved and more influential. That's something to keep an eye on, the extent to which we are going to see enlargement reinvigorated.

It is also important to mention that NATO has been obviously reinvigorated by the invasion of Ukraine, which brings some interesting questions to mind. Prior to this situation, the alliance had increasingly turned its attention to the Indo Pacific and China. Currently, there seems to be a massive pivot, not only for the Biden administration but even amongst

European powers, where the idea that the future was in the Indo Pacific was predominant. In that sense, the question is whether the war in Ukraine represents a “blip”, a short road block and that the pivot to the Indo Pacific will continue in the long term; or will the war in Ukraine lead to a more profound reorienting back to Europe, for the European powers and for the United States.

This analysis has been very focused on the European space; but if we revisit the assumptions of the 1990s and the early period of the post-cold war, the dominant idea was that the liberal international order, and the values that underpin it, could be easily spread and transposed to the global level. That one could simply enlarge the club and bring in members who had been historically on the outside, looking in. That was true for the way that the European integration process thought of itself. That it was simply a normative project that would just spread its values and that these were universal and would be welcomed by all. The least we can say is that this has not really happened in practice, and that there has been severe pushback by both outside powers and from within European societies.

On the other hand, if we analyze the international reaction to Russia's invasion, there has been large support in the UN to condemn Russia's actions, approximately 140 countries of 193 have done so. Still, many chose not to condemn, a significant number. Additionally, the number of countries that have signed on to the sanction's regime, essentially a form of economic warfare against Russia, has been quite limited. That is important when thinking about the responses of countries in the Western Hemisphere. The reactions of states like India or South Africa and the choices they have made to sometimes be on the fence or not entirely commit, is telling of the extent to which they have been pushed back against the international structure of governance. It seems that there is push back against the sentiments that too often western powers have neglected major grievances of other actors in the international community. This may become a moment of humility and reckoning for the Western powers to understand that they cannot take the support of others for granted.