Russia's war has brought the EU and the US together

By Daniel S. Hamilton
August 24, 2022

The biggest change: the post-Cold War era is over. A new era has begun -- more turbulent, violent, disruptive. The hopeful vision of a Europe "whole and free" is being challenged by a continent that has become fractured and anxious. Confrontation with a revanchist Russia is likely to persist, and competition with a revisionist China is likely to grow. But the Age of Disruption is not limited to major power competition. Emerging technologies are changing the very nature of rivalry and conflict. Digital transformations are upending the foundations of economic competitiveness, diplomacy and defense. Pandemics, climate change and energy transitions are likely to wreak further havoc on unprepared societies.

The new era's upheavals have collided head on with the sheltered assumptions of Maastricht Europe, which posited that the EU's magnetic qualities would continue to generate prosperity, safeguard democracy, and exert an irresistible pull on non-members to create conditions by which their integration could be possible. Now fewer Europeans believe "ever closer Union" is inevitable or desirable. The "Europe of institutions" failed to tackle COVID, supply chain disruptions, refugee inflows and Putin's aggression. And Putin's war has not enhanced the EU's "strategic autonomy," it has deepened Europe's strategic dependence on the United States.

The headline change is Vladimir Putin's all-out invasion of Ukraine -- clear evidence that he is determined to use military force, coercion and subversion to change Europe's map, undo the post-Cold War settlement and control his neighbors. Putin not only fears the challenge a successful Ukrainian democracy would pose to authoritarianism in Russia; he is intent on disrupting democratic societies across the continent -- not because of what they do, but because of who they are. It is useful to recall that Putin's pretext for his 2014 invasion of Ukraine was an EU-Ukraine trade agreement, not NATO's Open Door policy.

Thus far, EU unity in the face of Putin's aggression has been impressive – and unexpected. Sanctions, while uneven, have largely been robust. Support for Ukraine has generally been strong, although with some lapses. Sustaining these activities could be challenging, particularly if the conflict persists. And the EU must face up to the fact that its Neighbourhood Policy has failed to turn its periphery into a "ring of friends." Instead, the EU faces a ring of fire. Russian troops are in all six of the EU's Eastern Partnership countries. Regardless of how Putin's war in Ukraine evolves, Europe's vast eastern spaces will remain turbulent, and sporadically violent, for the foreseeable future.

Russia's assaults on Ukraine and other neighboring countries are multi-dimensional. They go beyond the use of conventional military force to include weaponized flows of food, energy, money, raw materials, refugees, cyber, information, and other flows to disrupt democracies in Europe and elsewhere around the world. As a result, the essential sinews of European economies, daily communications, and many other critical functions of European societies are increasingly susceptible to disturbances, interruptions, and shutdowns. This means that governments accustomed to protecting their territories must now protect the networks that connect their citizens with the rest of the world.

In this context, ensuring the EU's energy security will be particularly challenging. The determination of most EU member states to wean themselves off Russian energy has been impressive, but the task is daunting, and winter is coming. Moreover, the EU's Green Deal and related efforts to turbocharge clean tech development will further exacerbate the EU's reliance on critical materials sourced from questionable or unreliable sources. In essence, the EU is exchanging old dependencies on Russia in favor of new dependencies on China, which accounts for 98% of the EU's rare earth imports.

Putin's war has broken long-standing taboos against new forms of European integration and association. Most stunning is the decision by Finland and Sweden to cast aside their long traditions of military non-alignment and join NATO. Together with Denmark's decision to join the EU's security structures, these actions will strengthen deterrence and defence across the Arctic, Nordic and Baltic regions. And the steadfast commitment of the Nordic states to defending Western values will help to anchor internal NATO and EU debates at a time of great anxiety and confusion.

Other changes are under way. After years of waffling, the European Council has called for the acceleration of the accession process for the Western Balkans, decided to make Ukraine and Moldova EU candidate countries, and offered to do the same for Georgia, pending additional reforms. The EU's new Strategic Compass gives member states new flexibility in how they can participate in EU security and defense activities, and favors EU-NATO "joint and inclusive exercises." It remains unclear whether Emmanuel Macron's proposal for a European Political Community is a true innovation -- a framework for EU members and democratic non-members to address shared challenges -- or a last-ditch effort to derail further enlargement and stop the EU's center of gravity from moving eastward. Nonetheless, after years of sterility, a refreshing openness to new formats is apparent.

Putin has succeeded in uniting the transatlantic community in ways unknown since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. North American and European countries have provided arms, economic assistance, cyber and intelligence support to Kyiv, unleashed a barrage of economic sanctions on Moscow while isolating it diplomatically, taken steps to reduce their own reliance on Russia, and warned China against efforts to help Russia evade sanctions. At Madrid in June, leaders committed to strengthen their collective defense so that NATO can "defend every inch" of Alliance territory.

Putin's war has also uncovered the impressive strength and resiliency of the transatlantic economy. The United States has become the EU's major supplier of liquefied natural gas, outpacing Russia's natural gas pipeline deliveries. In 2021 U.S.-EU trade in goods and services is estimated to have hit an all-time high of $1.3 trillion — 42 percent more than the EU's trade with China. The deeply intertwined, $6 trillion transatlantic economy is proving to be the geoeconomic base from which the U.S. and Europe can isolate and punish Putin, address competitive challenges from China, and address broader challenges of global disruption. U.S.-EU policy differences remain, but they are now playing out in a context of transatlantic unity rather than division.

This article originally appeared in Swedish on August 24, 2022 for Nyhetssajten Europaportalen.