Thomas Greminger

REINTRODUCING ELEMENTS OF COOPERATIVE SECURITY IN THE FUTURE EUROPEAN SECURITY ORDER

Author: Thomas Greminger is the Director of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). He is a Swiss diplomat that acted in important leadership positions in and outside the Swiss administration, focusing on security, peace and development. Most recently, Thomas Greminger served as Secretary General of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). He published widely on military history, security, peace and development policy.

Abstract: Nearly one year into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its global repercussions have become indisputable as they transcended many dimensions, touching upon multiple aspects of our daily lives. Although the prospects of a conflict settlement at this stage still seem distant, the continued violence, civilian harm and risk of escalation urge us to reflect on how Europe's security and peace can be re-established. In this article, I uncover the critical security policy implications of the war in Ukraine and outline scenarios on how the war might unfold. Further, I offer pathways to restoring a European security order that is not exclusively based on deterrence but would again contain some cooperative elements. Finally, while acknowledging the severely polarized security environment, I argue that dialogue and cooperation remain conceivable and decisive in bringing this war to an end and restoring peace in Europe.

Problem statement: How could elements of cooperative security be reintroduced into a European security order that will be dominated by deterrence in the foreseeable future?

Bottom-line-up-front: It is conceivable to reconstruct a European security order containing cooperative security features based on a negotiated end of the war and a Russian government again ready to respect international law. There are building blocks that would allow to gradually restore trust, agree on military risk reduction measures, reinvigorate confidence- and security-building measures, and relaunch arms control and negotiations to embark on a proper discussion on the principles of European security.

So what?: As long as the war is ongoing, there is a need to introduce and strengthen deconfliction and crisis communication channels and compartmentalize as many security areas as possible. Based on a negotiated end of the war, a Helsinki 2.0 process should be seriously considered.

Source: shutterstock.com

SECURITY POLICY REPERCUSSIONS OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

The military aggression against Ukraine unleashed by President Putin on 24 February 2022 represents the most significant disruption of security and peace in Europe since the end of World War II. The war has far-reaching repercussions affecting practically every aspect of our lives and impacting far beyond the European continent. In this article, I will point out some apparent implications for international security policy. Since we cannot predict how the conflict will evolve in the immediate future, I would like to offer a few scenarios. I will then focus on possible building blocks that would allow to gradually reintroduce some elements of cooperative security in reconstructing a new European security order once there is again a political commitment of critical stakeholders to do so.

24 February 2022 was a crucial turning point for European security. Even though the war is still hot, we are clearly moving toward a new Cold War in many aspects. The length and depth of Cold War 2.0 will depend on the duration and character of the hot war and the type of its end. The consequences for the European security order are already clearly visible:

„DETERRENCE WILL DOMINATE EUROPEAN SECURITY FOR YEARS TO COME, WHILE COOPERATIVE SECURITY HAS DISAPPEARED.“[1]

Security policies will again focus predominately on territorial defense, while hybrid threats will remain high on the security agenda. As a result, defense budgets are skyrocketing. We are again at the outset of another arms race in the conventional and possibly nuclear field. This will likely crowd out investments in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition, total defense concepts that tend to militarize many aspects of civilian life will be reinvigorated.

A fundamental question is whether Cold War 2.0 will prevent any dialogue and cooperation in other central security policy areas. Will it, at some point, again be possible to talk about the Strategic Stability Agenda, that is, nuclear risk reduction, hypersonic weapons, new technologies, space security or non-proliferation, for instance? The same question is valid for transnational risks and challenges: Will we again manage to cooperate in dealing with climate change, combating terrorism, extremism and organized crime, or in tackling cyber security challenges? And how about cooperation in dealing with complex geographies such as the Korean peninsula, Afghanistan, Syria or Iran?

Momentarily, many of these discussions are formally or de facto suspended at the governmental track 1 level. Fortunately, the UN system has shown some resilience. In particular, the permanent members of the UN Security Council managed to separate their differences over Ukraine from cooperation in other areas and passed resolutions on critical matters like Afghanistan or Haiti.[2] In addition, some private foundations, and non-state actors are trying to substitute for the lack of formal dialogue by offering informal spaces for dialogue, so-called track 2 and 1.5 dialogues. However, we are all aware that this cannot be a complete substitute for the lack of formal governmental discussions and negotiations.

PHASES AND SCENARIOS

As we are approaching a year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we have reached the fourth phase of this war. The first one centered on the battle for Kyiv in February-March 2022, followed by a second stage marked by the invasion of the Kherson and Zaporizhia regions in the South and the battle for Donbas in the East. The third phase began in September 2022 when the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) successfully liberated important parts of the occupied territory. They advanced first in the Northeast, the Kharkiv region, and then in the Southwest, including regaining Kherson. Still, the Russian Armed Forces maintain control over most of Donbas and the South of Ukraine. Moreover, they have been attacking targets throughout Ukraine with launches of missiles and drones. As part of an escalatory logic, they have increasingly been targeting the country's energy infrastructure. In December 2022, partly caused by the cold season, we entered a fourth stage of the struggle, characterized by an unabated intensity of warfare but little territorial gains on either side.

„IT LOOKS LIKE A STALEMATE, A PURE WAR OF ATTRITION, RECALLING IMAGES OF THE BATTLE OF VERDUN IN WORLD WAR I."

For how long will this war continue? This is difficult to predict, given the unexpected turns that the war has already taken. Reflecting on scenarios seems the most sensible approach in such a situation:

• The most likely scenario, at least in the short term, is that the conflict will continue at high intensity, with the Russian Federation trying to gain complete control of the Donbas region and the UAF attempting to liberate as much of the occupied territory as possible;

• The second scenario is an ongoing low-intensity conflict due to the exhaustion of the armed forces on both sides. This may happen with a weak or without any ceasefire agreement at all. This scenario could take us to a state comparable to what we witnessed in the Donbas since 2014, with the line of contact further to the West and probably with much more resistance in the occupied territories;

• The third scenario would involve different possible forms of escalation. An escalation can be sought by conventional military means by, for instance, a push in the South towards Odessa and Transnistria trying to realize the concept of Novorossiya ("New Russia"). Alternatively, an escalation could involve targeting the critical civilian infrastructure of strategic relevance within or outside Ukraine. Taking the ongoing cyberwar to another level is another possible escalation: Launching "the big cyber-attack" that we have not yet witnessed. While outer space has been playing a vital role in the current war, and there has been electronic warfare targeting space assets, we have not seen any kinetic action. Eventually, as a last resort, an escalation could be conducted using tactical nuclear arms, a scenario that most experts consider highly unlikely. However, some would immediately add that it cannot be excluded should President Putin at some point face strategic defeat;

• A fourth scenario would be the end of the war with a clear military victory by one side. Many people thought there could be a Russian victory in the first days and weeks of the war. Meanwhile, the tide seems to have turned, and there is, particularly in the West, a sense that the war could and should end through a Ukrainian victory. The current stalemate on the battlefield does not seem to point in either direction. Still, it is worth recalling that history knows the ends of a war where the defeated were treated fairly, as after World War II or when it was sealed by a victor's peace (Versailles 1919-style). In this vein, I concur with Kimmage and Paikin's assessment that "Russia's strategic or tactical defeat in Ukraine is, therefore, more likely to breed further resentments and revanchism rather than a fundamental transformation in how Moscow views its 'near abroad' ;"

• The fifth scenario would be a negotiated end to the war. A settlement would mainly have to be negotiated between Russia and Ukraine. Yet, some dimensions go beyond a bilateral conflict settlement and would have to include the larger West. A negotiated end to this war would have to address at least two, perhaps four sets of issues: Definitely, it would have to provide answers to territorial issues (Crimea, Donbas, the newly annexed territories in the South). It would also have to look at the country's future status, coupled with security guarantees. In addition, it may also have to deal with war crimes and reparations combined with sanction relief. The latter themes were, as we remember, not on the agenda of the negotiations held in Minsk and Istanbul in March and April 2022.

Source: shutterstock.com

The scenario that we will witness and the type of end of the war will, together with the political commitment of key stakeholders, shape the future of the European security order.

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE EUROPEAN SECURITY ORDER AND PEACE

If today, many predict a long war and peace talks seem distant, restoring a European security order that is not exclusively based on deterrence but would again contain some cooperative elements is not inconceivable.

„EVEN WHILE THE WAR CONTINUES, AGREEING ON SOME RULES OF A COOPERATIVE NATURE WOULD BE PREFERABLE TO NO RULES AT ALL. THIS COULD ENTAIL SOLID CRISIS COMMUNICATION CHANNELS BETWEEN THE WARRING PARTIES TO PREVENT UNINTENDED ESCALATIONS."

Compartmentalizing to the largest extent possible, relations relevant to security would be another approach that could be a formally agreed policy or at least tacitly pursued. This would safeguard dialogue and cooperation regarding the strategic stability agenda and many transnational risks and challenges. It would obviously contradict a full-fledged strategy of isolation of the aggressor country. At the same time, I would acknowledge that recreating a European security order in a comprehensive sense, based on principles and commitments states would commonly agree to, is politically impossible as long as the war is raging on.
Should critical actors in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security area, once the war has ended, decide to embark on a process of recreating a European security order, states could work with several building blocks:

a)   The first building block would have to focus on the restoration of trust. Restoring trust would be best built on a negotiated war termination considered fair by relevant stakeholders. On this basis, Confidence- and Security-building Measures (CSBMs) could be agreed on, similar to the Helsinki process framework 50 years ago. The result may be a fully modernized Vienna Document, perhaps combined with a few military risk reduction measures, as discussed in OSCE's Structured Dialogue from 2017 onwards;

b)   A second building block would entail relaunching the substantive American negotiation offer that the formal US response to the two Russian treaty drafts of December 2021 contained. Submitted to the Russian government by the end of January 2022, it is known to us thanks to a leak by the Spanish newspaper "El Pais".[4] This document offered negotiations about essential military risk reduction measures, subregional arms control agreements in the NATO-Russian contact zone, and a successor to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). This would represent a fundamental arms control menu, even though it remains short of addressing the issue of NATO membership;

c)   A third building block, a broader conversation about European security, is undoubtedly also necessary at some point. This would imply a discussion and, eventually, an agreement on the fundamentals of European security. This is not to argue that we would have to reinvent the principles of European security. I still believe that what was agreed in the framework of the Helsinki Final Accord 1975 and reconfirmed subsequently by the Charter for a New Europe (Paris 1990), the Charter for European Security (Istanbul 1999) and the Astana Commemorative Declaration (2010) still makes sense. However, it is insufficient to reconfirm them. Instead, there is a need to agree again on what these principles mean in the 21st century and after 24 February 2022. To

do so, a mutual agreement on dealing constructively with the dilemmas inherent in these principles is paramount. Some crucial principles offer the potential for serious conflict of objectives: The right of people to self-determination versus territorial integrity; the non-interference in domestic affairs versus the legitimate concern of all participating states regarding compliance with human dimension commitments; or the indivisibility of security – meaning that no state should increase its own security at the expense of another state's security – versus the free choice of security arrangements. When applying the latter principles to the countries geographically located between the Russian Federation and NATO members, we are immediately confronted with a dilemma that needs to be resolved by diplomacy and not by force. While it is complex to overcome this paradox, there are possible solutions. For instance, a mix of security guarantees and arms control measures would have to be negotiated;[5]

d)   This takes us to the fourth building block that I propose: with long-term conflict prevention in the Euro-Atlantic space on our mind, we must talk about the status of the so-called "in-between countries". These are states like Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, geographically located between the Russian Federation and NATO. Instead of leaving them objects to geopolitical rivalry, the aim should be to turn these in-betweens into "bridge countries". This appears difficult to imagine after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, but there are means in the security policy and arms control toolbox enabling this transition;

e)   The fifth and last building block concerns the role of the Russian Federation: As soon as the Russian government is again ready to abide by international law, serious attempts will have to be made to find a place for Russia in the future security order. Some would argue that this is impossible to envision with the current Russian leadership. But in the long run, peace and stability in Europe are only possible with and not against Russia.[6]

CONCLUSION

In the foreseeable future, we will likely remain in a security environment where deterrence prevails, and political conditions will hinder comprehensively reintroducing cooperative elements into the European security order. However, some forms of dialogue and cooperation are warranted even in such a setting.

„WE NEED MINIMAL DECONFLICTION AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION CHANNELS TO PREVENT MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND UNINTENDED ESCALATIONS. IN ADDITION, A COMPARTMENTALIZATION POLICY WOULD ALLOW THE PURSUIT OF COOPERATION IN AS MANY ESSENTIAL SECURITY POLICY AREAS AS POSSIBLE."

At some point, we will have to launch another serious attempt to return to a cooperative European security architecture. For this to happen, we need an enabling political environment and political leadership by key stakeholders of European security. As long as the war in Ukraine is ongoing and not settled satisfactorily, this is unthinkable. Once the conditions are given, such a process could draw on existing institutions. A smart combination of bilateral and multilateral formats should be aimed for. Bilateral setups such as the Istanbul process between Ukraine and Russia facilitated by Türkiye or the Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD) between the United States and the Russian Federation could be complemented by multilateral platforms like a reinvigorated NATO-Russia Council or the OSCE. In particular, the broader discussion on the principles of European security should be conducted on an inclusive platform like the OSCE. This would permit amplifying Europe's voice through the EU and its member states, but also allow a solid representation by Ukraine and other "in-between" or "bridge" states. A process inspired by the Helsinki Process of the 1970ies, a Helsinki 2.0., could structure this broader discussion on the 21st-century meaning of the principles of European security. In this sense, a revitalized OSCE could serve as a coordination platform for European security, as envisaged by the Istanbul Summit Declaration of 1999.

Endnotes

1.   An assessment shared by Michael Kimmage and Zachary Paikin, "Can We Ever Build a Common European Home? The Perils and Promise of an Old Idea," CEPS Explainer, June 2022, https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/can-we-ever-build-a-common-european-home/.

2.   International Institute for Strategic Studies. "The UN and Russia's War in Ukraine," December 2022, https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2022/the-un-and-russias-war-in-ukraine.

3.   Kimmage and Paikin, "Can We Ever Build a Common European Home? The Perils and Promise of an Old Idea."

4.   Hibai Miguel Aza and Arbide Gonzalez, "US Offered Disarmament Measures to Russia in Exchange for Deescalation of Military Threat in Ukraine," EL PAIS English Edition, 22.02.2022, https://english.elpais.com/usa/2022-02-02/us-offers-disarmament-measures-to-russia-in-exchange-for-a-deescalation-of-military-threat-in-ukraine.html.

5.   Kimmage and Paikin, "Can We Ever Build a Common European Home? The Perils and Promise of an Old Idea" offer an interesting discussion of this dilemma.

6.   Peter Jones, "European Security Architecture: Against Russia, or With It?," Royal United Services Institute, December 2022, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/european-security-architecture-against-russia-or-it/ supports this argument.

7.   Marc Weller, "An Off-Ramp for the War in Ukraine," Opinio Juris, 14.03.2022, https://opiniojuris.org/2022/03/14/an-off-ramp-for-the-war-in-ukraine/.

8.   Martine Fischer, "Breaking the Escalation Spiral – Impetus for Peace," Brot Für Die Welt, 24.08.2022, https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/blog/2022-breaking-the-escalation-spiral-impetus-for-peace/.