

Perspectives on the war in Ukraine and the future of the European security order

**Speech by
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Excellencies, Dear colleagues! Distinguished guests!

Thank you very much for inviting me, it is a great honor for me to be with you tonight. I am grateful for the invitation to join you tonight. I would like to share some reflections on the war in Ukraine – a war at the heart of our continent which has now tragically been ongoing for more than two years.

The war has been subject to many twists and turns since Russia's invasion on the 24th of February 2022. We have seen moments of Ukrainian bravery, heroism and triumph – from the Battle of Kyiv, to subsequent victories in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions. But we have also seen Russian advances, often at great cost, in Bakhmut – and most recently in Avdiivka.

Yet despite this back-and-forth, the year 2023 was marked by **two major offensives** – one by Russia and one by Ukraine – both of which failed to yield a significant breakthrough. Overall, the frontline has not moved considerably **since the late autumn of 2022**. What we have been witnessing is a war of attrition.

Today, military momentum appears to be swinging back in Russia's direction. But it is **still too soon** to determine whether the stalemate, which has been with us for more than a year, will be broken. Even the recent Russian conquest of Avdiivka is of questionable strategic value for Moscow, although it is tactically, politically and psychologically damaging for Ukraine.

Therefore, as of right now, neither side appears poised to get 100% of what it wants. This provides us an opportunity to dwell on a question which has been with us since the early days of the war: do we have but **two paths ahead of us** – a path based on the revival of the “rules-based international order”, and another defined by the law of the jungle? Or can we imagine a **third option**, in which all sides can save face and European security can eventually be rebuilt?

Those who frame this war in strictly binary terms suggest that an **unambiguous Ukrainian victory** is required to restore the “rules-based international order”, given how important the norms of territorial integrity and non-aggression are to the UN Charter system and to the principles of European security. According to this perspective, anything less than this would amount to the advent of **a new international order** in which **might makes right** and threaten further aggression – either by Russia against NATO states or China against Taiwan.

However, I believe this perspective has certain **logical flaws**. Russia's willingness to attack Ukraine does not necessarily suggest that it is willing to test NATO's Article 5. And any Chinese decision to attack Taiwan would likely depend on the political state of US-China relations and the balance of military power in the area around the Taiwan Strait, more than on the result of the war between Russia and Ukraine. And given the **significant losses** that Russia has suffered in this war, it will be hard for other countries to draw the conclusion that **aggression pays**.

Beyond these logical flaws, there is the fact that a third option **does in fact exist**. A comprehensive settlement to the war in Ukraine may still be far away. Little trust remains in relations between Russia and the West, following decades of perceived broken promises.

But at least two of the key sticking points of this conflict – **security guarantees for Ukraine** and the **security concerns of Russia** – are **NOT** two isolated circles of a Venn diagram. The circles can, in principle, intersect.

Getting them to intersect will, above all, require political leadership and diplomacy. It will require Russia to make clear that it **does not seek to extinguish Ukrainian statehood** and that it views the idea of some kind of security



guarantees for Ukraine as **legitimate**, so long as Russia's security concerns about the military threats emanating from Ukrainian territory and the level of security cooperation between Ukraine and the West are met. Similarly, moving forward will also require the West and Ukraine to acknowledge the legitimacy of **Russia's** longstanding security concerns.

Besides political leadership, a **flexible approach to talks is also needed**. Some issues on the table will require talks between Russia and Ukraine. Others would need Western involvement as well. They would have to be conducted in a wider format.

Different tracks could be set up to deal with different issues – and these tracks should be in **parallel to one another** rather than **sequential to one another**. The guiding principle must be: Not **everything** must be agreed for **anything to be agreed**.

Rebuilding security is also about more than just relations between Russia and Ukraine or hard security issues such as arms control even though arms control agreements will be very important. It is also about **principles**. And when it comes to the broader principles shaping European security, these can often be **in tension with one another**. There are dilemmas created by applying principles to specific geographies. Dilemmas that need to be addressed constructively, i.e. by diplomatic and not military means.

This is true for the dilemma of **sovereignty versus human rights**, or **territorial integrity versus the self-determination of peoples**. It is also true of norms that have caused a great deal of friction between Russia and the West over the past three decades: **the right to freely choose one's security arrangement versus indivisible security**.

Foundational documents of today's European security order, such as the Helsinki Final Act, the Charter of Paris in 1990, the Charter of European Security of 1999 or the Astana Declaration towards a security community of 2010, all signed by our heads of states, include both of these norms. So Russia and the West have signed up to **both of them**. But unfortunately, we have often seen both sides engage in **cherry picking**.

Western countries have preferred to emphasize the right of countries to choose their own security arrangements, free from any third-party veto. This would mean that Ukraine's NATO membership is a matter purely for Kyiv and NATO members to decide – and that Russia should have no say.

Moscow, by contrast, insists on the **indivisibility of security** – namely, that no country should increase its security at the expense of another country's security: for example, by Ukraine or other so-called in-between countries pursuing NATO membership at the expense of Russia's security interests.

These principles may be in tension with one another. But that does **not mean they are irreconcilable**. How to interpret and apply certain principles can – and **MUST** – depend on **context**.

What is required is a shared commitment to **diplomacy** and to **crisis communication** so that principles once again become shared aspirations, rather than instruments to weaponize against one another. Talking past one another is **no solution to the crisis of security we face on our continent today**.

Dear colleagues and esteemed guests, as of right now, we do not know how the Ukraine war will end. As alluded to before, the war has seen many twists and turns so far – and further instances of dramatic change should not be ruled out,



even though the most likely scenario to me seems to be the continuation of high intensity warfare with neither side capable of breaking out of the current stalemate for the foreseeable future. This said, we do not know for certain. This is why, we better reflect in scenarios. So, we should not rule out a military victory of one of the sides, even if it does not appear likely.

If Ukraine's morale breaks and its lines collapse, then Russia could score significant territorial advances. By contrast, if Ukraine succeeds at recruiting and training a new crop of soldiers, and the West scales up its military support, then Kyiv may be able to go on the offensive once again.

Perhaps the conflict will **escalate**. We could see an increase in the scale and intensity of the fighting between Russia and Ukraine, the targeting of even more critical civilian infrastructure, it could escalate in cyberspace or outerspace, or even in a direct clash between Russia and NATO. Alternatively, the war might **de-escalate**, transition to low-intensity warfare with both sides agreeing on certain limits regarding when, where and how to engage along the lengthy front. Kyiv and Moscow might even begin talks aimed at achieving a **ceasefire, leading to the freezing of the conflict and ideally to settlement negotiations**.

But amid these many possibilities, **one thing is certain**: Over recent years, we have seen how the inability to resolve our differences at the diplomatic table can lead to attempts to resolve those disagreements **on the battlefield**.

Ending this war in a fashion that meets the demands of all parties will be a **monumental task**. But we also need to look **beyond the war**, and foster voices that can transcend the binary narratives which have done so much damage to our continent – to our **shared home**.

Indeed, if we do not escape this binary logic, then we will never be able to build a European security order on anything other than deterrence and confrontation. Such an outcome would come at the expense of **our generation's security** – and of the **next generation's wellbeing**.

We owe it to the next generation to find ways to breathe **at least some elements** of cooperative security into the fabric of our shared continent, so that we do not fight **today's battles** at the expense of **tomorrow's challenges**.

Thank you very much for your attention!