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GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT BETWEEN GREAT POWERS IN THE 21st CENTURY: ANALYSIS OF THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

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Abstract. The Ukrainian crisis is not just an armed conflict between two nations, but also reflects the geopolitical competition between great powers in the 21st century. This paper will analyze the deep-rooted origins leading to the military conflict through a geopolitical lens, delving into the long process of historical tensions and confrontation between Russia and the West represented by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) regarding the issue of Ukraine. The study will explore Russia's geostrategic motives in starting special military operation in Ukraine, NATO's efforts to expand its influence into this region, as well as the complex developments that caused the conflict to escalate into the largest armed war since the beginning of the 21st century. Through this, the paper analyzes the profound nature of the geopolitical crisis in Ukraine in the context of the power struggle between major powers in this strategic region; provide a comprehensive view of the motives, strategies of the parties involved, as well as the far-reaching implications this conflict has caused for security in the European region. In doing so, it contributes to a better understanding of the complex nature of geopolitical conflict and security in the 21st century.

Keywords: Ukrainian crisis, NATO, Europe, geopolitics, security

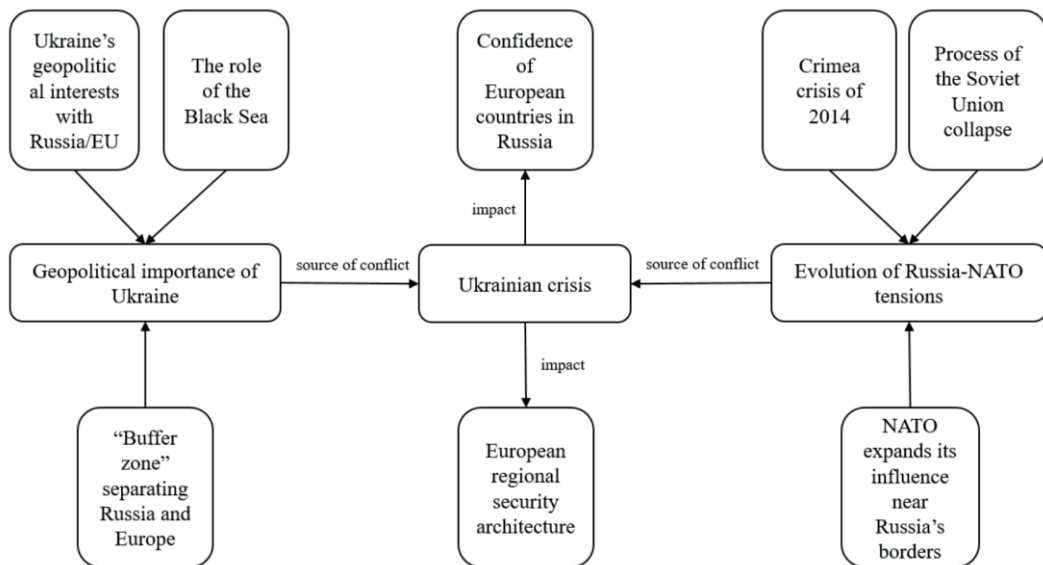
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Introduction

In the multipolar and complex world of the 21st century, the rise of new powers such as China, India, and Russia has altered the global balance of power. This has led to intense strategic competition between traditional Western powers and emerging forces, particularly exemplified by the adversarial relationship between Russia and NATO [Kiet & Tuyen, 2023]. The Ukrainian crisis in Eastern Europe has marked the beginning of the largest geopolitical crisis on the European continent since the end of the Cold War era [Khudoley, 2023]. The causes leading to the conflict stemmed from calculations regarding the issue of strategic competition between Russia and NATO in shaping the balance of power in Europe, which has seriously impacted the European security structure established since World War II [Raik et al., 2024].

Through Fig. 1, this study will analyze the deep-rooted causes leading to the military crisis through the lens of geopolitics, focusing on clarifying the historical process of tension and confrontation between Russia and the West represented by NATO over the geopolitical issue of Ukraine. The study will explore the geostrategic motives that drove Russia's military operation in Ukraine, NATO's efforts to expand its influence in this region, as well as the complex developments that escalated the conflict into the largest armed conflict in Europe since the 21st century. Through this, the study will analyze the deep nature of the geopolitical crisis in Ukraine in the context of the power competition among major powers in this geostrategic region; provide a comprehensive view of the motives, strategies of the parties involved, as well as the spillover effects of this conflict on regional security in Europe. Thereby, it contributes to elucidating the complex nature of geopolitical and security conflicts among powers in the 21st century. The research findings will provide scientific arguments about the causes leading to the conflict, while assessing the implications of this conflict for the regional security structure in Europe and European countries' confidence in Russia. Thus, it provides important information for building foreign policy and security strategy in the European region going forward. Specifically, the paper will focus on answering the following four research questions:

- (1) What geopolitical causes led to the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, two traditionally neighboring peoples?
- (2) What is the importance of Ukraine's geopolitics in triggering and escalating the conflict among the parties involved?
- (3) How did the historical process of tension and confrontation between Russia and the West (NATO) in Ukraine unfold, leading to the outbreak of armed conflict in 2022?
- (4) What is the impact of the Ukrainian crisis on the regional security structure in Europe and European countries' security confidence in Russia?

Figure 1: Analytical framework of this article

Source: Author's group.

The Geopolitical Importance of Ukraine to Russia and NATO

In terms of policy and strategy to expand influence and contain Russia in the European region, Ukraine has attracted NATO's attention as a country with an extremely important geostrategic position. This reflects the recognition of Ukraine's unique position in expanding NATO's eastward influence and power competition with Russia in Europe. This policy makes Ukraine an important link for NATO to create a defensive belt and encirclement to contain Russia's traditional influence and power in the "old continent" [Brzezinski, 2019: 175–180]. As analyzed by scholar Brzezinski, Ukraine's geographical features, with its vast plains and border adjacent to western Russia, will provide a strong impetus for NATO to bring Ukraine into its security structure, as well as strategic significance in separating Russia's geographic position from the "old continent" and shaping the power structure in Europe. If this policy is successfully implemented, it will not only weaken Russia's traditional influence and power, but also put Russia in an unstable situation in terms of defense and security in Europe. Therefore, in the Russian worldview, Ukraine's geopolitics plays a very important role in Russia's policies and strategies in Europe from history to the present. Scholar Robert Kaplan argues that Ukraine's geopolitical position is the "key" and "shield" helping Russia protect its western territories adjacent to Europe [Kaplan, 2018: 155–157]. Therefore, Russian leaders have always regarded Ukraine as a "buffer zone" helping Russia link

closely with the European continent while protecting the security of western Russia, the origin of the Muscovy Grand Duchy and the center of Russian political, economic and cultural activities for many centuries.

On the other hand, historical lessons learned from the Battle of Waterloo with French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, World War I and World War II made Russian leaders aware of the geostrategic importance of Ukraine for the defense of western Russia [Ahmed et al., 2023]. Simultaneously, the possession of the Crimean peninsula is crucial for Russia's core interests in the Black Sea, where the warm-water port of Sevastopol allows Russia access to the Mediterranean by sea and integration with the world's economies. This is one of the important "keys" that helps the Russian economy in the 21st century recover and regain its strong position like during the Soviet era in the 20th century, as specifically assessed in scholar Tim Marshall's study: "Because Russia lacks a warm-water port that does not freeze in winter, this has made the port of Sevastopol a core interest that could seriously affect Russia's security policy" [Marshall, 2020: 43]. Therefore, Ukraine's geostrategic position plays a very important role in Russia's security policies, strategies and ambition to regain its "superpower" status in the 21st century. Russian leaders have always seen Ukraine as a place under traditional Russian influence that cannot be allowed to escape from Russian "sphere of influence" by joining NATO, as clearly expressed in President V. Putin's speech at the Kremlin on 24 February, 2022: "For us, Ukraine is not just a neighboring country, but an integral part of our own history, culture and spiritual space"¹.

Recognizing the potential risks of Ukraine's geostrategic position in the power competition between Russia and NATO in Europe, scholar Tim Marshall emphasized the consequences of Ukraine joining NATO after the reunification of Crimea with Russia in 2014 [Marshall, 2020: 29]. Recent developments in the European region have demonstrated the accuracy of Tim Marshall's view on Russia's reaction to NATO's eastward expansion strategy. Therefore, Ukraine's determination to join NATO has reached Russia's "red line", prompting Russia to decide to conduct a "special military operation" in Ukraine. Scholar Tim Marshall also described the core characteristic of Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine, stating: "A pro-Russian government in Kyiv, Russia could maintain its buffer zone and ensure security for the North European Plain. Russia could even agree to the existence of a neutral government, as long as it ensures that Ukraine will not join NATO and allows Russia to use the port of Sevastopol in the Crimean Peninsula for a long time" [Marshall, 2020: 31]. Thus, Tim Marshall proposed a solution of forming a neutral government with a flexible foreign policy skillfully balancing the powers competing in Ukraine, such as the former government of President Viktor Yanukovich, which "brought Ukraine to the center of Europe while maintaining good relations with Russia" [D'Anieri, 2012]. This would be in line with Russia's core interests and ensure peace and security for Ukraine and Europe as a whole. Additionally, scholar John Mearsheimer offered a perspective on the Russia-West relationship in the context of the Euromaidan events in February 2014, stating: "Russia does not want

¹ Kremlin (2022) Address by the President of the Russian Federation. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843> (accessed: 02.03.2024).

a Western wall facing its doorstep, and this is a legitimate perspective from Russia's viewpoint. The West's failure to understand this perspective has made the situation more complicated"¹. Therefore, in the works "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy", scholar J. Mearsheimer and S.M. Walt criticized the US: "When the Soviet Union collapsed, with no other great power dominating any other region, the US should have gradually reduced its military presence here, built more friendly relations with Russia, and handed over the task of protecting European security to the Europeans themselves. But in reality, the US instead pushed for NATO expansion and disregarded Russia's interests, helping fuel the political crisis in Ukraine and other conflicts" [Mearsheimer, Walt 2016]. Therefore, the Ukrainian conflict is an inevitable result when NATO decides to admit Ukraine, a country of critical geostrategic importance to Russia's existential security in the West.

The Historical Process of Disputes between Russia and NATO in Ukraine

Hans Morgenthau argues that: "World politics, like all other forms of politics, is a struggle for power. The ultimate goal of international politics, wherever it may be, is power" [Hong & Hiep, 2018: 96]. Therefore, events occurring on the international political scene all stem from power, and the competition between countries all aims to gain power, leading to the "security dilemma" and pushing countries to ensure security by increasing their power. The Ukrainian crisis reflects a deep geopolitical and security divergence between the two countries, stemming from Ukraine's determination to join Western organizations, territorial disputes, Russia's security concerns over NATO, as well as differences in vision and ideology. Through historical events, in the spirit of objectively assessing reality, Ukraine is the "victim" between Russia and NATO in the strategy of power competition in Europe since the outbreak of the 1994 anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya.

NATO's history began on April 4, 1949, a time when the global context was undergoing complex changes as humanity had just gone through World War II and was entering the early stages of the Cold War. Faced with the rise of communism in the 1940s in the colonies of the Eastern Hemisphere and gradually spreading from Eastern Europe to Southeast Asia, twelve capitalist members including Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the US officially adopted the North Atlantic Treaty establishing NATO with three missions: "To keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down"². NATO's primary dual mission was to prevent the Russians from spreading communism to Western Europe and other regions of the world in the spirit of the 1947

¹ Mearsheimer, J.J. (2014) Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault. URL: <https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Why-the-Ukraine-Crisis-Is.pdf> (accessed: 22.02.2024).

² Shehadi, S. (2022) Why did NATO enlarge? URL: <https://www.investmentmonitor.ai/ukraine-crisis/nato-expansion-russia-putin-ukraine-germany/> (accessed: 13.02.2024).

Truman Doctrine. Simultaneously, it ensured the permanent military presence of the US against the potential threat of German revanchism that had occurred and formed German National Socialism after this country was defeated in World War I. In 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall marked an important turning point for German reunification. The relevant powers in the 1945 Potsdam Agreement, including West Germany, East Germany, France, Britain, the US and the Soviet Union, decided to sign the Two Plus Four Treaty on September 12, 1990, effective March 15, 1991, for the reunification of West and East Germany under the name the Federal Republic of Germany. An important part of the reason for the Soviet Union's consent was the "promise" made by US Secretary of State James Baker to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze during preliminary negotiations on the Two Plus Four Treaty, stating: "NATO will not move one inch eastward"¹. However, this "promise" was only in spirit as there was no official document, thus leaving open the possibility of NATO's later expansion of its geographic scope.

Through the Belovezha Accords on December 8, 1991, the three Soviet republics declared independence, setting the stage for the official dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991. It's worth noting that the end of the Cold War era was earlier marked by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990. Open a new era for all countries and nations around the world towards a prosperous, self-governing world order in line with the powerful globalization trend spreading across the globe. Therefore, in accordance with the juridical foundation of the 1922 Treaty establishing the Soviet Union and Article 72 of the 1977 Soviet Constitution on the right of "each Union Republic to retain the right to freely secede from the USSR", the Soviet republics declared independence through the Belavezha Accords and built a democratic state model suitable to the context of the times. This laid the foundation for the rise of "Western democratic" values spreading across the post-Soviet states, especially in Eastern Europe when the Soviet Union collapsed. In 1993, in the essay "Toward a New World Order: The Future of NATO" George Soros assessed the change in political consciousness in the wave of "Western democracy" in Central European countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, stating: "The Central European countries are clamoring to become full NATO allies as soon as possible, preferably before Russia recovers. Russia objects, not because it harbors any designs on its former empire but because it sees no advantage in acquiescing. Its national pride has been hurt, and it is sick and tired of making concessions without corresponding benefits"². Thus, George Soros argued that the collapse of the USSR did not mean the end for NATO when the alliance's "enemy" had disappeared. On the contrary, he believed that "anarchy was coming", which was an opportune time to push

¹ Wiegrefe, K. (2022) Is Vladimir Putin Right? URL: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/nato-s-eastward-expansion-is-vladimir-putin-right-a-bf318d2c-7aeb-4b59-8d5f-1d8c94e1964d> (accessed: 14.02.2024).

² Soros, G. (1993) Toward a New World Order: The Future of NATO. URL: <https://www.georgesoros.com/1993/11/01/toward-a-new-world-order-the-future-of-nato/> (accessed: 10.03.2024).

NATO's eastward expansion strategy when Russia was in a weakened state during the process of democratic reform. As predicted by billionaire George Soros, NATO's expansion strategy was pursued by the US despite the "promise" made to the Soviet Union in the 1990s¹, which angered Russian leaders and made them believe that NATO was trying to push Russia off the world map.

In 1994, the anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya broke out, and Eastern European countries applied to join NATO out of a desire to be protected by Article 5 from pressure from Russia. In a classified document from the US National Security Archive released on April 15, 2020, it was recorded that US President Bill Clinton faced a "difficult choice between on the one side showing respect for Russia's historical sacrifices in the struggle against fascism and supporting Russia's first democratically elected president, and on the other side (Chechnya) protecting basic human rights"². Observing the changing political situation in Chechnya and the future global political context, President Bill Clinton decided to implement NATO's eastward expansion strategy, opening up decades of power competition between Russia and NATO in Europe, creating instability in the security structure of the "old continent" established since the end of World War II. Therefore, scholar Mary Elise Sarote observed and concluded that: "This strategy was officially pursued by NATO when Russia attacked Chechnya in December 1994, which impacted the worldview of Eastern European countries, typically Poland"³. Over several waves, NATO pushed its eastward expansion strategy. This process, occurring during and after Russia's economic recovery following a decade of crisis (1991–2000), successfully admitted 14 Eastern European countries over time. This expansion coincided with the influence of the 'Western democratic' wave, which created a dual effect, forming a series of continuous 'color revolutions' in CIS member states from 2003 to 2005 (the first wave) and continuing into the 2010s.

In 2008, marking an important breakthrough in implementing NATO's strategy of expanding its influence over Ukraine and post-Soviet states with important geopolitical positions for Russia's western and southwestern security flank into NATO, at the NATO Summit in the Romanian capital Bucharest, President George W. Bush publicly supported Ukraine and Georgia's accession to the alliance when the unstable situation between Georgia and the two pro-Russian breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was becoming increasingly serious. He stated: "Such a move would send a signal throughout the region that these nations are, and will remain, sovereign and inde-

¹ Kremlin (2021) Vladimir Putin's annual news conference. URL: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/press_conferences/67438 (accessed: 02.03.2024).

² National Security Archive (2020) Chechnya, Yeltsin, and Clinton: The Massacre at Samashki in April 1995 and the US Response to Russia's War in Chechnya. URL: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2020-04-15/massacre-at-samashki-and-us-response-to-russias-war-in-chechnya> (accessed: 25.02.2024).

³ Lehnartz, S. (2022) It's high time to talk to the Russians. URL: <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/plus237014049/Streit-ueber-Nato-Osterweiterung-Es-ist-hoechste-Zeit-Tacheles-mit-den-Russen-zu-reden.html> (accessed: 05.03.2024).

pendent states”¹. Therefore, the support of the US (NATO’s most influential member) provided momentum for Georgia to attack South Ossetia, prompting Russia’s first “resolute” response to NATO’s eastward expansion strategy. Russia waged a “peace enforcement operation” in Georgia, marking the start of the first war in Europe in the 21st century. As for Ukraine, the situation became increasingly difficult to control when President Viktor Yushchenko issued an order to control the movements of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet at the port of Sevastopol in Ukraine during the South Ossetia - Georgia military conflict, an event that caused a serious internal rift between the pro-Western and pro-Russian factions within the Ukrainian government. In 2010, President Viktor Yanukovich took power and formed a new government, espousing the idea of “bringing Ukraine to the center of Europe while maintaining good relations with Russia” [D’Anieri, 2012]. However, the “color revolution” wave rose strongly in western Ukraine, and President Yanukovich’s government was overthrown in the Euromaidan Revolution in February 2014, prompting President Vladimir Putin to implement the plan to “bring Crimea back to the motherland” as Ukraine’s accession to NATO became increasingly real and difficult to prevent in the future. Russia deployed military forces to control the Crimean Peninsula and ratified the unification with Crimea after a referendum passed with 96.77% in favor among 83% of eligible voters, where 65.3% were Russian and 82.3% were Russian-speaking out of over 2 million people in the region².

On June 7, 2014, the pro-Western government under President Petro Poroshenko was established and simultaneously implemented the foreign policy of “integration with the EU and NATO” as planned [Shyrokykh, 2018]. This prompted a fierce reaction from the two pro-Russian breakaway entities in the Donbas region, where the traditional influence of Russian culture, Russian language and family ties meant that the majority of the population’s ideology and roots were intertwined with Russia. Therefore, this event led to a bloody conflict lasting more than 10 months between Ukraine and the breakaway republics until the Minsk II peace agreement was signed in February 2015 in Belarus by the Normandy Quartet. On February 7, 2019, Ukraine marked its decisive shift towards the West and complete opposition to Russia when its parliament passed a constitutional amendment stipulating EU and NATO membership as the country’s existential goals, explicitly stated in Articles 85, 102, and 116. Subsequently, on May 20, 2019, the new government under President Volodymyr Zelenskyy took power and declared it would “resist any interference from Russia”, gaining widespread support from the Ukrainian people, especially in western Ukraine where the population has long been influenced by Western cultural traditions. In January 2021, President Zelenskyy called on the US to admit Ukraine to NATO, prompting Russia to seek a final dialogue solution with NATO to prevent this action. Russia submitted the Russia-NATO Security Agreement on December 17, 2021, viewing this as the “final” peaceful dialogue before

¹ Erlanger, S., & Myers, S.L. (2008) NATO Allies Oppose Bush on Georgia and Ukraine. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/03/world/europe/03nato.html> (accessed: 17.02.2024).

² Nichukin, A. (2014) 96.77% of Crimeans voted for the reunification of Crimea with Russia. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/365090> (accessed: 19.02.2024).

Russia would take “unpredictable” actions to protect its existential security. However, the nine clauses in the agreement were interpreted by NATO as incompatible with its interests and were quickly rejected, leading Russia to move its military forces towards Ukraine’s eastern border. On February 22, 2022, Russia recognized the independence of the two breakaway Donbas republics, the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR), and launched a “special military operation” in Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

The continuous process of NATO admitting Eastern European countries has made Russia worried about its western border security and feeling encircled, directly threatening Russia’s existence. Therefore, on February 26, 2022, President V. Putin emphasized NATO’s “plan” in this crisis, stating: “They (NATO) have one aim to destroy the former Soviet Union and its core component – Russia. And perhaps they would then be willing to accept us into what they call the family of civilized peoples, but only separately, each part individually. Why is this necessary? So that they can then command these semi-degreed individuals and place them under their control”¹. Russian leaders resolutely oppose post-Soviet states, especially Ukraine, joining NATO – a country of extremely important geopolitical position for Russia’s existential security on its western border, where the “Russian world” connects to the European continent. Russia sees Ukraine as an important buffer zone to protect Russia’s security in the west, and Ukraine’s accession to NATO would cause Russia to lose this solid defense [Dodds et al., 2023]. If that scenario occurred, Russian territory would be encircled and isolated, with the US and the EU on the western flank, and the US, Japan, and South Korea on the eastern flank. This would create a domino effect destroying Russia’s traditional influence over other pro-Russian post-Soviet states in the Caucasus, the Balkan Peninsula, and Central Asia, paving the way for NATO’s “anti-Russia” policies and strategies to reach these countries within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It would also facilitate the spread of “Western democracy” into the political ideology of these countries, aiming to establish a “hub-and-spoke” model to encircle Russian territory in Europe and “dream of Russia being divided into many regions”². Overall, the Ukrainian crisis largely stems from NATO’s eastward expansion strategy, which has crossed the “red line” that Russia believes affects its existential security.

The impact of the Ukrainian crisis on the security situation in the European region

The Ukrainian conflict has had a strong impact on the regional security situation in Europe, disrupting the regional security order established since World War II, putting European countries in a state of severe security crisis due to the threat they believe stems from Russia. Among these, the regional European security architecture is serious-

¹ Plakuchev, G. (2023) Putin spoke about the West’s desire to destroy Russia. URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2023/02/26/16310917.shtml> (accessed: 13.02.2024).

² Cohen, A. (2005) Competition over Eurasia: Are the US and Russia on a Collision Course? URL: <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/competition-over-eurasia-are-the-us-and-russia-collisioncourse> (accessed: 04.02.2024).

ly threatened, and the confidence of countries in the region towards Russia are two core issues that Europe is facing due to the impact of this conflict.

First, the impact on the regional European security architecture.

As the Ukrainian crisis unfolds, the EU countries are the main political subjects directly and most lastingly affected, in which Ukraine (a country in the process of joining the EU) suffers the most severe damage as the “proxy” battlefield between NATO and Russia. Therefore, the military conflict has disrupted the regional European security architecture, especially Russia’s traditional role and position in the region. Russia’s military operation is considered by the West a serious violation of the principle of not invading the territory of an independent country, causing a strong wave of condemnation from Western countries. Faced with the erupting crisis situation, the EU High Representative Josep Borrell strongly opposed Russia’s actions, stating: “Such decisions are illegal and unacceptable. They violate international law, Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, Russia’s own international commitments, and escalate the crisis further”¹. Thus, the conflict has made relations between Russia and Western countries, especially NATO, more tense and confrontational than ever since the Cold War. In addition, this conflict also poses a challenge to the role of the EU (especially Germany) in maintaining peace and stability on the “old continent”. Although the EU has made some efforts in diplomacy and sanctioning Russia, it is still considered slow and lacking unity in front of the crisis. This exposes the limitations on the EU’s overall unity in security-related decisions, as well as the EU’s excessive dependence on NATO for security².

Moreover, the Ukrainian crisis has impacted the security and political situation in neighboring regions such as Eastern Europe, the Baltic Sea region and the Balkans. Some countries in these regions have close relations with Russia or are heavily dependent on energy and trade with Russia. Therefore, most countries in the region have faced many challenges in adjusting their foreign policy towards Russia to suit the new situation. The most significant change was in the Nordic region, where Sweden (maintaining 200 years of neutrality policy) and Finland (maintaining 70 years of neutrality policy) abandoned their traditional military non-alignment policy to join NATO. Thus, the conflict has changed the regional status quo and created a profound and long-lasting impact on the security of countries in these regions. Additionally, instability from the conflict could exacerbate ethnic, religious and political issues in these sensitive regions, typically the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the “hotspot” between Moldova and the pro-Russian Transnistria region, the “hotspot” in the Kaliningrad region [Tuan,

¹ European Council (2022) EU adopts package of sanctions in response to Russian recognition of the non-government controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine and sending of troops into the region. URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/23/russian-recognition-of-the-non-government-controlled-areas-of-the-donetsk-and-luhansk-oblasts-of-ukraine-as-independent-entities-eu-adopts-package-of-sanctions/> (accessed: 14.02.2024).

² Ráczová, O. (2023) The lingering war in Ukraine: Security implications in Europe. URL: <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/globsec-orsolya-intempl-final.pdf> (accessed: 13.02.2024).

2022: 244]. These “hotspots” are further exacerbating the regional security situation in Europe. Therefore, the Ukrainian crisis has profoundly changed the balance of power in the European region. If Russia succeeds in its military operation, they will control a crucial part of the territory, especially the Sea of Azov coast and an important part of the mainland linking Russia to Crimea. This will give Russia a “buffer zone” with Europe, connect Russian territory to the Crimean Peninsula, maintain the warm-water port of Sevastopol, and completely change the geo-strategic situation in the Black Sea region. The military crisis risks spreading across Europe if “any European country requests direct military support for Ukraine, the result could lead to an even broader confrontation between Russia and NATO”¹. The “hawkish” statements of French President Emmanuel Macron about NATO needing to provide direct military support to Ukraine only make the regional security situation in Europe more complicated, and the regional security architecture risks collapsing if NATO actually intervenes militarily directly in the battlefield of Ukraine.

Second, the impact on the security beliefs of European countries towards Russia.

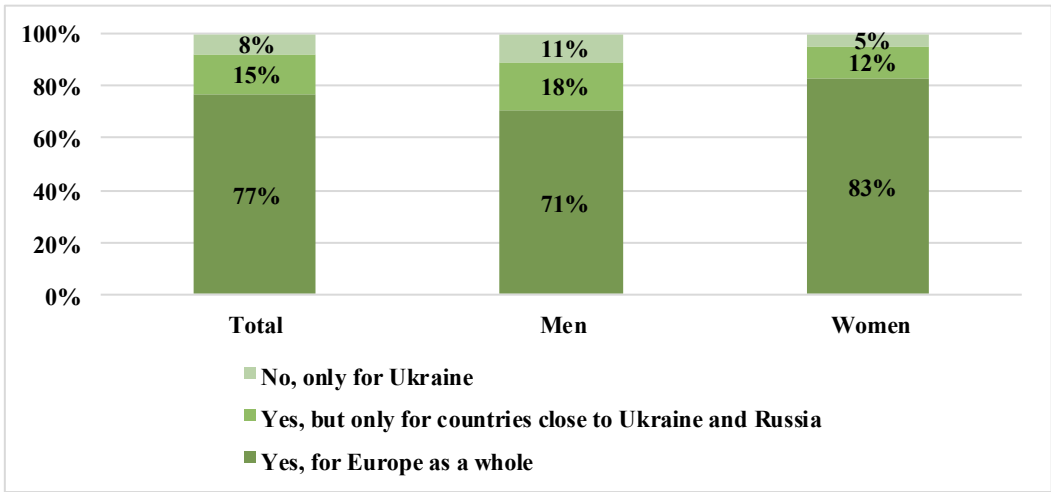
Russia’s military action has caused many European countries, especially in Eastern Europe and Northern Europe, to increase their awareness of the national security threat, according to scholar Le Hoang Kiet’s (2024) perspective: “The Russia-Ukraine conflict has created a sense of insecurity for European countries, as the history of war and ethnic hatred has haunted the psychology of European leaders”. Scholar Le Hoang Kiet’s hypothesis is based on the assessment of scholars Stephen M. Walt and Robert A. Belfer on the history of wars impacting the escalation of security competition between great powers: “History in war has a strong impact on the psychology of a country’s leadership. Even the most rational leaders are influenced by the power of collective memory”². Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine – an independent and Slavic neighboring country, has severely undermined the confidence of European countries towards Russia, with countries like Poland, Moldova, the Baltic states and the Nordic countries feeling they are facing the risk of being attacked or directly militarily intervened by Russia due to their neighboring position, especially those with large Russian diaspora communities [Vakarchuk & Ivoninskaia, 2024]. In particular, Finland and Sweden have abandoned their non-aligned military policy and applied an “external balancing” strategy with Russia, meaning adding NATO’s strength to gain greater power, increasing the cost-benefit loss if Russia intends to attack these two countries. In fact, when the Hungarian Parliament voted to approve Sweden’s accession to NATO on February 26, 2024, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson showed that his country is ready for military confrontation with Russia if the conflict spreads to the regional level:

¹ White, W.B. (2022) A Need for a New European Security Architecture. URL: <https://global.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/perry-world-house/burke-whiteukrainethoughtpiece.pdf> (accessed: 01.03.2024).

² Walt, S.M., & Belfer, R. (2017) Great Powers Are Defined by Their Great Wars. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/21/great-powers-are-defined-by-their-great-wars/> (accessed: 15.02.2024).

“Sweden is ready to take on its responsibility for Euro-Atlantic security”¹. In a survey of 1,083 people in 2022 by the Elcano Royal Academy (Spain), up to 77% of people believed that the Ukrainian crisis conflict is a threat to European countries (see Fig. 2). Therefore, the military conflict has fueled the trend of geopolitical realism in many countries, forcing them to recalculate their security strategies and strengthen their defense capabilities.

Figure 2: Survey of people’s beliefs about whether the Ukrainian crisis poses a threat to other countries



Source: Barometer of the Elcano Royal Institute (2022) Special edition: War in Ukraine and the NATO Summit. URL: <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/special-barometer-war-in-ukraine-and-nato-summit.pdf> (accessed: 23.03.2024).

According to a report by the European Defense Agency approved in October 2023, EU countries have significantly increased their defense budgets following the geopolitical crisis in Ukraine, with spending reaching €240 billion in 2022, marking the eighth consecutive year of growth since Russia’s reunification with Crimea in 2014. This is the largest increase in two decades, reflecting the efforts of countries to increase their military strength and deter Russia militarily. Among them, countries such as Sweden (+30.1%), Luxembourg (+27.9%), Lithuania (+27.6%), Spain (+19.3%), Belgium (+14.8%) and Greece (+3.3%) recorded the highest overall spending increases among

¹ Huy, A. (2024) After 200 years of neutrality, Sweden has finally joined NATO. URL: <https://vneconomy.vn/sau-200-nam-trung-lap-thuy-dien-cuoi-cung-da-gia-nhap-nato.htm> (accessed: 02.03.2024).

the 27 EU member states¹. It is estimated that the EU's defense spending will increase by another €70 billion in 2025. Meanwhile, some other major countries like Germany, France and the UK have also committed to significantly increasing defense spending in the medium and long term. Concerns about the threat from Russia have prompted many European countries to strengthen their war preparedness mentality, an event that has turned this once-peaceful region into the most likely place for a major war to break out in the 21st century. Since special military operation of Russia was started, the vast majority of Europeans view Russia as a security threat to the EU. According to the Eurobarometer survey published in December 2023, 78% overall agree that it is a threat, while 18% disagree. These figures are higher in some Central and Eastern European countries like Poland and Lithuania, where 88 and 84% respectively see Russia as a threat, but are also relatively high in larger countries like Germany (79%) and France (70%). Even in Hungary – the EU country most opposed to moving away from Russia, 65% of respondents see Russia as a security threat to the EU, while 33% disagree². These figures reflect the increasing level of concern in Europe about the strong resurgence of geopolitical realism in which national security becomes the top concern in foreign policy. Overall, the Ukraine crisis has forced many European countries to reassess their security approach, leading to a significant increase in defense spending and a heightened sense of anxiety and high alert towards what they say is a threat from Russia. This reflects a shift towards a “harder” mindset in the security thinking of EU countries in the context of escalating Russia-NATO tensions and the risk of spreading into a regional conflict.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian crisis is a complex geopolitical crisis that extends far beyond a mere territorial dispute between two neighboring nations. It is a manifestation of the deep-rooted historical tensions and power struggles between major powers vying for influence in the strategically significant region of Eastern Europe. Through a comprehensive analysis of the underlying geopolitical factors, historical context, and the unfolding events leading up to the conflict, this study has provided valuable insights into the intricate dynamics shaping the outbreak of the largest armed conflict in Europe since World War II. The research findings have highlighted the critical importance of Ukraine's geostrategic position in the escalation of tensions between Russia and NATO. Ukraine's unique geographical features, proximity to western Russia, and access to the Black Sea have made it a vital “buffer zone” and “shield” for Russia's security interests in the region. Conversely, NATO's efforts to expand its influence eastward and potentially in-

¹ European Defence Agency (2023) Defence data 2022: Key findings and analysis. URL: https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/brochures/2022-eda_defencedata_web.pdf (accessed: 16.02.2024).

² European Commission (2023) Standard Eurobarometer 100 - Autumn 2023. URL: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3053> (accessed: 21.02.2024).

corporate Ukraine into its security structure have been perceived by Russia as a direct threat to its traditional sphere of influence and existential security concerns.

The study has traced the historical process of confrontation between Russia and NATO over the issue of Ukraine, unveiling the deep-rooted origins of the conflict. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent wave of “Western democracy” spreading across Eastern Europe prompted NATO’s eastward expansion strategy, which Russia viewed as a violation of promises made during the reunification of Germany. This divergence in strategic interests and the failure to adequately address Russia’s security concerns laid the foundation for the escalating tensions that ultimately culminated in the outbreak of armed conflict. Furthermore, the research has shed light on the profound impact of the Ukrainian crisis on the regional security architecture in Europe and the eroding confidence of European nations towards Russia. The conflict has disrupted the established regional security order, fueling a resurgence of geopolitical realism and prompting countries, particularly those in Eastern and Northern Europe, to reassess their security strategies and defense capabilities. Moreover, the conflict has prompted a significant shift in European security thinking, with many nations increasing their defense spending and adopting a more hardline stance towards perceived threats from Russia. The once-peaceful European continent now finds itself on the precipice of a potential regional conflagration, should the conflict escalate further or spill over into neighboring territories.

Overall, the Ukrainian crisis serves as a stark reminder of the enduring importance of geopolitics and the complex interplay between great power ambitions, historical grievances, and strategic considerations. It underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the motivations and perspectives of all parties involved, as well as the necessity for diplomatic efforts to defuse tensions and prevent further escalation. As the international community grapples with the implications of this crisis, it becomes evident that the pursuit of lasting peace and stability in the European region will require a delicate balancing act between competing interests, a willingness to engage in constructive dialogue, and a commitment to upholding the principles of international law and sovereignty. Only through a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of the conflict and fosters mutual understanding can the specter of a broader confrontation be averted, and the path towards a more secure and prosperous future for all nations be paved.

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