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## Nato Past 75: Moving Into a Twenty Years' Crisis, 2021-2041

Simon Serfaty  
Old Dominion University, [sserfaty@odu.edu](mailto:sserfaty@odu.edu)

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## NATO Past 75: Moving into a Twenty Years' Crisis, 2021-2041

Simon Serfaty

“A constructive treatment of Europe’s present-day problems calls for historical thinking which is something more than mere historical knowledge,” wrote historian Hajo Holborn about the political collapse of Europe. Historical thinking views the moment as a combination of Saint Augustine’s “three presents”—of things past and things future as well as of things present. Admittedly, it is on all three accounts that current conditions now look bleak on both sides of the Atlantic. At home, the constitutional order is at risk in the United States and other Western democracies, pending the next national election; abroad, the postwar institutional order embraced by at least half the world has collapsed after 30 years of overlapping and failed transitions under four distinct U.S. presidents since George H.W. Bush (1991-2021). What went wrong? And what comes next, on the way to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1941 Atlantic Charter that changed the course of the twentieth century?

It was to keep the past at bay and to cure Europe’s prior suicidal insanity that the “over there” of the Old World and the “over here” of the New World extended the latter’s wartime return to Europe into a more permanent stay with a postwar alliance (NATO). This unprecedented peacetime security commitment was bold, and it conditioned a long peace dubbed the Cold War, during which the United States was locked in to keep the Soviet Union out while half of Germany was gradually allowed to reemerge within an ever-closer and -larger Europe. That the Alliance and the European Community outlived the Cold War should not have been surprising as they were both born out of the two wars that preceded it. And after Mikhail Gorbachev announced that the Kremlin no longer regarded the United States as an adversary, NATO therefore regained its original postwar identity as a “guarantee pact” for a whole and free Continent, including a now reunified and democratic Germany next to a shrunken and hopefully tamed Russia.

To renew and enlarge that guarantee for the post-Cold War era, the Bush-41 administration and the Allies acted no less quickly than the Truman administration had after World War II, redefining (membership), restructuring (governance), and redirecting (out of area) the Alliance. Secretary James Baker’s December 1989 speech in Berlin, the London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance in December 1990, the Rome Declaration on Peace and Cooperation in November 1991, and the Maastricht Treaty signed the following month collectively outlined a security structure that would be multilateral and multidimensional: transatlantic by virtue of the Washington Treaty and NATO, pan-European by virtue of a newly formed North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), inclusive by virtue of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), and *communautaire* by virtue of elevating the European Community into a Union (EU). These interlocking institutions were to combine their respective assets and comparative advantages to pursue reconciliation with former adversaries, promote economic and political reform in the newly liberated post-communist and post-Soviet states, re-balance responsibilities across the Atlantic, and end territorial conflicts whose memories still haunted the continent.

Left behind was Russia, forgotten after it was hijacked by the Soviet Union, but which lost little time questioning its condition as a war amputee. “We’re not Haiti, Russia will rise again,” Boris Yeltsin wanted “his friend” Bill Clinton to know, as he, like Gorbachev before and Putin next, insisted on “a relationship of equals” which would “respect” their country—still *la grande Russie*. History is not a U.S. forte, however; neither punished like post-Imperial Germany in 1919 nor rehabilitated like post-Nazi Germany after 1945, Russia was left to Vladimir Putin—“a man who meant nothing to us” when he replaced Yeltsin—to correct the geopolitical surrender that had “robbed” and “plundered” the “great Russia hegemony.”<sup>1</sup>

With Putin at the helm, the reset of Russian power was not just a self-induced burst of imperial nostalgia, a momentary post-bipolar funk, nor a fit of nationalist resentment toward triumphant neighbors who had closed the door to the “common home” to which Gorbachev had aspired. Framing all such reactions was a haunting idea of Russia as having endured the vicissitudes of history, outlived harsh and inept governance, and embraced a “holy” destiny at the expense but with the approval of its people. Dismissing Russia as “a failed state” lacking “resources for national purpose, at home and abroad” derailed the closing decade of the past century.<sup>2</sup> Putin became who he is because Russia is what it is rather than what the West had hoped it might become.

### **Failed Transitions, 1991-2021**

With a sense of the gathering storm ahead, the historian E. H. Carr planned his classic study of the interwar years in 1937, but it was completed and sent to the publishers only eight weeks before Germany invaded Poland. By then, such phrases as “the War,” “pre-War,” or “post-War” were already dated, as he noted in the book’s second edition (released after the war’s end). After 1919, the then-postwar primacy of “the existing nation-state, large or small” had been accepted “too readily and too speedily.” After World War II but also pre-Cold War, he found those territorial units “obsolete or obsolescent” and dismissed any “workable international organization built on a membership of a multiplicity of nation-states.”<sup>3</sup> Carr anticipated the bipolar structure inherited from the two world wars, and even the unipolar moment that followed the Cold War. Unexpectedly, however, that moment started 30 years of overlapping and failed transitions that produced a contested post-American and post-Western world composed of “a multiplicity” of adversarial and competing states—many large, some small, and all eager.

The transitions since 1991 are known, each proceeding from the previous and worsening its consequences prior to the next. First, the Soviet Union went down “in the blink of an eye,” George H. W. Bush later remembered. The unipolar moment that followed, and its expected peace

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<sup>1</sup> Yeltsin is quoted in Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand, A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 26-27 and 401. Putin is quoted in Ellen Barry, “History Should Guide Its Future, Putin Says,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Zoellick and Philip D. Zelikow, ed., *America and Russia: Memos to a President* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2000), 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1962), vii-viii.

dividends, were short-lived and unsatisfying. They hardly were the “end of History” (the end of ideological conflicts); nationalism remained alive and anxious to be heard again. Only ten years later, 9/11 made America feel more vulnerable than ever before, involving NATO and its partners in unwinnable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Framing the post-9/11 wars as a “clash of civilizations” was a geopolitical simplification that exaggerated the roles of religion and values in foreign policy, understated the scope and depth of conflicts within civilizations, and overlooked the coming “clash of globalizations.” Next came a “colossal failure of common sense” for political and economic liberalism with the great recession of 2007-2008, producing uneven recoveries and divisive populist consequences throughout the 2010s. Soon after, a spontaneous but deceptive Arab Spring stalled the democratic surge announced during the post-Soviet color revolutions in Central Europe: this was to be the end of “the Arab predicament” and its “time for deliverance,” but within months the Syrian and Libyan civil wars introduced the coming turbulence in and near the region.

Each unpredicted post-Cold War shock was misrepresented at the expense of its unintended opportunities: to engage in a long-term relationship with a recast Russia, to relaunch the peace process in a fearful Arab world, to restore fiscal sanity and social equity in the Western democracies, and to promote a closer community of rejuvenated democratic states that could respond to the ever-rising expectations of the Global South. Arrogance of power, intelligence failure, leadership shortcomings, wishful thinking? Guilty on all counts, as a new edition of the “betrayal of the intellectuals” recorded after the First World War one century earlier.<sup>4</sup>

The beginning is when it matters most: the moment when the worst of the past can be rolled back, and the best of the future can still be rolled out. Clinton’s timeout from History was therefore especially significant for his neglect of the defeated state, Russia. Mindful of the retroactive peace signed by Woodrow Wilson in 1919, Truman took 90 days after his second inauguration to sign the North Atlantic Treaty; only another six years were needed for Eisenhower to welcome half of Germany as a steadfast ally in Europe. After Bush-41 there was no such urgency: little credible attempt to accommodate the defeated state, however minimally. There was only the allocation of some pocket money to stay away from Europe while NATO moved closer to Russian territory, until a revanchist Putin resumed centuries of malfeasance with the approval of an angry populace that had concluded that they were better off when they were worse off. After Clinton and with Putin, the time for a new beginning was over: back to being a power in Europe, Russia could not be a European power like any other—it remained geographically too big, historically too dangerous, militarily too strong, and politically too hazardous.

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<sup>4</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Stanley Hoffmann, “Clash of Globalizations,” in *The Clash of Civilizations, The Debate* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations), 87; Lawrence G. McDonald, *A Colossal Failure of Common Sense: The Inside Story of Lehman Brothers* (Deckle Edge, 2009); Fouad Ajami, *In this Arab Time: The Pursuit of Deliverance* (Hoover, 2014); Julien Benda, *Treason of the Intellectuals* (Translated from the French by David Broder London, ERIS, 2022; *Trahison des clercs*, Paris, B. Grasset, 1921).

Nor did unfinished business in the non-Western half of the world receive the attention it needed, beginning with appalling indifference to a 100-day, 800,000-death genocide in Rwanda in spring 1994.<sup>5</sup> “It’s the economy, stupid,” insisted Clinton, in his initial postwar version of an America-First strategy. But History grants no timeout while time itself runs out. An agenda of allegedly-wartime irritants remained too long ignored in postwar time: the 1947 partition in the Indian subcontinent; a Palestinian nation left homeless since 1948; Taiwan, an aging orphan since 1949; North Korea, unforgiven and without a peace treaty; Iran, unforgiving and awaiting its renewal since 1953; Ukraine, separated from Russia’s “gift” of autonomy in 1955; the Middle East, divisive since the 1956 Suez crisis; nuclear proliferation announced since 1963; a new monetary order, sought since 1971. These issues, and many more, should have motivated Clinton and his successors to assert the needed global leadership. Not just the economy, but “the world, stupid.”

As the United States appeared to step aside, and with allies and partners unable to step up—including a Europe overworked with its “euro-ic” focus on enlargement but still short of its long-promised institutional finality—a surging China trended up, a vengeful Russia roared back, a zealous Iran moved center-stage, a nuclear North Korea made itself heard, and more. Bring it on, President George W. Bush urged, as 9/11 took him (and NATO allies and partners) into two wasteful wars. Hindsight is everything, but what was ignored was a known narrative: there is no coming home, winning a war is not the same as ending it, and even the long-term runs out of time. This was soon confirmed with the invasion of Crimea and rise of ISIS in 2014, the civil war in Syria and slow-moving nuclear crisis with Iran in 2015, Brexit and the U.S. presidential election in 2016. That turbulent decade closed with the disruptive influence of uninhibited rogue states and elusive non-state actors, increasingly provocative bids for preponderance by China and other new influentials, and a murderous pandemic that threatened to overwhelm an already fragile Western order, leaving the world astray and the West in search of leadership.

### **The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 2021-2041**

Since 1991, the four essential ingredients of the postwar institutional order have been exhausted: a constructive and largely shared vision of the whole, as Truman framed it; an emotional but sustainable public appeal, shared by nine Cold War presidents; a convincing and even indulgent right of moral judgment, despite recurring public concerns over specific policies or actions; and sufficient and usable instruments to defend the whole and its values. Since an unprecedented assault on the U.S. republic on January 6, 2021, which remains ongoing, a global multi-year crisis has seen the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan in September 2021—“our” Vietnam, circa 1975; the Russian war in Ukraine since February 2022—“our” Spain, circa 1936; and the Gaza war since October 2023—“our” Iraq, circa 2003; striking episodes amid an unmanageable

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<sup>5</sup> “CNN seldom shows pictures of the bodies on television, so few people care,” confided Clinton in his taped diary. Indeed, the 668-page transcript of his reflections “designed to narrate how the U.S. president wrestled with History” includes four references to Rwanda for a total of 11 lines. Taylor Branch, *The Clinton Tapes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 133, 499, 576, 624.

proliferation of conflicts(55 all told in 2023) fueled by a surge of defense spending to unprecedented levels (\$2,443 billion in 2023—nearly 2.5% of world GDP, \$104,476 billion).<sup>6</sup>

Although there is no geopolitical equivalence between the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, both illustrate the spreading de-humanization of the weak by the strong and de-inhibition of the weak relative to the strong, which leaves little room for moral purpose and proportionality for either the strong or the weak. Both also point to the growing risks of limited regional wars anywhere going global, which limits space for strategic and diplomatic flexibility. Each escalatory step is viewed as a plausible Sarajevo moment à la 1914, but each diplomatic initiative is questioned as a shameful Munich sell-out à la 1938, rendering each conflict a potential sleep-walk into world war à la 1939. Vladimir Putin’s nuclear saber-rattling in Ukraine and Benjamin Netanyahu’s war of annihilation against Hamas—the former heard throughout Europe and the latter throughout the Middle East—represent a new round of brinksmanship—the will to push the other side very close to what it fears most (even if it is least likely to occur). Consider Putin’s warnings of a nuclear strike in Ukraine in fall 2022 when he feared imminent defeat, which reportedly led U.S. intelligence to set the odds of a strike at 50%. As noted by Julian Lindley-French, “There is neither much new in the Russian way of war [to put steel and technology ahead of flesh and people] and the West’s lazy response to it.”<sup>7</sup> Hear, too, the periodic warnings from China and North Korea and the self-deterrence they inspire, with consequences among their obvious targets.

When appraising the terms of engagement for the period ahead—deterrence and defense—analogy can be irresistible, but they are not predictive. Trends can be convincing, but they are not destiny. The illusion of China’s ascendancy is that it is perpetually sustainable and thus irresistible, while for the United States, decline is thought to be irreversible and thus final. Yet remember Japan’s rise and U.S. decline during the 1970s, which contrasted to their relative status twenty years earlier or twenty years later. Now, China’s rising power faces unattended weaknesses: vulnerability to global economic fundamentals it does not control, falling economic growth below levels it can afford, demographic trends that cannot be corrected, an unsettled and even hostile region that cannot be regulated, a passively unhappy populace that cannot be satisfied, and more. Since 1949, the Chinese have been unable to stop digging when in holes of their own making: the Long March, the Cultural Revolution, the one-child policy, zero-covid, and the real estate crisis, for example. Is China peaking before its time, like Imperial Germany or even the Soviet Union? Will fear of decline take China to Taiwan before its time runs out, or will the pain inflicted on Russia in Ukraine return it to the path of cooperative normalization with the West? It is too early to tell, even if it looks a bit late to ask. Three decades of “normalization” are over; instead, prepare for the new normal: don’t provoke but don’t indulge.

Russia’s future, too, is fraught with uncertainties. Even before the Ukrainian war, the Russian state was running short of capabilities, resources, people, and security space. With a “win” in Ukraine

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<sup>6</sup> SIPRI, “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2023” (April 2024): [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404\\_fs\\_milex\\_2023.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404_fs_milex_2023.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> David Sanger, “Biden’s Armageddon Moment: When a Nuclear Detonation Seemed Possible,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2024; Julian Lindley-French, “Putin’s Power Protection Racket,” blog (May 21, 2024): <https://lindleyfrench.blogspot.com/2024/05/putins-power-protection-racket.html>.

out of reach so long as Western aid is maintained, Putin, too, is running out of time, notwithstanding his re-election in March 2024: remember Nikita Khrushchev, gone two years after his failed gambit in the Caribbean. With or past Putin, Russia's military and economic recovery from the war will take time, during which Moscow will continue to rely on a subordinate partnership with China, rogue arms suppliers like North Korea and Iran, and make-believe influence in every unstable country in Africa and elsewhere. Remember, though: Russia is most difficult to handle when it proves unable to be the most westerly of Eastern people and tries to become the most easterly of Western people. Clearly, the West will suffer from a close alliance between the two leading revisionist states, but can either of those countries depend on, or afford, a close alliance with the other? This is not about Cold War II, let alone World War III. Just deny Putin and his successor to make Russia great again.

Bringing the Ukrainian war to a close in or past 2025 will be the hole in the doughnut for the NATO Alliance, as well as for the two principal belligerents. Will the war escalate, but how far; inch forward either way, but how much; or stall, but where? As Bismarck reportedly said, Russia is "never as weak as it is believed, and never as strong as it is feared." Thinking of himself as Ivan III "the Great"—a gatherer of lands—Putin was unveiled as Ivan IV "the Terrible" who nearly lost his empire with his catastrophic Livonian war. Thoughts of a restored Soviet era—when, claims Putin, "we lived in a single country" and "were absolutely invincible"—are a fantasy: the war has convincingly shown the limits of Russian power. Warnings of falling dominoes should Ukraine not hold—with Moldova next, through Belarus to Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, thereby ending NATO itself—have lost their credibility. *Basta*. Now, it is Russia's turn to hesitate, after 30 months of steady and ever more-lethal Western arms deliveries.

The new geopolitical map is blurred further by a European Union that is struggling with its own institutional insufficiencies and national complexities. With Britain out, Germany stalled, and France adrift; with new members nearest to Russia and older members nearest to the Mediterranean feeling unevenly protected; and with a European Parliament open to the influence of anti-European parties; has the EU, too, peaked as an ever-closer and ever-bigger union whose promises of democratic peace, stability, openness, and affluence it can no longer meet and may even hinder? Too much Union policy clashes with too much of its members' politics, making less union feel smarter and fewer members sound better to many. Seven years after a newly-elected French president announced the coming of "a sovereign, united, and democratic Europe," and two years after he launched a typically ambitious European Political Community with 49 members, Emmanuel Macron now finds the EU "mortal," warning, "It could die."<sup>8</sup> Europe's collective response to Ukraine broadly matched and even exceeded that of its senior Alliance partner, but the war also confirmed its vulnerability to Russia's bad intentions (at their worst since 1991) and its continued dependence on U.S. goodwill (least convincing since 1941). "It's leadership, stupid"—do not let go of the EU; the alternative is worse.

Past a struggling China, a wartime Russia, and a fragile EU, the United States stands as the decisive X factor. After the Cold War, it was thought to be the irresistible pole of convergence within a

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<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Macron's speeches at the Sorbonne, September 27, 2017, and April 25, 2024.

new postwar order. Instead of drifting toward it, however, Russia and China have moved toward each other, while the United States and Europe have often been looking past each other. Pre- and post-Biden (or will it be post- and pre-Trump?) as well as post-Merkel and soon post-Macron, forget the economy: “it’s the voters, stupid.” Since Bush-41, four U.S. presidents have surprised the allies, each feared for his lack of interest in Europe and limited experience with the world relative to their nine Cold War predecessors. Welcomed by the Allies as the most experienced foreign policy president since the end of the Cold War, Biden temporarily restored a measure of confidence in U.S. leadership, but his presidency has not aged well—his image of competence stained in Afghanistan, his reputation for balance weakened in Gaza, his strategy questioned for its improvisations in Ukraine, and his resolve at the mercy of a hostile electorate. What will come next as U.S. democracy is said to be on the ballot, with nearly three-fourths of Trump voters still questioning Biden’s legitimacy, and two-in-five Biden voters explaining their choice as opposition to Trump? That it could have been and could still be worse is neither satisfying nor reassuring: if half of its people does not stop laying siege to their government, sooner or later a crippled America will have little credibility left with adversaries and allies alike.<sup>9</sup> And then what?

### **An Entangling Alliance**

The history of the Alliance is one of discord and collaboration: for 75 years, a devaluation of the U.S. commitment to Europe has been announced with nearly every new president. With Clinton, who had lived History from a distance and was eager to do “the economy, stupid” while the Allies lived their “hour of Europe.” With an angry post-9/11 Bush-43, engaged in an all-consuming war in Iraq that much of Europe rejected as wasteful and self-defeating. With Obama, warmly applauded at first for who he was but subsequently questioned for what he did (leading the Alliance “from behind” while “pivoting” to Asia). And with Trump, who made of America-First a transactional strategy that downgraded allies to rivals or worse while upgrading adversaries as opportunities or better.

In a demographically transformed New World, a re-founding of the Atlantic idea is overdue, as is a re-founding of the related idea of Europe in a geographically recast Old World. Although widely viewed now as unevenly-shared burdens, NATO and the EU matter to the United States because both matter to Europe, and Europe matters to the United States as the other half of the world’s largest military and economic bloc. NATO’s collective defense spending tops \$1.3 trillion (2023), the EU is the top trading partner of 80 countries, and the United States is for 20 more. Since the 1949 Washington Treaty, no country has ever left the Alliance, its membership growing from 12 at the creation to 32 now. Since the 1956 Rome Treaties, only one country has left the European Community/Union, which grew from six original members to 27 now, with many more applicants queuing up. The record is clear: the benefits of NATO and EU membership exceed or at least justify the costs.

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<sup>9</sup> In April 2024, both Biden and Trump had the lowest approval ratings at this point in their presidency of any postwar president, (38.7% and 46.6% respectively). In 2020, with a record turnout of 149 million voters, only 43,000 votes in three states (Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin) would have produced a tie in the Electoral College and Trump’s election at the House of Representatives, despite Biden’s 7 million votes advantage in the popular vote.



The prospect of a second Trump presidency threatens this legacy. Such concerns have merits given his past references to NATO as “obsolete,” the EU as “a rival,” and more recent assessments of Putin as a forceful leader entitled to a *carte blanche* for attending to his country’s security. But *basta* with such *sauve-qui-peut*: there is more to America than Trump, and there is more to NATO than America. A U.S. withdrawal from the Alliance, which would require an unlikely Senate approval, is doubtful even with Trump. Admittedly, a more likely adversarial distancing from NATO (including spotty attendance at NATO Summits, delayed appointment of high diplomatic and military officials, and reduced budget contributions) would weaken the Article 5 commitment to collective defense, but it would not end it. And, as an unintended consequence, Trump’s potential leave of absence from NATO would give the EU more room to speak and act European.

For Europe to find its voice and be heard, however, the EU and non-EU European members of NATO will have to achieve more unity and develop more relevant capabilities, meaning, forces with sustainable readiness, and credible reliability for quick and sustainable action. As a late geostrategic wakeup call, the war in Ukraine has motivated Europe’s rearmament to an extent unseen since, arguably, the Korean War—the United Kingdom (+7.9% in 2023 over 2022), Germany (+9.0%), and France (+6.5%). That remains far short of U.S. spending (68% of NATO’s total), especially as increases in real costs, above inflation, produce less “bang for the buck.” Yet at \$380 billion in 2023 (+11% over the previous year), European NATO allies’ defense spending is over three times more than Russia’s official \$120 billion budget. Nor do the allies’ traditional defense budgets account for the “broad range of tools” called for by the NATO 2030 agenda—“softer” dimensions of security that show Europe-friendly imbalances in costs for, commitments by, reliability of, and results from all 32 NATO members. These represent a more credible measure of the allies’ burden-sharing than an exclusive focus on traditional defense spending, which should nonetheless fall below 50% of total NATO spending for any of its members, including the United States.

In short, the days of alleged “free riders” are gone, and the European “pillar” envisioned after the Cold War (in a very different strategic landscape) is now emerging. Europe’s total aid to Ukraine during the war’s first two years (including about one-third in military aid) exceeded the four-year Marshall Plan as well as that of its senior partner.<sup>10</sup> For additional synergies and to better align their efforts, the European pillar will need a strategic “Compass” over the next two to three years—if 23 EU members can agree with their nine non-EU NATO partners on a strategic concept, they should be able to agree with their four non-NATO EU partners (Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta) on a common EU strategy. Failing to think strategically raises the risks of acting erratically—at 27 (EU), shown by the setbacks in the Sahel region since 2011; at 32 (NATO), shown during the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and indeed at 36 (NATO and EU members, accounting for

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<sup>10</sup> Since the war started, the EU has contributed, collectively and individually, more than \$101 billion in military (\$35 billion), financial, humanitarian, and refugee assistance to Ukraine, with another \$54 billion on its way. Non-EU members Britain and Norway have contributed an additional \$15.2 and \$5.2 billion respectively. Richard D. Hooker, Jr., “Why NATO Matters,” *New Atlanticist* (May 28, 2024): <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-us-interest-washington-summit/>.

the European countries that are members of both), shown in Western aid to Ukraine—always several months late and calibrated to keep it too weak to win but too strong to lose.

The two-pillar vision for NATO is not new.<sup>11</sup> With a U.S. blessing, it was written into the postwar Western European Union (WEU), whose members were all founding members of NATO and the EU. Under Anglo-French sponsorship, it was part of the European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI) after the Cold War. Past 75, NATO remains the only military organization that can guarantee its members' collective security, but their three separate-but-not-separable strategic dialogues (within NATO and with the United States, within the EU and among its members, and between NATO and the EU) will be made most effective, substantively and procedurally, with a Euro-Atlantic Forum of all 36 NATO and EU members plus the EU (as an entity of sovereign consequence) and NATO (as a participating observer). Such a Forum would help maximize the allies' strength and competencies with less duplication, as well as avoid discrimination against any country that is not a member of both institutions. While respecting the specific identity of each institution and the individual sovereignty of their members, it could address all security, political, and economic dimensions in complementary ways, leading eventually to a shared—neither common nor single—Euro-Atlantic strategy paper combining the NATO strategic concept and the EU strategic compass.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Long Year**

2024 has been a long year. It started early and badly on January 6, 2021, with a shocking constitutional challenge in the United States, and it soon got worse as a contested new president struggled to restore unity at home and order in the world. Even for never-Trumpers, the results have been mixed. Biden has achieved much of what he most wanted to avoid abroad, including a Vietnam-like exit from Afghanistan in 2021, a costly proxy war with Russia since 2022, deeper involvement in the Middle East since 2023, increasingly conflictual and contested relations with China, a strategic builddown in the vital Sahel region, and the neglect of human rights while pursuing allies like Saudi Arabia. At home, the aberrant Trump moment that Biden had pledged to end has turned into the new normal of a post-American America to an extent that the next presidential election will not end. Indeed, whatever its outcome, the November 2024 election will be contested before and long past the inauguration—in Congress, in the Courts, and in the streets.

Unlike his four provincial predecessors, Biden came to office as the most Atlanticist president since, arguably, John F. Kennedy. Welcomed by the allies, he rallied an allegedly “brain-dead” Alliance and a “sleepwalking” Europe to deny Moscow the quick and painless victory it had expected. But—déjà vu all over again?—despite his superior capabilities and the geostrategic

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<sup>11</sup> Antonio Missiroli, “Between Putin and Trump? Defending Europe,” *ISPI Policy Paper* (June 6, 2024): <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/between-putin-and-trump-defending-europe-175737>.

<sup>12</sup> Frank D. Kramer and Simon Serfaty, “Recasting the Euro-Atlantic Partnership,” *CSIS* (February 1, 2007): <https://www.csis.org/analysis/recasting-euro-atlantic-partnership>; Simon Serfaty, “An Opportune Moment for a Shared Euro-Atlantic Strategy,” *CSIS* (May 2009): [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/090506\\_serfaty\\_strategicconsensus\\_0.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/090506_serfaty_strategicconsensus_0.pdf).

advantages of willing and capable allies, Biden could not deter Putin in Ukraine any better than Bush-43 in Georgia (2008) or Obama in Crimea (2014). Nor could repeated pledges of unconditional support (“as long” and “as much” as it takes) intimidate an aggressor into accepting an endgame that would satisfy its victim, any better than a similar commitment to Israel after October 7, 2023 (“the equivalent of 15 9/11s,” claimed Biden) could produce an endgame in Gaza.

Thus, as the long year faces overtime—whether due to Trump obstructing Biden’s re-election or U.S. dejection after Trump’s return—the U.S.-light, post-American, post-Western world first sighted during the three decades after the Cold War continues to preview more brutality, less justice, deeper inequities, no moral certainty, plenty of resentment, less accountability, and much disorder—the jungle, as Robert Kagan called it. Yet it is when the future looks bleak and unsatisfying that leadership matters most; and it is when democracies are tired and fearful that the character of their people is best revealed. “As time goes by” was the title of the tune made famous in the film *Casablanca*: “You must remember this,” sang Sam at Rick’s urging, “Play it, play it again.” Much has changed over the past 75 years, but not the tune. Remember this: America in Europe, Europe as the EU, and the EU with NATO.

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