

The European Security Palimpsest

Diana Popa
Red Sky 4



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Table of Contents

Foreword.....3
Security arrangements.....4
The wider consequences of the Ukraine – Russia war6
Non-apologetic approach to state centred national interest8
Securing hearts and minds.....10
Mirroring a different reality: the European security palimpsest.....14



Foreword

The Munich Security Conference¹ from February 2026 will prove to be a historical register of the mood in Europe and beyond regarding security threats and realignment of global alliances in view of anticipated escalation of conflict. While most European leaders had a positive, firm and warning tone, some even unnecessary joking at times, the messaging concentrated on multiple sources of conflict, both from within and from outside national and regional boundaries, making system faultlines visible.

Some speeches made the audience cringe, spelling out the message too clearly for other's taste, yet reflecting equilibrium of capabilities and intent when defending self-interest. The following analysis focuses on the faultlines that were made visible by the speeches given and discussions held, if not overtly or purposefully then by way of inference.

The “under destruction” label under which the conference was held and accompanying characterizations of new world order suggest what can be seen as an induced or directed terraforming exercise, with phased yet not fully controllable implementation, hence tensions both on stage and in the audience.

Observations on the destruction of the international rule based order are accompanied by criticism of revisionist powers who engage in similar endeavours, albeit on a different time scale and geography. There is a fine line between this destruction of the old international rule based order (either observed or assumed as needed for renewal) and actions taken in what would be concomitantly labelled as revisionist or imperialistic.

The affirmed current destruction of the international rules based order induces the need for internal realignment, while in the same time being mirrored in tit for tat movements by ideologically or pragmatically opposed sides, strengthening opposite poles of concentrated power.

¹ www.securityconference.org



Security arrangements

Collective security guarantees are paradoxically once again proposed as solution for reaching and holding a ceasefire in the war in Ukraine, this despite the fact that security guarantees from externals in the form of the Budapest memorandum are exactly what failed in the first place. While this contradiction is acknowledged by at the security conference - “We cannot afford another paper tiger like the Budapest memorandum” - the vacuum of solutions is apparent because any defence of a rationally de-constructed and re-constructed notion of peace inevitably determines a cognitive dissonance in the European position that – once engaged in the development and ways to stop the conflict – is forced to rationalize for herself conflictual and inherently irreconcilable options.

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Many theories of victory put forward for the war in Ukraine currently focus on what cannot happen rather than what victory should bring as positive sum outcome, thus reflecting reaching of a deadlock point in practical terms and an incongruence between practical developments and conceptual frameworks. Victory should not be defined as vacuum or absence. Once again we (Europeans) rationalize to each other and ourselves the definition of peace, in the need to be able to convince ourselves that the assumed result is a victory, even if only for the sake of the time and resources invested in the negotiation process.

The security conference put forward contradictory formulas such as:

- “decent peace”,
- “negotiated settlement to the war so long as the just conditions are meet”
- “peace guarantees not assurances”.

In fact, any deal regarding ceasing of sovereignty and state integrity would not be a choice, but an imposition of power by external forces. In this, the approach that doesn't shy away from



assuming the ambition of forming a sphere of influence proves to be congruent in actions and declarations than the force that is driven to incongruence between narrative and action due to lack of power to transform narrative into action. This dissonance also reflects the left political inherent moral flaw: unlike the right that doesn't claim universal righteousness, the left claims values and morality which it cannot in practice deliver and thus is doomed to fail.

At the conference, an emphasis was made regarding the need for security guarantees, not security assurances. In this regard, foreign presence in the combat theatre in Ukraine as well as international civilian engagement on the ground during the hot phase of hostilities are part of these guarantees. They indicate for history sides alignment and dedication and volume of international efforts, as well as willingness to engage directly an enemy that cannot be repelled with symmetrically means on European soil. This proxy engagement with enemy forces creates antecedents of hostile interaction. Foreign national governments have long expressed the concern of seeing the conflict spill over into NATO or EU territory if international military support for Ukraine became overt. Yet this approach does not guarantee that the outcome remains inevitable. In this, Europe is also playing for time while rearming and increasing military personnel numbers. Foreign presence in Ukraine during hostilities replicates the intricate web of political, policy and trade interdependencies into concrete "on the ground" webs of interactions. It creates the concrete ground for consolidation of the argument for the need to speed up own defence capabilities. It also reverberates in the observation that European presence in Ukraine contributes to making Ukraine more European and goes against assumed Russian goals of making Ukraine "more Russian". Envisioned international "peace monitoring" troupes on the ground in Ukraine once a ceasefire would come into force could potentially enhance this process. Yet, as in the case of induced renewal, unanticipated effects can change this result, as tensions between Ukraine and European and US representatives regarding deliveries of weapons and support stand to show. In this, Ukraine has the potential to observe what could be labelled as a governing terraforming process, in either an Eastern or Western exercise.

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The wider consequences of the Ukraine – Russia war

For Europe, the cause of concern closest to her bed is the war in Ukraine. In the same time, the development of the war in Ukraine actively shapes security postures and defence policies beyond the regional proximity of the territory of the belligerent parties, expanding globally. Lessons from how technology is fielded on the battlefield are incorporated into national armies globally, either by direct (inter-allied) or indirect knowledge transfer – through the individual combatants on the ground gaining the knowledge and knowhow while being part of one of the opposing forces. At the security conference, Japan’s Defence Minister specifically gave the example of the 10.000 North Korean soldiers fighting in the Russian army and learning “the new way of war”, spreading the knowledge on the use of AI, drones and cyber in war. This reflects not only an observation over the state of affairs, but showcases the concern of countries who, despite not being directly affected by the conflict, could be directly affected in the future by the developments from the main theatre of hostilities where cutting age technology is fielded and deployed in innovative strategies. In this knowledge capturing function, mass does matter, as the individual deployment across a varied front line and varied missions can lead to novel cumulative input once systematized. The export potential could see a directed increase driven by Ukraine, should Ukraine’s capability to deploy troops to other theatres once a ceasefire is in place would be accompanied by intent to do so.

Mentioned reports on Russian interference suggest a systemic and multilayered global strategy being developed, with multi sector disruptions and attacks on NATO and EU interests outside main NATO and EU territory. This underlines not only direct conflict but actually the continuous battle for spheres of influence, whether acknowledged as such or labelled differently, and the competition for protection of own vital interests such as the need for assuring access to vital supply chains. It also underlines the re-alignment and strengthening of opposite poles of power and their corresponding zone of influence.

The developments of the war in Ukraine and Russian posturing reverberate within the NATO alliance, cumulating in introspective and mutual interrogations on the role, assumed obligations and limits of the overarching structure. Indicator of the call for changing NATO’s posture from a purely defensive one to one of heightened deterrence is the call to shift from deterrence by denial to deterrence by punishment.



Figure 1. Map Air Alert. Evolution on the 7th of February 2026.
Source: map.ukrainealarm.com



Non-apologetic approach to state centred national interest

A stark difference is to be noted between the tone in Rubio's speech on the security picture and security position as the US sees it and European representatives expressing the de-construction / re-construction view of the European security posture, most particularly in relation to the war in Ukraine. The difference emphasised a non-apologetic self-interest centred rational driven approach versus an emotional and traditions influenced approach.

In relation to the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Israel, the European discourse has relied too much on emotional calls to peace and order. In this again, the stark contrast between the open and unapologetic affirmation of supremacy of US national interest in Rubio's speech is noted. Going beyond the idea that "power means never having to say you are sorry", power projection means being able to convincingly shape, uphold and promote the main narrative. Power represents control over the narrative that gets to be imposed and distributed to the masses.

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The power to control and impose the narrative is reflected in what might be seen as a revisionist approach to history deployed for motivating a present day change of course and priorities. Rubio's speech again comes to emphasise this. The roots for perceived and identified current system dependencies are traced back to the era of the end of history and globalisation. This despite the fact that the US was for decades the world representative of globalisation. The current view expressed by Rubio regarding the consequences of globalisation on the internal US national interest resemble a revisionist approach, focused on the arguing for the need of countering those negative effects:

- "Handing critical supply chains to adversaries and rivals".
- "Creating a Western supply chain not vulnerable to extortion by other powers"



- “De-industrialisation was not inevitable – it was a conscious policy choice.”
- “We increasingly outsourced out sovereignty to international institutions while many nations invested massively in welfare states at the cost of the ability to defend themselves”.

Not dissecting here the reasons behind this view, what is clear is that Rubio’s speech demonstrated a profound state centred vision of history and current security picture:

“We want [...] an alliance that does not allow power to be outsourced, constrained, or subordinated to systems beyond its control. One that does not depend on others for the critical necessities of its national life and one that does not maintain the pretence that our way of life is just one among many and that asks for permission before it acts.”

The US vision seems to tear down past successes of globalisation and rationalize the current centrifugal forces in the US as consequence of damaging effects of previous centripetal forces during the globalisation “heyday”. In the same time it represents a criticism of the effects of unlimited accommodation of diversity to the point of annulling any cohesion of national identity. Yet system reboots rarely take place without opposition from within and from outside, given cascading effects in interlocked eco-systems. Power shifts – internal and external – imply power struggles, either overtly or hidden in the form of lower order effects. In anticipation of resistance to the undergoing shifts, Rubio addresses such concerns:

- “We don’t need to dismantle the old institutions of the old order that we built but these must be reformed and rebuilt”.
- “We want an alliance that is not paralysed by fear – of war of climate change. The only fear we have is the fear of shame of not leaving our nations stronger, wealthier.”
- What has ailed our societies is [...] a malaise of hopelessness and complacency.

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Securing hearts and minds

While Rubio didn't mention Russia at all in his speech, others have done so in an effort to project allied power against the identified aggressor and in a seemingly undermining approach meant to underline the inherent lack of chances of victory for the opponent. This undermining position does not acknowledge the unique cold – and fundamentally different rationality of the Russian approach to the war. Negative emotions marked several speeches or interventions of European representatives, either in relation to Russia's objectives, gains and chances of victory and in relation to own position and aims, in disproportion with actual deployed measures. Characterizations such as “crazy behaviour” and “it is so crazy that only the Russians would do such things” - in relation to Russian war efforts bring no additional relevance to the West's united front in identifying the source of evil. It undermines the coordination of efforts for the cause fought for and defended in the name of values as main motivation for the West's involvement in the conflict. Firstly, in military terms, Russia is not an enemy to be labelled as irrelevant or under evaluated. Rationality here should not be equalled, resumed to or rather excluded in case of negative result of a cost – benefit analysis in purely military and economic terms. As many others have noted, this is very much a war motivated by the idea of perceived historic national identity and perceived need for re-unification of that identity.

President Zelensky introduced this more nuanced vision in terms of this subjective rationality for war: “Can you imagine Putin without war?” In his intervention, at no point does Zelensky undermine the adversary he is facing. An additional remark adds further insight into the Russian position towards conflict: “In Russia [they say] first get into the fight then we'll see what happens”.

Secondly, in terms of principles and cohesion of the narrative that the West has publicly assumed, the use of such epithets actually erodes the very foundation on which the West has built its argumentation for defending a righteous cause and in doing so, indicating it lives by the very values it defends.

Thirdly, if the West upholds the principles of the state of law, then implying lack of rationality of the enemy implies lack of accountability for the enemy's actions and diminishes power of accountability in front of the law. The conclusions drawn at the trials of Nuremberg and Jerusalem should be observed *ex-durante* and *post factum* and not induced *a – priori*. The banality of evil is heightened in gravity of manifestation and consequences by its very rationality, not diminished as individual or collective form of lack thereof. Attributing aggression to anything else than intent and agency driven decisions is a very slippery slope that opens hidden doors and can have unexpected backlashes. While the rationality is profoundly different between the opposite sides, action taken by the other party should be considered as being that of an actor that is rational in its own system of thinking and view of the world, regardless of the fact that it might be labelled in terms of rational choice theory as an “irrational actor”.



In relation to the consequences of the fall of the Berlin wall Rubio mentions “With the fall of the Berlin wall came the fall end of an “evil empire” and “a civilization became whole again”. This is the only implied reference to the Russian space in Rubio’s speech, and while not openly being named, both the implication and characterization are clear.

Similar parallels to that of the label “crazy behaviour” can be drawn in regards to the impact of the affirmation “Vladimir Putin has not been negotiating in good faith” [in relation to a ceasefire in Ukraine]. Again, the driving assumption must be rationality in relation with the assumed objectives of the respective party. What each party defines as self-interest is what shapes positioning. It is this self-interest that first and foremost guides action, not good faith. After all, national interest is not to be sacrificed for the sake of acting in good faith.

Merz took a rational position in relation to Russia’s objective in the war, not diminishing the role of interacting with the opponent and the efforts to influence and change his course of action by undermining the rationality behind the war effort. However, saying that “Russia must be made to give up the war” inherently underlines the lack of effect of the balanced and restrained approach that Europe took so far in the efforts to stop Russia in Ukraine. It underlines the unbalance between the measures used to achieve the desired effect and the willingness to use escalatory measures to achieve the desired effect faster.

As observed so far, cumulation of sanctions has not had the speedy effects of the postulated objective. Even more so, imposed Western sanctions push for strengthening alignment of the so called “axis of upheaval” and isolationism from the Western world is rationalized by Russia as assumed sovereignty. In this, the multicentric global system is stimulated by the unwilling effects of sanctions.

Another notable intervention during the conference was that Ukraine is fighting for peace and freedom and “we must honour their sacrifice”. The wording here shifts the narrative to a view focused on glorification and compassion, not reflecting the view of *jus bellum*. If you live by the values of freedom, sovereignty and right to self-determination – which Europe upholds – then acting in the name of those values is not a choice but a moral imperative. Sacrifice implies choice and self-righteousness. It is here that Europe becomes irremediably trapped in her own narrative of living by a value system, caught between declarations and (self-) limitation of action that back those values. It appeals to the emotional side rather than the rational side, and it is the latter that is most enduring in an attritional war. Change of the traditional narrative is subtly communicated with the mentioning of Europe moving to a value based realism.

While the political struggle for winning hearts and minds is upheld as driving effort in most Western systems, we should not forget the lessons of Goleman of how the human brain works: either the cognitive or the emotional brain can function in any one time, and the activation of one determines the switch off of the other. More to the point, we should also remember the lessons of Le Bon on the contagious character of emotions. Emotion driven behaviour (and support) is also energy consuming and thus can become counterproductive in conducting or supporting efforts during wars of attrition. The argument for Europe’s contribution in the



defence of Ukraine should be based on rationality and self-interest, not on either negative or positive emotions, regardless of how this might be criticised as cold hearted politics. When the struggle is existential though, at a national scale, top down emotional rallying can have positive results, much like the observation regarding Churchill's speeches in which he mobilized the English language and sent it to battle. In this, Zelensky's speech (and call) at the security conference was much more infused with emotions than other interventions and remarkably different from the purely rational speech delivered by Rubio.



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Mirroring a different reality: the European security palimpsest

The security conference bore the mark of the “the new world order”. European representatives went as far as saying:

- “the status quo is not fit for purpose”,
- “Europe has taken some shock therapy and some lines have been crossed”
- “Europe is between a predatory US and a predatory Russia”
- “no tabu can go unchallenged”.

In the envisioned new world the idea that “no tabu can go unchallenged”, indicates a re-negotiation not only of state alignment but also of internal social contracts. The conference stood under the characterization of “under destruction” and the need for renewal. In this endeavour, references were made to Ukraine where “you change or you die”.

The unspoken consequences of these calls for envisioned deconstruction or rupture are a perpetual renewal process or a perpetual balancing act, meant to hold together a fragile stability. This goes beyond the observations on a global multi-crisis, suggesting the potential permanentizing of an instable system, needing to be in permanent adaptation to internal and external changing and threatening factors. This seems antagonistic with the European tradition of leaning back on continuity of traditions and systems and facilitating lean transformations, and – paradoxical in its results and more likely opposed in intent – resembles the sudden break and shift proposed by the US. If perpetual renewal is the response to a multi-crisis eroding old systems, - and thus more of a necessity than a strategic choice – then the adaptation strategies of different global centres of power in fact resembles one another. It becomes just a matter of construction of the narrative that publicly articulates a slightly different position, calibrated to size and momentarily constraints. Renewal is a destructive process, often with disruptive effects. If induced, these effects can be anticipated but not necessarily completely controlled. Such a process requires elasticity capacity since total system collapse can have backlash effects from and in the wider ecosystem and annul any foreseen desired effects of an induced approach. This more controlled approach - that Starmer caller “radical renewal” was accompanied by calls for a more European NATO and a more bolder Europe. The call for boldness reverberated in Rubio’s speech, as refusal of being paralyzed by or driven into action by fear. Political leaders seem to agree upon the need for radical change and in the same time acknowledge the fear inducing effects of such changes, weather induced from within or from the outside.



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Regrettably, Europe's Achille's heel has been noticed and acted upon by opponents, rivals and allies. Rubio's speech only comes to exemplify this observation:

- “Forces of civilizational erasure that today menace both America and Europe alike”
- “We want a Europe that has the means to defend itself and the will to survive”.

And most representative for what can be interpreted and perceived as same league association and reinterpretation of what mutual defence means is the following part of Rubio's speech:

“We do not want our allies to be weak, because that makes us weaker. We want allies who can defend themselves so that no adversary will ever be tempted to test our collective strength. This is why we do not want our allies to be shackled by guilt and shame. We want allies who [...] understand we are heirs to the same great and noble civilization and who together with us are *willing and able to defend it*. And this is why we do not want allies to rationalize the broken status quo rather than reckon with what is necessary to fix it. For we in America have no interest in being polite and orderly caretakers of the West's managed decline.” (emphasis added).

Complementing this view and reminiscent of the critique of the inherent flaws of the universally moral left approach are reflected in the next phrase of Rubio's speech:



”We want [...] an alliance ready to defend our people, to safeguard our interests and to *preserve the freedom of action* that allows us to shape our own destiny not one that exists to operate a global welfare state [...]” (emphasis added).

This again annihilates emotional arguments in favour of realism and reason. It links agency to capability, and implicitly reveals this observed incongruence as the cause for not reaching assumed objectives. The observed dilution of the united “West” becomes more and more reality. And if “peace without principles is not worth it”, principles without the backing of freedom and power of action to impose them are void.

Breaking away from the multilateralism of the old world rules based order and upholding sovereignty and prioritization of national interest first requires the capability to do so. While the US as well deplors supply chain dependencies internalised by choice of previous policies, it has the capacity, and will to ascertain and execute this position. In this new reality of atomization and realignment on the world stage, the US holds the role of the lion while Europe has to play the role of the fox. Not for nothing were the recent US National Defence Strategy and National Security Strategy and speeches on official security positioning dissected to their core and commented in terms of their breaking away from old priorities and embrace of a vision based on own state primacy.

While Europe seems bound to remaining engaged in multilateral interactions, the US has the option to do so if it so wishes under what it calls the freedom of action for shaping one’s own destiny:

“The US will once again take on the task of renewal and restoration [...]. And while we are prepared if necessary to do this alone, it is our *preference* and it is our hope to do this together with you, our friends here in Europe.” [original emphasis].


Europe might want to adopt the all in one move approach to reach sovereignty and be able to adopt the firm position of the US in this respect, but at the moment it cannot do so. Adopting the fox approach means engaging in multilateral interactions while concomitantly consolidating internally. Europe is literally constricted by the consequences of the intricate interdependencies or multi overall dependencies it has willingly created for herself and chosen as an instrument for power balancing and ensuring inter-cooperation. Europe *has to* uphold a more balanced discourse and narrative, being still conditioned by geographical constraints - close state proximity, proximity to a state with antagonistic interests in the region matched by military capacities and intent - technological lock-ins, harmonization requirements that delay decision making processes and trapped by own past policy choices and narratives. Europe is in fact conditioned by what Rubio openly assumes as US goal: freedom of action that allows to shape one’s own destiny.



Foreseen de-coupling will not automatically lead to de-risking due to unexpected second order effects. Inter-dependencies have long been hailed as a peace keeping mechanism. If de-coupling can be planned for, a push for sudden de-coupling leaves Europe with little time for countering the envisioned effects and implement safety mechanisms. The consolidation of a multipolar world, self-sufficient in purely existential terms yet antagonistic in interests would likely only enhance chances and intensities of conflict. Observed system instability and dilution of the once unified “West” are further enhanced by EU enlargements discussions. This while previous rounds of integration still lay bear old grievances and spark or enhance internal conflict. The long, conditioned and “in stages” EU integration process that was applied to many countries from later enlargement waves has seen a lot of resentment and remains a challenge in the effort of winning hearts and minds for strengthening multipolar coagulation.

Europe cannot start anew in its security policies, but gradually re-writes and re-shapes its stance and planned objectives. The European approach upholds what it calls a value based realism (Stub). While long having advocated for a value based identity, decision making process and governing system, Europe cannot now brake away from these declared values and undergo a sudden shift in narrative. She is forced to publicly assume the balanced approach, engaging on multiple fronts, internally and externally in lengthily multi-stakeholder discussions. While working towards reaching sovereignty in the digital and defence fields she is forced to engage in this permanent re-writing and re-viewing of the declared defence posture, simultaneously recalibrating to internal and external escalations of conflict. The European security posture is a palimpsest, thus being re-written on the same pergament. The seams of European construction still remain noticeably visible, not because of their direct consequences but because of desired and assumed position of a seamless project. In fact it is a polygamic marriage that is now seeing the unanticipated negative effects of an inter-breeding going dangerously wrong.


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About the author.

Diana Popa has over 17 years of experience in research and academia and has authored numerous reports and scientific articles. Recent research and analysis focus on resilience as part of defence programmes, emerging disruptive technologies, in particular Artificial Intelligence in high risk areas, including defence.

Red Sky 4
The Netherlands
www.redsky4.nl
Redsky4@ziggo.nl