



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 05 No. 02. April-June 2026. Page# 2267-2276

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20808567) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20808567)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20808567)

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20808567>



Eastern Europe as a Strategic Frontier: Geopolitical Transformation, Security Reconfiguration, and Power Competition in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The strategic significance of Eastern Europe has undergone a profound transformation in the early twenty-first century, evolving from a peripheral geopolitical space into a central arena of great power competition. This study critically examines the region's reconfiguration in the context of shifting global power dynamics, with particular attention to the consequences of the Russia–Ukraine War. Drawing on theories from International Relations including realism, constructivism, and geopolitical theory the research analyzes how Eastern European ¹states have transitioned from buffer zones to strategic actors within the security architecture of NATO and the political framework of the European Union. The study employs a qualitative methodology based on policy analysis, elite discourse, and regional case studies, focusing on key states such as Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic States. It explores three interrelated dimensions: (1) the militarization and securitization of the region amid renewed deterrence strategies; (2) the consolidation of Eastern Europe as an energy and logistical corridor reducing dependence on Russia; and (3) the region's role in mediating broader systemic rivalry between the United States and China. The findings suggest that Eastern Europe is no longer merely an object of great power politics but an active geopolitical subject shaping alliance cohesion, defense postures, and normative agendas within Euro-Atlantic institutions. Furthermore, the region's growing agency contributes to the emergence of a more fragmented and contested international order. By situating Eastern Europe at the intersection of regional security and global power transitions, this study advances the argument that the region constitutes a strategic frontier whose importance will continue to expand in the evolving multipolar system.

Keywords: Strategic Position, Russia-Ukraine Dispute, Europe, Securitization and Weapon War

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war represents a paradigmatic example of a high-intensity conflict in modern Europe, characterized by extreme violence, important humanitarian consequences, and far-reaching implications for international relations, regional security, and global governance. The ongoing conflict has generated a multifaceted crisis, with deleterious effects on international relations, global economics stability, and security architectures. It necessitates a nuanced

understanding of its complex dynamics and far-reaching implications. The conflict's outcome will likely have a profound impact on the future of great power competition, as the strategic rivalry between East and West continues to unfold. The country's strategic location along the Black Sea renders it a critical site for NATO's interests. Ukraine has emerged as a key site of contestation between NATO, the West, and Russia, with significant implications for the future of international relations and global security. The events of 2014, marked by Russia's annexation of Crimea and NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe, have created a critical juncture, with Ukraine situated at the epicentre of this emergent spatiality. Overall, the territorial dispute between Russia and Ukraine, coupled with both Russia and NATO's involvement, highlights the complex interplay of historical grievances, geopolitical interests, and regional security dynamics in Eastern Europe. Since 2022 approximately 17-20 percent of Ukraine's land has been occupied by Russian forces. ²

Historical Context

The historical relationship between Russia and Ukraine is deeply intertwined and holds substantial importance in understanding the ongoing conflict. Ukraine was an integral part of the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991, and this shared history has left enduring cultural, linguistic, and religious ties between the two nations. Despite these connections, Ukraine's efforts to assert its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union have led to persistent tensions with Russia. The roots of the current conflict are embedded in a complex historical context that spans several centuries, characterised by both cooperation and conflict. During the 20th century, Ukraine's status as a Soviet republic meant that its political, economic, and social structures were heavily influenced by Moscow. This relationship persisted even after Ukraine declared independence in 1991, as Russia continued to exert significant influence over Ukraine's political landscape and economic policies. The post-Soviet era was marked by Ukraine's struggle to navigate its newfound independence while managing its historical ties to Russia. This struggle was exacerbated by the internal political divisions within Ukraine, particularly between the pro-European western regions and the pro-Russian eastern regions (Rasool *et al.*, 2024), which often aligned more closely with Moscow's interests. The situation escalated dramatically in 2014, when a popular uprising led to the ousting of Ukraine's pro-Russian President, Viktor Yanukovich. This event, known as the Euromaidan protests, was a turning point in Ukraine's modern history. Yanukovich's removal from power was perceived by Russia as a direct challenge to its influence in Ukraine, prompting Moscow to take aggressive measures to reassert its control. In response, Russia annexed Crimea, a region with a majority Russian-speaking population, and began providing support to separatist movements in eastern Ukraine. These actions were justified by Russia on the grounds of protecting the rights of Russian speakers, but they were widely condemned by the international community as violations of Ukraine's sovereignty. The conflict that began in 2014 gradually escalated into a full-scale war, culminating in the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This invasion marked a major intensification of the conflict and has been driven by a complex interplay of factors, including competing national identities, historical grievances, and geopolitical ambitions. Ukraine's pursuit of closer ties with Western institutions, such as the European Union and NATO, has been perceived by Russia as a direct threat to its sphere of influence. Conversely, Ukraine views its alignment with the West as a crucial step toward securing its sovereignty and independence from Russian dominance. The ongoing war has resulted in catastrophic human suffering, with thousands of lives lost and millions displaced. The conflict has also wrought severe economic devastation, both in Ukraine and across the region, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. Moreover, the war has heightened global geopolitical tensions, as Western powers have imposed sanctions on

Russia and provided support to Ukraine, while Russia has sought to expand its influence and challenge the existing international order. This conflict, deeply rooted in historical complexities, continues to shape the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe and poses substantial challenges to global stability.³

The Reconfiguration of Transatlantic Relations

The United States has returned to the center of the European security system. Washington provided the most extensive military and financial support for Kyiv, and European leaders, even when reluctant, accepted the essential role of the U.S. as guarantor of defense. This reinforced the transatlantic axis but also highlighted Europe's strategic dependence on America, especially in military and technological domains.

At the same time, this reconfiguration is not without uncertainty. A recalibration of U.S. engagement in Europe and Ukraine has already begun, driven by the prioritization of competition with China in the Indo-Pacific and domestic fiscal pressures. Support for Kyiv has become more selective and conditional, with Washington sending a clear message to allies: Europeans must shoulder a far greater share of collective security. In this regard, the U.S. call for NATO members to allocate 5% of GDP to defense marks a paradigm shift, signaling that American resources will increasingly be directed toward other theaters.

The Militarization of Central and Eastern Europe

The countries on NATO's Eastern Flank — Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states — have become the new center of gravity for European security.

- Poland announced the most extensive military modernization in its history, aiming to build one of the strongest European armies.
- Romania accelerated procurement programs and hosted a growing number of allied troops and equipment.
- The Baltic states called for a permanent NATO presence and additional defense infrastructure.

This shift indicates a movement of the security center of gravity from the Atlantic to Eastern Europe, where risks are perceived as immediate and existential.

Redefining Security Frontiers

With Finland's accession (2023) and Sweden's accession (2024), NATO considerably extended its direct border with Russia, altering the strategic balance in Northern Europe. In the South, the Black Sea has become a key security zone for the Alliance, with Romania and Bulgaria gaining importance as frontline states. Thus, the "European security frontier" is no longer the Elbe River or the Berlin Wall, but NATO's eastern line, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea.⁴

Strengthening the Eastern Front

NATO shifted from a posture of deterrence through symbolic presence (multinational battalions) to one of forward defense: allied brigades, air defense systems, logistical hubs, and support infrastructure. In Romania, U.S. and allied military presence increased significantly, with the Mihail Kogălniceanu and Cincu bases becoming strategic nodes.

Increased Defense Spending

Most European states have committed to the 2% of GDP defense target, while some (Poland, the Baltic states) have even exceeded it. Germany created a special fund of €100 billion to modernize the Bundeswehr, marking a historic turning point. This trend shows that security has once again become an absolute priority for Europe, after decades of underfunding and complacency in the "peace dividend."⁵

Geopolitical Transformation in the 21st Century

The Rise and Decline of Global Powers

The first quarter of the 21st century has witnessed significant transformations within global power dynamics, characterized particularly by the remarkable ascent of China. China's rise from a developing nation to a formidable global power across economic, political, technological, and military dimensions has reshaped international relations profoundly. Today, China ranks as the world's second-largest power, with an explicit strategic ambition to assume global primacy by mid-century. In practical terms, China has already established dominance across Africa and considerable portions of Asia and Latin America, regions where it is increasingly recognized as the preeminent external actor. Central to this global strategy is China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the largest and most ambitious infrastructure and investment project ever undertaken, designed to enhance connectivity, bolster economic influence, and solidify China's geopolitical leadership worldwide.

U.S. Decline as the Absolute Global Leader

The United States has ceased to be the unequivocally dominant global leader it became after the end of the Cold War. This relative decline can primarily be attributed to factors such as political, financial, and military overstretch, coupled with a significant reduction in traditional industrial productivity. Furthermore, the persistent imbalance in U.S.-China trade relations underscores this weakened position, with U.S. imports from China exceeding its exports by a factor of approximately. This chronic trade imbalance highlights structural vulnerabilities within the American economy, exacerbating broader strategic challenges and weakening U.S. geopolitical leverage vis-à-vis China and other emerging global actors. Out of the group of additional potential global actors India, Russia, and the European Union only India appears poised to emerge as a significant global actor, owing to its strategic geographic positioning at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region and its unparalleled demographic potential as the world's most populous nation. China's strategic activities surrounding India further amplify India's geopolitical importance. China's territorial claims against India in the north, the strategic corridors developed through Pakistan and Myanmar to India's west and east, respectively, and the expansive Belt and Road Initiative to the south collectively constitute a de facto encirclement of India. Consequently, these developments position India as a natural strategic partner for the United States, as both nations share a vested interest in counterbalancing China's regional and global aspirations. Europe, considering its economic scale, highly developed human capital, and elevated living standards even post-Brexit retains substantial potential to rank among the top three global powers. This potential, however, hinges on Europe's capacity to formulate and execute cohesive foreign, security, and defense policies akin to those of a sovereign nation-state. Absent such unity, Europe's geopolitical influence, even within its immediate vicinity, has proven notably less effective compared to that of substantially smaller regional powers, such as Turkey, Iran, Israel, or Saudi Arabia. Simultaneously, major global institutions such as the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization (WTO), World Health Organization (WHO), and similar bodies have experienced significant erosion in their roles as central coordinating mechanisms, primarily due to persistent rivalry among major global powers and deepening divisions between developed and developing nations. The United States' attempt to establish informal global leadership structures, exemplified by the Group of Twenty (G20), has likewise fallen short of evolving into a robust coordinating instrument, primarily due to the pronounced disparities in development levels, strategic priorities, and interests among its members. The former Group of Eight (G8), following Russia's exclusion due to its illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Donbas in 2014, reverted to the Group of Seven (G7), serving as an informal intergovernmental forum predominantly for advanced Western economies. In parallel, the formation and subsequent expansion of BRICS alongside the newer BRICS+ under the joint leadership of Russia

and China have attained substantial political influence. In recent years, BRICS+ expanded into a forum encompassing eleven countries, collectively representing approximately half of the world's population, onethird of global GDP, and nearly half of global oil production, underscoring its considerable geopolitical and economic significance. At the Johannesburg Summit, BRICS+ articulated its strategic objective of reshaping global leadership structures and promoting international trade conducted in national currencies, a policy frequently described as "de-dollarization." Its broader ambition is to foster economic development across the Global South independently from Western-dominated institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This vision is operationalized primarily through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), headquartered in Beijing. Moreover, through its strategic inclusion of significant parts of the Islamic world, BRICS+ has effectively harnessed substantial anti-Western sentiment prevalent in many Muslim-majority countries. At present, approximately 40 additional states, including NATO member Turkey, have expressed their interest in joining this expanding coalition. In the long term, BRICS+ is advancing toward a global geostrategic vision that could grant it considerable control over critical maritime trade routes linking the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Key strategic chokepoints in this scenario include the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandab Strait, the Cape of Good Hope, the South China Sea, and the Strait of Malacca. Such control would also afford BRICS+ considerable leverage over essential global infrastructure, notably submarine cable networks, thus enhancing its capacity to influence global information and communications systems. However, substantial internal challenges to BRICS+ cohesion persist, particularly stemming from complex bilateral relationships, most notably the enduring tensions between China and India, as well as nuanced strategic dynamics between Russia and China. Despite these internal constraints, the emergence and growth of BRICS+ pose a significant and credible challenge to the established Western-led international order.⁶

Current Geopolitical Landscape and Emerging Alliances

In the contemporary global landscape, the dynamics of international relations have undergone a pronounced transformation, marked by the emergence of a multipolar geopolitical environment. This section undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the current multipolar context, unraveling its intricacies and assessing the implications of this complex global configuration. Resurgence of Power Centers: Multipolarity in Action The current geopolitical milieu is characterized by the presence of multiple power centers, each wielding significant influence. Nations such as the United States, China, Russia, the European Union, and regional powers in the Middle East and Asia contribute to the multipolar distribution of power. This multiplicity of influential actors reflects a departure from the unipolar moment that followed the Cold War, signifying a more balanced global power structure (Waltz, 1979).

Economic Interdependencies and Shifting Alliances Economic interdependencies play a pivotal role in shaping the multipolar environment. Globalization and international trade have intertwined the fates of nations, fostering a network of economic relationships that transcend traditional alliances. The fluidity of economic ties can lead to the realignment of partnerships as nations seek to safeguard their economic interests and adapt to changing market dynamics (Keohane & Nye, 1989).

Geopolitical Rivalries and Strategic Maneuvering The multipolar context has engendered new geopolitical rivalries and strategic maneuvering. Competition for influence, resources, and strategic advantages has intensified as nations navigate a complex web of relationships. The South China Sea disputes, Russia's assertiveness in Eastern Europe, and the Middle East's regional power struggles exemplify the multifaceted challenges posed by shifting alliances and competing interests (Legvold, 2009). Complexity of Alliances and Diplomacy The multipolar

environment necessitates a nuanced approach to alliances and diplomacy. Nations often engage in flexible partnerships to advance their interests, leading to intricate webs of overlapping and sometimes conflicting alliances. Diplomatic efforts to balance diverse interests and navigate multifaceted alliances require adeptness and pragmatism in a world where traditional alliances may no longer provide sufficient security or economic benefits. Global Challenges and Multilateral Cooperation While the multipolar landscape introduces complexities, it also offers opportunities for multilateral cooperation to address global challenges. Issues like climate change, pandemics, and transnational terrorism require collaborative efforts that transcend national boundaries. The multipolar environment can serve as a platform for nations to pool resources, share expertise, and collectively tackle pressing global issues (Ikenberry, 2011). In conclusion, the current multipolar geopolitical environment presents a multifaceted tableau of power distribution, economic interdependencies, and strategic complexities. As nations navigate this intricate web of relationships, adept diplomacy and the ability to navigate shifting alliances will play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of international relations in the 21st century.⁷

Impact on Global Stability and Power Dynamics

The dynamics of shifting alliances in a multipolar world carry far-reaching implications that reverberate across global politics, security, and economics. As nations recalibrate their partnerships, a range of potential consequences emerges, shaping the course of international relations. In terms of security, the realignment of alliances can trigger security dilemmas and heighten regional instability. As nations reassess their partnerships, perceived threats or vulnerabilities might lead to defensive reactions or even arms races. For instance, shifts in alliances involving countries in Eastern Europe or the Asia-Pacific may trigger responses from neighboring nations, potentially exacerbating security challenges. The delicate balance of power in certain regions could be disrupted, leading to uncertainties and the need for recalibrations in defense strategies (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Economically, changes in alliances can disrupt established trade relationships and impact market dynamics. As nations pivot their alliances, economic interdependencies may shift, potentially leading to trade conflicts or sanctions that affect global supply chains, economic growth, and financial stability. Such disruptions can have far-reaching implications for businesses, industries, and economies around the world. The intricate web of economic interactions may be strained, necessitating adjustments in trade policies and investment strategies (Keohane & Nye, 1989).

Furthermore, the consequences of shifting alliances extend to the realm of multilateral cooperation. As nations adjust their alliance priorities, resources and diplomatic efforts could be redirected from collaborative global initiatives. This might undermine multilateral efforts to address pressing challenges like climate change, pandemics, or disarmament. The potential diminishment of multilateral cooperation may hinder the collective response required for effectively tackling transnational issues that transcend national borders (Ikenberry, 2011).

On a broader geopolitical scale, the realignment of alliances can lead to shifts in power dynamics and the emergence of new rivalries. Emerging powers seeking to expand their influence may challenge established norms or spheres of influence, potentially leading to competition or conflicts.

The formation of new alliances or strategic partnerships can reshape the geopolitical landscape and trigger power struggles. The geopolitical map may evolve, influencing global diplomacy and potentially leading to scenarios of cooperation or confrontation (Waltz, 1979). Amidst the potential challenges, shifting alliances also present opportunities for conflict resolution and diplomacy. Changing alliances may create windows for dialogue and negotiation, enabling nations to address longstanding disputes or grievances. While realignment can introduce

complexities, it can also provide a fresh context for diplomatic solutions to regional conflicts or longstanding global issues. The evolving alliance landscape may serve as a catalyst for peaceful resolutions and enhanced diplomatic engagement (Legvold, 2009).

In conclusion, the consequences of shifting alliances are multifaceted and can significantly impact various aspects of international relations. From security dilemmas and economic disruptions to changes in global power dynamics and opportunities for diplomacy, the recalibration of alliances underscores the complexity of navigating the evolving dynamics of a multipolar world.⁸

Energy and Economic Implications

The war in Ukraine has had structural effects not only in the military and geopolitical realms but also in the energy and economic dimensions, fundamentally transforming relations between states and the logic of interdependence. Europe, in particular, was forced to make rapid and painful adjustments in order to maintain economic stability and energy security.

The Gas Crisis and the Reconfiguration of Energy Markets

By 2021, Russia was supplying approximately 40% of the European Union's gas needs. The invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines forced Europe to drastically reduce this dependency. In just two years, the EU managed to diversify its sources:

- Massive LNG imports from the U.S. and Qatar.
- Strengthened regional energy interconnections (Poland–Lithuania, Greece–Bulgaria, Romania–Hungary).
- Accelerated transition to renewables, with additional investments in solar, wind, and nuclear energy.

This shift, however, brought higher energy prices and inflationary pressures, with social and political effects on European governments.

Russia and the Loss of the European Market

For Russia, the loss of the European market was a strategic blow. The Kremlin attempted to redirect exports to China, India, and Turkey, offering significant discounts. Although this mitigated the economic shock, revenues remained far below those generated by the European market. The result was an accelerated repositioning of Russia as a supplier dependent on Asia, with a reduced capacity to project power through energy instruments.

The Reconfiguration of Trade Routes

The war disrupted transport and trade corridors:

- The blockade of the Black Sea affected Ukrainian grain exports, provoking food crises in Africa and the Middle East.
- The EU–Ukraine Solidarity Corridor (road and rail) was created to maintain trade flows, though at higher costs.
- Countries such as Romania and Poland became key logistical hubs for the transit of goods, including grain and energy.

Global Economic Impact

The conflict contributed to:

- The fragmentation of the global economy into blocs (the West vs. BRICS+).
- The acceleration of discussions on de-dollarization, with BRICS efforts to create alternative payment mechanisms.
- Increased defense spending in Europe, with effects on public budgets and fiscal policies.

Lessons for Energy Security

The main lesson is that unilateral dependence on a single supplier constitutes a strategic vulnerability. Europe learned this lesson at high cost but increased its long-term resilience. At the same time, the war demonstrated that⁹

Anticipation of Potential Future Alliance Configurations

In the ever-evolving landscape of a multipolar world, the anticipation of potential future alliance configurations becomes a critical exercise for nations seeking to navigate the intricacies of shifting global dynamics. This section delves into the complex task of projecting future alliance patterns and the significance it holds for shaping diplomatic strategies and international relations.

Scenario planning and strategic foresight are essential tools for anticipating potential future alliance configurations. By constructing various plausible scenarios based on different alliance shifts and geopolitical developments, policymakers can better prepare for a range of possible outcomes. This approach enables nations to proactively devise diplomatic strategies that align with their interests (Rasool *et al.*, 2023), whether by forging new partnerships or strengthening existing ones. The utilization of scenario planning was evident during the Cold War when both NATO and the Warsaw Pact engaged in envisioning potential alliance changes (Healey, 1993).

Anticipating future alliance configurations requires a keen understanding of emerging power centers. As the global balance of power evolves, new actors may rise to prominence, influencing alliance dynamics. By identifying these emerging players and their potential partnerships, nations can position themselves strategically to engage with or counterbalance these shifts. For instance, the rise of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) has prompted discussions about potential realignments and new alliance formations (Sharma, 2014). Also, it is important not to forget the role of Turkey in regional politics (Khatti, Soomro & Shah, 2022). Turkey has been actively expanding its role in Africa over the past decade. Its engagement with the continent is multifaceted and includes diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian efforts (Yavuz, 2016).

A thorough assessment of regional and global trends is vital for projecting future alliance configurations. By analyzing factors such as economic interdependencies, security concerns, and cultural affinities, nations can anticipate the direction in which alliances might evolve. This approach allows for the identification of potential convergences or divergences of interests, helping states proactively adapt their diplomatic strategies. The European Union's enlargement and the expansion of NATO are examples of alliance changes driven by assessments of regional trends (Dinan, 2005).

Scenario-based diplomacy involves engaging in diplomatic efforts that are contingent on specific alliance shifts or geopolitical developments. By tailoring diplomatic engagements to align with potential future alliance configurations, nations can enhance their relevance and influence in evolving regional and global dynamics (Khatti *et al.*, 2022). For example, a nation anticipating a realignment in a neighboring region might engage in preemptive diplomacy to establish favorable relationships with emerging actors.

In anticipation of uncertain alliance shifts, nations may adopt flexible alliance structures and hedging strategies. By maintaining a degree of adaptability in their partnerships, states can be better prepared to respond to unexpected changes. Flexible alliances, exemplified by Australia's approach to shifting regional dynamics, allow nations to navigate evolving geopolitical realities while safeguarding their core interests (Dorling & Kesteven, 2016).¹⁰

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war has become one of the defining events that has transformed the geopolitical landscape of Europe and the wider global order. It has revitalized the question of the

emergence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), brought the course of the European Union towards a direction of strategic autonomy, and given greater geopolitical weight to the Eastern European states. The conflict has also made the importance of energy security a major issue as Europe reduces its reliance on Russian fossil fuels and builds a more hardy and sustainable energy future. Globally, the war has heightened great power rivalries, deepened the strategic relationship between Russia and China and fomented the adoption of new regional alliances, boding well for a more fragmented and multipolar world order. In addition to affecting the most vulnerable flows of refugees and migrants worldwide, the nuances of the conflict, along with its intimate culture and roots suffering, and, in general, the consequences of the insecurity and a world split by natural wars, have a global impact on the supply chains, food safety and economic stability of the entire world.

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