

# The New Cold War: 'a new normal in European security'?

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) reacted swiftly to the Russian attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The following day the military alliance held an extraordinary summit. 'The Kremlin's objectives are not limited to Ukraine,' warned NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, adding: 'We are facing a new normal in European security.' Consequently, the military alliance heightened its alert level and vowed 'to protect and defend every Ally. And every inch of NATO territory'.<sup>1</sup> Just four months later, it seemed that 'a new normal in European security' started to take shape, with Western liberal democracies engaged in proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and NATO states agreeing a new strategic concept. The stratagem spelled out 'three core tasks: deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security' and committed NATO to the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. It focused on the Russian Federation as the chief threat to NATO and, for the first time, referred to China as a major strategic competitor.<sup>2</sup>

This begs the question as to how this supposedly New Cold War<sup>3</sup> is (dis)similar to the Old Cold War of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most fundamental difference lies in a significant shift in the power constellation. While the existence of a predominantly bi-polar world order with two superpowers and their respective blocs – plus several non-aligned

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<sup>1</sup> 'Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the extraordinary virtual summit of NATO Heads of State and Government', 25 February 2022, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_192455.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_192455.htm) [accessed 25 February 2022].

<sup>2</sup> NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept: Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022* (n.p.: NATO, [2022]), pp. 1, 3-5, avail. at <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/> [accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>3</sup> To differentiate between the Cold Wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I refer to them as the Old and the New Cold War respectively throughout.

states – characterized the Cold War of the second half of the twentieth century,<sup>4</sup> the picture that has started to emerge in 2022 is very different and seems much more complex.

Globally, China now plays a key role. Given the highly globalized state of the world in the twenty-first century, a Chinese attack on Taiwan, for example, could have serious economic consequences for Europe. In Europe itself, China has so far used primarily soft power initiatives such as the New Silk Road to gain influence. Plus, nations such as India and Brazil have greater economic leverage in the globalized world of the twenty-first century than in the Old Cold War.

Militarily, the balance of power in Europe has tipped quite considerably in favour of NATO, with most former Warsaw Pact states now members of the alliance. While divided Germany was once a ‘border region of the Cold War’ (Thomas Lindenberger) on the front line during the second half of the twentieth century,<sup>5</sup> this position is now taken by Poland or the Baltic States.<sup>6</sup> And, what is more, the Russian war on Ukraine even prompted Finland and Sweden – two countries that used to epitomize the very concept of neutrality – to apply for membership of NATO.<sup>7</sup> If the Finish ascension to NATO goes ahead as planned, then the shared border between Russia and NATO will increase by some 1,300 kilometres, leading to a more direct confrontation between the two sides.

With the Baltic Sea now more or less NATO’s inland sea, the Baltic region

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the history, historiography and conceptualization of the ‘old’ Cold War, see Holger Nehring, ‘What Was the Cold War?’, *English Historical Review*, 128. 527 (2012), 920-49.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Lindenberger, ‘Divided, but Not Disconnected: Germany as a Border Region of the Cold War’, in *Divided, but Not Disconnected: German Experiences of the Cold War*, ed. by Tobias Hochscherf, Christoph Laucht and Andrew Plowman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 11-33.

<sup>6</sup> This includes ‘forward-deployed capabilities, like air defence’. ‘Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Heads of State and Government (2022 Summit)’, 29 June 2022, avail. at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_197288.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_197288.htm) [accessed 26 August 2022].

<sup>7</sup> Note that Finland had a defence agreement with the Soviet Union during the Cold War that would have allowed Soviet forces to operate on Finish soil in the event of war with NATO.

not only illustrates this shift in military balance particularly well but simultaneously shows the potential for escalation between NATO and the Russian Federation. The changed power balance aside, the Baltic's strategic significance is not dissimilar to the situation in the latter twentieth century. After all, access to the Baltic Sea has always been crucial to the Soviet and Russian navies respectively. This included the strategically important islands of Bornholm (Denmark), which the Soviet Union occupied from May 1945 to April 1946, and Gotland (Sweden). Thus, it is no surprise that both the Russian Federation and NATO have stepped up naval exercises in the inland sea.<sup>8</sup> In summer 2022 this also involved posturing from both sides. The Russian navy deployed several ships, including two nuclear submarines, to the Baltic Sea, and the Kremlin issued a new naval doctrine that identified the United States as Russia's chief opponent on the seas. In response, the Biden Administration deployed an entire Marine Expeditionary Unit with some 4,000 Marines to the Baltic Sea.<sup>9</sup> That China, for the first time, conducted a joint naval exercise with Russia in the Baltic Sea in 2017 further underlines the strategic significance attached to the region.<sup>10</sup>

If such posturing formed an important part in the bloc confrontation during the Old Cold War, two of the oft-cited and related flashpoints of the New Cold War in the Baltic region – Kaliningrad and the so-called Suwałki Gap – can hardly be compared to similar sites in the twentieth century such as (West) Berlin or the Fulda Gap. Kaliningrad is a Russian exclave on the Baltic Sea that shares land borders with the NATO states Poland and Lithuania and is connected through the Suwałki Gap, a land corridor of some 100 kilometres

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<sup>8</sup> 'BALTOPS 22 Kicks Off in the Baltic Sea', 8 June 2022, avail. at <https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2022/baltops-22-kicks-off-in-the-baltic-sea> [accessed 25 August 2022]; Joseph Golder, 'Russia Starts Exercises with 60 Warships in Baltic Sea', *Newsweek*, 9 June 2022, avail. at <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-starts-exercises-60-warships-baltic-sea-1714375> [accessed 25 August 2022].

<sup>9</sup> Frank Behling, 'US Navy trotzt Putin in der Ostsee', *Kieler Nachrichten*, 3 August 2022, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> 'China in Baltic navy drill with Russia', *BBC News*, 21 July 2017, avail. at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-40682442> [accessed 26 August 2022].

that stretches from Kaliningrad along the Lithuanian-Polish border to Belarus. Although it is true that Russian forces could cut off the Baltic States from NATO by occupying the Suwałki Gap, such a move would have severe military consequences for the Russian Federation. Since Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are NATO members, any attack on their territory would trigger article 5 of the NATO Treaty, meaning that Russia would find itself at war with NATO. At the same time, NATO forces could in return blockade and attack Kaliningrad, which is home to the headquarters of the Russian Baltic Fleet and used as a base for nuclear-capable Iskander missiles. By contrast, the Fulda Gap would have enabled the tank armies of the Warsaw Pact to make a smooth advance into central West Germany through otherwise mountainous terrain in the Old Cold War – a much more significant role than the Suwałki Gap assumes today.<sup>11</sup>

Although currently no major flashpoint in the New Cold War is located on German soil, the country itself could have a decisive impact on the ‘new normal in European security’. This is in the sense that the recent decision by the German government to increase its defence budget could turn Germany, once again, into the chief conventional military power on the continent. The Russian attack on Ukraine marked a ‘turning point’ (*‘Zeitenwende’*) for Germany’s national security strategy because it prompted the Social Democrat-led coalition government to initiate a 180-degree change in its national security strategy away from dependence on Russian gas and oil as well as cutting its defence budget to below 1.5% of its GDP. In a seminal speech in the German parliament on 27 February

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion see Alexander Lanoszka, ‘Myth 2: The Suwałki Gap matters’, *Myths and Misconceptions around Russian Military Intent: How They Affect Western Policy, and What Can Be Done*, 14 July 2022, avail. at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/myths-and-misconceptions-around-russian-military-intent/myth-2-suwalki-gap-matters> [accessed 18 August 2022]. On the significance of the Fulda Gap: Dieter Krüger and Volker Bausch (eds), *Fulda Gap: Battlefield of the Cold War Alliances*, translated by David R. Dorondo (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018)

2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz promised a special one-off budget of 100 million EUR for the German military and pledged to comply in future with NATO's aim to spend 2% of the GDP on defence annually.<sup>12</sup>

While it is too early to tell what the military consequences of this monumental decision are, it seems likely that the *Zeitenwende* will spark political and public debates over Germany's defence expenditure and over the course towards Russia. The historian Heinrich August Winkler has recently called on the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to come to terms with the legacies of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik to remain a credible political force in Germany.<sup>13</sup> It is doubtful though that such internal debates will lead to divisions within the SPD as was the case in the 1980s when the party fought over the NATO 'double-track' decision.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps with the exception of the Green Party, all other German political parties, especially former Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its sister party Christian Social Union and the Liberal Party (Free Democrats), will have to undergo similar processes and take responsibility for their past decisions on building the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline or the negligence of defence and energy security during their stints in government.

Finally, nuclear weapons and the doctrine of nuclear deterrence represent a key plank of 'a new normal in European security' in the early 2020s. In its *2022 Strategic*

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<sup>12</sup> Military expenditure (% of GDP) – Germany, avail. at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=DE> [accessed 18 August 2022]; Deutscher Bundestag, Stenografischer Bericht, 19. Sitzung. Berlin, Sonntag, den 27. Februar 2022', pp. 1350-1355, avail. at <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/20/20019.pdf#P.1349> [accessed 18 August 2022].

<sup>13</sup> On the Social Democrats and the legacy of Ostpolitik: Heinrich August Wehler, 'Als die SPD konservativ wurde', *Der Spiegel*, 24 (11 June 2022), pp. 42-45. On Ostpolitik: Gottfried Niedhart, *Durch den Eisernen Vorhang: Die Ära Brandt und das Ende des Kalten Kriegs* (Darmstadt, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> On the SPD and the NATO 'double track' decision: Jan Hansen, *Abschied vom Kalten Krieg? Die Sozialdemokraten und der Nachrüstungsstreit (1977-1987)* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016).

*Concept*, NATO emphasizes its continued reliance on nuclear deterrence.<sup>15</sup> However, with many arms limitation treaties no longer in existence,<sup>16</sup> the New Cold War resembles a combination of different phases of the Cold War of the twentieth century. In this, it contains elements of both the opening phase of the Old Cold War when no international agreements on arms control existed and the late Cold War of the 1980s with its vast nuclear arsenals.<sup>17</sup> As for a lack of international control treaties, the withdrawal of the Trump Administration from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty after Russian violations of that treaty marked a crucial moment for Europe.<sup>18</sup> Ratified in 1987, the INF Treaty ended the so-called Euromissile crisis of the 1980s that had involved the deployment of Soviet SS-20 and United States Pershing II and cruise missiles on European soil and led to an escalation of the nuclear arms race.<sup>19</sup>

As it stands, the New Cold War might well see a new nuclear arms race take place on European soil, including hypersonic delivery systems. In the absence of the INF Treaty, the deployment of new nuclear missiles appears very likely. To counter the threat that Russian nuclear-capable Iskander or hypersonic Kinzhal missiles pose to European NATO members, the United States government took some steps over the past years. For example, the United States Army has started to deploy the new long-range hypersonic Dark Eagle missile that is

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<sup>15</sup> NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept: Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022* (n.p.: NATO, [2022]), pp. 7-8, avail. at <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/> [accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>16</sup> 'The New Strategic Arms Limitation (START) Treaty expires in 2026', United States Department of State website, <https://www.state.gov/new-start/> [accessed 26 August 2022].

<sup>17</sup> 'Nuclear Notebook: Nuclear Arsenals of the World', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, avail. at <https://thebulletin.org/nuclear-notebook/> [accessed 25 August 2022].

<sup>18</sup> 'The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance', August 2019, avail at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/INFtreaty> [accessed 25 August 2022].

<sup>19</sup> For an overview: Leopoldo Nuti, Frédéric Bozo, Marie-Pierre Rey and Bernd Rother, eds, *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

capable of carrying nuclear warheads.<sup>20</sup> In this context, the re-activation of the United States Army Europe and Africa 56th Artillery Command in November 2021, which is based near the German city of Mainz and was in charge of operating Pershing II intermediate-range nuclear missiles during the 1980s, might then also suggest that Germany might, once again, become a site for deployment of United States nuclear missiles, as it was in the Old Cold War.<sup>21</sup>

While (West) Germany hosted United States nuclear missiles, it has also participated in nuclear sharing until the present day. With the recent decision by the German government to purchase F-35 jet fighters as replacement for the aging Tornados in charge of carrying United States nuclear bombs, the question of Germany's future role in nuclear sharing has been solved.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Berlin has so far stayed silent on proposals by the French President Emmanuel Macron for creating a European nuclear deterrent. In light of concerns over a return of Donald Trump or a similarly isolationist Republican to the White House in future, Macron started to float the idea of a European nuclear deterrent in 2020. Since Europe could no longer count on the United States' 'nuclear umbrella', Macron proposed some form of nuclear sharing of French nuclear weapons.<sup>23</sup> As vague as these proposals still are, they bear a slight resemblance to discussions around a Multilateral Force in the 1960s.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kristen Burroughs, 'Dark Eagle is on the move: Soldiers complete New Equipment Training', *U.S. Army*, official website, 14 March 2022, avail. at [https://www.army.mil/article/254659/dark\\_eagle\\_is\\_on\\_the\\_move\\_soldiers\\_complete\\_new\\_equipment\\_training](https://www.army.mil/article/254659/dark_eagle_is_on_the_move_soldiers_complete_new_equipment_training) [accessed 25 August 2022].

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Army Europe and Africa Public Affairs Office, 'Fact Sheet: 56<sup>th</sup> Artillery Command', n.d., avail. at <https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/Portals/19/documents/Fact%20Sheets/56th%20Artillery%20Command%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf?ver=5dr0gLQYlbYclh5O2PIGMw%3d%3d> [accessed 25 August 2022].

<sup>22</sup> 'F-35: Nachfolger für den Tornado', 14 March 2022, avail. at <https://www.bmvg.de/de/tornado-nachfolger-beschaffung-neue-kampfflugzeuge-fuer-truppe> [28 August 2022].

<sup>23</sup> Shannon Burgos, 'France Offers Nuclear Deterrent to Europe', March 2020, avail. at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-03/news/france-offers-nuclear-deterrent-europe> [28 August 2022].

<sup>24</sup> This also involves consideration of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The Russian Federation, too, is looking to increase its nuclear capabilities, also with the help of its allies. The Belarussian regime recently declared its readiness to host Russian nuclear weapons on its territory. If carried out, this move would violate the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and put additional pressure on NATO. That the Kremlin also announced to site Iskander missile systems capable of delivering nuclear warheads in Belarus can be viewed as a further sign that a new nuclear arms race is already underway.<sup>25</sup> With the de facto termination of the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, Security between NATO and the Russian Federation of 1997<sup>26</sup> after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO might also deploy tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of Eastern European members states, especially Poland or the Baltic States, in future.<sup>27</sup>

By August 2022, it appears then that a New Cold War could indeed become ‘a new normal in European security’. The Ukraine War has served as a catalyst to revitalize an ailing NATO.<sup>28</sup> If the United States and the United Kingdom failed to honour their pledge to guarantee the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine under the Budapest Memorandum (1994) in the wake of the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea in 2014 and consecutive German governments continued to follow the ‘change through trade’ formula post 2014, the events of 24 February 2022 – the outbreak of the largest conventional war in Europe since the end of the Second World War – initiated fundamental

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Russia to send Belarus nuclear-capable missiles within months, as G7 leaders gather in Germany’, *Guardian*, 26 June 2022, avail. at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/26/russia-to-send-belarus-nuclear-capable-missiles-within-months-as-g7-leaders-gather-in-germany> [accessed 25 August 2022].

<sup>26</sup> ‘Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed Paris, France, 27 May 1997’, last updated 12 October 2009, avail. at [https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm) [accessed 18 August 2022].

<sup>27</sup> That NATO extended its ‘forward defence’ to member states that joined the alliance during its Eastern enlargement in the 1990s indicates the de facto cancellation of the Founding Act. ‘Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Heads of State and Government (2022 Summit)’, 29 June 2022, avail. at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_197288.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_197288.htm) [accessed 26 August 2022].

<sup>28</sup> French President Emmanuel Macron described NATO as ‘brain dead’ in November 2019.



change in Europe's security architecture. While it is too early to say what form the 'new normal in European security' will take, this contribution has attempted to discuss some of the key contours of the New Cold War that have so far emerged and how they both resemble and differ from the Old Cold War. It will be interesting to see how the most burning question of our times – climate change – will affect the course of the New Cold War, if not overshadow it as the 'new normal in European security'. But this is a question for historians in fifty years' time or so to address.