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*Krzysztof Śliwiński**

Is Geopolitics Still Relevant? Halford Mackinder and the War in Ukraine

Abstract

This paper starts with an assumption that geopolitics, understood as one of the great schools of international relations, is not only still relevant but, indeed, should be one of the essential items in the toolkit of any student or policymaker who peruses the challenging and ever-eluding realm of international security. It draws chiefly on Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland theory in order to explain the dynamics of contemporary European security in general, and the ongoing war in Ukraine in particular.

The analysis, which relies heavily on a historical examination of the geopolitical realities of Central and Eastern Europe, leads the author to a pair of conclusions. Firstly, the conflict in Ukraine is likely to linger on albeit with unpredictable intensity and, secondly perhaps more importantly, the outcome of the war will only be one of many steps leading to the emergence of a new, possibly multipolar, international system and consequently, and more obviously, a new security system in Europe, which will be strongly influenced by Germany rather than by the United States as before.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Heartland, Halford Mackinder, Europe, Security, Ukraine

Introduction

On Thursday 24th February, 2022, the Russian Federation commenced its invasion of Ukraine, officially referred to by Moscow as a “special military operation” against Ukraine (Osborn, 2022). The offensive caught

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many by surprise, especially considering the severity of Russia's military actions, such as targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure. During the first weeks of the war, the Ukrainian army and society impressed the world with their bravery and commitment to preserving territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Members of the European Union agreed on an extensive package of sanctions against various Russian entities and individuals connected to Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia. Until the attack against Ukraine, the EU had been muddling through with numerous countries pursuing their national interests, shaping their individual foreign and security policies, notably *vis-à-vis* Russia. The attack reinvigorated calls of EU bureaucrats for more unity and an actual common defence. The EU's chief diplomat, Joseph Borrel, during an extraordinary plenary session of the European Parliament on 1st March 2022, urged the European Parliament's MPs to "think about the instruments of coercion, retaliation, and counterattack in the face of reckless adversaries. (...) This is a moment in which geopolitical Europe is being born", he stressed (Brzozowski, 2022).

Heartland Theory – Geopolitics 101

As an analytical tool, geopolitics has been used since the 19th century. Its reputation, however, was tarnished as a consequence of the policies of the Third Reich before and during World War II (WWII). Yet, it is considered a worthy approach that allows for explanations that specifically look at the nexus between states' foreign and security policies and their geographical location in a historical context. Geopolitics is one of the grand theories of international relations (Sloan, 2017). Fundamentally, rather than treating states as separate, alienated geographical organisms, geopolitics allows us to look at a broader picture, including regions or even the whole globe, thus making it possible to account for interactions between many states functioning in particular systems defined by geographical criteria.

According to Grygiel, geopolitics exists outside the state; it is the environment within which, and in response to which, the state must act (Grygiel, 2006). Furthermore, two key variables shape this environment in the forms of the location of resources (distribution of power), and the lines of communication linking them (Grygiel, 2006).

Today's war in Ukraine occurs in a vital region for the European continent, i.e., Central and Eastern Europe. One of the founders of the scientific discipline that is geopolitics, Sir Halford Mackinder (a British geographer, Oxford professor, and the founder and director of the London School of

Economics) proposed an enduring model in his seminal publication at the beginning of the 20th century – “The Geographical Pivot of History”. Mackinder starts with the basics; he looks at a physical map. He concludes, looking at Eurasia, that Russia occupied half the continent, juxtaposed by many small European powers to the West. The East is generally flat and low, whereas the West has many complications, such as mountains, valleys, islands, peninsulas, and rivers. Geographical conditions account for the historical developments that could be summarised as a great push of various Asiatic peoples from the East to the West, culminating in the complicated political puzzle on the European continent (Mackinder, 1904, p. 425). Consequently, drawing on the general term used by geographers – “continental” – he posits that the regions of Arctic and Continental drainage measure nearly half of Asia and a quarter of Europe and therefore form a grand “continuous patch in the north and the centre of the continent” (Mackinder, 1919). It is the famous Heartland which is the key geographical area for anyone pursuing a dominant position in Eurasia. “whoever rules the Heartland will rule the World Island, and whoever rules the World Island will rule the world” (Kapo, 2021). Notably, the key to controlling the Heartland area lies in Central and Eastern Europe, as it is an area that borders the Heartland to the West. Heartland itself is protected by mountain ranges from the South and the Sea from the North. The developments of WWII slightly altered this approach, and, by 1943, Mackinder rightly foresaw the potential of the Soviet Union as a land power if it were to emerge victorious from the war (Mackinder, 1943, p. 600). Yet the intellectual seeds that would allow such flexibility had already been planted in 1904; “The actual balance of political power at any given time is, of course, the product, on the one hand, of geographical conditions, both economic and strategic, and, on the other hand, of the relative number, virility, equipment, and organisation of the competing peoples” (Mackinder, 1904, p. 425).

Historical Context of Contemporary European Geopolitics

Before Mackinder’s publications, what we now refer to as Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) had been primarily united under the crown dynasty of the House of Jagiellonian as The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, called the Commonwealth of Both Nations. Lasting from 1386 to 1795, at its height in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the Commonwealth became one of the largest (territorially), the most populous, and, politically, the most influential of the early modern European states, exhibiting democratic and religiously tolerant tendencies. Ultimately, by

1795, the Commonwealth was partitioned between three powerful states: the Russian Empire, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and Prussia.

The 19th century was probably the most dynamic era regarding technological developments and consequent socio-economic and political ramifications. The Industrial Revolution was well underway, and Europe's political and military leadership was being competed for between Great Britain, Germany (as united by Prussia), France, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and Russia. Against this backdrop, Central and Eastern Europe became vital for European and, later, global politics in the 20th century. The so-called "Eastern Question" emerged as pivotal amidst two related processes: on the one hand, there was the continuing expansion of the Russian Empire – the Third Rome (paralleled by the steady retreat of the Ottoman Empire) and, on the other hand, the growing power and political ambitions of a united Germany – the so-called "late-comer to the colonial world". Germany paid extra attention to Central and Eastern Europe after its unification in 1871 under Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Its policy was the one of remorseless *Kulturkampf* (culture war) through which Germans hoped not only to gain an advantage over the Catholic Church in Europe and the Papacy but, in the context of the region, to Germanise its people, which was, after all, a form of imperialism and colonialism (Bideleux, Jeffries, 2007). The policy was, in subsequent years, institutionalised by HAKATA (a pan-German Union established in 1891 to promote German interests in "eastern provinces" which later turned into *Deutscher Ostmarkverein*) and intellectually and morally supported by Friedrich Naumann's works, among which *Mitteuropa* (published in 1915) stands out as particularly influential. It was later picked up by Nazi Germany, which treated Central and Eastern Europe as ideal geographical circumstances to spread Germanic influence and provide the Aryan race with much-needed *Lebensraum* (living space).

WWII started with an attack on Poland in September 1939 and ended (at least in Europe) with Red Army soldiers seizing Berlin by the end of April 1945. Germany was consequently divided into four different occupation zones, out of which, by 1947, two independent German states were formed. Western Germany was under the political and economic influence of the Western allies, whereas the Eastern half was under the control of the Soviet Union. Most nations shared the same fate in Central and Eastern Europe, which had been pre-approved by the so-called "Big Three" conference in Yalta in 1945. In a nutshell, the region was sacrificed to the USSR and its territorial ambitions in Europe.

Under the Administration of President John F. Kennedy, the United States moved from its massive retaliation (response or deterrence)

strategy, which posited that in case of an attack by the USSR against the US or its allies, Washington would commit itself to retaliating with much greater power, including nuclear weapons (Wells, 1981). As proposed by Secretary of Defence Robert MacNamara, the Strategy of Flexible Response, adopted as early as 1961, introduced an “appropriate” response to potential aggression by the Warsaw Pact (a military alliance led by the USSR) (Pepper, 1990, p. 292). Whereas nuclear weapons were primarily located in the US, conventional weapons were spread around European lands. Washington assumed that an attack with conventional forces would occur in Europe, once again stressing the importance of Central and Eastern Europe. It was considered vital as one of the three options for NATO in case of an actual military operation. The so-called “forward defence” concentrated conventional defence efforts at or around the central European front (Pepper, 1988, p. 165). On the other hand, in its early years, the Warsaw Pact developed a tendency toward conferring privileged status on the northern members of the Pact. This took the form of referring to – in public media – the northern quartet of Poland, the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union as the “first strategic echelon of the Pact” (Wolfe, 1966). The territory of the three Eastern European members of the northern quartet lay directly in line with what in wartime would be the main axis of a central European campaign. Consequently, Central and Eastern Europe had to be controlled again should the USSR seriously consider protecting its core. As Patricia Haigh rightly reminds us: “The Warsaw Pact meant that the countries of Eastern Europe could be bound to the strategic policies of the Soviet Union, and the concept of buffer States against a resurgent Germany realised” (Haigh, 1968, p. 170). This is precisely how historians read the events of 1968 and the application of “The Brezhnev Doctrine”, exemplified by the intervention of the Warsaw Pact in Czechoslovakia the same year.

In 2005, then-Polish Minister for Defence Radosław Sikorski made public some classified Soviet documents that revealed a likely war plan, known as “Seven Days to the Rhine”. It was a possible scenario of World War III based on a 1979 military exercise that assumed NATO would be the aggressor that would nuke a series of twenty-five targets in Poland, including Warsaw and the port of Gdańsk. The cover story of countering aggression was a mere fig leaf for the true nature of the anticipated conflict; a bolt-from-the-blue Soviet attack against NATO (Mizokami, 2016).

Twenty-First Century Geopolitics (Dugin vs Mearsheimer)

The most influential thinker and writer in the Kremlin of recent times is arguably Aleksandr Gel'evich Dugin. Accordingly, his 600-hundred-page book, *Foundations of Geopolitics 2*, published in 1997, has allegedly had an enormous influence on the Russian military, police, and statist foreign policy elites (Dunlop, 1997). In his book, Dugin, drawing on the founder of geopolitics, Karl Haushofer, posits that Russia is uniquely positioned to dominate the Eurasian landmass and that, more importantly, "Eurasianism" will ultimately hold the upper hand in an ongoing conflict with the representatives of so-called "Atlantism", i.e., the US and the UK. Crucially, Dugin does not focus primarily on military means as a way of achieving Russian dominance over Eurasia; instead, he advocates a relatively sophisticated program of subversion, destabilisation, and disinformation spearheaded by the Russian special services, supported by a tough, hard-headed use of Russia's gas, oil, and natural resource riches to pressure and bully other countries into bending to Russia's will (Dunlop, 1997).

The Moscow-Berlin Axis

According to Dugin, the postulated New (Eurasian) Empire has a robust geopolitical foothold, namely, Central Europe. "Central Europe is a natural geopolitical entity, united strategically, culturally, and partly politically. Ethnically, this space includes the peoples of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany, Prussia, and part of the Polish and Western Ukrainian territories. Germany has traditionally been a consolidating force in Central Europe, uniting this geopolitical conglomerate under its control" (Dugin, 1997). Consequently, while the impulse of the creation of the New Empire needs to come from Moscow, Germany needs to be the centre of its western part. Furthermore "only Russia and the Russians will be able to provide Europe with strategic and political independence and resource autarchy. Therefore, the European Empire should be formed around Berlin, which is on a straight and vital axis with Moscow" (Dugin, 1997, p. 127).

Regarding the role of Anglo-Saxons in Central and Eastern Europe, Dugin offers a most straightforward analysis: "The creation of the Berlin-Moscow axis as the western supporting structure of the Eurasian Empire presupposes several serious steps towards the countries of Eastern Europe lying between Russia and Germany. The traditional Atlanticist policy in

this region was based on Mackinder's thesis about the need to create a *cordon sanitaire* here, which would serve as a conflict buffer zone preventing the possibility of a Russian-German alliance, which is incredibly dangerous for the entire Atlanticist bloc. To this end, England and France strove to destabilise the Eastern European peoples in every possible way, to instil in them the idea of the need for *independence* and liberation from German and Russian influences". It follows logically that "Ukraine as an independent state with certain territorial ambitions, represents an enormous danger for all of Eurasia and, without resolving the Ukrainian problem, it is, in general, senseless to speak about continental politics" (Dugin, 1997). "The independent existence of Ukraine (especially within its present borders) can make sense only as a *sanitary cordon*. Importantly, as this can inform us to an extent about the future settlement of the conflict; the absolute imperative of Russian geopolitics on the Black Sea coast is the total and unlimited control of Moscow along its entire length from Ukrainian to Abkhazian territories".

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

In the preface to the update of his seminal book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics" (2013 edition), John Mearsheimer acknowledges that his analysis had to be updated with regard to the so-called "peaceful rise" of the People's Republic of China as a significant challenger to the role and position of United States in the international system. Consequently, he envisaged that the process would produce a highly sensitive, if-not-prone-to-local-conflicts environment (Mearsheimer, 2013, p. 10). Following the logic of power balancing, he claimed that, firstly, China had to build formidable military forces and, secondly, to go on to dominate Asia similarly to how the United States dominated the Western Hemisphere. Correspondingly, China would strive to become a regional hegemon to maximise its survival prospects. This would make China's neighbours feel insecure, and prompt counterbalancing by, as one might surmise, strengthening existing bilateral and multilateral alliances and building new ones (AUKUS being a perfect example). Logically speaking, therefore, should one follow Mearsheimer's argumentation, Russia and India, Japan and Australia, and the Philippines and Indonesia should build a solid coalition to counter the ascent of China. Such developments would be in the interests of the United States, and Washington would naturally play a crucial role in such circumstances. Notably, the rise of China was not likely to be peaceful and could potentially prove to be a challenge for US-dominated international trade as well as peace and security. This

was approximately what the Trump administration had in mind when preparing its national security strategy in 2017. The Strategy mentions Russia 25 times, frequently in connection with China as major challengers to the US: “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and fair, grow their militaries, and control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence” (National Security of the United States of America, 2017). Yet, after even a short analysis of the document, one identifies the difference between the two in terms of how the US perceives the challenge that each represents. Regarding Russia, Washington concludes that the Kremlin’s main aim is to: “seek to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders”. China seems to be more ambitious in the eyes of the Capitol, as evidenced by such statements as: “Every year, competitors such as China steal US intellectual property valued at hundreds of billions of dollars”, “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favour. China’s infrastructure investments and trade strategies reinforce its geopolitical aspirations. Its efforts to build and militarise outposts in the South China Sea endanger the flow of free trade, threaten other nations’ sovereignty, and undermine regional stability” (National Security of the United States of America, 2017). Given this perception, it is no wonder that under Trump, Washington embarked on a new mission that questioned the processes of globalisation for the first time in many decades. Also under Trump, the USA introduced numerous economic sanctions against China, which sparked a revolution so-named as a “decoupling”. Johnson and Gramer, writing for *foreignpolicy.com* in 2020, questioned this policy: “The threat of a great decoupling is a potentially historical break, an interruption perhaps only comparable to the sudden sundering of the first massive wave of globalisation in 1914, when deeply intertwined economies such as Great Britain and Germany, and, later, the United States, threw themselves into a barrage of self-destruction and economic nationalism that didn’t stop for 30 years. This time, though, decoupling is driven not by war but peacetime populist urges, exacerbated by a global coronavirus pandemic that has shaken decades of faith in the wisdom of international supply chains and the virtues of a global economy” (Johnson, Gramer, 2020).

With the comfort and benefit of hindsight, we should conclude that, perhaps luckily for the Far East and international political economy, Mearsheimer was wrong, at least for the time being. Firstly, no military conflicts exist in the Far East or the Pacific. The most potentially dangerous

issue remains in the form of one of the cross-strait relations, i.e., the PRC vs Taipei. Whether Xi Jinping will risk another diplomatic backlash by an open invasion remains to be seen. The jury is out, and one might claim that with the world being focused on the war in Ukraine, China could get away with an invasion of Taiwan. Then, on the other hand, perhaps there is no need for the People's Republic to unite all territories of China in the imminent future by force.

At the same time, as it appears at least at mid-2023, and contrary to Mearsheimer's predictions, Russia and China seem to be getting closer regarding geopolitics and geoeconomics. On February 4th, Russian President Vladimir Putin met face-to-face with the Chinese President. The leaders convened in Beijing at the start of the Winter Olympics and issued a lengthy statement detailing the two nations' shared positions on a range of global issues (kremlin.ru, 2022). The meeting happened shortly before the Russian invasion, and one could surmise that it was supposed to soften the possible adverse reaction from Beijing to the already prepared military operation by the Kremlin since Putin told Xi that Russia had drawn up a new deal to supply China with an additional 10 billion cubic metres of natural gas. Consequently, China abstained from a U.N. Security Council vote condemning the Russian invasion (Gerson, 2022). Indeed, one cannot but notice that most of the energy transferred to the West before the war in Ukraine has been redirected to the East, mainly China (Soldatkin, Aizhu, 2022). At the same time, Russia has also shifted its imports of high-tech. Instead of the US or Germany/France, it now has developed cooperation with China (Taplin, 2023).

Andrew Krepinevich's Protracted Great-Power War

Andrew Krepinevich's "Protracted Great-Power War – A Preliminary Assessment Work" published by the Centre for a New American Security, informs us about America's posture. Accordingly, "Now, however, with the rise of revisionist China and Russia, the United States is confronted with a strategic choice; conducting contingency planning for a protracted great-power conflict and how to wage it successfully (or, better still, prevent it from occurring), or ignoring the possibility and hoping for the best" (Krepinevich, 2020).

Among many valuable lessons that history can offer, one should remember that no country can wage a systemic war on its own on two fronts and hope to be successful. Suppose both China and Russia were seen as strategic challengers to America's position in the international system. In such case, it follows logically that the US would need to make

one of them at least neutral (i.e., appease them) when in conflict with the other. Given China's technological, economic, military, and population challenges, the most optimal choice would be to make Russia indifferent to American interference in Central Asia or the Middle East *vis-à-vis* China. The price for such indifference also seems logical, that price being the dominance of the Russo-German tandem in Central and Eastern Europe and German dominance in the EU. This would explain at least some developments in Europe regarding energy security, particularly President Biden's administration's position on Nord Stream 2 and the not-overly-enthusiastic help extended to Ukraine from Germany. However, recent developments seem to contrast such logical argumentation. President Biden's administration, as well as the leadership of the US Armed Forces, seem to be committed to continuing the country's financial, technical, and logistical support to Ukrainian President Zelensky's government for "as long as it takes" (the term frequently used in official speeches by Secretary of State Antony Blinken). According to the US Department of Defence information (as at 21st February 2023), the US has provided security assistance to Ukraine in the form of 160 Howitzers, 31 Abrams tanks, 111 million rounds of small arms ammunition and four satellite communication antennas, among others. On top of that, Washington has committed more than 30.4 billion US dollars to the cause (and that is only since the beginning of the Biden Administration) (US Department of Defence, 2023). The US is the leader of a coalition of many nations (54 to be exact) in efforts to counter the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This situation puts Washington in a predicament as, at least in the media sphere, experts and former policymakers such as the former CIA Director and US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta do not shy away from identifying the existing state of affairs as a "proxy war" between the United States and the Russian Federation (Macmillan, 2022).¹

But is Uncle Sam still in a position to effectively challenge either Russia or China on their own? In 2001, the French historian, sociologist, and political scientist Emmanuel Todd claimed that as of the beginning of the 21st century, the United States was no longer a solution to global problems; instead, it had become one of the problems (Todd, 2003). The US had guaranteed political and economic freedoms for half a century. In contrast, today, the Americans seem to be more and more agents of international disorder, causing uncertainty and conflicts wherever they can. They demand the international community support their foreign

¹ Importantly, the Kremlin has been playing the proxy war card for some time in building its narrative regarding the ongoing "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine.

policy goals and join in their actions regardless of cost and benefit analyses. Given the geopolitical changes after 1989, the US took its position in the international system for granted and decided to extend its interests across the globe. Surprisingly, perhaps for Washington, even traditional US allies started to demand more independence (see the case of Germany and its role in southern Europe, or Macron's idea of "strategic autonomy").² According to Todd, given the actual balance of power globally, the US would have to fulfil two conditions to maintain its hegemonic position. Firstly, it would have to continue controlling its protectorates in Europe and Japan. Secondly, it would have to finally eliminate Russia from the elite group of so-called "big powers", which would mean the disintegration of the post-Soviet sphere and the elimination of the nuclear balance of terror. None of these conditions have thus far been satisfied. Not being able to challenge Europe or Japan economically, the US has also been unable to challenge the Russian nuclear position. Consequently, it switched to attacking medium powers such as Iran or Iraq economically, politically, and militarily engaging in "theatrical militarism" (Todd, 2003). In contrast to the aforementioned French historian, American political scientist Joseph Nye Jr claims that "the United States will remain the world's leading military power in the decades to come, and military force will remain an important component of power in global politics" (Nye, 2019, p. 70). He goes on to question whether the rise of China is going to spell the end of the American era, "but, contrary to current conventional wisdom, China is not about to replace the United States as the world's largest economy. Measured in *purchasing power parity* (PPP), the Chinese economy became larger than the US economy in 2014, but PPP is an economist's measure for comparing welfare estimates, not calculating relative power. For example, oil and jet engines are imported at current exchange rates, and, by that measure, China has a 12 trillion US-dollar economy compared to a 20-trillion-dollar US economy (...) Power – the ability to affect others to get what you want – has three aspects: coercion, payment, and attraction. Economic might is just part of the geopolitical equation, and even in economic power, while China may surpass America in total size, it will still lag behind in per capita income (a measure of the sophistication of an economy)" (Ney, 2019, p. 70). And yet, as of 2023, the economic components of America's power seem to be very quickly

² "Emmanuel Macron's comments about Taiwan and his call for European *strategic autonomy* sparked controversy as he advocated for the EU not to become followers of the US and China". This parallels with President de Gaulle's earlier calls for European strategic independence from American influence over European security (Lory, 2023).

eroding. After the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis and the consequent COVID-19 induced economic crisis, there would be several woes on the horizon; indeed, inflation has been rampant (that is one of the effects of federal stimulus after COVID-19), which makes the Federal Reserve continue to increase interest rates, thereby making loans more and more expensive (Goldman, 2022). The stock market has been in the so-called “sell-everything” mode, which means investors are losing a lot of money, so their trust in the economy is decreasing. Thirdly, this time around, investors are not switching to bonds, which seems to confirm the previous point. Fourthly and finally, according to Mr Goldman, “none of this is happening in a vacuum. Russia continues its deadly invasion of Ukraine, which has choked off supply chains and sent energy prices through the roof”. China, on the other hand, remains in semi-locked mode when it comes to some of its biggest cities due to post COVID-19 vulnerability. On top of that, a labour shortage has sent salaries surging and hindered the normal flow of goods worldwide (Goldman, 2022). Worse still, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis of the US Department of Commerce, some of the key performance indicators regarding international trade are primarily negative (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2023). As at July 2022, experts debated whether or not the country was technically in recession, whereas at the time of this writing (mid-2023), the actual national debt has surpassed 31.46 trillion US dollars (FiscalData.Treasury.gov, 2023), with states such as California officially defaulting on its debts towards the Federal Government (Gillmore, 2023). Finally, one cannot but notice the latest initiatives by BRICS nations to drop using the US dollar as a means of international payments (Aizhu, 2023). Some economists predict the Ukraine crisis will lead to the end of the dominance of the dollar-euro system, the very backbone of Western military power. With nearly 4 billion people, Asia will develop a parallel financial system and lessen its dependence on the West (Krikke, 2022).

One could also argue that the fact that the war in Ukraine happened in the first place and is continuing proves that the position of the United States and the *Pax Americana* are being effectively challenged.

The German-French Engine of European Federalisation?

The economic and political decrease of the US and the parallel increase of China, with Russia holding its position or even reclaiming its influence *vis-à-vis* NATO countries, offers significant challenges to European powers but also offers some ground-breaking opportunities. In terms of challenges,

especially economically, Germany and France, as mentioned before, find themselves in a predicament. Their idea (albeit more Germany's idea), was to continue in the role of being an economic powerhouse, based chiefly on the export of manufactured goods worldwide, thanks to energy security provided by the Russian Federation. The war in Ukraine has changed these dynamics completely due to the pressure from the US to support Ukraine and economic sanctions against the Russian Federation. Similarly, France, is not very happy with the economic sanctions against Russia and has continually tried to play down the possibility of an all-out EU vs Russia conflict. Should one listen to the speeches of Macron and Scholz, one cannot but hypothesise that Paris and Berlin would be happy with the end of the war as soon as possible at any cost (a cost to be borne by Ukraine, by the way), just to be able to go back to business as usual. Apparently, in an attempt to escape forward, both European powers are proposing further steps to generate even more federal dynamics. To be more exact, they suggest that as far as Foreign and Security Policy is concerned, the still-observed voting pattern based on unanimity, one of the last strongholds of sovereignty, should be abolished, and that decisions should follow qualified-majority voting. Notably, such arguments are made, and invoke potential gains for the EU as a geopolitical actor. In other words, countries such as Poland and Hungary would no longer be able to block Paris and Berlin from imposing their interests on the rest of the EU by presenting them as European. According to this vision, Hungary would no longer be able to "sympathise" with Russia, and Poland would no longer be the so-called "Trojan Horse" of the US interests in Europe in those states' game with Russia. And so, the war in Ukraine presents a perfect circumstance to call for a European federation. Germany has recently publicised such a vision. On 24th August 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz presented a speech at Charles University in Prague regarding his vision of the future of the EU at the beginning of the 3rd decade of the 21st century against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Experts, policymakers, and media pundits widely commented on the speech. It started with an assertion that Russia is the biggest threat to the security of Europe. That fact produces two breakthrough consequences. Firstly, Berlin has to pivot from Russia to its European Partners both economically and politically. Secondly, the European Confederation of equal states should morph into a European Federation (The Federal Government, 2022). Scholz's vision includes four of his major "thoughts", the first of which was that given the further enlargement of the European Union of up to 36 states, a transition should be made to majority voting in common foreign or tax policy. Secondly, regarding European sovereignty,

Scholz stated, “we grow more autonomous in all fields; that we assume greater responsibility for our own security; that we work more closely together and stand yet more united in defence of our values and interests around the world”. In practical terms, Scholz singles out the need for one command and control structure of European defence efforts (a European army equipped chiefly by French and German companies?). Thirdly, he believed that the EU should take more responsibility (at the expense of national governments) regarding migration and fiscal policy against the backdrop of the economic crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. This, in practical terms, means, according to Scholz, one set of European debt rules to attain a higher level of economic integration. Finally, some disciplining was put forth. “We, therefore, cannot stand by when the principles of the rule of law is violated, and democratic oversight is dismantled. Just to make this absolutely clear, there must be no tolerance in Europe for racism and antisemitism. That’s why we are supporting the Commission in its work for the rule of law. The European Parliament is also following the subject with close attention. For that I am very grateful (...). We should not shy away from using all the means at our disposal to correct failings. (...) It also seems sensible to consistently tie payments to the maintenance of the rule of law standards – as we have done with the 2021–2027 Financial Framework and the Recovery Fund in the COVID crisis.”

Conclusions

The war in Ukraine is arguably proof of the region’s role in the security and stability of Europe and its economy. Food supplies, myriad crop harvests, energy, but mainly gas, are cases in point. On top of that, the region has a lot of raw materials. Ukraine has large deposits of 21 of 30 such materials critical to Europe’s green transformation (Ukrinform, 2023). In July 2021, before the war in Ukraine had even begun, the EU and Ukraine signed a strategic partnership on raw materials, no less. The partnership includes three areas from the approximation of policy and regulatory mining frameworks, through a partnership that will engage the European Raw Materials Alliance and the European Battery Alliance to closer collaboration in research and innovation along both raw materials and battery value chains using Horizon Europe (European Commission, Press Release, 2021). As for security, in a traditional sense, the US is involved with Ukraine regarding nuclear weapons. In a letter dated 17th March 2023, the director of the Energy Department’s Office of Nonproliferation Policy, Andrea Ferkile, tells Rosatom’s director general

that the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in Enerhodar “contains US-origin nuclear technical data that is export-controlled by the United States Government” (Bertrand, Lister, 2023; www.state.gov, 2022). Worse still, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Victoria J. Nuland, admitted in her testimony on Ukraine in the US Congress that, indeed, “Ukraine has biological research facilities, which we are now quite concerned Russian troops, Russian Forces, may be seeking to gain control of, so we are working with the Ukrainians on how they can prevent any of those research materials from falling into the hands of Russian forces should they approach” (C-Span, 2022).

As Scott and Alcenat claim, the analysis of the competitive policies of each great power confirms the Heartland concept’s importance. They project the utility of Mackinder’s analysis to Central Asia, asserting that “it is valid in today’s foreign policy and policy analyses. Each power strives for control of or access to the region’s resources. For China, the primary goal is to maintain regional stability as a means for border security and assurance of stable economic relations. For the European Union, the main goal is to gain economic access while simultaneously promoting the democratisation of those countries that are politically unstable” (Scott, Alcenat, 2008).³

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³ Senior Colonel Zhou Bo (retired) – a senior fellow of the Centre for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University and a China Forum expert, and former Director of the Centre for Security Cooperation of the Office for International Military Cooperation of the Ministry of National Defence of China offered a similar evaluation; “the competition between the two giants (the USA and China) will not occur in the Global South, where the US has already lost out to China. At the same time, in the Indo-Pacific, few nations want to take sides. Instead, it will be in Europe, where the US has most of its allies, and China is the largest trading partner” (Bo, 2023).

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