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Cover Page Image: *Official White House Photo by Andrea Hanks; President Donald J. Trump and President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation hold a joint press conference, July 2018*

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European Security in the age of Trump and Putin

Ariel Français

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EUROPEAN SECURITY IN THE AGE OF TRUMP AND PUTIN

More than ever, European security has become, or rather has become again, an absolute requirement for the future of the peoples of Europe, including the Russian and Ukrainian peoples. I have written on this subject before, insisting on a new architecture of security in Europe, but recent developments under the leadership of Presidents Trump and Putin call for, if not a new examination, at least a deepening of the subject.

To understand the issues of the day, we must look at the underlying currents of history and not at the incessant blurring of information that only aggravates the intelligence of the latter. Beyond the thunderous declarations and muddled interpretations of current events, I invite those who are open-minded and impartial to delve deeper into the causes of the conflict that is afflicting Europe at the moment and to seek the foundations of a just and lasting peace.

Ukraine, the abscess of a growing confrontation

Let us first look at the Russian point of view, which has been so decried by the Western press. The war in Ukraine is first and foremost a response for what Russia considers as existential in the face of NATO's continued expansion on its borders (with Ukraine, as a major challenge, and Georgia, potentially, in the former Soviet and previously Russian space). I analysed it at length in my previous paper entitled "For a new architecture of security in Europe" [1] without it being necessary to return to it. The so-called "denazification" of Ukraine remains a smokescreen with no real substance intended to justify the special military operation against its neighbour. The operation, in essence, was supposed to consist of a halt to the perceived expansion of the West in the former Russian-Soviet backyard, both militarily and politically, even if it meant trampling on the United Nations Charter and international law. After all, seen from Moscow, the United States had not hesitated to invade Iraq some twenty years earlier! Moreover, the creeping westernization of most of Ukraine in terms of customs and ideas, on the one hand, and the autonomist aspirations of part of the Russian-speaking populations of the Donbass, on the other hand, justified from Moscow's point of view the Russian intervention in the Ukrainian space.

For Ukraine, on the other hand, the Russian invasion was experienced as a double aggression: aggression against the desire of the vast majority of its population to get closer to the Western world (and to integrate the European Union for this purpose) and aggression against its desire to defend a territory resulting from the partition of the former USSR and universally recognized as such by the international community (even if it meant ignoring the

autonomist aspirations of part of its population Russian-speaking). To do this, Ukraine's leaders who supported a rapprochement with the Western world asked to join the European Union while requesting the country's integration into NATO's military system. In practice, however, faced with the reluctance of the West to formally welcome Ukraine into NATO, they have not hesitated to move closer to this organisation under the guise of informal military cooperation, perceived by the Russian leadership as a shift to the other camp. Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression has proven to be exceptional, helped it is true by the so-called "Western" countries which have so far mobilized 267 billion euros for military, financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine (including 135 billion for the European Union and its Member States and 114 billion for the United States) nor spared sanctions of all kinds, in ascending order, against Russia (economic, trade, financial and technological sanctions in particular). Three years after the beginning of this war in the heart of Europe, no decisive offensive has been able to prevail on either side, at the disastrous cost of one and a half million dead and wounded on the battlefields according to the most recent estimates.

For the so-called "Western" countries - the United States on the one hand and the countries of Western Europe on the other - the Russian aggression has been denounced as a serious attack on the world order and a serious violation of international law, but not without ulterior motives on both sides. Condemnations of the Russian invasion rained down from all sides of the world while offering budding geopoliticians the opportunity to strut their stuff on television to demonize Russia. But beyond the television studios, the initiatives of the various parties, as well as their reluctance, hide ambitions and fears that go much further than the war in Ukraine.

For the United States under Biden, as for the United States under Trump, Ukraine was and remains only a pawn on the politico-military chessboard of the world order. The "pivot" of the United States to the Pacific and Asia, begun under Obama, continued under Biden and now consolidated by Trump (under the discreet leadership of the major American foundations and pressure groups that seek confrontation with China in the ignorance of the vast majority of the American people) is now at the heart of the United States' diplomatic-military strategy. Under Biden - this is my interpretation - it was a question of bringing Russia to its knees in Ukraine in order to be able to redeploy the military apparatus and the military-industrial complex of the United States towards Asia (and with a bonus, however discreet: that of involving NATO and the so-called "Western" country in a possible future confrontation with China).

Trump's goals have not fundamentally changed, despite the president's denials, as the *Heritage Foundation*'s *Project 2025* makes clear, project which orchestrates the political repression of the federal administration at home while strengthening its security and military components in support of the U.S. diplomatic-military redeployment to Asia. It is no longer a question of Trump's United States bleeding Russia in Ukraine, but rather of neutralizing and coaxing it by offering it - with the help of pressure on Ukraine and negotiations - a de facto

victory on the battlefield and prospects of cooperation with the United States that would distance it from the temptation to ally itself further with China. Nothing definitive, however, so far, because the negotiations are bogged down. Trump's charm offensive against Putin is therefore likely to fizzle out, without leading to real progress in terms of peace.

Western Europe confronted with an existential threat

For Western European countries, the war in Ukraine has been seen as a new challenge for European integration and as a cold shower for the continent's security. Like all the crises that European integration has faced in the past, the war in Ukraine has proved to be a new challenge: the need to define a common position in the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine (a candidate country for entry into the European Union), the need to take retaliatory measures against Russia (sanctions and military aid) and the imperative to start a defence system against Russia (the common defence policy). While the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been unanimously condemned in Europe, some states - such as Hungary in particular - have expressed reservations and reluctance about the sanctions imposed on Russia. The latter have also proved ambivalent, penalising the European economy (loss of access to Russian gas, in particular, abundant and cheap) and boosting Russia's growth (thanks to the development of the war economy and import substitution). But it is above all in the area of security and defence that the most pressing imperatives have become. The advent in the United States of a populist regime with authoritarian, even fascistic overtones, hostile to European integration, determined to put the interests of American power first and ready to make a pact with the devil at the cost of the deliberate destruction of the multilateral order, has radically upset the parameters of the continent's security. The security of the European continent no longer depends solely on the Russian unknown, but also, just as much, on the American unknown.

On the Russian side, the grievances against Western Europe and the United States - through NATO - are well known. Russia wants to halt NATO's continued expansion on its borders while militarily neutralizing Ukraine (a neutralization that further targets any process that would challenge the internal socio-political order of Russia and its related countries, such as Belarus and Georgia, in various forms). Territorial gains are not, in my opinion, key factors but parameters of negotiation. Also, the qualification of Russia as a "neo-imperialist" power, tempted by territorial conquests, is, from my point of view, pure political speculation and pure war propaganda. On the other hand, no one knows where the socio-cultural borders of Russia and the countries linked to it begin and end in the mind of its president - Vladimir Putin. Nor even where the Russian zone of influence inherited from the former empire of the tsars (which historically extended to Poland, the Baltic States, Finland, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova) ends in Putin's mind. And this is where the problem lies for the security of Western Europe.

On the US side, the situation is not much better. The new US administration under the leadership of President Trump, who is back in power, wants to get rid of the Ukrainian issue

and temporize with Russia in order to be able to redeploy the American military to the Asian theater and to ensure Russia's relative neutrality in the event of a major confrontation with China. It also wants to get rid of NATO's military burden by obliging its European allies to finance it (while retaining the organization's politico-military control and the ability to resort to the nuclear threat or conventional support, while requiring its allies to buy American equipment). In doing so, it is grossly interfering in the political life of European states by supporting far-right movements and encouraging a populist discourse that is an attack on freedoms. Add to this Trump's violent, vindictive and unpredictable behavior, who demands concessions after concessions, both in terms of trade and military spending, castigates Europe's values through his collaborators, threatens to deprive Europeans of the nuclear umbrella and military support of the United States, and many other threats, it must be recognized that Europe, starting with the European Union, can only rely on itself.

As a result of the above, Western Europe is now facing an "existential threat", in the words of the French President (Emmanuel Macron, March 2025), who has long advocated for Europe's strategic autonomy. The German and Polish leaders – Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Prime Minister Donald Tusk – have also stepped up to the plate to significantly strengthen the military and armaments of their respective countries. The Baltic and Nordic countries are methodically preparing to deal with possible Russian aggression. The European Union has launched an € 800 billion plan for the rearmament of Europe on the initiative of the President of its Commission - Ursula von der Leyen. Even the United Kingdom, which had let go of Europe after Brexit, recently changed its mind under the impetus of its Prime Minister - Keir Starmer - to move closer to the continent, considering together with France the presence of ground troops to secure Ukraine. As for France, it now considers that it can call upon its nuclear deterrence to protect Europe, a deterrence which, coupled with that of the United Kingdom, would significantly strengthen Europe's deterrence capacity in the face of hypothetical Russian aggression. There is no doubt that decisive steps have been taken towards the establishment of a common defence policy, even if procrastination and reluctance accompany the process of European integration, as always.

The conditions for a return to peace

At this stage, the question arises as to whether it is conceivable and possible to bring peace to Europe and to build promising cooperation between all the parties present on the European continent, which presupposes in my view three conditions:

1. That a viable and lasting peace process can be initiated and concluded between Russia and Ukraine;
2. That Europeans no longer depend on the United States to ensure their own defence; and
3. That cooperation be resumed between Russia and the European Union on a sound and lasting basis.

The first and most urgent condition is fundamental to bringing peace and security to Europe. The longer the conflict continues, the more deaths and injuries accumulate and the more economic and social tensions develop on both sides, the more it will be necessary to reach compromises sooner or later (for Western Europe in the long term, of course, but also and above all for Russia, faced with a serious demographic crisis and human losses that are difficult to sustain in the long term). But for such a peace to come into being and be credible, it must necessarily become the result of frank discussions and the sincere will of both parties to conclude a lasting peace without ulterior motives. However, no viable agreement will be conceivable if the parties stick to their demands and refuse to compromise. Both must accept the idea of compromise, without which no progress would be possible. So what do I think these compromises could be?

For Russia, from my point of view, this would consist of recognising Ukraine's sovereign right to enter the European Union, without restrictions of any kind, including in terms of its defence (access in particular to the mutual defence clause of Article 42, paragraph 7, of the Treaty on European Union). This would also consist of a formal Russian commitment not to intervene in Ukraine in any form whatsoever (military, political or any other). Finally, it would consist of recognising the right of the Donbass populations to decide their own fate sovereignly: belonging to Ukraine for some or joining Russia for others, according to the wishes expressed (in the form of referendums, supervised by the UN with the support of the OSCE, in the four oblasts of the Donbass). In addition, reparations due to Ukraine would be demanded from Russia to rebuild destroyed infrastructure and compensate war victims (guaranteed by the seizure of Russian assets frozen following the invasion of Ukraine).

As far as Ukraine is concerned, the compromises would first consist of a definitive renunciation of the country to enter NATO (committing to a status of neutrality, like Austria for example, without prejudice to the common defence clause of the Treaty of the European Union). They would also consist of the recognition of a definitive annexation of Crimea to Russia (non-negotiable in all probability, for Russia). The same would probably be true for the recognition of the two Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, which are attached to Russia (subject to a ratification referendum by the populations concerned in the two autonomous republics). Finally, they could consist - more for the gallery than in substance - of a commitment for Ukraine to ban any far-right organisation in the future (a commitment of a constitutional nature, as in the case of Germany).

The parameters for a collective security

More broadly, the questions that are being raised today at the level of Western Europe are those of its security, on the one hand, and its independence, on the other. The security of Western Europe has become a critical issue at a time when the United States is disengaging from the continent without renouncing its vassalization. As for the independence of Europe,

it will remain a pious wish as long as the Europeans have not given themselves the means to do so, not only in terms of their diplomacy but also in terms of their own defence.

Until very recently (with the exception of France under De Gaulle) the countries of Western Europe relied almost entirely on the United States for their defence against the East (USSR until 1990, then Russia again since 2022). The cement of this alliance was based on the North Atlantic Treaty (collective defence clause of Article 5 of the treaty) and on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to which it gave birth. Over the years, NATO had become the backbone of Europe's defence system, although it had been diverted from its purpose at the end of the Cold War (in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan). Strictly speaking, NATO should have disappeared with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (1991), but it persevered in its being, only to be reborn from its "brain death" (Macron, November 2019) during the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In practice, and until Trump's return to power last January, the defense of Western Europe was fundamentally based on NATO and the American "nuclear umbrella." This was part of the German creed, in particular, and more generally the creed of the Baltic countries and many countries formerly known as Eastern countries (Poland in particular), particularly burned by their past relations with Russia.

If Donald Trump's return to power has created a wind of panic in Europe over the last four months, European countries should have become aware of the new dangers long before the collapse of the American commitment to the continent (the United States' pivot to Asia, the quarrel over NATO funding, etc.). The awakening has been brutal for countries accustomed to relying on the United States for their defense according to the declarations made by President Trump: doubts put forward - accompanied by threats - about the deterrence and military commitment of the United States in Europe, demand communicated to European countries to devote 5% of their GDP to defense spending, blackmail and threats about the nature and extent of American involvement in Ukraine, diplomatic rapprochement with Russia and intentions to settle the war in Ukraine on the backs of Ukrainians and Europeans, and other daily surprises according to presidential tweets and official communiqués.

The trade war declared on the whole world, the new president's claims on Canada, Greenland or Panama, the sermons addressed to Europe, the intimidation of China, the attacks and threats against multilateralism in a world plagued by climate change, conflicts of all kinds and humanitarian crises ravaging the South complete a most worrying panorama. If we add to this the cynicism and brutality associated with the behavior of the new American power, it is clear that there is danger in the house. All in all, the damage done to the world over the next four years is likely to be so great that it will be impossible to return to the *status quo ex ante* (even assuming that Trumpism disappears after 2028, for the greater good of the American nation). Europe's independence and strategic autonomy are therefore imposed on everyone now, even for the most cautious, as illustrated by the rearmament of Western Europe and the measures taken in support of a common European defence in recent months.

To go further, however, in the direction of collective security and a return to peace, it would be necessary to put forward at the same time the agenda of a new security architecture for Europe, as outlined in my previous paper [2]. This is the third condition set out above, which presupposes the resumption of a frank and sincere dialogue with Russia and, beyond that, the development of real cooperation without ulterior motives with the Euro-Asian entity that it legitimately aims to lead. This will be all the more necessary for Russia as the determination of Europeans to face the threats it poses to them is unlikely to weaken in the future and the human and economic consequences of the war in Ukraine will continue to worsen (with their attendant possible repercussions on the internal order). For this, too, two other conditions are also necessary: a resumption of dialogue between the countries of Western Europe and Russia, on the one hand, and a resumption of cooperation sketched out in the past, undermined by the war, on the other.

President Trump's claims to solve the conflict in Ukraine alone with a magic wand, and moreover on the backs of the Europeans, cannot go unanswered. On the one hand, because Europe is a stakeholder in the conflict through the aid it provides to Ukraine and the sanctions taken against Russia (which significantly exceed the American commitment), but also and above all because it is a question of the very future of the security of the European continent. In other words, the issue of Ukraine and the conflict it has engendered is primarily about Western Europe and its future security. For this very reason, it is imperative that European capitals renew dialogue with Moscow and that European leaders agree on a common position in the face of Putin, even if the latter persists in turning a deaf ear to their calls. Sooner or later Russia will have to face the fact that the commitments made by the European countries and by the European Union in particular are irrevocable since it is a question of their own security. Sooner or later, Russia will have to realise that nothing will be settled without the help of Western Europe, thus opening the door to dialogue and negotiations on the future of the continent.

But beyond dialogue and a return to less bellicose relations, it will be imperative to build a sustainable architecture of European security on the basis of mutual respect for the choices made by the two entities involved: Western Europe on the one hand - with the European Union joined if possible by the United Kingdom - and Russia on the other - with its procession of close or allied countries beyond the Urals. This presupposes mutual respect for the respective socio-political and socio-economic systems, pending their distant but desirable convergence. This therefore requires a reciprocal non-interference of each "side" in the internal affairs of the other, which has not been the case in the last twenty to thirty years. It will then hopefully be possible to build, or rather to rebuild, a security architecture in Europe, on the basis of the principles already set out in the Helsinki Accords at the end of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (1973-1975), a process wrongly buried in recent decades but whose principles remain more necessary than ever.

After all, President Putin declared in May 2004 that: *"There will be no peaceful, democratic and prosperous Europe if there are not relations of trust between these two major components, the European Union which is enlarging and Russia with its CIS, relations of trust, relations of co-development in the medium and long term. This is obviously a necessity. We are not going to fall back into what we have known, that is to say the division of our continent and the Cold War." (Vladimir Putin, 6th Russia-EU summit).* Let us hope that these wise words have not entirely disappeared from his memory, or that they will later be taken up by his successors, for it would be lamentable if Europe remained divided and bruised by war as it has recently become.

The resumption of dialogue and the return to cooperation between these two parts of the continent are essential imperatives if the whole of Europe is not to be set ablaze again by a disastrous conflict and to be able to turn deliberately and generously towards the rest of the world. Towards the South, in particular, which is in serious need of it to face climate change, misery and local conflicts and the despair of populations abandoned to their fate in a world that suffers from deadly imbalances that could lead to its demise.

References

[1] and [2] https://arielfrancais.wordpress.com/2023/04/20/pour-une-nouvelle-architecture-de-la-securite-en-europe/

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