

The Top Five U.S. Priorities for European Policy After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

It is essential that the U.S. and Europe work together to defeat Russian aggression in Ukraine and bolster the NATO Alliance to deter future Russian aggression.

While European nations failed to deter Russian aggression, and turned a blind eye to Chinese exploitation, securing peace is still a job too big for Europe alone.

The U.S. must pursue a positive agenda of trade, energy security, and regional cooperation in Europe to protect and strengthen the West's security and prosperity.

The year 2022 is the most important year in transatlantic relations since the end of the Cold War three decades ago. Russia's unprovoked second invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, brings new urgency to the need for cooperation between the United States and its European allies. The U.S. can only meet the demands of this new era of great-power conflict, in which Russia and China both pose grave and wide-ranging challenges, if the U.S. builds on the strength of the transatlantic alliance, which remains central to its security. Russia's attack and continuing onslaught against civilians demonstrates that Europe has profoundly underestimated the dangers for which the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was founded—and exists—to deter.

The top five priorities on which the U.S. should focus its efforts are: (1) deterring Russian aggression

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against NATO members, (2) reducing malign Chinese influence in Europe, (3) enhancing European energy security, (4) negotiating and ratifying an ambitious free trade area with Britain, and (5) ensuring that the U.S. and its European allies do not squander the progress and potential of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI).

1. Deterring Russian Aggression Against NATO Members

Russia's unprovoked second invasion of Ukraine—after the 2014 invasion and Russia's occupation of Crimea—should put to rest any questions about the utility of NATO and about which threat should be the focus of NATO's upcoming strategic concept.

The U.S. must lead NATO to a wholesale refocus on its *raison d'être* of collective defense. While NATO faces challenges emanating from an unstable Mediterranean basin, and terrorism originating from the Middle East, the fact remains that Russia continues to be the only existential threat to member states. NATO must send a strong signal that it is strengthening deterrence measures explicitly in response to the increased threat from Russia.¹

Since Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, the U.S. and its allies have signaled a willingness to overlook, excuse, or compartmentalize Russian aggression, failing to take the steps necessary to deter Vladimir Putin from pursuing his goals by force. While the West took some important steps after Russia's initial invasion and occupation of Ukraine in 2014, these were ultimately inadequate for deterring Putin's attempts to gain control of the entire nation.

The U.S. and its allies must not repeat the mistakes of the past and must showcase a steely resolve to deter potential Russian aggression against a NATO member in the future as well as continue to support Ukraine's fight for freedom and sovereignty, while punishing Russia for its barbaric war. Examples of such actions include maximizing economic sanctions against Russia, helping Europe to obtain energy from non-Russian sources, providing Ukraine with the weapons and intelligence needed to defend itself, and maintaining a robust permanent U.S. presence in Europe.

The U.S. should seek to play a leadership role in NATO, which will continue to remain the cornerstone of transatlantic security. The U.S. must lead the Alliance toward a wholesale recommitment to collective defense, which entails members living up to their defense-spending commitments. At the NATO summit in March, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated: "We face a new reality for our security. So, we must reset our deterrence

and defense for the longer-term.”² At the summit, NATO announced the deployment of four new NATO battlegroups to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, to join those already deployed to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.³ While these are positive decisions, the Alliance must move from mere “tripwire” force deployments to large permanently deployed capabilities in Eastern European member states to adequately deter Putin from future action against a NATO member. These deterrence measures must be carried out with the recognition that, from a long-term perspective, China is the largest peer challenger from whom the U.S. must expect hostile action. The U.S. must not make any improvements to its force posture that would be to the detriment of the nation’s ability to counter China. These measures must also recognize that failure to deter Russian attacks will only embolden China. While Ukraine is not a NATO member, the U.S. and other democracies must support Ukraine without committing combat forces in resisting the Russian invasion, both by arming Ukraine and by taking wider national and international measures to isolate, sanction, and apply pressure on Russia.

2. Reducing Malign Chinese Influence in Europe

Russia’s and China’s goals in Europe are identical. They both want a weakened and divided Europe that they can exploit. They both want to eclipse the U.S. partnership with Europe so that the free world is divided and more vulnerable.

On December 30, 2020, the European Commission and China reached a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), which commission president and former German defense minister Ursula von der Leyen described as an “important landmark in our relationship with China and for our values-based trade agenda.”⁴ But on May 20, 2021, the European parliament voted to freeze ratification of the CAI due to Chinese miscalculations in issuing tit-for-tat sanctions on EU politicians and entities (in response to EU sanctions against Chinese officials responsible for abuses of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang).

The EU Commission’s negotiation of the CAI was troubling because it highlighted the EU’s desire—in particular, Germany’s desire—to prioritize trade over security and human rights in the cases of Iran and Russia. The EU regularly proclaims its desire to conduct a values-based foreign and trade policy, but in practice, the U.S. has been far more willing than the EU to sacrifice its trade and financial interests for the sake of broader security and values considerations.

It is essential that the U.S. and Europe work together to address the challenge of China. The U.S. must seek common ground on China with Brussels and Europe by consistently calling out Chinese human rights abuses and the wider geopolitical support it gives to autocratic regimes—pointedly Russia, whose barbarism in Ukraine Beijing has supported and enabled. At the same time, the U.S. should work with European nations to bolster their woefully inadequate investment-screening mechanisms and to continue to secure vital telecommunications networks.⁵

3. Enhancing European Energy Security

One of the most threatening aspects of Russia's hostility to its neighbors is its manipulation of energy markets. It is a shocking statement of Europe's—once again, Germany's, in particular—weakness and folly that it took the second Russian invasion of Ukraine to convince Germany to freeze the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to Russia.

Russia's war against Ukraine has shocked Europe into re-evaluating long-decided policies, including the phasing out of nuclear power, the curtailed use of important European fossil fuels, and, most critically, Europe's reliance on Russian energy. Russia's actions have underscored the foolishness of Europe's long-term subjugation of its energy security interests in favor of aggressive and unrealistic climate targets and other political calculations.

The U.S. must help European nations to more fully integrate into the U.S. market for liquefied natural gas (LNG). U.S. exports of LNG to Europe have increased rapidly since the start of the Russian war on Ukraine.⁶ The U.S. must expand its domestic production of LNG and its capacity to export it, just as Europe must expand its ability to import LNG, as rapidly as possible.

4. Negotiating and Ratifying an Ambitious Free Trade Area with Britain

On December 31, 2020, the United Kingdom completed its exit from the European Union. Shortly before, it concluded a trade deal with the EU. With its full exit from the EU, the trade deals that Britain has signed with national or territorial governments around the world came into effect. The U.K. has also formally applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Heritage Foundation experts were the first to call for the U.S. and the U.K. to negotiate a free trade area (FTA). In 2018, Heritage experts, working in

collaboration with trade experts on both sides of the Atlantic, participated in drafting an ideal U.S.–U.K. FTA.⁷ A free trade deal would benefit both nations, promote the development of a wider and renewed U.S. free trade agenda, and set a valuable example of liberalization for the world.

Brexit is now a reality. The U.S. can either ignore this reality or build on it. The U.S. should take advantage of Britain’s demonstrated commitment to free trade by rapidly concluding the negotiations for a U.S.–U.K. FTA. The recently announced U.S.–U.K. dialogues on the future of Atlantic trade are a welcome first step but are no replacement for the ambitious trade agenda that both nations need and deserve.⁸

5. Continuing to Rely on the Three Seas Initiative as a Cornerstone of Engagement

Launched in 2016, the 3SI aims to improve trade, infrastructure, energy, and political cooperation among the 12 nations bordering the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea. A strong, prosperous, and secure Eastern Europe is in the interest of the United States: If appropriately funded and given adequate political support, the 3SI can bolster the security of Eastern Europe.

The 3SI allows the U.S. to strengthen transatlantic business, energy, and geopolitical ties to the region, while counterbalancing Chinese and Russian efforts to make regional inroads. During a virtual speech to the 3SI summit in Bulgaria last July, President Joe Biden declared that the U.S. will be an “unfailing partner” of the 3SI countries.⁹

Those words must be followed with action. The U.S. should keep its pledge to match Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund contributions up to \$1 billion and should encourage every 3SI member to contribute to the fund—including lobbying wealthy non-members, such as Germany and the U.K., to match their contributions to those of the United States. American contributions and political support for 3SI are in the national interest, and the U.S. should sustain them over the long term. The failure of the U.S. to yet live up to its investment pledges undermines an important project with European allies.

The U.S. should also promote the idea of non-EU states joining the 3SI. Currently, the 3SI only includes EU members. This serves as an artificial constraint to regional cooperation, since so many countries, for instance much of the Western Balkans and Ukraine, are not EU members. Expanding the scope of the 3SI will help to steel vulnerable nations against undue influence from nefarious outside forces, while sending an important message to the publics of these nations.

Conclusion

Russia poses the central threat to European security—which NATO must deter. The threat from China is wider and will likely prove more enduring. Dangerously, both the U.S. and Europe are responsible for serious errors of policy that have empowered these autocratic competitors.

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has repeatedly tried to hand the job of securing the peace of Europe to the Europeans. But with Russia forever on Europe's door, that job is too big for Europe alone. While remaining committed to NATO in word, the U.S. has relentlessly downsized its military presence in Europe. This yawning gap between words and deeds has emboldened Russia, with results now obvious in Ukraine.

The European failure has been even more serious. By dallying with the folly of an EU army, refusing to spend enough to fulfill NATO commitments, and failing to recognize that a feckless multilateralism would never deter Russia or China, European nations have virtually invited Russian aggression and Chinese exploitation.

Because of these failures, the challenge facing the West is now very great. The U.S. and its European allies, spurred on by Russia's naked aggression against Ukraine, must act to reverse the errors of past policies as rapidly as possible by building the deterrence and prosperity that will be the foundation of peace in the transatlantic world.

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Endnote

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