

WASHINGTON'S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

AMERICAN GEOPOLITICS AND EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE LIGHT OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

The realities of power that are at the heart of geopolitics have not only played a decisive role in the history of the United States and East-Central Europe; these realities have also bound the transatlantic parties together. However, the latter's relationship to geopolitics is more nuanced. On the one hand, while today's international order was established according to Washington's expectations, American foreign policy thinking has long rejected great power politics.¹ On the other hand, East-Central Europe was constantly the subject of great power politics, as the smaller states of the region were squeezed between the surrounding powers. This is why geopolitics itself has acquired a dubious reputation.² While it is debatable whether geopolitical considerations have ever disappeared from international politics, it is undeniable that the power competition between the United States and its challengers has been spectacularly revived in the 2010s. East-Central Europe is one of the sites of these geopolitical ambitions.

¹ MCCORMICK 2010: 22.

² Geopolitics is derived from the German word *Geopolitik*, which was associated with German (and Nazi) great power ambitions between the two world wars (OWENS 1999: 62). Likewise, the German word *Mitteleuropa* was also taboo (especially in Slavic circles) as one of the first geopolitical concepts targeting East-Central Europe.

East-Central Europe in American geopolitical theory

There has always been a certain distancing from Europe in British and American foreign policy thinking. Yet prominent geopolitical thinkers have paid special attention to Eastern Europe. At the beginning of the 20th century, the British geographer Halford J. Mackinder referred to Eurasia as the *World Island*, emphasising a core territory (*Heartland*) there. By this territory he meant (without really precise impoundment) a space surrounded by the Baltic Sea, the middle and lower Danube, the Black Sea, Asia Minor, the Caucasus and Persia, Tibet and Mongolia. Mackinder reminded that the root cause of the First World War was the competition for the Heartland (specifically the desire to bring the Slavs under Germanic rule and the resistance of the Slavs), which involved three major powers with considerable human resources (Germany, Austria–Hungary and Russia). As early as 1919 he believed that no written treaty (such as the Covenant of the League of Nations) could guarantee that the Heartland would not become the focus of another world war. Thus, Mackinder felt it important to emphasise his famous idea for posterity: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; who rules the World Island commands the world.”³ Accordingly, one of the main goals of British geopolitics is to prevent a hostile power from becoming a hegemon in Eurasia.

The ideas of the British Mackinder were applied from the perspective of the United States by the American Nicholas J. Spykman, who also based his theory on geographical conditions and the relationship between maritime and land powers. One of the features of Mackinder’s Heartland was that it had no exit to the oceans, unlike the inner crescent around it. Spykman retained the idea of the Heartland, but renamed the inner crescent to the more colloquial rimland, and applied the more apt term off-shore to the outer crescent that covers the islands and territories scattered around Eurasia. He also refined the British geographer in his geopolitical conclusions.

³ MACKINDER 1996: 78–80, 106.

According to Spykman, Mackinder's idea that in Eurasia the land and maritime powers were competing for dominance (which meant British–Russian competition) is misleading. Instead of these two powers, the forces that change the power relations in the rimland are the real objects of conflicts (as illustrated by the anti-French and then anti-German British–Russian alliances). Hence Spykman's famous saying: "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world." Thus, instead of the Heartland the rimland has become important: this is where the United States took up arms in two world wars against a drastic shift in the balance of power.⁴

Spykman may have played an important role in geopolitics getting out of the hands of the Nazis and becoming a recognised part of international relations analysis. After all, American foreign policy thinking could become aware of the thesis that the question of the balance of power in Eurasia is an important task for the United States, involving local activity. According to Colin S. Gray, Spykman, alongside George F. Kennan, could also be considered the father of the strategy to contain the Soviets, as the creation of NATO ensuring a U.S. presence in Europe was "a characteristically Spykmanesque development".⁵ Ironically, it was the bipolar order that removed our region from the U.S. geopolitical calculus. In 1963, American geographer Saul Bernard Cohen noted that after having Europe divided into western and eastern parts, "Central Europe is no more. It is a mere geographical expression that lacks geopolitical substance".⁶ After the Cold War, the idea of rethinking the geopolitical map of Eurasia was revisited, and Cohen himself was one of its proponents: in 1991, the author identified Central and Eastern Europe as a *gateway region*, a site of interaction between the two main geostrategic spaces (the maritime and Eurasian areas).⁷

⁴ SPYKMAN 1944: 35–44.

⁵ GRAY 2015: 880, 883–884, 892.

⁶ Saul B. Cohen is quoted by DHAND 2018: 165.

⁷ OWENS 1999: 70–71.

East-Central Europe's geopolitical oblivion and return

In practice, Washington's interest in our region was muted in the 20th century. Although Spykman's insight into the relationship between the rimland and U.S. involvement in the two world wars was correct, the United States was less active in the post-war settlements in East-Central Europe. While Woodrow Wilson's liberal internationalist views offered self-determination for the nations in the region that did not bring stability, Franklin D. Roosevelt's approach did not envisage a central role for East-Central Europe, and ultimately meant a realist acceptance of a Soviet sphere of interest. During the Cold War, Washington's attitude was characterised by ambivalence:⁸ the disconnect between rhetoric and action indicated that the region was 'politically dead',⁹ meaning that it was a 'forgotten region'.¹⁰ There was also a duality in U.S. foreign policy of the post-bipolar era. In the Western literature dealing with the future of East-Central Europe the American authors (for example Henry A. Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski) were more active, but their views have not resonated well in the states of the region.¹¹ A striking example of this is a 1991 article by Madeleine Albright, who was of Czechoslovakian origin. On the one hand, the later Secretary of State stated that "the region of central and Eastern is strategically important to the Eurasian landmass [where countries wishing to strengthen their American relations] [...] provide an important foothold for the United States [...] between Russia and Germany". On the other hand, she saw the establishment of a pan-European security system more likely than the enlargement of NATO to the East at the time.¹²

All this meant that in Washington, East-Central Europe was not important in itself, but only in relation to other powers: primarily Russia and secondarily Germany.¹³ In the early 2000s, the countries of the region were

⁸ HUTCHINGS 1994: 45–46.

⁹ LUERS 1987: 978–979.

¹⁰ GATI 1975: 136–140.

¹¹ RIEKHOFF 2003–2004: 56.

¹² ALBRIGHT 1991: 82–84.

¹³ KOCH 1993: 92.

able to strengthen their positions through their support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, although this was only temporary: 'New Europe' proved to be an enthusiastic but weaker ally in Washington than the western 'Old Europe', and its geopolitical value was less relevant to global challenges. The latter was changed by the 2014 conflict in Ukraine. Geopolitics itself has returned into U.S. foreign policy with the Trump Administration's strategic documents: the 2017 National Security Strategy mentioned the term 'geopolitics' several times,¹⁴ which was previously uncommon in documents of this type, and usually they had not dealt with and had not been aware of the reality of power struggles in other regions of the world.¹⁵ Similarly, the 2018 National Defense Strategy stated that Washington's focus is now on "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism".¹⁶ The Trump Administration proclaimed the need to defend the West, associated with the liberal international order, precisely in East-Central Europe, as it was President Trump's 2017 Warsaw speech that formed the basis of the official Europe strategy entitled "Anchoring the Western Alliance".¹⁷ The strategy was announced by A. Wess Mitchell, who had previously written about power probes on the borders of the Western alliance, designed to test Washington's commitment to its local allies.¹⁸ Therefore, it was not surprising that our region received special attention in the Trump Administration's Europe strategy,¹⁹ and that U.S. diplomacy returned to East-Central Europe with "principled engagement"²⁰ and various gestures.

¹⁴ The White House 2017: 26–28, 32, 34, 45–46.

¹⁵ SCHADLOW 2017.

¹⁶ United States Department of Defense 2018: 1.

¹⁷ MITCHELL 2018a.

¹⁸ GRYGIEL–MITCHELL 2011.

¹⁹ WRIGHT 2018.

²⁰ WEMER 2019.

U.S. GEOPOLITICS AND EAST-
CENTRAL EUROPE TODAY

During the Trump Administration, our region benefited from increased U.S. interest, which was mainly felt in the form of improving political ties. Washington's 'principled engagement' with East-Central Europe brought a sort of pragmatism which meant flexibility in dealing with politically sensitive issues according to their strategic priority. The main question for the East-Central European governments, which had a better political relationship with the Trump Administration than their Western European counterparts, was how far it was politically tenable to enforce actions (common interests of the U.S. and East-Central Europe) over words (gestures expected in transatlantic relations). Thus, the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election was a highly significant development in our region, especially in light of the fact that Joseph R. Biden's victory suggested the return of an old-new U.S. foreign policy.

The justification for and the lack of U.S. strategy

The experience of recent years shows that not even transnational challenges that are supposed to bring everyone into a community of interests can alleviate the international power struggle, as the coronavirus epidemic has further increased the turbulence in international politics. According to Henry A. Kissinger, the pandemic changed the world order forever, bringing to the fore an anachronistic concept of governing, a kind of 'walled city' against external enemies.²¹ While previous regional security challenges have called into question the viability of the institutions of the liberal international order, the coronavirus epidemic has called into question the sustainability of the dependencies arising from the global production chains. The latter has necessitated a reassessment of the West's relationship with the People's Republic of China, reinforcing the idea already expressed earlier,

²¹ KISSINGER 2020.

that Washington's main geopolitical rival is not Moscow but Beijing. For all his personal and professional antipathy, Joseph R. Biden shares some of the insights of his Republican predecessor in this area: both see inherent flaws and abuses in the liberal international order, stemming partly from the domestic socio-economic changes caused by globalisation and partly from the actions of foreign revisionist forces. Jake Sullivan, President Biden's chief national security advisor, previously wrote that none of Washington's challengers can replace the liberal order, as Moscow lacks the capacity and Beijing lacks the will.²² In the year of the presidential election, however, he also thought it timely to ask whether the People's Republic of China wanted to be the world's leading power. If so, Beijing can achieve this at the regional level by gaining ground in East Asia through hard power, or at the global level by politically and economically undermining U.S. alliances through sharp power in various places like in East-Central Europe.²³

A. Wess Mitchell also believed that this was the very reason and justification for the U.S. strategy in our region, and other analysts as well have later confirmed this,²⁴ pointing to the importance of U.S. support for geopolitically motivated regional initiatives.²⁵ Nevertheless, the foreign policy of the incoming Biden Administration was met with mixed expectations in East-Central Europe. The Democratic politician's personal and professional profile is the antithesis of his Republican predecessor: President Biden has nearly fifty years of experience in Washington politics, part of which was spent specifically on foreign affairs issues in his time in the Senate and as Vice President. Notably, key members of his Foreign and Security Policy team (including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and Assistant Secretaries of State Victoria Nuland and Karen Donfried) are also known as professional veterans. With regard to East-Central Europe, critics have pointed out that President Biden and the above experts were recruited largely from the Obama Administration, which had enjoyed unrealistic popularity in Western Europe for a long

²² SULLIVAN 2018: 16–17.

²³ BRANDS–SULLIVAN 2020: 46–51.

²⁴ TUZHANSKYI 2021: 69.

²⁵ FARAPONOV 2021: 74.

time, while paying less attention to East-Central Europe (up to the crisis in Ukraine), one of its first foreign policy initiatives being the attempt to reset U.S.–Russian relations. In contrast, optimists highlighted the liberal internationalist and Atlanticist profile of the members of this foreign affairs team, as well as their hardline Russia policy, which was already voiced during the tenure of Barack H. Obama. In light of this, some expected that the Biden Administration's foreign policy in our region would in fact not repeat but exceed that of its Democratic predecessor.²⁶

However, it is debatable whether the Biden Administration even planned a comprehensive strategy for East-Central Europe. While President Biden's domestic and international political situation is far from identical to President Obama's, there are important similarities. On the one hand, since the Obama Administration, there is a growing desire in U.S. foreign policy to change its role of the hegemon. In practice, this is mainly reflected in stronger domestic (social and economic) programs and more restrained international engagement (ending and avoiding military conflicts). The desire to cut the costs of the global war on terror coincided with the need to address the problems of the 2007–2008 financial and economic recession, directly linked to promises of long overdue improvements of domestic infrastructure. The latter idea in particular has gained ground in both Democratic and Republican circles. Donald J. Trump's campaign slogan of 'America First' (complemented by the motto 'Make America Great Again'), associated with his realistic nation state selfishness, was essentially intended to express this need, and although Joseph R. Biden's agenda is closer to the liberal tendencies in international relations, in the shadow of the coronavirus epidemic, the strengthening of the U.S. economy and infrastructures is also a priority for him. This was clearly illustrated by the initiatives he has promoted (including the presidential executive order favouring the purchase of U.S. goods, and particularly the \$1.2 trillion bipartisan-supported bill essentially on physical infrastructure development, as well as the more politically divisive \$1.75 trillion Build Back Better package referring to infrastructure in a broader sense). Of particular note is the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act,

²⁶ ÅSLUND 2021: 47–48.

passed along party lines (with Democratic support), which, contrary to its name, mainly promotes green transition. The law essentially aims to boost the U.S. electric vehicle industry through protectionist measures (federal subsidies for North American products), which in turn forces European economies into competition.

On the other hand, in terms of transatlantic relations, President Biden started from a similar position as President Obama: like the Bush Administration, the Trump Administration left behind a politically damaged U.S.–European relationship, which was felt above all in Washington's relations with the European Union institutions. In terms of ideology, Trump's foreign policy took a more pragmatic approach towards U.S. allies and partners, which facilitated U.S. gestures to East-Central European governments (including presidential-level meetings and ministerial-level visits). The Trump Administration's conservative internationalism indeed brought it closer to the vision of many East-Central European governments on certain issues (such as national sovereignty), but it also led to political disputes between Washington and its Western European allies (Brussels, Berlin and Paris), with a feeling reminiscent of the early 2000s. In 2021, the Biden Administration made several gestures to address this problem. The President's trip to Europe in June proved to be quite rich in symbols, from the signing of the New Atlantic Charter to the NATO meeting before his meeting with Vladimir Putin, to the halting of Donald Trump's planned withdrawal of 12,000 U.S. troops from Germany. These were mostly positive developments for East-Central European allies, but the Biden Administration's practice increasingly revealed a desire to see Europe as a single entity, as it was the case in the Obama Administration. In the first half of the 2010s, this practice marginalised East-Central Europe, and the 2014 crisis in Ukraine only partially changed this. In fact, this was the kind of European policy that was to be expected from Biden's foreign policy, meaning that Washington would prefer to see Brussels or Berlin as its primary European partner.²⁷

²⁷ SOROKA 2021: 101–102.

Reloading U.S. geopolitics

Joseph R. Biden's foreign policy strategy is based on a foundation that is partly in continuity and partly in discontinuity with the foreign policy of his predecessor. On the one hand, the Biden Administration shares the Trump Administration's perception that the challengers to U.S. power have become more assertive in international politics, representing alternatives to the liberal American political system. At the same time, Biden's foreign policy stressed that the action of the revisionist forces should not be interpreted as a mere realist competition, but also as an ideological confrontation. In other words, the geopolitical competition is ultimately between democracies and autocracies.²⁸ Accordingly, unlike its conservative predecessor, the liberal Biden Administration goes beyond the logic of a realist contest for power and would instead forge a closer community of democratic countries and confront democracies that are deficient or lag behind in democratic values.²⁹

President Biden's vision is almost identical to G. John Ikenberry's post-coronavirus worldview: according to the theorist, an internationalist backlash is expected to come, as in the 1940s, in which "democracies will come out of their shells to find a new type of pragmatic and protective internationalism".³⁰ According to the Biden Administration, strengthening U.S. leadership can be achieved through a stronger application of elements of the liberal internationalist tradition. In the words of the President, "[t]he answer to this threat is more openness, not less: more friendships, more cooperation, more alliances, more democracy".³¹

On the other hand, the Trump and Biden foreign policies also agree that the actions of the revisionist powers have made it impossible for the institutions of the liberal international order to function (as envisaged by its founders). However, unlike his predecessor, President Biden saw the solution not in withdrawing the U.S. from the institutions, but in

²⁸ The White House 2022: 6–8.

²⁹ BIDEN 2020: 64–67.

³⁰ ALLEN et al. 2020: 11.

³¹ BIDEN 2020: 76.

fundamentally rebuilding them. According to the Biden Administration, the liberal international order's "flaws and inequities have become apparent [...] and the past order cannot simply be restored".³² In this respect, the Biden concept has "broken down the dividing line between foreign policy and domestic policy".³³ In practice, this meant that American initiatives aimed to reform the international order could be achieved by launching domestic socio-economic programs on the one hand, and gathering foreign allies receptive to the spirit of the latter on the other. Concrete examples include the strong support for the idea of a global minimum tax, and the thoughtful plan to rebuild global production chains in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic (including the boost to the U.S. electric car industry to counter the Chinese industry). In fact, the latter was facilitated by the series of Western sanctions imposed on Moscow following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Sanctions packages of unprecedented scale and power, applied by the United States and its partners, not only hit the Russian military machine, but also isolate its supporters from Western financial and economic systems. In this respect, the Biden Administration's actions also reflected the views of some analysts, such as Hal Brands: Washington eventually had to face the fact that instead of a comprehensive international order, a world divided along geopolitical lines is emerging.³⁴

For East-Central Europe, this means that in the geopolitical competition between the great powers, the countries of the region are not only targets of influence, but also members of a community of democracies with which Washington can ensure that the agenda, norms and agreements that define international political and economic relations are anchored according to U.S. interests (and values).³⁵ But this does not mean that Washington has a new strategy for the region as a whole. U.S. relations with the countries of East-Central Europe continue to be determined by the specific geographic location and foreign policy orientations of these countries, primarily in

³² The White House 2021a: 8, 13.

³³ The White House 2022: 11.

³⁴ BRANDS 2022: 24–27.

³⁵ The White House 2021a: 20.

relation to Russia: while all the countries of the region are stakeholders of securing NATO's eastern flank, the U.S. pays special attention to the strategically prominent countries (primarily Poland and Romania). Washington is aware that its geopolitical competition with Moscow and Beijing brings smaller countries to crossroads, which is why the Biden Administration has stressed that it does not want a rigid bloc system to emerge.³⁶ Nevertheless, the Biden Administration's foreign policy has recharged U.S. geopolitics in East-Central Europe: on the one hand, the region is being repositioned as a borderland rather than a potential gateway region, and on the other, this means a longer-term strategy of deterrence and containment (until the enemy is exhausted).

U.S. GEOPOLITICAL PRIORITIES IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

For the security of the U.S. allies and partners in East-Central Europe, the military and energy sectors, as well as the modern (e.g. digital) infrastructures are of particular importance. The Biden Administration saw the region in relation to Russia from the start, which implied a stronger deterrence and sanctions policy towards Moscow.³⁷ However, this happened step by step, as events unfolded. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is indeed of global significance, as is the unprecedented level of U.S. attention on NATO's eastern flank, but the Biden Administration has basically reacted to developments, in contrast to the (sometimes counterproductive) proactive practice of the Trump Administration. In addition, the U.S. influence on Europeans' relationship with Beijing is not an easy task either, because although Biden's approach seems friendlier compared to Trump's style, Washington offers similar geopolitical responses as before.

³⁶ The White House 2022: 9.

³⁷ ÅSLUND 2021: 48.

Defence and deterrence against Moscow

While the Trump Administration was often accused of not being committed to the collective defence with NATO allies and of being soft on Moscow, American practice disproved this claim: the U.S. has not only maintained but also increased its military presence in East-Central Europe, including by increasing resources for the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) and by funding Defender-Europe 20 which started off as the largest U.S.–European military exercise in the last quarter of a century. In addition, U.S. military cooperation with East-Central European allies was further strengthened by the sale of U.S. military equipment in the region. Finally, an important development under the Trump Administration was that Washington started to support Ukrainian forces with lethal weapons (Javelin anti-tank missiles), to increase the cost of a possible future Russian military action. All of this demonstrated well how the Trump Administration used hard power to assert its interests in the geopolitical competition. The downside of its efforts was the neglect of sophisticated diplomacy, especially towards Europeans: while President Trump's remarks on transatlantic burden sharing in defence were not new in substance, the U.S. criticism was expressed in a style that was unusual among allies, and as a result political tension within NATO increased. Moreover, the gap between the Trump Administration's words and actions has also divided European allies: while the words have been missed by Western Europe, the East-Central European countries have been concerned with practical measures rather than American rhetoric. In essence, the transatlantic political debates and their manifestations (such as the U.S. and French assessments of NATO's viability) have led to the curious situation where European confidence in the reliability of the United States weakened despite unprecedented U.S. engagement.

The Biden Administration has sought to demonstrate a spectacular improvement in U.S. foreign policy towards European allies. At the same time, many of President Biden's gestures in 2021 were mostly symbolic, while Europe was not a top priority in Washington's military planning. The Biden Administration has moved EDI into the Pentagon's base budget (meaning that it plans for this expenditure in the longer term rather than annually),

but has reduced its amount: while EDI was budgeted at \$4.5 billion in 2021, the 2022 plan appropriated only \$3.7 billion. In truth, this reduction was already part of a trend that started in 2020 under the Trump Presidency, as the previous administration increased the \$3.4 billion European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) in 2017 to \$4.8 billion in 2018, renamed it to EDI, and then increased it to \$6.5 billion in 2019, before starting to reduce it to \$6 billion in 2020.³⁸ Meanwhile, the Biden Administration launched the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) with a budget of \$5.1 billion in 2022. Underlying the PDI is the spectacular rise of Chinese power ambitions, which the Pentagon sees as the number one challenge.³⁹ In essence, this is also a legacy of the Trump Administration: the 2018 National Defense Strategy already focused on the People's Republic of China and proposed to strengthen U.S. military forces in East Asia rather than in Europe. The Biden Administration was expected to continue this and, at the same time, to push for greater European autonomy.⁴⁰ Washington has partly returned to the Obama Administration's 'Pivot to Asia' policy, although it has pushed its European allies to greater autonomy in practice, too, with the controversial issue of 'strategic autonomy' once again coming to the fore.⁴¹ From an East-Central European perspective, this means that, in addition to the greater extension of European integration initiatives to the defence sphere, we can expect a geographically and thematically more limited U.S. attention (focused on certain countries, primarily Poland and Romania, and on critical infrastructure at the regional level), and that both should be interpreted in the Chinese context.

The issue of the U.S. military presence in East-Central Europe has come to the fore again with the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine. The overall U.S. activity manifested in the form of political statements, emerging economic sanctions, and the provided military assistance and potential deployments can be described as consistent. Yet the sequence of events also highlighted that Moscow's actions caught Washington overall unprepared. On the one

³⁸ BELKIN-KAILEH 2021.

³⁹ United States Department of Defense 2021.

⁴⁰ HERSZENHORN 2021.

⁴¹ KOCHIS 2021.

hand, an early 2022 statement by President Biden inadvertently highlighted the reluctance of the United States and the internal divisions within NATO when he spoke of the possibility of a dispute among European allies over the precise response to a possible “minor incursion” by Russian forces into Ukraine.⁴² Kyiv’s leadership, which communicated that it would treat any further violation of Ukraine’s territorial integrity as an invasion, was concerned about the uncertainty surrounding the \$200 million U.S. military aid announced in 2021 but not delivered (postponed to 2022). On the other hand, also in early 2022, the Biden Administration started to consider the deployment of thousands of U.S. troops to eastern NATO member states (mainly the Baltic States and countries bordering Ukraine): in January, the Pentagon put 8,500 troops on high alert, but no decision was taken to redeploy them from the U.S. It should also be noted that Washington announced their possible deployment (and the sending of additional troops) only after the failure of the peace talks, and intended this move as a deterrent in parallel with continued diplomacy.⁴³

However, the latter raises the question of whether the Biden Administration really planned to strengthen U.S. military presence in East-Central Europe at all in the first place, and thus to deter Moscow. Washington’s action in this regard was limited in 2021: in addition to the halting the withdrawal of 12,000 troops, previously announced by the Trump Administration, the Biden Administration announced in April 2021 the deployment of 500 additional U.S. troops to Germany. The forces deployed months later are intended to be involved in multidimensional (including cyberspace) operations and to support longer-range strikes in the European theatre of operations. Both activities can be seen as part of the defence and deterrence against the Russian threat,⁴⁴ but the size and geographic location of the deployed forces still did not represent a shift in Washington’s planning towards East-Central Europe. Moreover, the timing of the build-up of military deterrence against the Russian threat in 2022 may have been late, especially in light of the fact that there was essentially no political deterrence:

⁴² CROWLEY–ERLANGER 2022.

⁴³ COOPER–SCHMITT 2022.

⁴⁴ DENI 2021.

the Biden Administration (unintentionally) took a soft line on Moscow at several points in 2021, when it held up the promised military assistance to Ukraine and when it paid disproportionately great attention to improving U.S.–German political relations in its foreign policy, limiting its own room for manoeuvre. Although Barack H. Obama’s foreign policy team and Joseph R. Biden’s team only partially overlap in personnel and concept, in Moscow’s eyes they showed a similar attitude when favouring de-escalation diplomacy.⁴⁵ Although President Biden had in January 2022 held out the prospect of increasing the number of U.S. military forces in NATO member states in Eastern Europe, he said at the time that the latter would not have meant deploying “too many” troops.⁴⁶ However, by June 2022, the United States had increased its presence in East-Central Europe by 20,000 troops and redeployed a number of military equipment, mainly to Poland, the Baltic States and Romania.⁴⁷

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 therefore proved to be a milestone for the U.S. military presence in East-Central Europe. On the one hand, despite the communication failures earlier that year, the Biden Administration successfully united its European allies. The new strategic concept adopted at the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid identified the Russian Federation as the most significant direct threat to the political sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states, while the People’s Republic of China was identified in the document as a systemic challenge – both positions are in line with Washington’s strategic vision going back to 2017. In terms of its military footprint in East-Central Europe, NATO has moved away from a tripwire-like deterrent presence towards a forward defence, although the implementation of the latter concept is to be ensured by NATO’s new force model, which had not yet been detailed at the Madrid Summit.⁴⁸ On the other hand, Washington has been at the forefront of direct support for Ukraine: in 2022, the Biden Administration has committed nearly \$27.1 billion in security assistance to the Eastern European country.

⁴⁵ ROUGH 2021.

⁴⁶ NELSON 2022.

⁴⁷ United States Department of Defense 2023.

⁴⁸ GOTKOWSKA–TAROCIŃSKI 2022.

The U.S. assistance came through various channels, two of which are worth highlighting: on the one hand, President Biden used his 'Presidential Draw-down Authority' nearly thirty times between August 2021 and January 2023, which meant the transfer of stockpiled military equipment worth a total of \$18.3 billion,⁴⁹ and on the other hand, Congress gave additional leeway to the U.S. Government through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI), which provided military assistance worth nearly \$6.57 billion in seven tranches in 2021–2022 through the procurement of new equipment.⁵⁰ In terms of U.S. support and transatlantic unity, it is worth highlighting President Biden's announcement on 25 January 2023, in which he approved the transfer of 31 pieces of M1 Abrams armoured personnel carriers to Ukraine after months of reluctance. The point of the U.S. turnaround was to align with the German position, given that Berlin had at the same time (also after a long period of reluctance) authorised the transfer of Leopard 1 and 2 tanks to Ukrainian forces. The latter vehicle is intended to support the Ukrainian offensive against Russian forces, which is a qualitative milestone in Western support for Ukraine.

The United States and European energy security

Although most European countries have recently created independent energy programs emphasising energy diversification, the Russian Federation remained the EU's top supplier of natural gas and oil products when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. And until the mid-2000s, the only route to meet Europe's growing demand for gas from Russian sources was through Ukraine, which also meant vulnerability: in 2005–2006, Ukraine tapped the gas pipelines on several occasions, causing Moscow to stop gas supplies to Europe. Although following a similar situation in 2009, a Russian–Ukrainian agreement was made, still, Moscow sought to bypass Ukraine through the Nord Stream and South Stream pipelines under the Baltic Sea. The first Nord Stream project started in 2006, and after its inauguration in 2012, Russian

⁴⁹ ARABIA et al. 2023.

⁵⁰ Bureau of Political-Military Affairs 2023.

gas supplies to Ukraine decreased significantly.⁵¹ Washington opposed the pipeline already at the planning stage, and later it even threatened to impose sanctions on it, because it said it would make European states more vulnerable to Moscow.⁵² While the original construction of the South Stream pipeline became impossible due to the relevant EU legislation in 2014, the construction of Nord Stream 2 could not be prevented by Brussels, although in 2016 some EU Member States (including the Visegrád countries) sent an open letter to the European Commission expressing their concerns about the geopolitical consequences of the construction of the second northern pipeline. East-Central European countries share Washington's view that a second German–Russian project would have further increased Europe's already strong dependence on Russian energy (and would have significantly reduced Ukraine's revenues from gas transmission).⁵³ The Trump Administration imposed sanctions on companies involved in the construction of Nord Stream 2, nevertheless, the project was completed by August 2021. Before the delivery of the pipeline, Washington (already under the Biden Administration) had reached an agreement with Berlin regarding the pipeline's completion.⁵⁴ Although the project was considered by many to be inevitable, Washington wanted to favour Berlin on the matter, while not informing Warsaw of its merits.⁵⁵ In addition, the Biden Administration did not increase sanctions, despite the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine: in January 2022, a new package of measures proposed by Republican Senator Ted Cruz was rejected by Democratic Senators, who had consistently supported sanctions for years, because the sanctions would make Washington's negotiations with Moscow and its unity with Berlin more difficult. The decision by the Democrats was partly influenced by Biden administration staff (Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Energy Security Advisor to the President Amos Hochstein).⁵⁶ Following

⁵¹ PROKIP 2019.

⁵² FARMER 2021.

⁵³ SYTAS 2016.

⁵⁴ FARMER 2021.

⁵⁵ MITCHELL 2021.

⁵⁶ COWAN–GARDNER 2022.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, economic and trade relations between the West and the Russian Federation deteriorated rapidly, while dialogue between Moscow and Washington was significantly reduced. Presumably Nord Stream 2 was also a victim of the escalation of the war: under unclear circumstances, damage was caused to the pipeline by an explosion. The pipeline through the Baltic Sea would have transported approximately 55 million cubic metres of Russian gas to Germany,⁵⁷ a project on which U.S. representatives repeatedly disagreed. It is worth noting that as a result of the Western sanctions policy, the international companies responsible for the implementation of Nord Stream 2 had pulled out of the project before the explosion.

In addition to sanctions, another option Washington must alleviate Europe's dependence on Russian gas is to export American liquefied natural gas (LNG). The United States became a net exporter of natural gas worldwide in 2017 for the first time since 1957, meaning that it has been able to increase its sales steadily over the past five years (apart from a downturn in 2020 due to the coronavirus epidemic).⁵⁸ As the United States exports LNG to the world from 2016 and wants to sell it as soon as possible, Europe is an important target for Washington, both in security and economic terms. Following the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, the United States responded with economic sanctions and sought to reduce dependence on Russian gas in East-Central Europe by placing its LNG on the European market.⁵⁹ In 2019, Mike Pompeo visited Budapest and Warsaw as Secretary of State, where he discussed strengthening U.S. relations, with a special focus on energy diversification.⁶⁰ Although East-Central European allies would welcome U.S. LNG as part of a move to reduce dependence on Russian gas, the arrival of this LNG has been hampered by infrastructural and financial obstacles. Poland is the most important customer in the region and aims to become an important distribution hub for U.S. LNG in Europe in the

⁵⁷ Nord Stream 2023.

⁵⁸ ZARETSKAYA 2021.

⁵⁹ LOHMANN–WESTPHAL 2019.

⁶⁰ SZCZUDLIK 2020: 127.

future.⁶¹ Croatia can also be mentioned as a potential distributor, although it has a shorter history of U.S. LNG exports and much lower volumes: while the Poles purchased nearly 3,905 million cubic metres of gas between 2017 and 2022, the Croats imported only 1,115 million cubic metres of gas from the U.S. between 2020 and 2022.⁶² Moreover, even LNG exports are surrounded by a myriad of questions under the Biden Administration, as while it remains in Washington's economic interest to maintain international sales of U.S. LNG, President Biden has been less receptive to the exploitation of fossil resources (in particular shale gas from fracking) for environmental reasons.⁶³ However, since 2021, the United States has nearly doubled its liquefied natural gas exports to Europe, becoming the EU's second-largest gas supplier (after Norway) by the end of 2022.⁶⁴

Investment competition with Beijing

A. Wess Mitchell, as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs in the Trump Administration, repeatedly stated that the influence of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation as rivals of the United States had increased in East-Central Europe. Mitchell was primarily trying to point out to the American political elite that Europe had once again become the scene of strategic competition, where the emphasis is on influence over the eastern flank.⁶⁵ Beijing, with its rapid economic and technical advancements, and Moscow, with its expanding energy sector, cyberattacks and potential for armed war, are Washington's real concerns. Mitchell attributes the dependence of East-Central European states on China partly to the 2009 Eurozone crisis, which left Western European banks slower to lend than many states in the region needed to restart after the crisis. Beijing has seized the opportunity to offer these states attractive deals in the form

⁶¹ MARINEAU 2021.

⁶² United States Energy Information Administration 2023.

⁶³ KEATING–GERDES 2021.

⁶⁴ PALTÍ-GUZMAN et al. 2023.

⁶⁵ HORNÁT 2020.

of investments and affordable loans.⁶⁶ While Chinese direct investment in Europe was just under \$1 billion in 2008, by 2017, in less than a decade, it had swelled to \$318 billion across Europe.⁶⁷ From the U.S. perspective, the process is part of China's grand strategy to increase its influence in the region. To facilitate the latter, the so-called 17+1 Cooperation⁶⁸ was established in 2012 on the initiative of China, with its secretariat being directly under the control of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is also responsible for coordinating relations with the States Parties.⁶⁹ In fact, the main purpose of this cooperation for Beijing was to facilitate the implementation of the ambitious *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)* that it had planned. Under this initiative, Beijing (taking advantage of investment niches characteristic of the region) has prioritised the development of transport, logistics, telecommunications and other trade infrastructure from the Balkans to the Baltic.⁷⁰

In recent years, the BRI has gradually expanded its potential areas of cooperation: in addition to transportation, communication and financial networks, it is now also negotiating medical, urban planning, environmental and youth policy issues.

It should be noted that in many of the projects, implementation has slowed down compared to what the East-Central European countries would have expected.⁷¹ In total, \$2.4 billion worth of investments have been put

⁶⁶ MITCHELL 2020.

⁶⁷ MITCHELL 2018b.

⁶⁸ Cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European countries, also known as the 16+1 institutionalised cooperation between China, Greece, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. Greece joined the cooperation in 2019, so the quasi-organised format was also referred to as 17+1 cooperation until 2021. However, in 2021, Lithuania announced its withdrawal from the cooperation, followed by Estonia and Latvia in 2022, therefore it is now considered a 14+1 cooperation.

⁶⁹ CHAUHAN 2021.

⁷⁰ MITCHELL 2020.

⁷¹ CHAUHAN 2021.

at risk by the coronavirus epidemic.⁷² Although Chinese FDI (foreign direct investment) across Europe fell significantly in 2020 (to around EUR 6.5 billion compared to EUR 11.7 billion in the previous year), the share of greenfield investment in Europe has not been this high since 2016 (when China was the largest investor in Europe, with around EUR 44.5 billion).⁷³ The failure to implement planned projects has increased the skepticism of the 17+1 states towards Beijing. The majority of the 17+1 States Parties have expressed this by abstaining from the 2020 BRI online conference. Nevertheless, the cooperation of the East-Central European states with the People's Republic of China tends to be described by both the European Union and the United States as a sell-out to Beijing, even though the share of Chinese direct investment in this region is much lower than in Western Europe. In recent years, more than half of Chinese investment has been implemented in Germany, the U.K. and France. Thus, Chinese influence is in fact affecting the whole of the European Union, some of whose member states are divided over their involvement in the American containment of Beijing's expansion,⁷⁴ and while East-Central Europe is receiving more attention on this matter, there is no specific strategy for this region.

To counteract the 17+1 cooperation, Washington has belatedly and to a lesser extent than Beijing tried to offer an alternative with the *Blue Dot Network* (BDN) in the field of infrastructure development. The BDN was launched in 2019 by the United States, Japan and Australia, essentially to counterbalance the Chinese BRI initiative, but its scale was not nearly as large as the Chinese effort, and East-Central Europe was again, also in this case, only a secondary consideration.⁷⁵ Washington wanted to present the BDN to the G7 in 2020 as a global initiative that is transparent for investors and guarantees high standards of technical implementation and environmental protection and occupational safety. Since the G7 summit was cancelled and there was no agreement between the Trump Administration and its European partners on the issue of environmental protection right from the start, the

⁷² Business Standard 2021.

⁷³ KRATZ et al. 2021.

⁷⁴ HUNTER 2021: 36.

⁷⁵ KUO 2020.

BDN could not win the official support of the G7.⁷⁶ However, the Biden Administration's increased focus on infrastructure development and its climate policy, which is closer to that of Europe, has given the U.S. initiative a new impetus. As an international projection of the domestic *Build Back Better* concept, the Biden Administration launched the *Build Back Better World* (B3W) *Partnership* in 2021 to support infrastructure development in low- and middle-income countries, focusing on climate, health and biosecurity, digital technology and gender equality.⁷⁷ The question is whether the East-Central European states will fall into this income bracket in Washington's view, and how receptive individual governments will be to different development areas and policies.

The Three Seas Initiative could offer a direct U.S. entry point for infrastructure development in East-Central Europe. The latter was set up in response to geopolitical pressures in the region, at the initiative of Poland and Croatia, but it is intended to provide a framework for 10 other Central and Eastern European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) to promote critical infrastructure projects. Accordingly, the main focus of the Three Seas Initiative was on energy, transport infrastructure and digital development, however, at the start of the initiative, the participating countries had quite different ideas about how it should work. While Budapest, Prague and Bratislava saw it more as an informal cooperation, Warsaw, Zagreb and Bucharest were ready to implement it in a much closer form.⁷⁸ Washington has pledged \$300 million in funding for the initiative under the Trump Administration, but this is still far less than what is needed: the IMF estimates that connecting the East-Central European infrastructure networks to the Western European systems will require nearly \$600 billion. Since the Three Seas Initiative calls for practical investments to counter both Chinese and Russian influence, the Biden Administration has also backed it, at least in words (President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken attended the initiative's July 2021 summit

⁷⁶ ARHA 2021.

⁷⁷ The White House 2021b.

⁷⁸ STEPPER-KOZMA 2020: 27.

in Bulgaria, online and via a pre-recorded video message).⁷⁹ The Three Seas Initiative also enjoys congressional support: in February 2021, a group of Democrats and Republicans asked the Biden Administration to confirm the Trump Administration's pledge of \$300 million.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the dilemma of the Biden Administration here too stems from the American demand for European unity: in a video message in July, President Biden noted that the initiative could bring member states closer to the European institutions, echoing German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier's hope that the initiative could in time become a value-based part of the EU's toolbox. Although this possibility is not excluded, the initiative itself is not intended to promote the political or ideological integration of East-Central Europe, but rather its economic (and infrastructural) integration.⁸¹ Thus, for the Three Seas Initiative, not only Washington's willingness to act, but also its conceptual approach will be an important factor in the future.

CONCLUSION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a key factor in the increased presence of the United States in East-Central Europe. With over 100,000 U.S. troops stationed in Europe, the U.S. is now more present than it has been in almost 20 years. Additionally, the amount of U.S. attention and presence in East-Central Europe is unmatched since the conclusion of the Cold War. In addition to the increased military preparedness and redeployment, the war has also highlighted that the military dimension of security remains of paramount importance in the 21st century and is a driver for military technology and military force development, especially on the periphery of geopolitically competing powers. Meanwhile, the Russian–Ukrainian war has also put European states on a forced economic course. The acquisition of alternative energy sources and routes has become a strategic priority to

⁷⁹ VOLKER 2021.

⁸⁰ GARDING–MIX 2021.

⁸¹ BAULT 2021.

avoid dependence on Russian energy sources, and this offers Washington a favourable market opportunity in Europe and in our region.

Nevertheless, the economic impact of the war and the nature of the Western sanctions regimes made in response to the invasion suggest that Europe's eastern periphery is once again the site of a geopolitical conflict of global significance. The United States, with its commitment to military security in East-Central Europe, has returned to the logic of American geopolitical theory, that is to prevent the rise of a power hostile to Washington (Moscow), to be achieved through a long-term strategy (both military and economic, based on attrition). Nevertheless, there is no specific U.S. strategy focused on East-Central Europe; therefore, it is the countries that are of particular importance in the Russian context that will continue to receive special attention from Washington. As the Russian–Ukrainian war progresses, the geopolitical map of our region and its U.S. relations are likely to evolve along the latter aspect.

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