

The Ukraine crisis or the revival of the Grand Chessboard's geopolitics: Euro-Atlantic response to Russia's assault

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Zbigniew Brzezinski at the 50th Munich Security Conference, 1 February 2014. Tobias Kleinschmidt / 50th Munich Security Conference 2014.

*"[A] shock to the West"*¹, Moscow's assault on Ukraine in March 2014 appears to be a 'symptom' of a broader Russian impudence on the Western-established post-WWII order: when the Kremlin wages war for "*spheres of influence and territories*"², it actually brings us back to 'old-fashion geopolitics'. In this context, what happens in Ukraine is a sign that "*realpolitik remains relevant*"³.

According to Brzezinski [*who passed away in May 2017*], independent since 1991, Ukraine is an "*important space on the Eurasian chessboard*", the

¹ U. Speck, "The West's Response to the Ukraine Conflict: A Transatlantic Success Story", *Transatlantic Academy Paper Series*, April 2016, p. 14.

² A. Merkel, "Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel", quoted in U. Speck, *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³ J. J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no 5, September/October 2014, pp. 1-12, p. 2.

control of which is supposed to make a domination over the world possible⁴. In a post-Cold War world under the United States' (US) geostrategic domination, Brzezinski identifies Ukraine – in Eurasia, alongside Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan – as the state “*deserving America’s strongest geopolitical support*”⁵. While Ukraine’s independence affects the nature of Russia’s state itself⁶, it is for the US “*the critical state*”⁷ among “*key Eurasian geopolitical pivots*”⁸; ‘geopolitical pivots’ being defined as “*states whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location and from the consequences of their potentially vulnerable condition for the behaviour of geostrategic players*”⁹, such as Russia. Having “*the capacity and the national will to exercise power or influence beyond [its] borders in order to alter – to a degree that affects America’s interests – the existing geopolitical state of affairs*”¹⁰, Russia looks for regional hegemony and the recognition of its power on the international stage, and its interests are susceptible to confront with the US’ ones. Thus, Russia’s aggression on Ukraine in 2014 could be explained by its will to regain its status as a ‘Eurasian empire’ and thereby, the Ukraine conflict seen as a campaign for Eurasia.

Even if “[t]he [US] would like Europe’s Eastern neighbourhood to be Europe’s sole

responsibility”¹¹, Speck demonstrates that the global consequences of the Ukrainian crisis call for a response from “*the only global power and with a strong interest in stability in Europe and a constructive relationship with Russia*”: themselves¹². However, from a neo-realist point of view, such as Mearsheimer’s, the Transatlantic partners are also, to a certain extent, responsible for the emergence of the crisis with Russia, on account of both EU and NATO enlargements since the 1990s¹³. In the end, even if the Euro-Atlantic community has not play hard power politics, considering this crisis’ upheavals and the actors involved, it is clear that the post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic order is now “*challenged by great power rivalries of an entirely familiar kind in [...] a new and dangerous world*”¹⁴.

With regards to these elements, I will see **to what extent the Euro-Atlantic response to the Ukrainian crisis has reinforced Transatlantic relations face to Russia’s new assertiveness**. Addressing the origin of the crisis leadership in Transatlantic cooperation (1), I will discuss Obama’s ‘leading from behind’ approach (2), before questioning this response building as an ‘example to follow’ (3).

⁴ Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, Basic Books, New York, NY, 1997, p. 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁶ J.-S. Mongrenier, « Ukraine » in *Dictionnaire des conflits*, Paris, Atlante, 2013, p. 596.

⁷ Brzezinski, *Op. Cit.*, p. 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

¹¹ H. A. Conley, “The ‘Consequences’ for Ukraine and the Transatlantic Partnership”, *CSIS.org*, 21 February 2014, retrieved 29 March 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/%E2%80%9Cconsequences%E2%80%9D-ukraine-and-transatlantic-partnership>

¹² Speck, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

¹³ Mearsheimer, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 1-12.

¹⁴ H. M. Oswald, *Ukraine crisis and transatlantic security relations: causes for reassessment of strategy and partnership*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, June 2016, p. 69.

A welcome European initiative: Germany's leadership in Transatlantic cooperation

Insofar as, as Daubenton argues, Ukraine expects from the EU a solution to its *"triple equation"* – a Slavic State boarding an enlarged EU, a State between conflicting imperial heritages, and a State willing to further reform while being the neighbour of an authoritarian Russia¹⁵ – it is not surprising that, when the crisis emerged, Washington showed its will to see Europe handle the situation¹⁶.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Vladimir Putin at a joint news conference in Moscow in 2012, kremlin.ru.

Playing a role of *"facilitator in the process of building consensus"* and useful for its *"expertise (especially on sanctions)"*¹⁷, Brussels did not take the lead in handling the crisis and was let aside of the

¹⁵ A. Daubenton, « Ukraine : les euro-déterminés, ou comment l'idée européenne devient une idée nationale », in J. Rupnik, *Géopolitique de la démocratisation : l'Europe et ses voisinages*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2014, pp. 105-133, p. 105.

¹⁶ Conley, *Op. Cit.*

¹⁷ Speck, *Op. Cit.*, p. 6.

discussions among political leaders. However, considering the EU as a 'multi-faceted, multi-method, multi-level and multi-location' foreign policy actor¹⁸, its members' are *also* EU's foreign policy. On Brzezinski's 'Grand Chessboard', out of the five 'key geostrategic players', two are EU Member States: France and Germany¹⁹. Engine of the European construction, they need to go for Ukraine to assert themselves as geostrategic players on Eurasia, and more particularly Germany²⁰. Brzezinski's premonitory thought became real when, whereas usually reluctant to engage, Berlin took the Euro-Atlantic lead face to Russia, notably after the annexation of Crimea on 18 March 2014²¹. An economic and political leader in Europe and a priority for Washington's strategic commitment on the 'old continent', Berlin has been a central player in the geopolitical game with Moscow – notably in terms of energy relations or with regards to Central and East-European EU Member States' fear of Russia – which considers essential to avoid any new *"Cold War constellation"*²². Ukraine being at the Eastern limit of Russia's area of cultural influence²³, Oswald argues that only Germany could assume the leadership necessary to handle this crisis²⁴. The response itself being unlikely to work without a unified Europe, Paris has provided Berlin with *"a critical mass within the EU"* to make the management of the Ukrainian crisis a European issue and build an EU consensus²⁵.

¹⁸ S. Keukeleire & T. Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 408 pages.

¹⁹ Brzezinski, *Op. Cit.*, p. 41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²¹ Speck, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

²² Speck, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.

²³ Brzezinski, *Op. Cit.*, p. 69.

²⁴ Oswald, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 75-76.

²⁵ Speck, *Op. Cit.*, p. 6.

If Germany was central in formulating Europe's response, it also shaped the Transatlantic response, through the predominance of the Berlin-Washington channel. Europe's first-class partner, even if the US wanted to let the Europeans deal with their own backyard, Washington was indeed closely involved in the decision-making and the decision-shaping processes, through ties between leaders (Merkel – Hollande – Obama)²⁶, EU-US relations, and directly concerned through NATO – to show support to its Eastern-Europe members. Despite Putin's aversion for Europe in his view of Ukraine, the US was not dissuaded from trying to transform the crisis and contribute to build stability²⁷. Obama's approach to reach this goal happened by letting Europeans take more initiative in a more cohesive Transatlantic partnership.



The US, 'leading from behind': from burden-sharing to transfer of leadership

According to Struye de Swielande, when dealing with geopolitical pivots, the US tries to avoid any sort of direct engagement and maintain a way out, moving from a '*transactional*' to a '*transformational leadership*'²⁸.

To avoid Huntington's 'Lippman gag', *i.e.* an engagement which would "*exceed*" the US power²⁹, the US rely on like-minded 'geostrategic players', that can help take on common challenges. A bit contradictory at first³⁰, this new '*leading from behind*'³¹ approach – if not a '*doctrine*'³² – was confirmed through the US Department of Defense's 2014 *Quadrennial Review*, stating that "*in many regions [the US is] witnessing the emergence of international partners with the capacity to play productive and even leading security roles in their respective regions*"³³: that is where Germany is relevant. That does not mean that Germany takes

²⁸ T. Struye de Swielande, « Obama ou le retour de la Realpolitik », *Politique étrangère*, vol. 4, Winter 2016, pp. 141-151, p. 148.

²⁹ S. P. Huntington, "Coping with the Lippman Gap", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 66, no 3, 1987, pp. 453-477.

³⁰ P. Gros, « "Leading from behind" : contour et importance de l'engagement en Lybie », *Politique Américaine*, vol. 1, no 19, 2012, pp. 49-69, p. 50.

³¹ R. Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy", *The New Yorker*, 2 May 2011, retrieved 1 April 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>

³² M. Kandel, « Obama et la Libye : aux origines du *Leading from Behind* », *Foggy Bottom*, 12 February 2014, retrieved 1 April 2017, <https://foggybottomblog.com/2014/02/12/obama-et-la-libye-aux-origines-du-leading-from-behind/>

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Conley, *Op. Cit.*

the lead over the US, but that the US remains at the top of the hierarchy while better integrating its partners' interests and sharing the responsibility and the burden. As stated in the *2015 National Security Strategy*, to the extent that agendas do not confront, this "*strategic patience and persistence*"³⁴ has allowed the US to avoid an exhaustion or a decline of its strategic power that would have been caused by an '*imperial overstretch*'³⁵.

This is however where shortfalls in the Transatlantic relations can be found: "*a deficient common security identity*"³⁶, notably institutional. Whilst the EU and NATO proved to be ineffective or even inappropriate frameworks to formulate a plausible response to Russia, the consensus was only reached "*in an ad hoc panel of political leaders outside of institutional frameworks*"³⁷. However, even if the implemented approach based on non-military means would have been likely to provide Moscow with "*a decisive strategic advantage*"³⁸, this *ad hoc* set of "*nevertheless constituted a significant departure from the pre-Crimea 'business as usual' approach with Moscow*"³⁹. To a certain extent,

³³ US Department of Defense, *Quadriennial Defense Review*, 2014, p. 6.

³⁴ President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 6 February 2015, <http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2015/>

³⁵ P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, New York, Vintage, 1989, 704 pages.

³⁶ B. Stahl et al., "Comeback of the transatlantic security community? Comparative securitisation in the Crimean crisis", *East European Politics*, vol. 32, no 4, 2016, pp. 525-546, p. 525.

³⁷ Oswald, *Op. Cit.*, p. 73.

³⁸ A. Moravcsik, "Doubling Down on Success: The Western Response to Russia and Ukraine", in *Russia: A Test for Transatlantic Unity*, Transatlantic Academy, May 2016, p. 22.

³⁹ L. Kulesa, "Russia and the West: Russia's Recent Assertiveness, Western Response, and What the Future May Hold", *Harvard International Review*, vol. 37, no 4, Fall 2016, retrieved 1 March 2017, <http://hir.harvard.edu/russia-and->

Russia was not expecting Europe – and more particularly Germany – to step up, play a forefront diplomatic role while "*bolstering its resilience*" and assert itself as "*the indispensable power*"⁴⁰.

A 'model' for the future of Transatlantic cooperation?

According to Knigge, "[t]he escalating crisis in Ukraine has served as something of a stress test for transatlantic unity"⁴¹. While, when looking at the interweaving of the players, the Ukraine conflict could be analysed as a "*three-dimensional chess game*", Richter argues that a military response to Russia would be "*a self-defeating 'strategy'*"⁴².

The Transatlantic approach to the crisis is, to a certain extent, realistic. However, basing his analysis on Obama's March 2014 *Statement on Ukraine*⁴³, Speck advocates that, face to the return of geopolitics and beyond this realist lens, the US shared Germany's perception of the conflict as "*a violation of fundamental international norms against which the international community must push back*"⁴⁴ while claiming to be "*the guardian of*

west-assertiveness-response-what-the-future-may-hold/

⁴⁰ Moravcsik, *Op. Cit.*

⁴¹ M. Knigge, "Ukraine crisis exposes transatlantic rift", *DW.com*, 8 February 2015, retrieved 28 March 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-crisis-exposes-transatlantic-rift/a-18243536>

⁴² S. Richter, "The Transatlantic Battle Over Ukraine", *TheGlobalist.com*, 11 February 2015, retrieved 28 March 2017, <https://www.theglobalist.com/the-transatlantic-battle-over-ukraine/>

⁴³ B. Obama, "Statement by the President on Ukraine", *The White House - Archives*, 20 March 2014, retrieved 3 April 2017, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/20/statement-president-ukraine>

⁴⁴ Speck, *Op. Cit.*, p. 6.

the liberal international order”⁴⁵: even if Putin sees sanctions as aiming at “geo-politically pushing Russia back”⁴⁶, the Euro-Atlantic community has shown it is ready to defend its shared values. Whereas in the 2000s, the invasion of Iraq created unprecedented divisions between and within European and American partners, this Transatlantic response to Russia’s aggression “has demonstrated [the West’s] ability to act jointly”⁴⁷: through deterrence (NATO), economic sanctions (“severely harming Russia”⁴⁸), diplomatic means (Minsk II negotiations, between Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia – being present as a neighbour and not a party to the conflict) and economic support to Ukraine, thus raising expectations with regards to coming challenges.

The biggest challenge for the Euro-Atlantic community is now to ‘transform this test’, or in other words, to “move from crisis response to strategy”⁴⁹, in order to have a long-term overview of what the West is capable of, not only in the post-soviet space – where dialogue and cooperation with Russia is preferred in order to achieve stability – but also in other regions, notably in the Middle-East. As the consensus on the response to the Ukraine crisis was found between Heads of States, outside the ‘usual’ institutional frameworks, cooperation also clearly depends on personal leadership. Also, there is a clear risk that repetitive *ad hoc* solutions lead Euro-Atlanticism towards more unilateralism, whilst

“neither US exceptionalism or isolationism or European strategic independence can lead to more stable conditions for peace in the transatlantic area”⁵⁰. Thus, for the Transatlantic added-value to be sustainable, it is important for partners to commit institutionally, but maybe *via* new configurations: as long as NATO is badly perceived by Russia, it is important to build political dialogue with Moscow through other institutional frameworks, where it would be fully included.



Presidents Barack Obama & Vladimir Poutine during the G8 meeting in June 2013. Photo by Pete Souza, Obama White House Archives.

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Face to an “assault on core principles of the European peace order and on basic rules of civilized international behaviour”⁵¹, Transatlantic cohesion to crisis in Ukraine proved to be a ‘success’ – according to most experts quoted in the present paper. The way the response was formulated however indicates that the existing post-Cold War

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁶ N. Blome, K. Diekmann & D. Biskup, “Putin: The Interview: For me it is not borders that matters,” *Bild*, 11 January 2016, retrieved 3 April 2017 <http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/wladimir-putin/russianpresident-vladimir-putin-the-interview-44092656.bild.html>

⁴⁷ Speck, *Op. Cit.*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ Blome, Diekmann & Biskup, *Op. Cit.*

⁴⁹ Speck, *Op. Cit.*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ Oswald, *Op. Cit.*, p. 73.

⁵¹ Speck, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1.

institutional framework is overaged, particularly face to a reasserting Russia, still military present in the Donbass – even if not recognising it – and favouring hybrid means. Thus, this ‘success’ has to be relativized.

From this point of view, whereas most EU countries (22) are also NATO members, it is not manifest that the Alliance’s and the Union’s approaches overlap much. The conflict itself particularly exposed the difficulties for the EU to give an appropriate security response to a security threat. In the end, if the fact that the EU is not a security organization *per se* happened to be an asset in containing Russia’s aggression on Ukraine, it can also appear to be a weakness in the longer term. Indeed, Russia can adapt its approach to face the West and draw benefits from the Transatlantic partners’ institutional difficulties to reach a consensus when faced with such a threat.

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