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“From Euromissiles to CSDP: the EU’s strategic relations with Russia and the US from Brezhnev and Reagan to Putin and Biden”

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The calendar years 1985 and 1994 feature several significant events that can be seen as “bookends”. 1985 is important in that it saw the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev and the second mandate of Ronald Reagan. It also saw the Cockfield Report launching the Single European Market, which can be seen as the first serious step to the EU emerging as a power. 1994, for its part, witnessed the Gingrich revolution in the US, followed closely by the outbreak of the first Chechen War in Russia, both of which events heralded a fundamental shift in East-West relations. 1994 also saw the emergence of the *European Security and Defence Identity* (ESDI) and the *Berlin Plus* process in European defence, as well as the process of EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe. While it is possible to see these events as constituting a decade of geopolitical hope and substantial geopolitical change, that ten year period is significant historically mainly to the extent that 1985 marked the conclusion of a bitterly divisive period starting in about 1979; while 1994 is significant largely for what it implied for the decades that followed, particularly for the enlargement of both the EU and NATO, processes that are not unconnected with the present war in Ukraine.

As the 1970s turned into the 1980s, many in the West began to think that the USSR was on the point of ‘winning’ the Cold War. The US defeat in Vietnam; President Carter’s penchant for isolationism and non-interventionism; the US humiliation during the Teheran embassy hostage crisis; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; and the oil price hikes following the Iranian revolution -- all indicators seemed to suggest a kind of superpower role reversal. Smart people were discussing the 1975 publication, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. This highly significant report argued that democracies would be hard pressed to compete with the authoritarianism of an autocracy such

as the USSR. The *Trilateral Commission* report was published the same year as the *Helsinki Final Act*, which capped two years of discussions around détente, and which contained two very different agreements. First, the inviolability of Europe's borders, which was widely seen as guaranteeing Soviet control over Eastern Europe. But second, there was a declaration on human rights and fundamental freedoms which would eventually work against the USSR. **The key point here is that the Carter years (1976-1980) underscored the widespread fear in the West that the Soviet Union was increasing in power and influence while the US was on the decline.** There are echoes of this late-1970s/early-1980s debate in today's agonizing over whether or not democracy is up to the challenge faced by rising authoritarianism.

The crisis over the Soviet deployment of the SS-20 intermediate range nuclear missile system (the "Euromissiles crisis" – 1979-1983) seemed to many analysts to confirm those fears. The Euromissiles crisis engulfed the transatlantic partnership throughout the first half of the 1980s¹. West European governments rallied behind US leadership in "responding" to the threat posed by the SS-20s with the deployment, via NATO, of a new generation of US missiles (Pershing-2 and Cruise). Even the new socialist government of François Mitterrand in France enthusiastically embraced the US deployments². Reagan had been so alarmed by Mitterrand's plan to include communist ministers in his government that he despatched vice-president George H.W. Bush to Paris for urgent talks. He need not have bothered. Mitterrand's objective was to stifle communism with his socialist embrace. While the veteran (communist) Russian foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko visited Berlin in March 1983 to support the German socialists in the federal elections, the (socialist) François Mitterrand made a speech to the Bundestag supporting the Christian Democrat chancellor Helmut Kohl against the SPD³. The Euromissile crisis was creating strange bedfellows.

¹ Leopoldo Nuti et alii (2015), *The Euromissiles Crisis and the End of the Cold War*, Stanford University Press

² Jolyon Howorth & Patricia Chilton (eds.) (2022) *Defence and Dissent in Contemporary France*, London, Routledge

³ Jolyon Howorth, "Consensus of silence: the French Socialist Party and Defence Policy under François Mitterrand", *International Affairs*, Vol.60, No.4, (1984), 579-600.

The NATO missiles, like the SS-20s, were highly accurate and led many to fear that a “first strike capacity” would render defunct the relatively stabilising logic of mutual assured destruction (MAD). Nuclear war was no longer seen as improbable. For many, it was becoming likely⁴. This fear led peoples in most West European countries to organise million-strong demonstrations against the NATO deployments. Meanwhile, Western leaders, and especially President Reagan, ratcheted up the Cold War stand-off and launched a new anti-Soviet crusade denouncing the USSR as an ["evil empire"](#) . With hindsight, it now seems ironic that, while the Western world was fretting about the Soviet system becoming the force of the future, the Soviet leadership was dropping like flies. Leonid Brezhnev, in office since 1964, died in November 1982, aged 75; his successor, Yuri Andropov, ruled for just fifteen months before dying in February 1984 at age 69. He was succeeded by Konstantin Chernenko, who managed to hang on to power for just over a year, before dying in his turn in March 1985, aged 73. Mikhail Gorbachev succeeded him only to preside over the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991. **Western fears about Soviet dominance were unfounded. Soviet communism was withering on the vine. The key question in the mid-1980s was: how to manage the power transition that was about to take place.**

The most interesting development during the Euromissiles crisis was the emergence of a trans-continental process that called into question the very bases of the Cold War.

Throughout most of the Cold War period, anti-nuclear movements in the West were inspired or fuelled either by a relatively apolitical form of pacifism, or by front organizations financed by Moscow. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, dissident movements in the East were inspired by the dream of American “freedom” as purveyed by propaganda media such as *Radio Free Europe*, and as epitomized by Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s enthusiastic embrace of market capitalism once he was forced into exile. During the Euromissiles crisis, such binary frameworks were jettisoned. The 1980 [European Nuclear Disarmament Appeal](#) inspired by the historian

⁴ Jonathan Schell (1982), *The Fate of the Earth*, New York, Knopf

Edward Thompson, called not only for a nuclear-free Europe⁵ but also for nothing less than the transcendence of the Cold War itself⁶. It sought, in Mary Kaldor's words, "détente from below"⁷. This involved peace activists from the West making common cause with human-rights activists from the East. Both, it was argued, were the victims of superpower confrontation and both demanded that that confrontation end.

"We must", the *END Appeal* insisted, "commence to act as if a united, neutral, and pacific Europe already exists. We must learn to be loyal, not to 'East' or 'West', but to each other, and we must disregard the prohibitions and limitations imposed by any national state". The leaders of END were conscious that the USSR would try to make propaganda out of Western activists' protests against the military policies of their own governments. They also knew that Western governments would attempt to portray peace activists as tools of Moscow propaganda. "We must" the Appeal cautioned, "resist any attempt by the statesmen of East and West to manipulate this movement to their own advantage". This did not amount to "equivalence" in the rejection of the two political systems of the Cold War. But it did indicate that, for growing numbers in the West, American nuclear sabre-rattling seemed as threatening to their lives as Soviet manoeuvres. **Above all, it signalled a concerted, transcontinental desire to move beyond the Cold War⁸.**

Before long, this popular mood began to affect the political class. Even a man as solidly anchored in the Atlanticist mindset as the then British foreign secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, reacted negatively to American nuclear sabre-rattling during the Euromissiles crisis. He raised eyebrows within the establishment international relations community by proposing, in his own

⁵ Various alliterative formulae were devised to designate the area to be covered. The most common was Poland to Portugal. But variants on that were Madrid to Moscow; Wales to Warsaw; and even Brest (in France) to Brest (Litovsk, in Poland)

⁶ E.P. Thompson (1982), *Beyond the Cold War*, London, Pantheon

⁷ Mary Kaldor (1991), *Europe from Below: An East-West Dialogue*, London, Verso

⁸ Jolyon Howorth, "The Third Way", *Foreign Policy*, No 65, (1986/87), 114-134 - reprinted in Charles William Maynes (ed.) *A Decade of Foreign Policy*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1990, 26-47.

distinctively mild-mannered way, the establishment of a European pillar within the Atlantic Alliance:

“In short, the Europeans want to do more and are preparing to do just that. They are getting their act together, which means both a better joint analysis of problems and more pooling of effort to find solutions. If our American friends support the ends, they must logically support the means. They must be confident and show themselves confident that a more united European front does not mean united against the United States. A European position can be different from an American position without implying treachery or hostility. It is reasonable for the United States to ask that in seeking integration the Europeans should not become exclusive and inward-looking, waste time on rhetoric, or dwell on the most divisive issues. It is equally reasonable for the Europeans to ask Americans to appreciate that there are distinctively European interests and policy requirements involved in the business of "doing more," and that changes in roles and burdens imply changes in policymaking machinery as well as in policy itself.”⁹

Three years later, at The Hague, the recently “revitalized” *Western European Union* (WEU) stated in a landmark policy document that European integration would “never be complete until it had been extended to the fields of security and defence”¹⁰. These pre-1989 manifestations of European awakening all delivered the same basic message: Europe was beginning to assert its intention to assume greater control over its own security fate. Actors may not have been conscious of the precise destination, nor of the route to be followed, but they were increasingly certain that they wished to make the trip. **In the years prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the first signs of a European aspiration towards autonomy from both superpowers slowly began to emerge. But the key point in the mid 1980s is that many Europeans seemed less concerned about the aggressive intentions of a Gorbachev-led USSR than they were about the unilateral tendencies of their main ally.**

On 11-12 October 1986, a breakthrough summit between Reagan and Gorbachev took place in Reykjavik. Reagan, having begun his presidency as a sabre-rattling antagonist of the USSR, was threatening to end it as an apostle of wholesale nuclear disarmament. He and Gorbachev came close to agreeing on the total elimination of all nuclear weapons systems. The

⁹ Geoffrey Howe (1984-85), “The European Pillar”, *Foreign Affairs*

¹⁰ [WEU] (1988), *The Reactivation of WEU: Statements and Communiqués, 1984-1987*, London, WEU

Europeans, who had believed for forty years that their security depended on US nuclear deterrence, were appalled (as were Reagan's own advisers) and this demonstration of US unilateralism was a further stimulus to the inchoate movement towards European security autonomy. In December 1987, Reagan and Gorbachev took their discussions at Reykjavik to their logical next level and, by signing the [INF Treaty](#), eliminated all intermediate range nuclear weapons from their arsenals. This development was widely seen as presaging a general relaxation of hostilities between the superpowers, which was, of course, consummated when the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989. Thereafter, historians and political scientists engaged in a debate about "Who won the Cold War?" The dominant narrative held that NATO, through the deployment of the Euromissiles, had made it clear to the Soviets that they could no longer compete, either economically or industrially? On the other hand, the "détente from below" narrative argued that the notion of transcontinental reconciliation had been a prerequisite for Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*? A key member of Gorbachev's cabinet, Andrei Gratchev, has consistently argued that the NATO deployments in fact delayed the advent of political change in the USSR, by consolidating hard line opinion behind Gorbachev's gerontocratic predecessors¹¹.

Whatever the ultimate truth behind that issue (and there is little doubt that both factors played a part), the Cold War did come to an end and the Soviet Union was dissolved. While George H.W. Bush focused on the crucial business of managing the fallout from the Soviet collapse, European leaders and opinion-shapers were initially most concerned about a resurgent, unified, Germany. Both François Mitterrand and Margaret Thatcher were nervous about German intentions, but while Thatcher sought overtly to obstruct German unification, Mitterrand sought to channel it into a European framework, by trading off economic and monetary union against political union¹². The *Common Foreign and Security Policy* (CFSP) and the eventual *Common Security and Defence Policy* (CSDP) were the price France decided to pay for a common currency (the euro).

¹¹ Andreï Gratchev (2001), *Le Mystère Gorbatchev : La Terre et le Destin*, Paris, Du Rocher

¹² François Mitterrand (1996), *De l'Allemagne. De la France*, Paris, Odile Jacob

As far as Russia was concerned, opinion across the Atlantic diverged. George H.W. Bush's pitch for a [new world order](#) – from Vancouver to Vladivostok – was an overt attempt to perpetuate American global leadership, at least across the Northern hemisphere. On the other hand, François Mitterrand's dream of a *European Confederation*, embracing the whole of Europe and Russia (and excluding the US), was a premature attempt to jump-start a new multi-polar world order¹³. It was stillborn from the moment the Central and Eastern Europeans understood that its (not so) hidden agenda was to delay or even avoid enlarging the European Union beyond the existing 12-15 Western member states already in or on the books¹⁴. For most West European states, deepening the Union took priority over enlargement.

The 1990s saw further divergence in the priorities of the two sides of the Atlantic with respect to Eastern Europe. West European states were totally preoccupied with managing the collapse of Yugoslavia, which Washington saw as an unwanted diversion (James Baker: “we got no dog in this fight”)¹⁵. The Balkan wars gave considerable impetus to the emergence of CSDP, which was hardly influenced at all by concerns about Russia¹⁶. The US, on the other hand, especially under President Clinton, prioritised NATO enlargement in an ever-increasing advance towards what Russia perceived as its sphere of influence. In this endeavour, Clinton was both hustled and encouraged by the states of Central and Eastern Europe who wanted nothing more urgently than NATO accession. In terms of Western relations with Russia, the key year was arguably 1999 when the first three former members of the Warsaw Pact (Poland, Hungary, and Czechia) joined NATO at the very height of the Alliance's war against Russia's Balkan ally Serbia. For Moscow, this constituted the first serious “final straw” in the disintegration of its relations with the West¹⁷. Only months later, Vladimir Putin became President.

¹³ François Mitterrand & Vaclav Havel (1991) *Prague : Les Assises de la Confédération*, Paris, Editions de l'Aube

¹⁴ Six founders + UK, Dk, Ireland (1973) + Greece, Spain and Portugal (1980s) + Austria, Sweden & Finland (1995)

¹⁵ Josip Glaurdic (2011), *The Hour of Europe: Western Powers and the Break-Up of Yugoslavia*, New Haven, Yale University Press; Ivo H. Daalder, *Getting to Dayton: the making of America's Bosnia policy*, Washington DC, Brookings, 2000

¹⁶ Jolyon Howorth (2014), *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union*, London & New York, 2nd ed., Palgrave

¹⁷ Personal interviews with Russian officials, Moscow, 2000, 2001, 2002

At this point, we need to look closely at the story of NATO expansion that has been such a central element in the Russian narrative behind the current Ukraine crisis. The dominant narrative in the West is that NATO is a defensive alliance and that its enlargement up to and, in the case of the Baltic states, even beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union should in no way be seen in Moscow as threatening or a cause for concern. The dominant narrative in Moscow is that NATO enlargement posed a genuine security threat to Russia that was unacceptable. The literature on NATO enlargement fills many large shelves of leading libraries and the issues are complex, controversial, often emotional, and always highly political. This is not the place to go into the detail.

In my opinion, by far the most serious historical account of the subject is the recent book by Mary Sarotte¹⁸. Sarotte is not without her critics, but the book brings out three key moments in the process of NATO enlargement that are beyond dispute. The first is that President George H.W Bush intended his “new world order” to be underpinned by an expanding NATO and was not prepared to contemplate dissolving (or even mothballing) the Alliance as many at the time were suggesting would be appropriate. The second is that President Clinton was initially very concerned to ensure that NATO expansion should not create a new dividing line across Eastern Europe. In 1994 (our conference’s “swing” year), he therefore launched the scheme known as *Partnership for Peace*, under which all Eurasian states (including Russia and its successor states) could engage in association activities with the Alliance. He knew that Russia remained deeply unhappy about NATO, but he was confident that Moscow could be “bought off” (Sarotte, p.223)¹⁹

The third moment, however, came in 1996. Clinton was coming up for re-election. In the mid-terms of 1994, New Gingrich’s Republican party had campaigned energetically in favour of NATO enlargement in critical swing states such as Wisconsin, Illinois, and Ohio, which

¹⁸ Mary E. Sarotte (2021), *Not One Inch: America, Russia and post-Cold War Stalemate*, Yale University Press

¹⁹ In September 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev accepted from German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, a cheque for 15 billion DM as the price for Moscow’s withdrawal of all Soviet troops from East Germany. Gorbachev had demanded 36 billion, but Kohl succeeded in “buying him off”. Clinton was confident he could do the same, Sarotte, pp.101-102.

contained large Polish and Lithuanian communities. Clinton had won all three states in 1992 and needed them crucially in 1996. But he had lost all three by a short margin in 1994. He therefore decided to jettison *Partnership for Peace* and actively campaign for NATO enlargement. In a tense meeting with Boris Yeltsin in Moscow in May 1995, he told the Russian leader that he could not be re-elected without the votes of the East European diaspora of the mid-West swing states. Yeltsin, himself up for re-election in 2006, told Clinton that he had the opposite problem. He would go down to defeat if NATO enlargement was in process. Clinton thereby agreed not to make a formal announcement of the first round of NATO enlargement until after Yeltsin had been safely re-elected. NATO enlargement in part define the political fortunes of both presidents.

European states in general were not enthusiastic about NATO enlargement, judging that EU enlargement should give the Central and East European states sufficient reassurances and stability to anchor them to the West. US administrations of all stripes knew full well that Moscow was deeply uncomfortable with the expansion of the Alliance but were confident that Russia was in no position to stop it. The Europeans, unwilling at any stage to risk a confrontation with the US over NATO enlargement, simply went along with Washington's preferences.

The one area where they tried to strike out on their own was CSDP. After the WEU *Declaration of The Hague* in 1987 (above, p.5) there were several key stages in the EU's assertion of its right to take greater responsibility for its own defences. I mentioned, as one development in 1994, the emergence of a *European Security and Defence Identity* (ESDI), under which the EU member states of NATO attempted to define, via the WEU, a distinctive force structure and capacity from within NATO. This failed to work for a variety of reasons too complex to go into in this paper²⁰. Progressively, it became clear to most EU leaders that the WEU was too weak a structure to permit the emergence of a genuinely European capacity. The

²⁰ Jolyon Howorth & John T.S. Keeler, "NATO, the EU and the Quest for European Autonomy", in Jolyon Howorth & John Keeler (eds.), *Defending Europe: NATO and the Quest for European Autonomy*, London & New York, Palgrave, 2003, 1-19

[Saint Malo Declaration](#) of December 1998 was the first overt assertion of the need for and the desirability of “autonomous action” on the part of the EU in the area of security and defence. These developments had virtually nothing whatever to do with Russia. The entire history of CSDP has been accompanied by constant assertions that Europe’s collective defence, its ultimate existential security, remained the exclusive prerogative of NATO. CSDP was intended only for crisis management missions in the EU’s immediate periphery with which the US did not necessarily wish to be associated.

However, until the turn of the decade 2000/2010, the Russian “threat” and, ipso facto, the vital significance of NATO, were not seen as first order issues. The crucial security threats from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and especially to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, were seen as those posed by failing states, humanitarian emergencies, civil conflict, and cross-border instability. Throughout the entire post-Cold War period, there has been continuous dialogue between the EU and NATO over the precise nature of their relations and interactions²¹. Even after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of conflict in the Donbass, the EU, in its key strategic document of 2016, [the EU's Global Strategy](#), the Union continued to showcase and emphasise its objective of “strategic autonomy”. Most analysts assumed that such autonomy (clearly from the US) would come via the strengthening and empowerment of CSDP – in parallel with but in contradistinction to NATO. For many years, [I have been arguing](#), on the contrary, that it can only be through and via NATO, in tight coordination with the US, in the interests of both parties, that the EU can gradually be empowered to move towards autonomy²². But the growing crisis with Russia has called into question many of the fundamentals of CSDP-NATO interaction. Russia has become what few in the EU believed it would ever become again: a military threat. There are many causes behind this development

²¹ Jolyon Howorth, “ESDP and NATO: institutional complexities and political realities”, *Politique Etrangère* 2009/4 (special issue on NATO), pp. 95-106.

²² Jolyon Howorth, “Strategic Autonomy: Why It Is Not About Europe Going It Alone”, Brussels, Martens Centre for European Studies, [Special Report](#), June 2019, 52 pages.

The decision, taken at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008 that “Ukraine and Georgia [“will become members”](#) of the Alliance, was seen in Moscow as the crossing of an absolute red line²³. Although, at Bucharest, leading European members of NATO (especially France and Germany) strongly opposed offering a *Membership Action Plan* to the two states Russia saw as part of its “near abroad”, the US was determined to insert in the summit *Declaration* a commitment to accession at an unspecified date in the future. This did little to stabilise the borderland states between the European Union and Russia.

Within months of the Bucharest summit, Russia invaded Georgia and annexed the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, President Medvedev launched a full-scale proposal for a [“new security architecture”](#) in Europe, which remained on the agenda for several years, but which neither the US nor the main actors in the European Union were prepared to take seriously. Simultaneously, the EU launched its *Eastern Partnership* scheme which sought to offer closer association with the Union to the six frontline states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. There were many flaws in the *Eastern Partnership*, not the least of which was that it involved no prospect of eventual accession to the EU. But the biggest flaw of all was that it was conducted with absolutely no attention to geopolitical realities. Russia, instead of being appropriately consulted, was simply ignored²⁴.

This confused and confusing situation was a cardinal element behind the 2014 Maidan crisis which saw the ouster of the pro-Russian Ukrainian president Yanukovitch, the installation in Kyiv of a pro-Western government backed by elements of the [Ukrainian far-right](#), and the eventual Russian annexation of Crimea and launch of military clashes in the Donbas. The dominant narrative in the West since the outbreak of the war on 24 February 2022 has been

²³ President Biden’s Director of the CIA wrote, in a 2008 memo to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice: “Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players [. . .] I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests”. *Congressional Record* Volume 168, Number 27 (Thursday, February 10, 2022), Senate, Pages S632-S636

²⁴ Stefan Lehne (2014), “Time to Reset the European Neighbourhood Policy”, Brussels, Carnegie Europe, February; Neil MacFarlane and Anand Menon (2014), “The EU & Ukraine”, *Survival*, 56/3, June-July

that Vladimir Putin, an unreconstructed [imperialist](#), is attempting to restore the Tsarist Empire, with the backing of nationalist forces inside Russia – and of the Orthodox church. The *Financial Times* award-winning journalist [Catherine Belton](#) has detailed how Putin and a select band of former KGB officers, in cahoots with cynical oligarchs, “took back” Russia and set out to confront the West. Yale university historian [Timothy Snyder](#) sees the war as a decisive struggle between democracy and tyranny. There is truth in all of this. But it is not the whole story. And the causes of the war in Ukraine cannot be reduced to the megalomania of a single individual.

The point I want to make here is simple. Nothing can excuse, justify, disculpate, or otherwise validate Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine. But those who seek to attribute exclusive responsibility to Russia in general and to Vladimir Putin in particular, are consciously refusing to recognise that the underlying tensions that gave rise to this war are multiple.

We have come a long way from the perceived “superpower role reversal” of 1979. Over the past four decades, the pieces of the kaleidoscope have been shaken and re-shaken in different ways. Russia has gone through many lows and a few highs. The US has engaged in disastrous wars of choice and has become internally divided more seriously than at any time since the Civil War. The EU has sought in different ways, but with limited success, to become a major international actor. Neither the US nor the EU has been able to design a “Russia policy” that succeeded in helping constructively to manage the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, it would seem, any thought of CSDP acting as the vehicle of European strategic autonomy has been put in cold storage. NATO has become empowered in ways that were unimaginable only three years ago when Emmanuel Macron accused it of being [brain dead](#). “Sleepy Joe” Biden has emerged as the geostrategic actor most analysts thought him incapable of being. The current war is a war between Russia and NATO but via Ukrainian proxies. How it will end is the million-dollar question that everybody is asking but to which nobody can offer a convincing answer.