

## GEOSTRATEŠKI PREMIKI V SODOBNI EVROPI

## GEOSTRATEGIC SHIFTS IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

**Povzetek** Članek analizira geostrateške spremembe v današnji Evropi in svetu, ki smo jim priča od konca hladne vojne in predvsem od leta 2014 naprej. Klasična geopolitična dinamika se je vrnila in geopolitične teorije, kot sta osrčje in obrobje, so ponovno aktualne. Posledično se na svetovni oder vračajo tudi klasični geostrateški igralci. Članek analizira premike v treh evropskih državah in hkrati članicah Evropske unije, ki so v preteklih stoletjih krojile usodo Evrope, in sicer Francije, Nemčije in Združenega kraljestva. Geostrateške igre v Evropi so zmeraj imele globalne posledice, zato je bila v članku posebna pozornost namenjena tudi ZDA in Rusiji, njunim geopolitičnim interesom in geostrateškemu repozicioniranju. Sčasoma postaja jasno, da smo v tranziciji in na poti k oblikovanju nove evropske in svetovne strateške arhitekture. V tem smislu članek prepoznava nove porajajoče se geostrateške vektorje v Evropi. Ti lahko po eni strani opredeljujejo novo prihajajoče ravnotežje sil, po drugi strani pa možnost kolizije teh vektorjev. Pri slednjem smo lahko priče nepredvidljivim varnostnim posledicam tako za Evropo kakor tudi za ves svet.

**Ključne besede** *Geopolitika, geostrategija, Francija, Nemčija, Združeno kraljestvo, ZDA, Rusija.*

**Abstract** This article shows how Europe and the world we are living in have changed drastically since the end of the Cold War, and especially since 2014. Classical geopolitical dynamics have resurfaced; theories, such as Heartland and Rimland, apply time and again. Consequently, classical players on the Europe and world stages are back in the game. The article analyses shifts in the following three traditional European powers and members of the European Union which have shaped the destiny of Europe during the last centuries: France, Germany and the United Kingdom. As strategic games in Europe have always had global dimensions, the United States and Russia's influence and their geostrategic repositioning in Europe is also duly considered. The trend of a transition towards a new strategic architecture in Europe and in the world is ever

more evident; the article thus also indicates the new emerging geostrategic vectors in Europe. On the one hand, they may indicate that a new balance is emerging, and on the other hand, that these vectors might collide. In case of the latter, we may face unprecedented security ramifications for Europe as well as for the entire world.

**Key words** *Geopolitics, geostrategy, France, Germany, United Kingdom, United States, Russia.*

**Introduction** Since early 2014, the overall geostrategic situation in Europe has drastically changed. The post Second World War order, which resisted and prospered well beyond the Cold War, has come to a crossroads where peace and security in Europe cannot be taken for granted any longer. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the war in Ukraine, the mass migration wave in 2015, and the decision taken by the United Kingdom (UK) in a referendum in 2016 to leave the European Union (EU), have unveiled the shaky grounds of Europe's unity and stability.

Under the pressure of these events, the EU, a political and economic framework which has reflected the success of the continental geopolitical reconciliation project, has struggled to find appropriate solutions to revert a trend of renationalization in the integration process. As a consequence, EU member states today find themselves in a changed geopolitical environment constantly trying to adapt to a new strategic context. With the UK leaving, the EU will depend on the Franco-German axis. Yet, the EU is geopolitically part of the wider European continent, and its security is also potentially influenced by two global players, the United States (US) and the Russian Federation (Russia). Any change in Europe must be looked at carefully through the geostrategic lenses of these five countries and the relations between them.

This article will analyse geostrategic changes in France, Germany, the UK, the US and Russia, and will consider several indicators and trends in strategic shifts in Europe. In developing the argument, the geopolitical theories of Harold Mackinder and of Nicholas Spykman will be taken as a foundation. We will present how the two theories are re-applied and how Europe, in particular France, Germany and the UK, have found themselves yet again part of a greater game between the US and Russia, in which the US plays by the rules of the old Truman doctrine based on containment, while Russia tries to penetrate through it. This game has shaped new vectors in Europe which indicate that new alliances are about to be formed or evolved in and around Europe, directly affecting the EU. To conclude, the article will show which emerging geostrategic vectors the author sees as potentially colliding and thus with a potential impact on Europe's security.

## 1 THE GEOSTRATEGIC SITUATION IN EUROPE

While we were marking the centenary of the First World War, which so profoundly changed the pace of Europe's geopolitical landscape, Europe found itself yet again at a crossroads similar to those witnessed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For a

short time in our post-Cold War history there was an impression in Europe that we could, with Euro-Atlantic integrations on the one hand, and a (oil and gas) business oriented Russia on the other, overcome geostrategic axioms. Hence, for the first time in the history of Europe, we could live in peace and prosperity. However, geostrategic algorithms, as so many times in history, have proved it false and utopic.

It seems that the geopolitical theories of the Heartland and Rimland, developed by Mackinder<sup>1</sup> and Spykman<sup>2</sup> in the first half of the last century, have re-emerged on the surface of Europe's geostrategic realities. A century ago Mackinder stated that "who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland, who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island, who rules the World-Island commands the World" (Mackinder in Kaplan, 2013, 74). A while later Spykman claimed that "the Rimland of the Eurasian land mass must be viewed as an intermediate region, situated as it is between the Heartland and the marginal seas"<sup>3</sup> and that the "Rimland functions as a vast buffer zone of conflict between sea power and land power" (Spykman, 1944, p. 41). "Who controls Rimland rules Eurasia, who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world" (Spykman, 1944, pp. 41 & 43).

Whereas Mackinder's work points to a struggle of Heartland-dominated land power against sea power, placing the Heartland-based land power in the better position, Spykman held that the "Rimland was the key to world power, as the maritime-oriented Rimland was central to contact with the outside world" (Kaplan, 2013, p. 96). Spykman's theory heavily influenced the US Cold War Containment strategy towards the Soviet Union, which practically controlled the whole of Mackinder's Heartland. This strategy was implemented through the Truman doctrine in 1947, which became the foundation of American foreign policy. It led, in 1949, to the setting up of NATO and to various security agreements in East Asia, such as those with Japan and with South Korea after the Korean War (1950-53). Based on the Containment strategy, the Marshall plan (or the European Recovery Programme) was launched to help recover the economies of the Western European nations and to stimulate them to foster economic cooperation. Even though the European Union does not derive from the Marshall Plan, the latter inspired the European integration process which started in 1951 with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community.

Based on that we are going to present three traditional European powers, France, Germany and the UK, whose relationships are decisive for the future of European integration. These relationships represent the fundamentals of the current order in Europe. These three countries do not exist and act in isolation, but in a complex

<sup>1</sup> Harold Mackinder was a British geographer, known for his famous Heartland Theory, which represents a basis of modern geopolitics.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Spykman was an American political scientist who developed the Rimland theory, which is based on a positive critique of Mackinder's Heartland theory.

<sup>3</sup> The European coastline, the Arabian Middle Eastern Desert land (including the Persian coastline), and the Asiatic Monsoon land (including India and the East-Asian coastline).

strategic context influenced primarily by two additional powers upon which peace and security in Europe and the world depend: the US and Russia. Let us present them one by one.

## 1.1 France

France is one of the five permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council and a nuclear power. Even though France has been a world power which controlled many of the world's trading routes, it was predominantly continental<sup>4</sup> and less of a maritime power. From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the Second World War, France had been heavily present in the Western Mediterranean, the gate to the African continent, and controlled much of Western Africa. After the end of the Second World War, though, it lost most of its colonies. In the years following the First World War the German geostrategist Karl Haushofer underlined that despite its remarkable overseas empire, "France's history shows curious changes from continental to oceanic tendencies and back again" (Haushofer in Parker, 1985, Location No. 1649), but that "France, like Germany, did not really understand the importance of the sea and that continental considerations had invariably taken over the oceanic ones". (Parker, 1985, Location No. 1649). According to Pascal Gauchon, French president Charles De Gaulle saw France's rapprochement with Germany after the Second World War as natural, as both countries were continental powers, as opposed to the UK-US axis which represented the two maritime powers (Gauchon, 2012, p. 37). For Olivier Kempf, France's predominantly continental character since the end of the Second World War is due as much to US supremacy on the world seas as to its orientation towards EU integration (Kempf in Billard, 2013). Nevertheless, France's strategic interests today are, in good part, still focused on the Mediterranean, Africa, the Pacific and the Antilles.

According to the French geopolitician Pierre Verluise, the world economic crisis in 2008 was a geopolitical turning point for France. It shifted the central strategic role France had held since the end of the Second World War in favour of Germany. This was evident in 2009, when France sacrificed the traditional strategic and military autonomy it had enjoyed since 1960, when de Gaulle withdrew from the NATO Command Structure, by rejoining the Alliance at the NATO Summit in Strasbourg and Kehl (Verluise, 2012). It was an important strategic shift; as Verluise stresses, since 2008 France had started to balance between an economically dominant Germany and the UK (Verluise, 2012). The military and strategic rapprochement could be seen in regard to nuclear capabilities, as codified in the 2010 French-UK Strategic Treaty (France-UK Treaty, 2010). It was further manifested in 2011, when France, together with the UK and with the support of the US, toppled the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi (Verluise, 2012). This intervention, followed by another, less noticeable one

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<sup>4</sup> *Spykman saw France as a continental power (Spykman, 1944, p. 4).*

in Mali in 2012<sup>5</sup>, provided the French military with the opportunity to reassert the country's position in the world and, at the same time, increase French influence in North Africa.

However, since the Crimea crisis in 2014, it seems that France has become more attentive to Russia and closer to Germany. It is interesting that after the terrorist attack on 13 November 2015 in Paris, which turned France's attention even more to the South, France did not invoke NATO's famous Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, but went to the EU for support, based on Article 42, Paragraph 7, of the Lisbon Treaty. Moreover, the French president at the time, Francois Hollande, talked to the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, on how the two countries might cooperate in the fight against terrorism, which Hollande explicitly stated at the NATO Summit in Warsaw (Le Monde, 2016).

It seems that France does not perceive a major threat to its strategic interests emanating from Russia, but rather from the South and South-East, which geographically coincide with its traditional areas of interest: Levant (Syria, Lebanon), the Western Mediterranean and North Africa. At the same time, France must be able to rely on a politically and financially strong EU as its geopolitical platform, which it influences substantially. However, to continue to do so, it must carry out structural changes in its economy, as was the case with Germany, otherwise it could face significant financial difficulties which would leave France in a slightly more junior position towards an economically stable Germany (Verluisse, 2012). With the UK leaving the EU, France is being drawn even closer to a financially stable Germany, as their common strategic interest is to politically sustain the ever-weaker EU and the Eurozone.

## 1.2 Germany

Germany does not have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, but has recently adopted an official position expressing its wish to acquire one in the future (White Paper on Defence, 2016, p. 63). It is predominately a continental power, traditionally oriented towards Central and Eastern Europe and partially towards Anatolia and the Middle East. According to Mackinder, "Germany occupies the central strategic position in Europe" (Mackinder, 1904, p. 436). Lying on the North European plain, its East-West openness puts it in the vulnerable strategic position of potentially being overrun from two sides. Avoiding two fronts at the same time was the permanent aim of Bismarck's<sup>6</sup> strategic thinking. To do so, it needed a strong army and a skilled diplomacy. This was well reflected in Bismarck's statement that "Prussia (and later Germany) was an armed camp in the middle of the plains and its only effective frontiers were its armies" (Parker, 1985, Location No. 1026). Today's Germany draws its strategic thinking from the times of Bismarck, from the

<sup>5</sup> *In January 2012, a rebellion against Mali's central government began, which was later taken over by islamists. Based on an official request from the Malian interim government, a French military operation was launched in Mali.*

<sup>6</sup> *Otto von Bismarck was Germany's first Chancellor, from 1871 to 1890.*

Weimar Republic, and from its reestablishment as West Germany in 1949. Since its reunification with the former East Germany in 1990 and the end of the Cold War it has again become a major European power; today, according to World Bank data from 2015, it is the fifth economy in the World<sup>7</sup> and is by far the largest economy in Europe (The World Bank, 2017). As a country with few natural resources and at the same time gigantic exports due to its industrial production, it is in Germany's interest to have good political relationships with both Russia and the US while preserving its strategic axis with France and thus with the EU, especially as the EU represents its most important market. According to Friedman, "Germany's strategy is still locked in the EU paradigm. However, if the EU paradigm becomes unsupportable, then other strategies will have to be found" (Friedman, 2012, para 27). Friedman does not exclude even a possible future German alliance with Russia (Friedman, 2012, para 27).

Germany has faced various challenges in the last decade, which it did not anticipate and which were neither beneficial for the geostrategic environment it belongs to, nor for its prospects for further industrial and economic development.

The first was the intervention in Libya in 2011 in which Germany, unlike France, deliberately did not participate. That was very different from the French-German unity over the Iraqi war in 2003, when neither of the two countries participated.

The second event was the Crimea crisis and Ukraine conflict starting in 2014, when Germany's reactions were quite reserved; it displayed a rather moderate stance with regard to Russia when compared to its neighbours and Allies in the region, such as Poland, the Baltic States or Romania. Even though Germany aligned itself fully with the US with regard to the Ukraine crisis, it has always toned down those voices who advocated a stronger stance against Russia. The German White paper on Defence summed it up by emphasising that Germany will "promote in NATO a dual approach to Russia, consisting of credible deterrence and defence capability as well as a willingness to engage in dialogue and attempts at cooperative security" (White Paper on Defence, 2016, p. 69).

At the same time, Germany's Eastern neighbourhood, Poland, the Baltic States and Romania, found themselves between the two major players of continental Europe, Germany and Russia. These are the same countries which, at the time of the Second Iraqi war in 2003, lent their support to the US-led coalition in invading Iraq and which Donald Rumsfeld<sup>8</sup> called the "New Europe" (Baker, 2003, para 1). It became evident that the New Europe has become a kind of a buffer zone which separated Germany from Russia and which, at the same time, counted heavily on the support of Washington (and London) rather than on that of Berlin or Paris (Friedman, 2015). But Rumsfeld's term "New Europe" has deeper geopolitical roots emanating from the

<sup>7</sup> *Russia being the 6<sup>th</sup>, France 9<sup>th</sup>, the UK 10<sup>th</sup>. The US is ahead of Germany, being the 2<sup>nd</sup>, while China is the 1<sup>st</sup>.*

<sup>8</sup> *US Defence Secretary between 2001 and 2006.*

Polish President Marshal Jozef Pilsudski's geostrategic concept of the Intermarium<sup>9</sup> and its geopolitical project of Prometheism<sup>10</sup>. "The geopolitical strategies of Prometheism and Intermarium were developed in Poland at the beginning of the 20th century as a counterweight to Russian political aspirations" (Črnčec, 2010, p. 37). During the interbellum period, and especially after the end of the Polish-Soviet War in 1921, Pilsudski's plan of Intermarium came to a halt. What remained of it was partly reflected in the Polish-Romanian alliance which lasted until the fall of Poland in 1939. It was not until the end of the Cold War that the idea re-emerged in the shape of the Višegrad Group countries<sup>11</sup>. The latest initiative even encompasses the countries between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas, also known as the "Three Seas Initiative"<sup>12</sup>. It may have the potential to evolve into a new geostrategic reality between Germany and Russia. Taking into account the current security situation in Europe, both initiatives, the Višegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative, fit well into traditional UK geostrategic thinking, based on Mackinder.

The next major event occurred in 2015; the massive influx of Muslim migrants to Germany prompted by the ongoing war in Syria. The security ramifications were immediately visible, beginning with the incidents in Cologne on the Eve of the 2016 New Year, and continuing with attacks across the country during the following few months. Most of those attacks were reported as religiously oriented, and the perpetrators labelled as Muslim radicals. The spillover effect of such events could, however, be far-reaching, as it could carry the seeds of change into German and European political life, leading to the radicalization of the internal political spectrum.

All these challenges have made Germany think about its future position in a geostrategic context that has suddenly become fragile. Germany's strategy still views the EU geostrategic platform, together with NATO, as its cornerstone, and that has been clearly reflected in the latest White Paper on Defence, issued in July 2016. In that paper Germany reiterated that its "security is based on a strong and resolute North Atlantic Alliance" and that Germany is "working towards strengthening NATO's European pillar to increase the capacity for action of NATO and the EU." (White Paper, 2016, p. 138). It is explicitly stated that "the long-term goal of German security policy is to create a European Security and Defence Union" (White Paper,

<sup>9</sup> *Intermarium was a plan pursued after World War I by Polish President Jozef Pilsudski, which would include the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland), Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia.*

<sup>10</sup> *Prometheism was a political project of Josef Pilsudski, the aim of which was to weaken the Soviet Union by supporting nationalist independence movements among the major non-Russian peoples that lived within the borders of Russia and the Soviet Union.*

<sup>11</sup> *The Višegrad Group (or V4), established in 1991 in the Hungarian town of Višegrad, currently consists of four European Union member states: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. The V4 is a political alliance within the EU with the aim of advancing military, economic and energy cooperation between these countries.*

<sup>12</sup> *Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia agreed in Dubrovnik, Croatia in 2016 to establish the Three Seas Initiative (the countries between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas), which geographically also resembles Pilsudski's Intermarium project.*

2016, p. 179). Notably though, the White Paper also states that the country is ready “not only to assume responsibility in international security policy but also to play a substantial and leading role” (White Paper, 2016, p. 139). This signals a shift for Germany, which “has tread softly in global and military affairs since World War II” (Johnson, 2016, para 4). Moreover, with the UK leaving the EU, Germany may focus more on the EU to increase the visibility of the Common Security and Defence Policy to better balance its strategic interests within NATO and vis-à-vis Russia.

### 1.3 The United Kingdom

The UK is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power. It is predominantly a maritime power and, as such, oriented towards the sea. Although it used to control the world’s seas, traditionally it has primarily focused on the Atlantic (West) and the North Sea (North); its security, though, has always been interlinked with developments in continental Europe. The UK’s security was best explained by Mackinder a century ago; according to him, its security is “dependent on the preservation of a power equilibrium between the maritime and continental states of the world island (Eurasia). If either of the two gained the ascendancy, the whole continent would be dominated and the pivot area controlled by the single power. It was therefore the task of British foreign policy to prevent any integration of power on the continent of Europe and, particularly, to see that nothing would lead to an effective military alliance between Germany and Russia,” (Mackinder in Spykman, 1944, pp. 36-37).

The strategic situation evolved with the First and Second World Wars. The UK was on the winning side of both Wars, but gradually lost its empire and world influence, mainly to the US. To compensate for this loss, the UK has retained special relations with the US. With European integration becoming more and more attractive, the UK decided to join the then European Economic Community in 1973, immediately followed by its strategic entourage, Ireland and Denmark. Ever since, the UK has provided a permanent transatlantic link and has represented a (strategic) bridge between the EU and the US.

The UK has, throughout its EU membership, objected to the idea of an ever-closer political union, and has never joined the Eurozone or the Schengen area, even though the Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair played with the idea. In 2009, the EU Lisbon Treaty entered into force, including for the very first time in EU history the possibility for a member state to withdraw. With the 2008 financial crisis and its severe ramifications leading to an economic recession across the EU, including in the UK (Van Reenen, 2016), the political atmosphere, especially on the right side of the political spectrum, became ever more Eurosceptic. This prompted the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, to make a political pledge in 2013 to hold a referendum on his country’s EU membership (The Economist, 2016). In June 2016, a majority of voters decided to leave the EU (Brexit).



It is difficult to predict the repercussions of Brexit for the EU integration project, but it certainly represents a game-changer at the strategic level. Most probably the UK will define a special relationship with the EU, as it is too big to be strategically and economically overlooked. Nevertheless, in the long run, the UK could slowly start to distance itself from continental Europe. In this respect, it could start searching for new strategic partnerships around the globe, and view the EU as an entity towards which it could apply Mackinder's old strategic paradigm, the balance of powers.

#### 1.4 The United States

The US entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the sole remaining superpower in the world, after the Soviet Union had collapsed ten years earlier. This was a triumphant and unique geostrategic position, which could hardly have been predicted at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power, the US expanded its political and economic influence across the globe, which was mirrored in its boosted economy and consistent economic growth throughout the '90s. Spykman characterised the US geopolitical position as being "surrounded geographically by the Eurasian land mass plus the continents of Africa and Australia" (Spykman, 1944, p. 33). Based on that, Spykman claimed that it was in the US's interest to exercise control of the two oceans which divide it from both shores of that land mass and adjacent territories (in particular, the European peninsula and East Asia-Pacific). For this reason, US is in its essence primarily a maritime power, similar to the UK.

Since the end of the Cold War four key events have steered US strategic thinking. At the turn of the century, the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York shifted US strategy towards the War on Terror and interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. The Arab Spring revolutions in North Africa in 2010-2012 resulted in intervention in Libya in 2011 and in the same year sparked a civil war in Syria. The appearance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 contributed to an overall deterioration of the situation in a region strategically important for all players, including the US, due to its rich oil and gas reserves.

The global economic crisis, which began with the collapse of Lehman Brothers at the New York stock exchange in 2008, represents the second key event that has had economic as well as geopolitical consequences for the US and worldwide. The evolution of this crisis, with global ramifications, has been well captured by George Friedman: "The financial crisis became an economic malaise. The economic malaise created a social crisis. The social crisis generated a global political crisis. The class that had absorbed the existential blow of 2008 turned on the elite and their values. The elite, focused obsessively on their interests and ideology, failed to notice the revolt" (Friedman, 2016, para 11). This revolt was "manifested in the election of Donald Trump in the US, Brexit in the UK and the rise of numerous radical political parties across Europe" (Friedman, 2016, para 11).

In 2012, the US Strategic Guidance was issued, where the US declared it wanted to rebalance its strategic focus from Europe to East Asia and the Pacific (US Strategic Guidance, 2012, page 2). The US has deepened its military engagement and cooperation in the region, especially with Japan and South Korea. In 2014, the Crimea crisis and the war in Ukraine forced the US to acknowledge that rebalancing in East Asia and the Pacific could not be done without leaving Europe unprotected, especially in times when both shores of Spykman's Eurasian land mass had once again become unstable.

Today, the US is trying to contain Russia in Eastern Europe and limit its influence in the Middle East, while at the same time trying to contain China in the South China Sea, and to manage the unfolding security situation in the Middle East and North Africa. This was clearly recognized in the latest US National Military Strategy (Military Strategy, 2015), which also calls for an overhaul of the nuclear arsenal, in response to Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling (Davidson, 2015). And yet, Spykman's Rimland theory as a basis for Truman's doctrine is still relevant to contemporary US strategy, which aims to contain the Eurasian heartland through various alliances which the US is trying to reinvigorate, mainly by strengthening its forces in the eastern parts of NATO in Europe and by deepening military cooperation with its allies in East Asia and the Pacific. This was clearly underlined in the new US National Security Strategy of 2015, where it is stated that the US will further "advance its rebalance to Asia and the Pacific" and at the same time "strengthen its enduring alliance with Europe" (US National Security Strategy, 2015, pp. 24-25).

## 1.5 Russia

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was recognized as its legal successor, and thus became a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power. Mackinder stated that the Heartland and the pivot area of the world's island lies in Russia, and thus "in the world at large Russia occupies the central strategic position held by Germany in Europe. She can strike on all sides and be struck from all sides, save the north" (Mackinder, 1904, p. 436). Russia, therefore, represents a true land power to both Mackinder and Spykman.

In the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia went through a difficult political and economic period, where military and strategic issues were not given priority status. In 1999, though, three events changed the geopolitical, and consequently the geostrategic, course of Russia. The first was the NATO bombardment of Serbia (then Yugoslavia), which showed that Russia was not capable of protecting its historical ally Serbia. This was followed by the Second Chechnya War, where Russia symbolically halted the trend of fragmentation. The third event, late that year, was the appointment of Vladimir Putin, by then President Boris Yeltsin, as Acting President of the federation, which proved to be a grand strategic change in the geopolitical stance of the country.

The change was not apparent until the war in Georgia broke out in 2008. It became a fact with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Ukraine. With its entry into the war in Syria in 2015, Russia showed the West its ability to actively project power not only to its near neighbours, but also to the Middle East and the Mediterranean; that is well beyond the Heartland, into Spykman's Rimland. From the Russian viewpoint, this change could be a consequence of Ukraine leaving its neutral status and moving towards the EU (and possibly NATO)<sup>13</sup> which, in a potential conflict with the West (NATO), would represent a loss of strategic depth for Russia. This strategic depth lies, according to Friedmann, west of the "line from St. Petersburg to Rostov-on-Don" (Friedman, 2016, para 4). He also states that "it should be no surprise then that Russia's national strategy is to move its frontier as far west as possible. The first tier of countries on the European Peninsula's eastern edge, the Baltics, Belarus, and Ukraine, provide depth from which Russia can protect itself, and also provide additional economic opportunities. In the south, the focus is on the Caucasus." (Friedman, 2016, para 19).

After the 2014 events in Crimea, Russia was reported to be in violation of its obligations under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987 (NATO, 2014). At the same time, though, Russian officials openly declared that the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty of 1989 was dead, and Russia "continued a large-scale comprehensive defence build-up in areas ranging from space and counter-space to submarine and ground forces as well as nuclear forces" (Blank, 2015, para 1).

At the end of 2015, Russia announced its new National Security Strategy, where a comprehensive view of how Russia sees the world around it and its strategic position is well described, and where one might notice elements of Mackinder's and Spykman's schools of thought. In this document, Russia perceives itself as a main unifier of Eurasia. In this respect, it sees "the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union as a new stage of integration in the Eurasian space" (Russian Security Strategy, para 91). The idea of Russia being an Eurasian power comes from "the most stable geopolitical school in Russia, the Eurasian school, founded by brothers George and Evgeny Trubetskoi at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its basic idea is that Russia is neither Europe nor Asia, but Eurasia. The contemporary leader of this school is Aleksandr Dugin" (Črnčec, 2010, p. 37), an influential scholar, whose ideas are respected by the current Russian president, Vladimir Putin.

According to the new Security Strategy, new threats to Russian national security emanate through "the policy of containing Russia" (Russian Security Strategy, para 12) by the US and its allies. In this context "further expansion of NATO, and the location of its military infrastructure closer to Russian borders are creating a threat to its national security" (Russian Security Strategy, para 15). Therefore, one of the

<sup>13</sup> Russia expressed its reservations in 2004, when former Warsaw pact countries entered NATO, and especially the Baltic States, which were, till 1991, part of the Soviet Union.

key long-term strategic goals is “consolidating Russia’s status as a leading world power” (Russian Security Strategy, para 30) through a “process of shaping a new polycentric model of the world order” (Russian Security Strategy, para 13) coupled with an “all-embracing partnership and strategic cooperation with China” (Russian Security Strategy, para 93). With regard to Europe and the EU, Russia will seek to “consolidate a mutually beneficial cooperation and the formation in the Euro-Atlantic region of an open system of collective security” (Russian Security Strategy, para 13).

Another crucial moment which changed the strategic situation in favour of Russia was the failed attempted military coup in July 2016 in Turkey. Turkish President Erdoğan publicly accused the US government of backing the coup attempt, and started to strategically approach Russia. A first step in this rapprochement had already been made in 2013, when Erdoğan, frustrated with the slow-moving and demanding EU accession process, appealed to Putin to allow Turkey into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Erdemir & Zilberman, 2016). This process turned Russia into a major player in the strategically important Black Sea region, and helped it spread its geopolitical influence into the heart of the Middle-East and thus Spykman’s Rimland.

## 2 STRATEGIC SHIFTS IN EUROPE

It seemed that, up to the world financial crisis in 2008, the EU and the whole European continent, including its Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods, were stable regions. Yet, with the Greek debt crisis and NATO’s Bucharest Summit, Europe’s Pandora’s box had opened again, as it has done so many times throughout history. The former sparked the lack of trust in European institutions, while the latter is linked to NATO’s decision that “Georgia and Ukraine will become members of NATO” (NATO Summit Declaration, 2008, para 23), which could be interpreted as a possible “*causis belli*” for the War in Georgia in 2008, by which Russia indicated its opposition to any further enlargement of NATO.

Developments in Ukraine since 2014 could be seen as a Russian geostrategic reaction, a push-back against the EU and NATO, enabled by the EU’s internal weakness, including the divergent views on Russia among the EU Member States, but also among the European Allies of NATO. The reasons lay partly in the new geopolitical economy or geo-economics, based on Russian oil and gas pipeline projects, and partly in the re-emergence of classical geopolitics, based on the Heartland and Rimland theories, which had been frozen since the end of the Cold War.

Germany clearly sees itself as a new great power, officially expressed in the new White Book on defence. Relations with Russia have been always high on its agenda. The Nord-Stream gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea, which connected the two countries, directly increased their mutual economic interdependence and tied the bonds between the two. Germany’s relations with France have been strategically important since the end of the Second World War, so great attention has been given

to the EU, a mutual platform for stability, trust and economic cooperation for both countries. At the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine, the similar positions of Germany and France towards Russia could be seen.

France is traditionally focused on the Mediterranean and North Africa, as the War in Libya in 2011 and the intervention of French forces in Mali have clearly shown. It is also a core EU Member State and, for the time being, its bond with Germany is strong. It seems that France's main preoccupation is preserving its internal security against the radicalization of its Muslim population, and it does not perceive a major threat coming from Russia. However, it also seems that France's position could shift towards closer ties with London, if Germany becomes too strong within the EU.

For the UK, Eastern Europe is a crucial territory which should serve as a buffer zone to prevent strong Russian links with Germany, and here Pilsudski's Intermarium comes into contemporary geostrategic play. Only an economically and militarily strong Central Europe, based on the Višegrad countries (mainly Poland) plus Romania could physically and geostrategically cut direct links between Moscow and Berlin. But these countries cannot act alone, without a strong strategic back-up from the US and the UK. As to the UK's strategic alliance with the US, it is long-established, as both are traditionally maritime powers. Another factor that might influence the UK is its future strategic stance outside the EU. Based on Mackinder, it is possible that the UK might endorse its traditional geostrategic principle, the balance of powers.

A common goal for all five countries is to fight Islamic terrorism. A stronghold of Islamists is currently ISIS. However, due to strategic moves by the big players, ISIS has gained enough manoeuvring space to start influencing the strategic game itself. The clearest example was the migrant crisis and ability of jihadi fighters to infiltrate the migrants and, together with domestic European jihadi cells, carry out several attacks in 2015 and 2016 (France, Belgium and Germany). These attacks have contributed to a growing radicalization of Europe's political spectrum, which might, in the long run, threaten the current predominant centrist political powers in Europe. All this, coupled with Europe's dependence on Turkey's willingness to stop the migrants in 2015, showed that the EU is clearly having difficulties handling problems of such magnitude. It has become evident that various countries (such as Turkey or Russia) can politically intimidate the EU and thus France and Germany. The feeling of a politically as well as economically fragile union was successfully used during the Brexit referendum campaign in June 2016. With the UK decision to leave the EU comes a fear that the UK, as a future non-EU member state, might find itself in a similar position to two important EU neighbours, Russia and Turkey, when it comes to its power to influence EU decision-making. It cannot be excluded that, in the future, the UK could find itself on a different strategic footing with regard to key political and security questions in Europe.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to show that the world we are living in has changed drastically since the end of the Cold War, and especially since the 2014 Crimea crisis. History has reminded us, time and again, that classical geopolitical dynamics repeat. Today we are living in times of an accelerated geopolitical transition from the post-Cold War unipolar system towards a new strategic architecture in the making. Based on this assumption, the author sees the following geostrategic vectors which are appearing in Europe.

The first is the US-UK or the “Atlantic” vector, with the two (maritime) powers in the lead, encompassing the Scandinavian and Central and Eastern European countries between the Baltic and the Black Seas, in particular the three Baltic States, Poland and Romania. The countries between the Baltic and Black Seas (and possibly the Adriatic Sea), also known as the Intermarium, serve as a counterbalance towards potential Russian expansion towards the West and, at the same time, as a geostrategic corridor towards the Black and Caspian Seas, areas of special US strategic interest. They also represent the new core of NATO and have raised their defence budgets, fearing a resurgent Russia. The countries of the Intermarium might be seen in the future as an autonomous power axis within Europe, but for the foreseeable future, the author sees them as a bastion of the “Atlantic” axis, whose key mission is exercising containment towards Russia as well as against Russian potential future links to Germany.

The second vector is the “EU” vector, based on the France-Germany (continental) axis, which represents the core of the EU. Italy, and possibly the Benelux countries, could be associated with this vector, as they could serve as a regulator in a permanent process of searching for a fine balance between Paris and Berlin. Regardless of the rest of the EU member states, the fate of the EU depends solely on France and Germany and their willingness to retain and deepen the Union. Having said that, the EU will exist as long as French and German geopolitical interests coincide. One should not forget that those interests also depend on the geostrategic and geoeconomic environment, two interlinked variables whose dynamics are difficult to predict but will certainly shape the future strategic landscape of Europe.

The third vector is the “Eurasian (continental) vector”, based on the Russia-China axis, where Russia is geostrategically focused on the European and Middle East regions, and China on Asia, East-Asia and the Pacific regions. In Mackinder’s and Spykman’s language we could say that this vector represents the Heartland trying to penetrate the Rimland through various points, Europe, the Middle East (Turkey and Syria) and East-Asia and the Pacific (South China Sea), in order to obtain a hegemony over Eurasia and to challenge US supremacy on both shores of the two oceans.

An additional fourth vector cannot be ruled out, that is, a combination of the EU and Eurasian vectors resulting in a “Trans-Eurasian” vector. In this case, the Franco-German axis would be extended to Russia and possibly even to China. This scenario

of the united continental powers of Eurasia would, following Mackinder's theory, be a true existential threat to the UK as well as to the "Atlantic" vector, which the US and the UK would most probably try to prevent. The collision points between the "Trans-Eurasian" and "Atlantic" vectors would be the countries between the Baltic and Black Seas (the Intermarium region), most probably Poland and/or Romania.

A crucial strategic point, where the interests of all these vectors could collide, is the Middle East, including Turkey. The wider Middle East region, extended to Iran and the Central Asian countries, rich in natural gas and oil, represents a crucial territory which the "Atlantic" and the "Eurasian" oriented vectors will try to control. It is, therefore, a potential geostrategic collision point, and a direct security challenge for the EU and, hence, for France and Germany.

The EU has found itself today amid these strategic shifts, internally divided, and sensitive to external influences. Its core changed in 2016, from the Paris-Berlin-London triangle being reduced to the Paris-Berlin axis as a new core "EU" vector. The very existence of the EU and the "EU vector" might depend on this axis being preserved. This will depend, however, on what will be the economic and consequently the political balance within the axis itself. Should Germany become too powerful and France run into a financial and economic downturn, their mutual relations would be greatly challenged by a critical impact on the future of the common European integration project.

The direction of the strategic shifts presented in this article is still unclear; yet it is evident that the trend of a transition towards a new strategic architecture in Europe and in the World is underway. Peace and stability in Europe is no longer something we can take for granted. The next decade will be crucial for Europeans to show how much they have learned from past experience, as all kinds of conflicts from within and without will shape the future of the continent we are living in.

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