Special Report

How the war in Ukraine is shaping Europe’s geopolitical ambitions

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As Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine approaches the one-year mark with no end in sight, there are hints at how the outcome of the war could transform the global order.

What lessons did European policymakers learn from the first year of the war? How can support for Ukraine be sustained long-term? Will Kyiv’s accession towards the EU accession gain speed? And can Europe wean itself off decade-long dependencies?

EURACTIV goes beyond the headlines to look at how Russia’s war has already affected the EU’s position in the world, Ukraine’s post-war future and the new geopolitical rivalries that are emerging.
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As the one-year anniversary of Russia’s invasion nears, Kyiv and its Western allies are looking at how to keep up sustained long-term support. To do so, this could see the EU entering unchartered territories.

Sustaining Ukraine’s fight and EU unity while keeping the war from escalating into a potentially disastrous global conflict is one of the bloc’s biggest foreign policy challenges to date.

Ukraine said its forces had repelled Russian assaults along the length of the front line on the eve of the war’s anniversary, as President Vladimir Putin, empty-handed after a bloody winter offensive, talked up Russia’s nuclear arsenal.

“We will continue to do whatever it takes to defend Ukraine’s freedom,” EU’s chief diplomat Josep Borrell told EURACTIV at the beginning of this year.

“[Russia’s President Vladimir] Putin underestimated the EU’s and our partners’ powerful reaction and the unity we have demonstrated after his invasion, and this unity is one of our main assets,” Borrell said.

But while the EU seems now to be on firmer footing, European officials and diplomats worry that
unity is fragile.

Sanctions and how to keep them

Since Russia invaded Ukraine the bloc’s member states have started to systematically cut all economic ties via nine sanctions packages adopted by EU leaders.

The proposed tenth “anniversary” package includes trade curbs worth more than €11 billion, according to the European Commission, barring EU exports to Russia of tech equipment and spare parts that could be used on the battlefield.

But while EU member states have shown unprecedented unity in their sanctions policy toward Russia – albeit with a few hiccups here, here and here – the question of when the bloc might reach ‘peak unity’ on sanctions remains.

Arms and ammo: ‘As long as it takes’, but how?

If there’s a question mark over how long Russia can keep fighting the war in Ukraine, it’s also unclear how quickly Ukraine can get what it needs to shorten Moscow’s time.

As Ukraine is pressed to defend against a potential Russian offensive towards spring, the biggest constraint on the Ukrainian side will be the availability of materials such as armoured vehicles and ammunition.

A Ukraine Defence Contact Group meeting in January broke the NATO member states’ taboo of delivering heavy ground combat capabilities, but so far, the number of Western-made tanks that have reached Ukrainian soil remains low.

As Europeans have moved from breaking the bloc’s defence taboos, one after the other, support for the joint purchase of ammunition is gaining traction among EU member states.

Now, EU officials and diplomats agree that it seems more a matter of when and how, not if, the Commission will be granted the powers to negotiate ammunition contracts on behalf of the bloc’s member states.

According to a proposal by Estonia earlier this month, the bloc should pool resources to accelerate ammunition production and deliveries to Ukraine in a mechanism akin to the one used during the COVID-19 pandemic to jointly acquire vaccines.

EU foreign ministers discussing the idea on Monday (20 February) said there is little time to waste, with the bloc’s officials and diplomats mostly agreeing such an approach would be more efficient and cost-effective than member states placing orders individually.

“Our immediate priority remains to deliver to Ukraine. Time is of the essence,” the EU’s chief diplomat Josep Borrell wrote in a letter to EU member states, seen by EURACTIV, a day later, urging them to send Kyiv ammunition from their own, current stocks immediately.

Borrell confirmed the EU is working on proposals to
jointly procure ammunition, ramp up production capacity and refill stocks. One option on the table is the European Peace Facility, the EU’s intergovernmental weapons kitty currently used to reimburse member states for their military support to Ukraine.

In parallel, the EU is also looking into setting up joint procurement projects, including on ammunition, through the European Defence Agency (EDA).

An options paper is expected when the bloc’s defence ministers meet in two weeks in Stockholm, with EU senior officials stressing the matter is “treated with utmost urgency” and “needs to be resolved in a matter of weeks”.

But with needs on the rise and European support adopting an ‘as long as it takes’ mentality, some European diplomats have started to suggest a shift when it comes to Western responsibility.

“With the growing amount of more sophisticated Western weapons we’ll be providing to Ukraine in the long run, there will need to be a discussion about our say how this war ends,” one Western European diplomat told EURACTIV in Munich, speaking on condition of anonymity.

**Peace plans multiply**

In the run-up to the anniversary, there’s a flurry of diplomatic activity both in Russia and the West, with the singular focus on weapons deliveries starting to shift towards consideration of a post-war order.

Zelenskyy first announced his 10-point peace formula, supported by the EU, at the G20 summit in Bali last November, urging world leaders to hold a Global Peace Summit based on it.

But others are weighing into the post-war peace discussion, too.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak surprised some of his counterparts last weekend at the Munich Security Conference with a bold but vague proposal for a new “charter” to assure Ukraine’s long-term security.

China announced support for peace talks, which will come in the form of a position paper on the political settlement of the war.

President Xi Jinping is expected to make a “peace speech” on Friday, but Ukraine says there can be no talk of peace while Russian troops occupy its territory.

For Ukraine, however, it is clear that it will not agree to any peace plan “at any price” as past experience has shown that no compromises are possible with Russia.

“No concessions, no compromises are possible, not over the smallest square metre,” Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told reporters in Munich over the weekend, adding it would be in Ukraine’s interest that China plays a role in the search for peace, but that its territorial integrity is not negotiable.

After Munich, Beijing’s chief diplomat Wang Yi met Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow on Thursday (23 February), in the first visit by a top Chinese official since Russia’s invasion.

“The sequence is interesting because in Munich Yi met with a number of Western high-level officials including Blinken, Borrell and Kuleba, going only afterwards to Moscow, not before,” one EU diplomat, who was present at the Munich Security Conference, pointed out.

A European Commission spokesperson said that the EU would “not have all elements to evaluate the [Chinese] peace
plans”.

**Accession talks with meaning**

For Ukraine, EU accession efforts go in parallel with the country’s war efforts. For the EU, this year will be about deciding how hard it is going to fight to keep Ukraine in its sphere.

On the issue of the EU membership bid, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy voiced hopes Kyiv could start opening “the dialogue about our future within the EU” this year, not least because it is a way of motivating Ukraine’s armed forces.

“We are not starting from scratch here,” Igor Zhovkva, Zelenskyy’s foreign policy advisor, told EURACTIV after the summit.

“Large parts of the Association Agreement have been implemented, and now we have the EU-Ukraine action plan of integrated sectors and economic growth – this is about concrete things, and it’s irreversible,” Zhovkva said.

“De facto, everybody understands Ukraine already belongs to the EU – Ukrainians are working in the EU, economies are integrated, there’s visa-free travel...,” he added.

“After the victory of Ukraine, the geopolitical circumstances will change severely, and so will the political decisions,” Zhovkva concluded.

But while Zelenskyy received a hero’s welcome in Brussels earlier this month, EU leaders remain cautious about making accession promises.

Provided that positive progress is noted in those reports, some EU officials and diplomats say that there could be two crucial summits.

One in October (26-27), which could formally discuss the accession matter for the first time, and the other in December (15-16), which could see EU leaders making a decision.

“There are two factors that play in Ukraine’s favour,” an EU senior official with knowledge of the enlargement portfolio told EURACTIV recently.

“First, EU top leaders, and especially Von der Leyen, seem to have tied their legacy to Ukraine’s accession process,” the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said.

“And second, should progress go hand in hand with victory on the battlefield, it will be difficult to say ‘no’ to Kyiv – whether that’s in the short-term, it needs to be seen, but that definitely applies in the long-term,” the official added.
How the Ukraine war is resetting the EU’s institutional balance

By Alexandra Brzozowski | EURACTIV.com

Languages: Français | Deutsch

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine one year ago, the European Commission has slowly started filling the political leadership vacuum increasingly left by the bloc’s member states.

Weeks before Russia’s President Vladimir Putin gave the order to invade Ukraine, European Commission officials, in coordination with the US, the UK and Canada, started working to draw up sanctions against Moscow.

The EU executive, in consultation with member states, subsequently drafted ambitious proposals for the ten subsequent packages. But despite the speed of work on the first stage of sanctions, not all member states agreed.

Shortly after the EU decided to break the ‘taboo’ of financing the purchase and delivery of weapons
to Ukraine, the Commission took the unprecedented step of assisting coordinate and fund member states’ weapons deliveries.

Most strikingly, however, the executive began to play a central role in pushing for Ukraine's EU membership bid – something that the Juncker Commission's 'no enlargement in the near future' line had been deemed unthinkable.

It was the first ever European Commission-to-government consultations in an active war zone, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy welcomed the EU executive's delegation of more than half of the bloc's Commissioners in a heavily fortified Gorodetsky House in central Kyiv earlier this month, where he pressed them to advance his war-torn country's accession to the bloc.

‘Technical charisma’

"We might look back at this two, three years from now and see that actually, some major things changed in the way that the European Commission's public policy power is used and utilised to advance political goals," Ricardo Borges de Castro, Head of Europe in the World, European Policy Centre, told EURACTIV.

According to him, the visit showed that the EU's executive is more and more willing to use what former European Commission President José Manuel Barroso used to call the 'technical charisma'.

The Kyiv talks included a discussion of military aid for Ukraine as well as a series of policy agreements that suggest the will for 'progressive integration' into the bloc, such as access for Ukrainian products to the EU single market, extending an EU no-roaming zone to Ukraine and participation in a number of programmes that will allow Ukrainian businesses and agencies to access EU funds.

Beyond sectoral deliverables, symbolism and photo-ops, the format, as several EU officials and diplomats pointed out to EURACTIV, was also a message.

“They are in a race of outbidding each other toward the Ukrainians,” one EU official said about Von der Leyen and European Commission President Charles Michel, just ahead of the planned visit.

Over the past months, member states’ cautious language in declarations and joint statements has started contrasting sharply with the messages that have been coming from within EU institutions, especially from the EU's executive.

Von der Leyen had pledged to bring enlargement back when she arrived at the EU executive's helm, but the promise was side-tracked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine reshuffled the cards.

In June, the European Commission recommended EU candidate status for Ukraine on the understanding that Kyiv undertakes a series of legislative and policy steps, dubbed the seven recommendations.

The EU executive is expected to release its assessment of Ukraine's progress later this year, with an oral presentation of the EU executive's seven reform recommendations expected in spring and the formal enlargement package in autumn.

Provided that positive progress is noted in those reports, some EU officials and diplomats believe the bloc could start discussions on opening accession talks.

Even European Council President Charles Michel hinted that a discussion among EU leaders on accession was likely by the end of the year, pending member states' buy-in.

Centralisation on Ukraine

Most recently, the European Commission's internal so-called Support Group for Ukraine has been turned into a whole new directorate dedicated to the country, focused on reconstruction and accession.

The new directorate would be placed within the EU executive’s DG NEAR, which oversees EU enlargement and the bloc’s relations with its near neighbourhood.

“Over the last year, there has been a lot of rhetoric and not much on substance – this has been changed, now we're structured,” one EU official with knowledge of the matter told EURACTIV.

Separated along three areas of responsibility, the directorate was tasked with coordinating the EU response to Ukraine's
future reconstruction, taking care of economic and sectorial policies and overseeing reforms and monitoring rule of law and corruption efforts.

The purpose is to centralise efforts related to Ukraine and use it as a tool to guide and oversee Kyiv’s accession bid in the long-term, according to sources close to the matter.

**Balance of power**

Some in Brussels, however, believe that the EU executive’s boosted involvement does not come without risks.

“EU top leaders, and especially von der Leyen, seem to have tied their legacy to Ukraine’s accession process,” an EU senior official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said.

“Let’s see whether EU member states are willing to be led by an institution without a democratic mandate,” the official added.

However, Russia’s war in Ukraine has shifted the power centres in Europe.

The bloc is split between emboldened Eastern Europeans, a less-hawkish Western European camp led by France and Germany, a tandem that has become less so after Chancellor Olaf Scholz took over from his predecessor, and a ‘middle-ground camp’.

“The Franco-German tandem, it’s still a combustion engine from a previous period, it doesn’t work properly, but Paris and Berlin will remain fundamental to move the needle forward in many policy areas,” Borges de Castro said.

Asked by EURACTIV about the possibility, that once the crisis situation is over, the European Commission’s new-won competencies would somehow be rolled back, he said such a scenario “would be rather difficult”.

“With the current permacrisis likely to persist, you need to be able to have an institution that is able to handle this on a much broader scope – problems will need to be faced more and more with executive capacity at the EU level,” he said.

While the majority of the EU executive’s staff would want their institution to be less political and more of an ‘honest broker’, the body’s future chiefs at the helm of the institution will need to decide whether to take a risk, Borges de Castro said.

“Especially looking at measures such as the ten sanctions packages, can we imagine a situation such as this without an institution like the Commission? It would have been a disaster,” he added.

“The genie is out of the bottle,” Borges de Castro said.
Retaking control of the Russian-seized Ukrainian territory of Crimea, which Kyiv says it needs to retake to end the war, could soon become a point of divergence between Kyiv and its Western allies.

"It began with Crimea, it will end with Crimea," Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said last August, quoting jailed Crimean activist Nariman Dzhelyal.

The Black Sea peninsula, seized by Russia in 2014, hosts several important Russian military bases, and was one of the launchpads for what Moscow called its "special military operation".

Holding Crimea as well as the seized land bridge from Zaporizhzhia enables the Russian military to threaten Ukrainian positions from the south and gives Russia's Black Sea Fleet a forward base in Sevastopol for carrying out long-range attacks.

Kyiv has repeatedly emphasised
the need to retake the peninsula, affirming it will not abandon efforts to regain control of the region along with the swath of eastern Ukraine and other territories that Moscow’s forces have seized since 24 February.

Since the start of the invasion, the region has come under attack several times – most spectacularly last summer when a series of explosions destroyed a group of warplanes at a Russian naval base.

In recent months, Ukrainian forces have been pushing a counter-offensive in the south towards Crimea and reclaimed Kherson, the capital of the southern territory bordering the annexed peninsula.

With the help of newly promised Western tanks and other Western-made weapons, Ukraine’s armed forces are likely to liberate more territory in the east and south of the country – raising the possibility of an eventual Ukrainian campaign to retake Crimea.

However, Kyiv is missing one thing to achieve the strategic goal: Western-made long-range missiles that are able to shoot 150-300 kilometres directly at the target.

“Crimea is our land, our territory,” Zelenskyy said told the World Economic Forum in Davos last month. “Give us your weapons,” he urged, and Ukraine will retake “what is ours”.

Ukrainian military officials this week warned on the one-year anniversary of the war that Russia is swiftly working to bolster its defence of the Crimean Peninsula.

‘Crimea first’

But is it possible for Ukraine to reclaim Crimea?

“Ukraine has to take Crimea first, this year, before the Donbas,” former commander of US troops in Europe, General Ben Hodges, told EURACTIV, sitting in a Munich cafe holding a strategic map of the country.

“As long as Russia is able to launch planes of rockets, drones out there, or the Black Sea Fleet is able to operate from here, the country will never be safe or secure, or be able to rebuild their economy,” Hodges said.

With the looming threat from Russia’s Black Sea Fleet in Crimea, Ukraine will not be able to use the ports in Mariupol and Odesa.

Contrary to what some sceptical policymakers and analysts say, Hodges believes a Ukrainian military campaign to liberate Crimea is not out of the question.

Provided Western allies would provide all the necessary weapons, primarily long-range missiles, Kyiv could liberate the Black Sea peninsula by the end of summer, he said.

“If you want to accomplish the isolation and then the liberation of Crimea, you need the capability to isolate it – disrupt the main communications between Russia and Crimea, the Kerch bridge and the landbridge – with long-range missiles air strikes on the bridges and ground strikes by a large armoured force,” Hodges said.

According to the general, Ukraine has done well protecting information about its own capabilities and mixed together with equipment pledged by Western allies, it would be enough for such an endeavour.

“If we assume it’s at least three months before the conditions are right – weather, ground and Russians exhausted – that’s three more months to train and practice,” Hodges said.

Western hesitation

The issue, however, has been increasingly posing a dilemma for Western policymakers, despite public assurances of Crimea’s territorial integrity.

Many fear that in a Russian roulette scenario, Putin’s defeat, and especially the liberation of Crimea, may constitute a ‘red line’ and very well prompt him to use nuclear weapons.

Several European NATO members have been cautious on the issue, with Western Europeans, in particular, sceptical of what can realistically be achieved on the battlefield.

They have been wary of going into details about what Ukrainian victory would entail in practice, with many NATO diplomats unwilling to go on record whether Crimea would be included in such plans.

Most recently, NATO’s biggest European members – Germany, France and the UK – have seen stronger ties between NATO and Ukraine as a way to encourage Kyiv to start peace talks with Russia.
later this year, as some of Kyiv’s Western partners have growing doubts over its ability to reconquer all its territory, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Earlier this year, Zelenskyy said Ukraine needed US-made ATACMS missiles, which have a range of roughly 297 kilometres. Washington has so far declined to provide the weapon.

The list of ATACMS users includes South Korea, Poland, Romania, Greece, Turkey, Qatar and Bahrain.

Asked by EURACTIV about Crimea and the possibility of longer-range missiles supplied to Kyiv, NATO’s Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declined to go into military-operational issues.

While he cautiously pointed to the fact that “support has evolved as the war has evolved”, he stressed that the West’s “responsibility is to ensure left Ukraine is capable of defending their own territory – and that’s what we’re doing”.

“Wars are by nature unpredictable, but of course, this war may end at the negotiating table. What we do know is that what happens around that negotiating table is totally dependent on the strength of the battlefield,” he added.

Turning tides

Washington until recently has maintained strategic ambiguity on the issue, with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stating that the goal was merely to give Kyiv the means to “take back territory that has been seized from it since February 24”, not what Russia seized already in 2014.

But the tide seems to be turning across the Atlantic.

The Biden administration has begun to warm to the idea that Ukraine may need to threaten Russia’s foothold on the peninsula to strengthen its negotiating position, even at the risk of escalation, according to the New York Times.

“The United States does not and never will recognize Russia’s purported annexation of the peninsula – Crimea is Ukraine,” the US State Department said in a statement on Sunday (26 February).

“Ukraine is not going to be safe unless Crimea is, at a minimum, demilitarized,” US State Department Undersecretary Victoria Nuland told the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace last week.

“There are command-and-control sites in Crimea that are essential for Russia’s hold on all of the [occupied Ukrainian] territory, including the land bridge,” she said.

“There are mass military installations in Crimea that Russia has turned into essential logistics and back-office depots for this war – those are legitimate targets,” she added.

Jake Sullivan, President Joe Biden’s national security adviser, told NBC’s Meet the Press that it is up to Ukraine to decide what constitutes victory or an acceptable diplomatic outcome, even though no peace negotiations are occurring.
Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has forced the EU to drastically rethink its energy supply and wean itself off Russian fossil fuels. But the EU’s diversification efforts don’t come without new risks.

Russia was traditionally the EU’s key supplier of fossil fuels, with major infrastructure, such as gas and oil pipelines, further tying it into energy from the east. In 2021, Russian exports covered 40% of the EU’s fossil gas, 30% of the EU’s crude oil, and 30% of the EU’s hard coal demand, according to Eurostat.

However, confronted with the reality of fossil payments likely fuelling Russia’s war machine, the bloc ramped up its sanctions and sought alternative ways to meet Europe's energy needs.

“Through our collective efforts, and in solidarity with Ukraine, we have ended our coal imports from Russia, eliminated 90% of Russian oil imports, and pipeline gas
deliveries have fallen significantly,” said Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson, summing up efforts made last year in emailed comments to several media.

An energy divorce

Throughout the first months of the war in Ukraine, one question dominated EU energy industries and member states alike: Will Vladimir Putin turn the gas tap off?

Although Russia had a record of restricting gas flows to Europe as part of past disputes with Ukraine over the years – 2005-06, 2009 and 2017 – many assumed that, because the Kremlin kept supplies flowing throughout the Cold War, it would not resort to cutting off its largest market.

But Russia seized the occasion to weaponise gas flows, first against Warsaw and Sofia, sending a clear signal to other EU countries.

Kremlin-controlled energy firm Gazprom also began to shut off gas supplies through the Nord Stream 1 pipeline to Germany.

While other European countries were still grappling with the challenge of reducing Russia’s lucrative fossil fuel supplies, Lithuania became the first European country to stop all imports of “toxic” Russian gas.

“It was a huge political victory, but also an economic win – it was like we won our independence for the second time because never again would we feel energy blackmail again,” one Lithuanian diplomat recalled for EURACTIV.

“Without a question, if many of our fellow European neighbours would have done this before the war, especially Germany, response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine would have been quicker and bolder,” they added.

Nevertheless, by cutting off gas supplies throughout last year, Moscow forced Europe’s hand and made it lower its dependence. By the end of the year, Russian gas had dropped from forming half of Europe’s imports to under 10%.

Meanwhile, imports of coal and other solid fossil fuels were prohibited in August, with a ban on crude oil and refined petroleum products following – with limited exceptions – coming into force in December and February 2023 respectively.

But despite EU leaders agreeing on an embargo on seaborne Russian oil, any outright ban on gas supplies appears unlikely given how much certain members rely on it.

LNG saves the day

With less energy coming from Russia, the EU needed to make up the gap. This was partly done by increasing fossil gas supplies from foreign partners, maintaining flows through pipelines from Norway and Algeria to the EU at high volumes and marginally increasing flows from Azerbaijan.

Most importantly, the EU secured record volumes of liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports, which increased by 66% from 2021. The US supplied Europe with 42% of its LNG supply last year and is expected to cement its position as a steady source of fuel to Germany and other EU member states.

“By working with reliable
partners, we have been able to swiftly replace most of our imports of Russian coal, oil and gas. This is hurting the Russian economy and helping Ukraine in its valiant war efforts,” Simson said.

The bloc also reduced the amount of gas it required via demand reduction and renewable energy production.

“Our citizens and industries have reduced their gas demand by 20% and we have found alternative supplies from international partners and through investing in new domestic renewables,” Simson said.

What about Russian gas?

Despite all efforts, Europe has not freed itself completely from Russian energy and is still sending money to the country in exchange for supplies. In total, the EU has paid just shy of €140 billion in return for Russian fossil fuels since the start of the war.

Imports of Russian LNG also increased last year, although only marginally.

“If you look at the comparison between 2021 and 2022, it increased by about six billion cubic metres, which is, we’d say, nothing compared to the loss that we had in terms of pipeline gas from Russia,” an EU official told EURACTIV.

Russian LNG will also be excluded from the supplies jointly purchased by EU countries to help secure European energy security, the official added.

While at present it appears politically and morally unfeasible for the EU to ramp up its imports of Russian supplies, it remains a possibility in the long term.

Russian coal and crude oil would be difficult to return to since they fall under EU sanctions or are being otherwise phased out. However, fossil gas currently remains outside the EU’s punitive measures, and despite efforts by Russian hawks Poland and the Baltics, is unlikely to make the sanctions list very soon.

“The contracts haven’t been ended, so technically, there’s a big question and a challenge if Russia decides it wants to send more gas, whether companies will legally have to take it. It’s likely someone will have to step in,” Ben McWilliams, energy and climate consultant at thinktank Bruegel told EURACTIV.

Compared to other energy sources, Russian gas is difficult to send to alternative buyers, due to both the political unpalatability of working with Moscow and sanctions curtailing the possibility of building new LNG storage capacity.

“One thing Russia will really lose out on is technology. Before the war, they were working on new LNG export capacities in the Arctic, but the European energy majors pulled out and there are sanctions on energy technology exports,” McWilliams said.

The ideal would be for Europe never to need Russian fossil fuel supplies again, Lisa Fischer, programme leader at climate think tank E3G, told EURACTIV. According to energy experts, the bloc could replace two-thirds of Russian gas by 2025 by turbocharging renewables and energy efficiency and fully replace it quickly after 2025.

Alongside this, Fischer said that the EU should ensure any money sent abroad for gas supplies is “absolutely necessary and unavoidable” or it is a wasted investment in making domestic industries more efficient and
competitive, insulating homes and boosting renewables.

The EU is already pushing the rollout of more renewables in order to increase its domestic energy production, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and combat high prices. In the long run, this increase should boost its security by making it less reliant on other countries for energy.

“Renewables are the best option to boost our energy security. In 2023, we must focus on getting as much new capacity online as possible,” Simson said.

“2022 was also a record year for renewable energy in the EU. We have added almost 50 gigawatts of new capacity, mostly from wind and solar,” she added.

**China’s creeping influence**

On the other hand, China has stood to gain massively from the energy sanctions, with Moscow supplying around 22 billion cubic metres of gas to the country, delivering 53 million tons of coal and increasing the electricity supply by 33% between January and October last year.

The increase of energy supplies to its neighbour came as part of Russia’s wider ‘pivot to Asia’ strategy to mitigate the economic impact of Western sanctions.

China also poses geopolitical risks for Europe in the acquisition and sale of LNG contracts.

“Lots of gas looks like it came from the US and it did, but along the way, Beijing was involved. China has complete flexibility on whether or not it wants to sell. Last year, it was quite generous in the volumes it sold,” Bruegel’s McWilliams said.

He added that this trend will continue in the coming years, with the country having bought up much of the planned capacity.

“You might move into a world where China is controlling the swing aspect of this market,” he added.

In addition, the strict COVID-19 lockdowns in China over the past year meant there was less demand for gas, leaving more global supply up for grabs from Europe – a situation that is likely to change this year as the country shakes off the pandemic.

Alongside gas supplies, Beijing has a stake in the oil market and exports refined products, like diesel and petrol. The Chinese government sets export quotas on this, so has the ability to unilaterally limit supply.

Beyond fossil fuels, Europe is also heavily reliant on China for solar panels and critical raw materials, something the bloc is likely to address in its upcoming legislative package in March that will look at building EU competitiveness and addressing international supply chains.

“We need to see how the demand in Asia and the weather will evolve,” a second EU official said, adding: “Still, we believe that, in terms of attracting LNG, the EU will remain an attractive market.”

**Beware new dependencies**

As the EU looks for replacements for its energy supply, it needs to avoid falling out of one dependency and into another.

“There’s obviously the risk of creating new dependencies, be it on what is perceived to be friendly countries, like Norway and the US, but also countries that have authoritarian regimes or poor human right track records, like Azerbaijan, Qatar and so we risked obviously strengthening those regimes,” Fischer said.

And it is not just geopolitical risks that should be mitigated by diversification.

“Even if it’s not a political risk, there can be physical damage or weather events that cause shut-offs. Never again being so reliant on one source would be the obvious takeaway,” McWilliams said.

In this respect, LNG would be a viable option as it is based on an international market with several suppliers, McWilliams added.

However, Europe is buying on short-term markets, meaning it is facing more volatility and risk.

Signing long-term contracts would also be difficult as much of the future supply is already bought up and would be difficult to align with Europe's climate goals, which require a drastic reduction in gas use, he warned.
Russia’s growing influence across Africa over the past decade, laid bare by Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine, has sparked significant concern, leaving Europeans struggling to find ways to counter it.

If China measures its influence across Africa through the volume of infrastructure investment, the EU is trying to build a broad political and economic relationship based on trade, investment, aid and technical support from Brussels in exchange for African states doing more to control irregular migration.

Russia’s strategy in Africa, meanwhile, so far has involved a mix of arms sales, political support to its authoritarian leaders and security collaboration at the expense of French influence in the Sahel region and central Africa, typically in exchange for business opportunities and diplomatic support for Russia’s foreign policy preferences.
After four years of neglect under the Trump administration, meanwhile, his successor Joe Biden has begun the process of rebuilding the United States’ influence in Africa.

‘Shuttle diplomacy’

Moscow’s relative popularity in the Global South continues to frustrate observers in the West.

Most recently, weeks where a visit by Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is followed or preceded by high-ranking EU or US administration officials, have become commonplace.

On his first swing through the continent in January, Lavrov visited South Africa, Eswatini, Angola and Eritrea. In a second leg in February, he stopped by Mali, Iraq, Sudan and Mauritania to shore up support for Russia in Africa.

Russia has long used “memory diplomacy” in Africa, but after Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine, these tactics have really started to pay off.

“Russia tries to market itself as an anti-colonial power to Africans, with a huge touch of victim mentality towards the West, which seems to strike many sentiments in the region,” a frustrated EU official admitted.

“What many countries in the region fail to acknowledge, is that Moscow itself has not been falling short of brutal colonialism in its neighbourhood,” the EU official added.

South Africa, meanwhile, has become the most vivid example of the West vying for influence over Russia’s charm offensive on the continent.

“Russia was among the few world powers that neither had colonies in Africa or elsewhere nor participated in [the] slave trade throughout its history. Russia helped, in every possible way, the peoples of the African continent to attain their freedom and sovereignty,” Russia’s embassy in Pretoria tweeted last year, sparking anger in Europe and the United States.

In the span of a few days, Lavrov and US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen as well as the EU’s chief diplomat Josep Borrell paid a visit to the country.

Pretoria has strong historic ties with Moscow dating back to Russia’s support of the African National Congress during the apartheid era and has taken an officially neutral stance on the conflict, to the dismay of Washington and Brussels.

“I very much hope that South Africa, our strategic partner, will use its good relations with Russia and the role it plays in the BRICS group to convince Russia to stop this senseless war,” Borrell then said speaking alongside Pretoria’s Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor.

Earlier, Pandor gave Lavrov a warmer welcome.

Asked by a reporter whether she would repeat the call made by her ministry early last year for Russia to withdraw from Ukraine, she said she would not, noting the massive transfer of arms to Ukraine that had since occurred.

What followed were much-criticized military exercises with China and Russia the month after, to which the EU side responded that Pretoria has the right to follow its own foreign policy, but noted the drills were not what the bloc “would have preferred.”
**Disinformation and food propaganda**

Beyond the diplomatic battle, comes another one.

Russia’s President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly accused the West of being responsible for disrupting the global supply chains – something that has hit African states, which are particularly reliant on wheat and grain imports, harder than most.

The International Monetary Fund has reported that staple food prices in sub-Saharan Africa increased by an average of 23.9% between 2020 and 2022.

EU leaders had appealed to African countries not to fall for a Russia-led propaganda campaign that portrayed the current global food insecurity caused by a disruption to the global supply of grains and fertiliser as the result of Western sanctions against Moscow.

Experts believe a key reason why some pro-Russia disinformation narratives about the war in Ukraine have found resonance, especially in Africa and Southeast Asia is that they have successfully tapped into pre-existing anti-US and anti-West sentiments.

EU officials have called for a more proactive approach to disinformation and propaganda, but so far the bloc has had limited resources to deal with the matter.

““You have to present your truths, and you have to have a plan, and you have to counterattack, because the Russians, very much equalled by the Chinese, are doing that in a very much well-organized manner, as a real battle,” a senior EU official described the bloc’s efforts last summer.

“The global battle of narratives is in full swing and, for now, we are not winning,” EU’s chief diplomat Josep Borrell admitted shortly after.

But the narrative sticks – and is evolving.

Most recently, the EU said it will launch a new platform to counter disinformation campaigns by Russia and China.

Beyond the platform, Borrell also announced he plans to strengthen EU delegations abroad with disinformation experts “so that our voice can be heard better”, in “a long-term battle” that “will not be won overnight”.

“This is one of the battles of our time and this battle must be won,” Borrell stated.

EU missions and operations are increasing “targets” of disinformation and manipulation of information by foreign actors, while EU delegations “face an increased risk of becoming a target of these initiatives, with potential threats putting staff at risk”, a senior EU official told reporters recently.

However, there are indications that African leaders are increasingly
resistant to Western diplomatic attempts to target Russia.

African Union chair Macky Sall has expressed concern about the Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act, a bill which has Wagner’s activities in its crosshairs, currently on the table in the US Senate, arguing that this could lead to sanctions against African firms doing business with Russian counterparts.

Wagner looming

The shadow of Russian influence also hangs over the EU’s embattled diplomatic and security agenda in the Sahel.

One mentioned by the EU source is the bloc’s training mission in the Central African Republic, where reports that EU instructors might have provided training to local forces controlled by the Russian mercenary group, Wagner, sparked concerns about Moscow’s increased destabilising influence in the region.

The EU has recently launched programmes aimed at tackling what the European Commission describes as Russian ‘disinformation’ on social media in the Sahel.

Officials in Brussels are also keenly aware that Russia wants to expand its presence via the Wagner group in the region, but it is less clear whether they can do anything to stop it.

Military regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso have stepped up their diplomatic contacts with Russia, and it is likely that Chad, Niger, and other countries in the Sahel and neighbouring regions will also be targeted by the Kremlin.

Investment and doubt

In the coming months, the EU is likely to offer financial inducements – potentially several billion euros – primarily to North African states, for migration control after the bloc’s leaders doubled down on the need to increase repatriations and tackle irregular border crossings at their own summit in Brussels last month.

At a meeting between the European Commission and African Union in November, the two sides agreed that the EU would start to allocate funds for infrastructure investment from its ‘Global Gateway’ programme and provide support for an African Medicines Agency (EMA), alongside the creation of a ‘high-level dialogue on economic integration with a view to strengthening trade relations and sustainable investment.’

The EU’s Global Gateway scheme, intended to be the bloc’s answer to China’s Belt and Road initiative, will start paying out €750 million in infrastructure funding to African states over the coming year.

However, these are small sums compared to the Chinese or US offers – the Biden government has promised to invest at least $55 billion in Africa over the next three years and wants to increase bilateral trade with Africa via the tariff and quota-free trade offered by its Africa Growth and Opportunity Act – and African diplomats regularly complain that accessing EU funding involves more bureaucratic hurdles.

Where Russia is out of step with its international rivals is on the EU and Chinese-led campaign for the African Union to have a seat at the G20, while the US and Europe also support an African permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

In the meantime, however, the reality is that Moscow has managed to acquire more political leverage in Africa than its economic and diplomatic investment suggests it should. For most of the last decade, EU officials have been increasingly frustrated by China’s growing economic influence in sub-Saharan Africa. There is now growing reason for them to cast their eyes nervously to the east.