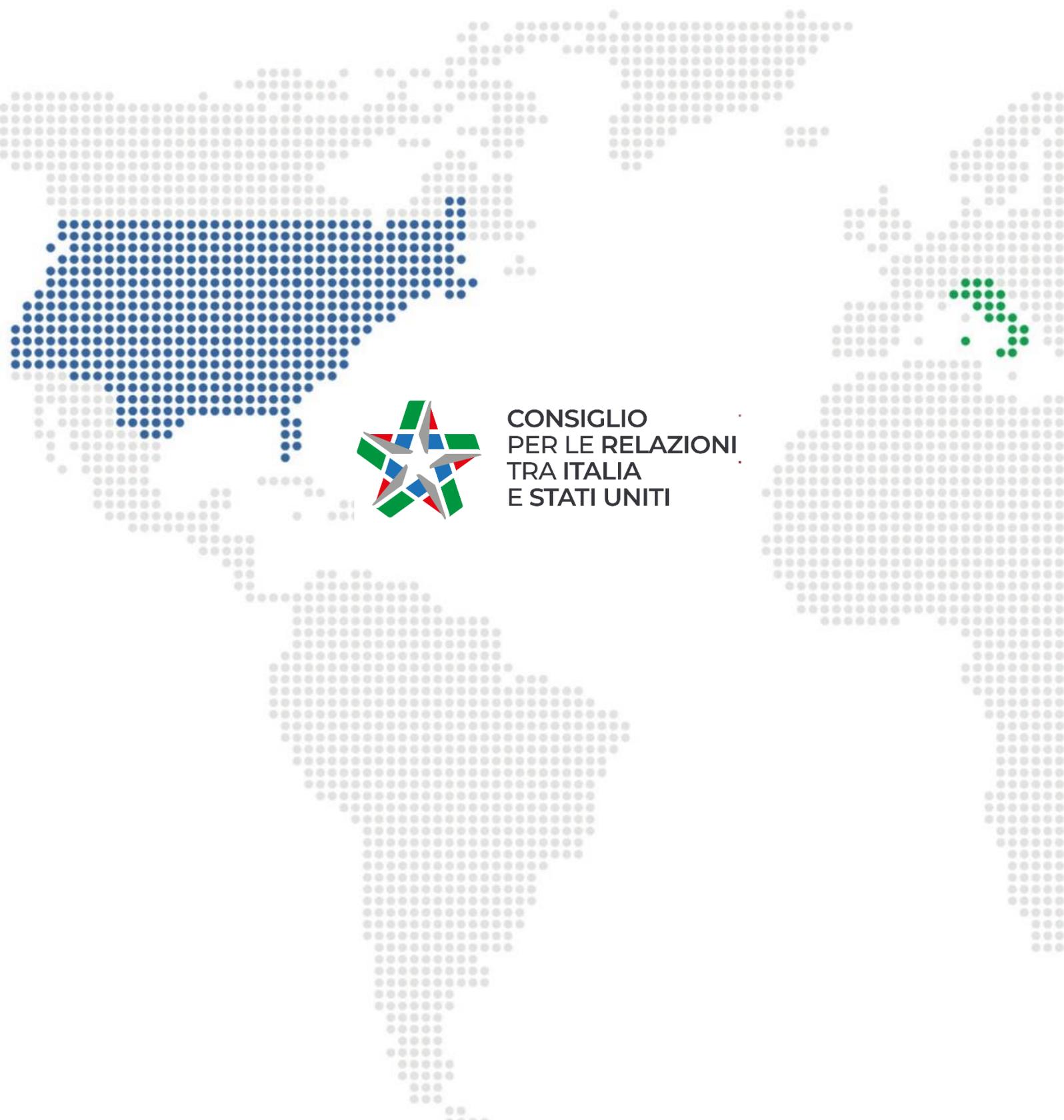


February 2022



CONSIGLIO
PER LE RELAZIONI
TRA ITALIA
E STATI UNITI

RUSSIA'S STOLEN FUTURE (Project Syndicate – Feb 24, 2022)



Joschka Fischer, former Germany's foreign minister vice chancellor and leader of the German Green Party

By invading Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin is challenging not only that country's independence but also the broader European system, which rests above all on the inviolability of borders and the law of nations. There has been no comparable event in Europe since the Hitler era.

BERLIN – Russian President Vladimir Putin has made his choice. He has brought war to Ukraine. This is a watershed moment for Europe. For the first time since the Balkan wars of the 1990s, which were limited to the area of the disintegrating Yugoslavia, the continent is once again confronted with bombardments of cities and rolling tank divisions. But this time, it is a nuclear superpower that started the fighting.

By ordering an invasion, Putin is showing a brazen disregard for international treaties and the law of nations. There has been no comparable event in Europe since the Hitler era. According to Putin's latest declarations, Ukraine has no right to exist as a sovereign state – even though it is a member of the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Council of Europe; and even though Russia itself (under Boris Yeltsin) has recognized the country's independence.

Putin now claims that Ukraine is an inseparable part of Russia. Whatever the majority of Ukrainians think is irrelevant to him; Russia's greatness and international standing are all that matter. But make no mistake: Putin wants more than Ukraine. His war is about the entire European system, which rests above all on the inviolability of borders. In seeking to redraw the map by force, he hopes to reverse the European project and re-establish Russia as the preeminent power, at least in Eastern Europe. The humiliations of the 1990s are to be erased, with Russia once again becoming a global power, on par with the United States and China.

According to Putin, Ukraine has no tradition of statehood, and has become a mere tool of American and NATO expansionism, thus posing a threat to Russia's security. In a bizarre speech the day before his troops stormed across the border, Putin even went so far as to claim that Ukraine is trying to acquire nuclear weapons. In fact, when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, Ukraine – home to the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal at the time – surrendered its nuclear weapons to Russia with the active diplomatic support of the "evil" US. Ukraine did so because it had received "guarantees" of its territorial integrity, as stated in the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of December 5, 1994. That document was signed by the guarantor powers: the US, the United Kingdom, and Russia, alongside Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (the latter two relinquished the smaller nuclear arsenals they had inherited from the USSR).

Set against the historical facts, Putin's statements are nonsense. His primary purpose, clearly, is to give his own population a justification for invading Ukraine. Putin knows that if ordinary Russians were given a choice between a war to dominate Eastern Europe and a better, more prosperous life at home, they would prefer the latter. As so often in Russian history, the country's people are having their future stolen by their rulers.

Russia's ascent to global power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in numerous tragedies not only for the neighbors it subjugated and gradually absorbed, but also for its own people. China's current leaders, in particular, should be mindful of this history, considering that imperial Russia seized more territory from China than from anyone else.

What Putin does not seem to realize is that Russia's longstanding policy of dominating foreign peoples in its sphere of influence makes other countries focus on how to escape the Kremlin's geopolitical prison at the first opportunity, by securing protection from NATO. The alliance's eastward expansion after 1989 attests to this dynamic. Ukraine wants to join NATO not because NATO intends to attack Russia, but because Russia increasingly demonstrated its intention to attack Ukraine. And now it has. It is worth remembering that in the 1990s, Russian propaganda accused the West of harboring all manner of evil plans. None of these plots was realized at the time, when Russia was down, because no such Western scheme ever existed. The accusations were fearmongering nonsense.

The Russian imperial project has always been characterized by a mixture of domestic poverty, brutal oppression, florid paranoia, and aspirations of global power. And yet, it has proved to be exceptionally resistant to modernization - not just under the czars and then under Lenin and Stalin, but also under Putin.

Just compare Russia's economy to China's. Both are authoritarian systems, yet Chinese per capita incomes have grown robustly while Russian standards of living have been declining. In historical terms, Putin is taking Russia hurtling back toward the nineteenth century, in search of past greatness, whereas China is forging ahead to become the defining superpower of the twenty-first century. While China has achieved unprecedentedly rapid economic and technological modernization, Putin has been pouring Russia's energy-export revenues into the military, once again cheating the Russian people out of their future.

Ukraine has tried to escape this never-ending cycle of poverty, oppression, and imperial ambition with its increasingly pronounced orientation toward Europe. A well-functioning European-style liberal democracy in Ukraine would jeopardize Putin's authoritarian rule. The Russian people would ask themselves and their leaders, "Why not us?" Putin would have no good answer to give them, and he knows it. That is why Russia is in Ukraine today.