

BRIEFING
PAPER

408

March 2025



The boom and crash of cooperative security in Europe

Four scenarios for the future

Sinikukka Saari & Tyyne Karjalainen

FIIA

FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

BRIEFING PAPER 408 / March 2025

The boom and crash of cooperative security in Europe

Four scenarios for the future

Summary

- The post-Cold War European cooperative security order, based on shared liberal norms and institutions, has been challenged by Russia's revisionism and aggression – and more recently by the alienation and even hostility of the United States.
- Cooperative security has shrunk in scope to an internal European order, shaped around relations among like-minded European states. To maintain this order, Europe will need to actively defend it, not only in words but also in deeds, and even militarily as a last resort.
- There is a crucial link between the fate of Ukraine and wider European security: the outcome of the war will effectively either validate or reject spheres of influence in Europe and, by extension, the basic principles on which the future of Europe is being built.
- Europe's emerging military posture should be grounded in the key norms of European cooperative security: multilateral cooperation, democratic values and international law. Europe can leverage these strengths to navigate the global context of shifting power dynamics.

Authors



Sinikukka Saari

Leading Researcher,
Great Power Politics and Foresight,
FIIA



Tyne Karjalainen

Research Fellow,
The European Union and Strategic
Competition,
FIIA

Introduction

In early 2025, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte relentlessly toured European capitals with a chilling message: Europe must prepare for war. The Secretary General is urging Europeans to quickly shift to a “wartime mindset” and to “turbocharge” their defence spending to adapt to a long-term confrontation with an aggressive, revisionist Russia.¹ The fear is shared by the wider public: over 60% of respondents expressed concern about the possibility of a war in NATO countries in an organisation-wide opinion poll carried out in mid-2024.²

Since the start of Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, European leaders have woken up to the need for stronger military deterrence against Russia. Some fear that Europe might become the main stage for a global arms race reminiscent of the Cold War. However, three-quarters of a century later, the global power dynamics have shifted. Europe is a continent whose relevance is shrinking, even in the eyes of its transatlantic ally, the US. Europe is more alone than ever and needs to prepare to defend itself amid faltering US backing.

Russia’s ambitions for transforming the European security order extend well beyond Ukraine and potentially even to NATO countries – particularly if the alliance continues to be weakened by slow action by Europe and US President Donald Trump’s ideologically informed, post-liberal great power

transactionalism.³ A substantial de facto victory for Russia in Ukraine would vindicate Russia and further embolden its revisionism – an outcome that looks likely today. Through the war in Ukraine, Russia aims not only to subjugate Ukraine but also to weaken and divide Europe, while strengthening its own position both regionally and globally.

This Briefing Paper provides background on the rapidly shifting context of European security by tracking key developments and drawing lessons from European security arrangements since the Cold War. It outlines four broad scenarios highlighting the potential implications of today’s policy choices for European security in the future. The scenarios emphasise the causal links between European action, Ukraine’s sovereignty, and Europe’s long-term security and agency in global affairs. The main argument is that if Europe wants to maintain cooperative security as a regional paradigm for the like-minded, it needs to defend it actively, not only in words but also in deeds.

Optimism in the past

The doom and gloom atmosphere in today’s Europe could not be further from the zeitgeist of the early 2000s. In the immediate post-Cold War years, up until the early 2000s, it was widely believed that European security rested on the principles of cooperative security. Russia, NATO countries, as well as the “states in between”, were seen as capable of advancing their security interests constructively together, based on a positive-sum

1 Aktan, Sertac (2025) “NATO Chief Mark Rutte calls for ‘shift to a wartime mindset’”, Euronews, 15 January. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/15/nato-chief-mark-rutte-calls-for-shift-to-a-wartime-mindset>.

2 NATO Public Diplomacy Division (2024) NATO Audience Research: pre-Summit polling results 2024, July. [240705-pre-summit-polling-results-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/docu/2024/07/240705-pre-summit-polling-results-en.pdf).

3 Holm, Minda (2015) “A Postliberal Global Order? Challenge(r)s to the Liberal West”. NUPi Report, 15 January. <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/a-postliberal-global-order-challenge-r-s-to-the-liberal-west>.

logic. Reflecting this optimism, cooperative regional organisations mushroomed. The Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the Council of the Baltic Sea States were established in 1992; the Barents Euro-Atlantic Council founded in 1993; the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) became the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 1995; the Arctic Council was established in 1996; and the NATO-Russia Council in 2002. NATO itself was believed to have changed beyond recognition, as demonstrated by its cooperation with non-member countries – first and foremost with Russia.⁴

As the most inclusive security organisation, the OSCE embodied this new thinking. The normative core of the CSCE, established in 1975, was upgraded for the cooperative security era with the adoption of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in November 1990. For a brief moment, USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev believed that the country was about to enter the ‘Common European Home’. Furthermore, the new Russian leadership not only accepted but also actively participated in the construction of the post-Cold War security order.⁵

This context also allowed the EU to build its emerging security identity around the idea of being a force for good, a normative power rather than a military one.⁶ Instead of developing extensive military capabilities or cooperation within the EU framework, the EU’s crisis management operations and missions were geared towards conflict prevention and peacebuilding in partner countries. The cooperative security framework also provided fertile ground for developing economic cooperation with Russia, which was soon to become the EU’s largest supplier of oil, gas and coal.⁷

4 Cohen, Richard (2001) “Cooperative Security: From Individual Security to International Stability”. *The Marshall Center Papers* 3, April. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/marshall-center-papers/cooperative-security-new-horizons-international-order/cooperative-security-individual-security-international>.

5 Forsberg, Tuomas (2018) “Russia and the European security order revisited: from the congress of Vienna to the post-cold war”. *European Politics and Society*, 20(2), 154–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2018.1545182>.

6 Manners, Ian (2002) “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol 40, issue 2, pp. 235–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>.

7 Siddi, Marco (2023) *European Energy Politics. The Green Transition and EU-Russia Energy Relations*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Finally, the role of the US was fundamental in enabling and shaping this tranquil period in European security. The US “unipolar moment”,⁸ its continued military presence in Europe, and the widening NATO umbrella created the backdrop for the self-confident optimism and enduring belief in a cooperative security order in Europe. Gradually, however, as Russia’s discontent and aggressiveness grew, the cracks in the cooperative security order became undeniable, and Europe’s carefree self-confidence gave way to irresponsible complacency.

The reasons for the US reorientation away from Europe are beyond the scope of this paper, as they relate to wider global dynamics, such as the unprecedented rise of China. However, the responsibility for the collapse of the European cooperative security order lies primarily with Russia, as will be discussed in the following section. At the same time, responsibility for the inability to respond to and contain Russia’s predatory behaviour towards its neighbours lies with the European actors.

Putin’s European (re)visions

Today, Russia interprets the immediate post-Cold War years as a period of humiliation at the hands of the West, which – according to Russia’s post-factum reinterpretation – sought to exploit Russia’s weakness when it was down. This was certainly not what the cooperative security framework was all about. Rather, the idea was that by engaging Russia and building a binding partnership between Russia and the West, the balance of power would shift in such a way that security competition between the two would give way to mutually beneficial cooperative security.⁹

The Russian leadership has reinterpreted its own actions, Western actions, and shared concepts to support its later revisionism.¹⁰ One concept that underwent a process of significant reinterpretation in Russia was ‘indivisible security’. The 1990 Charter

8 Krauthammer, Charles (1990) “The Unipolar Moment”, *Foreign Affairs*, January. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1990-01-01/unipolar-moment>.

9 Ikenberry, John (2023) “Engage, Contain, Exclude, or Coexist?: How Liberal Democracies Cope with Illiberal Great Powers”. *The Kissinger Center Papers*, July. <https://mediahost.sais-jhu.edu/saismedia/media/web/files/kissinger/engage-contain-exclude-coexist.pdf>.

10 Forsberg, Tuomas and Hiski Haukkala (2016) *The European Union and Russia*. Bloomsbury Publishing 2016, pp. 17–23.

of Paris stated that “security is indivisible, and the security of every participating state is inseparably linked to that of all the others”. At the time, the concept was used interchangeably with cooperative security, and it was repeatedly emphasised that no state or group of states “can consider any part of the OSCE area as its sphere of influence”.¹¹ Furthermore, according to the first principle of the Helsinki Final Act (1975) on sovereign equality, every state has the right to determine its political and economic systems and foreign policies, including membership in international organizations and alliances.

Since then, however, Russia has revisited the concept and used it to draw completely different conclusions. Paradoxically, Russia has invoked the principle to justify its military interventions and claims to a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. According to this updated concept, Russia’s neighbours are not allowed to make independent foreign and security policy choices without Russia’s approval; the independent foreign policy of a small neighbouring state could serve as justification for military intervention. In effect, this amounts to claiming an exclusive sphere of influence in Russia’s neighbourhood, contrary to the original meaning of the term.

Russia’s revisionism and its military interventions violate the core norms of the post-Cold War European security order, and Russia has made the dissolution of this order its explicit goal. Russia has made several attempts, both within and outside the OSCE structures, to gain traction for its notion of a new security deal that would impose limits on its neighbours’ sovereignty, NATO enlargement, as well as the military equipment and personnel stationed in NATO’s eastern member countries.¹² From Russia’s perspective, its military interventions since 2008 have been a more effective means of challenging the European security order than its diplomatic efforts.

In 2025, it seems that Russia has been at least partly successful in its attempt to reshape

the European security order. Although its formal attempts to rewrite European security norms were firmly rejected time after time, in practice, European and Western actors did relatively little to defend existing norms when Russia broke them in Georgia in 2008, and in Ukraine in 2014. Although the approach changed considerably in 2022, the snail-paced revamping of defence capabilities, even in wartime Europe, and the restrictions on the support provided to Ukraine, testify that the change has been only partial.

“The new US administration seems to share Russia’s views on spheres of influence, the conditional territorial integrity of smaller states, and its antipathy towards rules-based international institutions.”

If the first major blow to cooperative European security came from the east, the second came from the west. Since President Donald Trump’s inauguration in January 2025, European leaders have been forced to confront the reality that the new US administration seems to share Russia’s views on spheres of influence, the conditional territorial integrity of smaller states, and its antipathy towards rules-based international institutions. While European capitals seem to have shifted into crisis mode, it remains uncertain whether European states will be able to rise to the challenge with concrete common action and a strong, unified commitment.

How to deal with Putin’s Russia – and Trump’s us?

For the past three years, European states have sought to isolate Russia economically and diplomatically by cutting ties and imposing sanctions. Alongside the immediate goals of supporting Ukraine and punishing Russia, there has also been substantial reflection on long-term developments and the future security order in Europe. Cooperative security has effectively shrunk in scope to an internal European order, shaped around relations among like-minded European states. However, Russia’s hybrid interference

11 Ivanova, Polina and John Paul Rathbone (2022) “What is ‘indivisible security’? The principle at the heart of Russia’s ire against Nato”. Financial Times, 7 February 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/84a43896-2dfd-4be4-8d2a-c68a5a68547a>.

12 A draft European Security Treaty was announced in June 2008 and discussed at the Ministerial Council of the OSCE in December 2008, leading to the informal Corfu process. A revised version of the treaty was presented in June 2009 and in December 2021.

and military actions continue to challenge even this limited regional cooperative security system.

In Europe, there is a growing understanding of the crucial link between Ukrainian and European security. At the same time, Europe is now more isolated with its vision than ever before. The European vision for moving forward relies on a strong NATO, enhanced military deterrence against Russia, credible security guarantees for Ukraine, and its integration into the EU. While de facto acceptance of Russia's presence in parts of Ukraine may be practically unavoidable, most Europeans are unlikely to support any de jure territorial agreement legitimising Russia's landgrab and thus eroding key UN and OSCE norms in the middle of Europe.

However, President Trump appears to have other visions for Ukraine, Europe and Russia. In an apparent attempt to woo Russia into negotiations and weaken the Russia-China partnership, the US president has insisted that Russia cannot be blamed for its invasion of Ukraine; that Ukraine should move on, accept territorial losses to Russia, and abandon the prospect of NATO membership. He has further argued that NATO should not be affiliated in any way with a Ukrainian peace deal or its monitoring. There are still many obstacles to overcome before a ceasefire agreement – not to mention a peace deal – is signed. However, it is undeniable that Trump approaches world politics from a similar angle as Russia: great power interests can overrule the sovereignty and security of smaller nations. Europe, famously described as “small states and small states that have not yet realised they are small”,¹³ understandably has significant difficulties with this approach.

As US backing falters, the most urgent challenge for Europe is to maintain and strengthen military deterrence against Russia. While quickly replacing the US military presence, key capabilities and nuclear umbrella is impossible, this is nonetheless the direction in which Europeans need to orientate themselves. Rapidly increasing military spending and capability projects, investing in European and Ukrainian defence industries, and preparing to provide the core of Ukraine's security guarantees are

tasks that Europe must undertake today to manage growing security risks on the continent.

However, there are many hurdles along the way. Given the rising populism and national polarisation around Europe, there is a significant risk that this new European endeavour will not be a joint effort. A scenario in which Europe is divided, with states developing security agreements and trade relations with competing global powers, is not unimaginable; history shows that Europe can also become a platform for competing global powers.

Furthermore, the process of updating security arrangements in Europe needs to take into account a number of new security issues. Whole-of-society preparedness is essential in an era of hybrid threats, where geoeconomic influencing, cyberattacks and disinformation operations are all part of the new European security environment. The blurring of the line between war and peace poses a particular challenge for European states, whose security policies are guided by democratic decision-making and respect for international law.

Four security scenarios for Europe

The following section maps out four trajectories along which the European security order could develop over the next ten years. These rough scenarios have been constructed under the following preconditions: firstly, Russia remains a revisionist power, seeking to retain its imperial status by controlling its near abroad; and secondly, the US will not return to Europe even after Trump's presidency, but will continue to insist on European responsibility for its own security. We also assume that European policy decisions will interact with these factors, either by reinforcing these trends or mitigating them.

The two changing variables in these scenarios are the fate of Ukraine and the degree of European unity. As previously discussed, Ukraine's fate is understood as a precedent for the European security order: the resolution of the war will either validate or reject spheres of influence in Europe. These scenarios contemplate what would be required of Europe to manage the security challenges, and the consequences of failing to do so.

¹³ This quote is attributed to the late Belgian Prime Minister and NATO's second Secretary General, Paul-Henri Spaak (1899–1972).

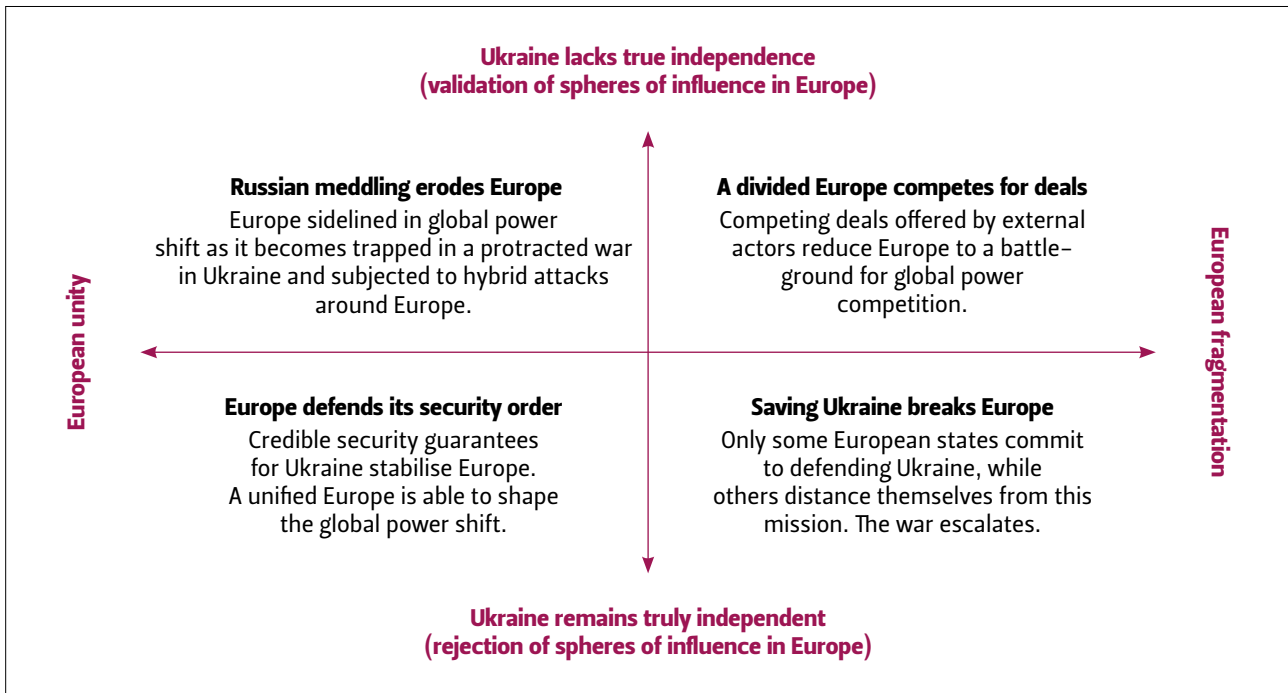


Figure 1. Four potential security scenarios for Europe.

Scenario 1: Russian meddling erodes Europe

This scenario closely resembles the situation in today's Europe: the core of cooperative security is seemingly maintained among like-minded countries, but Russia's revisionism is not properly addressed. A lack of European investments in defence and weak security guarantees for Kyiv would invite emboldened hybrid operations across Europe and active testing of the security guarantees in Ukraine. This could potentially lead to renewed Russian military aggression in the country.

Counting on Europe's difficulty in attributing and punishing clandestine activity, Russia could use proxy actors to fuel political turmoil in Europe and its neighbourhoods. This would diminish Europe's standing – particularly to Russia's advantage – in the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus. The European security order would be gradually eroded by Europe's inability to contain Russia's predatory behaviour on the continent. A lack of investment in defence would deepen US frustration with Europe and accelerate Washington's pivot away from the region. Europe's economy would suffer under the strain of intensifying hybrid warfare, and its global role would diminish as European weakness would be noted and exploited by rising global powers.

Scenario 2: A divided Europe competes for deals

In this scenario, the US would negotiate with Russia and Ukraine to end the war but would not be genuinely committed to ensuring a lasting peace. Ukraine would not receive any security guarantees, and nothing would prevent Russia from continuing its interventions in the country, including military action. In practice, Ukraine would be forced into Russia's sphere of influence, with no NATO or EU perspective for the country. Both the US and Russia would aim to bilateralise relations with individual European actors, undermining EU unity and weakening the single market.

The West would be divided into liberal and post-liberal camps, with the latter potentially lifting sanctions on Russia. Illiberal or post-liberal great powers, such as China and the US, could even attempt to strike a deal to reduce tensions between them, while dramatically weakening the standing of small states in the international system. This trajectory of European fragmentation could even lead to the demise of NATO. This could unfold, for example, if Russia were to test NATO's Article 5 by launching a military operation against one of the alliance's weaker frontline states and found that collective defence would not be activated in practice. Essentially, no cooperative security framework would be left standing in any form. Europe's decline

as a global actor would be accelerated, and illiberal norms would become the global mainstream.

Scenario 3: Saving Ukraine breaks Europe

This scenario is based on the idea that a small group of states deploy peacekeepers to monitor a negotiated ceasefire in Ukraine, without the necessary size, capabilities, US backing, or even sufficient European support. The precarious situation could escalate into a catastrophe due to internal political developments. For instance, France might initially send troops, but after a domestic power shift, the troops could suddenly be withdrawn. The remaining forces would be left in a vulnerable position, which Russia could be eager to exploit.

Should Russia choose to test the weakness of the security guarantees, European troops could find themselves fighting Russia in Ukraine. Instead of demonstrating solidarity, other European states might respond by further distancing themselves from the escalating war. However, some European states, or perhaps an actor like Turkey, could assist or even join the Ukrainian-European side in the expanding conflict. Even if, in the end, Ukraine were to miraculously remain independent and Russia were to be defeated (as Figure 1 suggests), the whole European idea and security architecture would need to be reconsidered and reconstructed after the war.

“Should Russia choose to test the weakness of the security guarantees, European troops could find themselves fighting Russia in Ukraine.”

Scenario 4: Europe defends its security order

This scenario starts from the premise that Europe is unified and capable of pursuing sustainable peace in Ukraine. Security guarantees for Ukraine could be provided by a sufficient number of European troops and an air protection zone over Ukraine-controlled territories. This would be combined with Europe ensuring significant and long-term investments in both Ukraine's and its own defence capabilities, along with Ukraine's integration into European political and security structures (even in the absence of a NATO perspective). Ideally, there would be some

degree of US backing behind the mission, but that currently seems unlikely.¹⁴

An alternative solution to deploying European troops would be to create a more global presence by establishing a broader international mission in Ukraine, involving not only Europeans but also other actors, such as China and Turkey. Russia's politics of spheres of influence would be successfully pushed back. Once Russia is forced to accept that Ukraine and other Russian neighbours are allowed – not only in principle, but also in practice – to build a European future for themselves, Europe's order and status would be significantly strengthened. Europe's ability to defend its cooperative security order from predatory Russian politics would also enhance its ability to manage the global power transition and recalibrate its relations with the US on a more mutually satisfactory basis.

Conclusions

Europe is currently living through a make-or-break moment. It is no longer viable to talk about cooperative principles and the inviolability of borders without backing up these words with concrete actions (as Scenario 1 demonstrates). Furthermore, European unity is challenged not only by a predatory international environment but also by illiberal forces within Europe. If the institutionalised Europe is unable to rise to today's challenges, these forces are likely to gain ground (as played out in Scenarios 2 and 3).

The fourth scenario points to a path of European strategic maturity: a Europe that can stand up for and defend its cooperative, institutionalised order. The fourth scenario should be the strategic goal towards which all European actors should navigate through their political decisions and common actions, starting with ensuring a sustainable solution to the war in Ukraine. As the other three scenarios demonstrate, any other option – weak or non-existent security guarantees for Ukraine

14 Momtaz, Rym (2025) “Taking the Pulse: Will Strong U.S. Backing Materialize for European Security Guarantees in Ukraine?”, Strategic Europe blog, Carnegie Europe, 6 March 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/03/taking-the-pulse-will-strong-us-backing-materialize-for-european-security-guarantees-in-ukraine?lang=en¢er=europe>.

– paves the way for trajectories that compromise not only Ukraine’s but also Europe’s own security.

It should be highlighted that all four scenarios for European security unfold in the context of Europe’s decreasing global weight. Whether European states face the new post-Western world united or divided, and amidst escalating or stabilising interstate war, will determine a different trajectory for Europe’s ability to manage the global power transition.

Europe’s unity and its practical ability to defend its security order against both internal and external challenges are among the most important factors shaping its future. That will also have a direct impact on Europe’s economic prospects and global standing. If Europe manages to preserve cooperative security and uphold its basic norms and institutions, even as a security framework for the like-minded, it will stand a better chance of defending international law-based behaviour globally. ●

BRIEFING
PAPER
408
March 2025

ISBN 978-951-769-824-5
ISSN 1795-8059
Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen
Graphic design: Joonas Juutilainen
Cover photo: Pool/i-Images, Eyevine/Lehtikuva

This Briefing Paper is part of the research project 'European security order in transition – National OSCE Research network', funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland.

FIIA
FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

Arkadiankatu 23 b
POB 425 / 00101 Helsinki
Telephone +358 (0)9 432 7799
www.fiia.fi



The Finnish Institute of International Affairs is an independent research institute that produces high-level research to support political decisionmaking and public debate both nationally and internationally.

All manuscripts are reviewed by at least two other experts in the field to ensure the high quality of the publications. In addition, publications undergo professional language checking and editing. The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.

While all FIIA publications are freely accessible, they may not be republished, in whole or in part, without prior written permission from the Institute.