

BRIEF

THE CONTOURS OF A NEW WESTERN RUSSIA STRATEGY

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 triggered profound changes in the EU's and NATO's approach to Russia. The leading Western organisations have reassessed their understandings on two core issues: military force and economic interdependence. Both changes were long overdue and have now been hastily introduced in response to the shocking images of war. In the next months, the chosen new course needs to be fully implemented and confirmed as a long-term policy aimed at preserving the rules-based security order in Europe and beyond and blocking Russia's imperial ambitions and efforts to destroy Ukraine.

For years, NATO's approach to the collective defence of its Eastern member states was constrained by the NATO-Russia Founding Act signed in 1997. In the document, NATO committed to refrain from "permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" on the territories of the former Warsaw Pact states. Importantly, Russia took on the obligation to "exercise similar restraint in its conventional force deployments in Europe".¹ In 2014, Russia's aggression against Ukraine gave rise to calls in some NATO countries to abandon the treaty which the Russian side was clearly violating through the annexation of Crimea, war in eastern Ukraine and military exercises next to NATO's borders.² However,

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THE NECESSITY OF HARD POWER

The first major change has taken place in the Western approach to the role of military force in containing and pushing back Russian aggression. The shift is clearly indicated by two factors: Western military aid to Ukraine and the plans to considerably increase NATO's presence on its eastern front. Both steps move towards rejection of the previously widely held view that European security was improved by constraining Western military presence and involvement in Russia's neighbourhood. Until recently, limitations of NATO's presence in the Baltic states and Poland as well as Western military support to Ukraine used to be seen as means to reduce tensions and avoid provoking Russia. This view is obviously untenable in the light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

some allies, especially Germany, insisted on sticking to the normative approach on the NATO side. As a result, NATO limited its steps to strengthen defence and deterrence on the eastern front and only introduced battalion-sized rotational deployments under the enhanced forward presence initiative in 2016.³

Today the claim that such caution on NATO side could have a positive impact on European security has lost credibility. In response to the war in Ukraine, NATO is preparing a strengthened and more permanent presence in the eastern front countries, to be decided at the summit in Madrid in June. It is time to quietly bury the NATO-Russia Founding Act as a relic of a different era.

A similar, even more radical change has taken place in Western views on military aid to Ukraine. The military assistance that was given to Ukraine

by the US, UK, Estonia and some other Western countries prior to 24 February 2022 was seen as controversial by some allies. However, after the invasion, Ukraine started to receive deliveries of military equipment from a number of countries that had previously considered such action unconceivable, including Germany, Finland and Sweden. Furthermore, the EU took a radical leap forward as a security actor by its decision to provide €1 billion of military assistance to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility.⁴ The expected new aid package from the US worth \$33 billion, including \$20 billion in military aid, would bring Western support to a further new level and indicate a long-term commitment. These changes mark the definite end of the post-Cold War era when the Western-Russian relations were guided by the belief that it was possible to leave behind military confrontation and build a peaceful, cooperative and norms-based relationship. So strong was the wish on the Western side to believe in this prospect that Russia's use of military force in Georgia in 2008 did not lead to a reassessment of policy, and the annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas were met with a rather cautious response.

Western weakness and constraint encouraged Russia to move ahead with efforts to impose its vision of a European security order based on spheres of influence and ultimately defined by force. Russia's imperial ambitions did not emerge as a result of NATO enlargement; they have centuries-long roots in history and resurfaced when Russia was regaining strength after the chaotic 1990s.

The shift in Western policy has not been smooth or uncontroversial, as indicated by the hesitation especially in Germany with regard to supporting Ukraine with harder military equipment. The concern that military aid to Ukraine may provoke Russia and lead to escalation has not disappeared from Western discussions.

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Indeed, Russia is provoked by a Ukraine that is independent, democratic and able to defend

itself. However, the only way for Europe to maintain a security order that is based on norms and not brutal force is to make sure that Russia is defeated in Ukraine. Tragically, it took the lives of thousands of Ukrainians before the West was convinced about the necessity of military force in pushing back Russian aggression and defending European values and principles.

THE FAILURE OF POSITIVE ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE

The second area where a profound change of Western policy is underway is economic ties with Russia. Again, the change is particularly radical for Germany. During half a century, the German Ostpolitik advanced economic cooperation first with the Soviet Union and then Russia in the hope that this would contribute to good political relations, stability and security. Yet the preconditions for positive interdependence were missing, as the economic relationship remained hugely unbalanced and asymmetrical. In recent years, the share of Russia in the EU's total trade was approximately 6%, while the EU accounted for 37% of Russian trade.⁵ Hence, the EU was much more important as a trade partner for Russia than vice versa, and yet it turned out to be deeply vulnerable due to its high level of dependence on Russian fossil fuels. In 2021, two-fifths of the gas consumed in the EU came from Russia, and over a quarter of imported crude oil, with Germany and Italy among the most dependent countries.⁶

Tragically, again, it took the invasion of Ukraine before the EU started to see this dependence as a geopolitical problem. Between 23 February and 8 April, the EU imposed five packages of sanctions, including unprecedented restrictions on the banking sector and trade.⁷ However, extending the sanctions to the energy sector, where they hurt Russia the most, has been slow and difficult. In late February, the EU introduced an export ban on all goods and equipment needed for oil refining, and on 8 April it banned imports of coal. The most profitable areas for Russia – exports of oil and gas – have taken a longer time to tackle. The EU is expected to phase out oil imports and cut gas imports by

two-thirds by the end of the year.⁸ The oil ban will be of major importance for crippling Russia's future ability to wage war.

As the EU-Russia energy trade makes plain, interdependencies make both sides vulnerable to each other's influence. The EU and US have been able to impose costly sanctions on Russia due to the latter's dependence on the Western economy. However, Europeans have appeared as the more vulnerable side in their relationship with Russia, fearful of the costs of cutting off Russian energy supplies and pushed to increase their funding of Putin's war due to the extraordinary growth of energy prices in 2022.⁹

As with military force, the change in thinking about economic interdependencies goes deep to the core ideas about how the EU, and also the US, see their relations with external powers. Integration of both Russia and China into the global economy was an important strategic goal of the West after the end of the Cold War. The accession of China and Russia to the WTO, respectively in 2001 and 2012, was expected to promote not just economic development and liberalisation, but also the spread of democracy and peace.¹⁰

In reality, state control over politics, society and the economy has tightened in both countries, while their relations with the West have become increasingly hostile. The global trends of early 21st century suggest that positive economic interdependence works among countries with similar political systems and a commitment to shared norms, with the EU as a prime example. However, economic interdependence does not seem to bring about convergence of political systems and normative commitments. Instead, dependence on an increasingly aggressive, authoritarian and today even totalitarian Russia has turned into a major

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vulnerability for Europe. More broadly, the war in Ukraine highlights that economic ties with authoritarian major powers may be a source

of strategic vulnerabilities, which is a highly relevant concern also with regard to China.

A LONG STRUGGLE AHEAD

Enhancing Ukraine's and NATO's defence vis à vis Russia and isolating the Russian economy from the West are key elements of an emerging new Western strategy. The steps that the US and Europeans have taken thus far are yet to be consolidated and fully implemented, but the direction is visible. In contrast to the post-Cold War attempts to transform and integrate Russia, the new strategy has to be based on a realist recognition of Russia as an adversary and existential threat that needs to be – and can be – contained.

The changes described above mark a radical turn for some Western countries, most notably Germany, while others, such as Poland and the Baltic states, have been calling for the current approach for many years. Kaja Kallas, the Prime Minister of Estonia, has named the new approach a policy of smart containment.¹¹

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As a result of the war in Ukraine, a hard border is emerging again between Russia and the West, defined by a strengthened military presence on both sides, stark contrast and competition between totalitarianism and democracy, heavy restrictions of economic interaction and people-to-people contacts, and lack of a shared understanding on the European security order. The same elements of confrontation existed during the Cold War when the Soviet Union was occupying large parts of Europe. Russia's desire to return to a similar division of Europe was clearly expressed in the demands that it presented in December 2021. By now it should be clear to all Western leaders that a shared vision of security order will not emerge as long as Vladimir Putin stays in power. What will come after Putin (and when) is unpredictable, but the West should prepare for a long-term confrontation

and struggle over the key principles of European and international security.

The outcome of the war will be decisive not only for the fate of Ukraine but for the viability of the European and international rules-based security order. Ukraine's defeat would encourage authoritarian great powers to keep pushing for a revised security order based on spheres of influence, a complete cynicism about rules, intimidation and subversion of neighbouring states and rejection of the values of democracy and human rights. One might argue that Russia and China would establish a different, but still

rules-based order, with different rules, but fundamentally their version of order would mean force prevailing over norms.

Ukraine's survival as an independent state and integration in a democratic Europe would, on the contrary, re-energize the democratic community and its efforts to maintain the rules-based security order. Ukraine with Western support is defending the order that Russia wants to destroy. It can give a decisive blow to both Russian imperialist ambitions and the spread of authoritarianism.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹¹ Government of Estonia, "[Address by the Prime Minister Kaja Kallas to the European Parliament](#)," news, 9 March 2022.

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