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Ukraine conflict exposes Western weakness on Russia¹

The European Union has colossal achievements to its credit in stabilising and integrating post-communist countries after 1990 by a mixture of carrots, civilisational attraction, and economic incentives and penalties. But the Yugoslav crises of the 1990s and now Russia's war on Ukraine have highlighted the limitations of the European Union's security capabilities. After centuries of conflict originating in Europe, often radiating effects far beyond, the European Union has sought to abolish conflict. Confronted by a rogue state that thrives on conflict, its policy toolkit looks painfully depleted.

The economic malaise of the years since the global financial crisis of 2008–09 has significantly vitiated the European Union's capacity to attract and influence its members, and to project itself to neighbours and would-be members as a compelling role model. Moreover, although many countries to its east would still prefer to integrate with the European Union rather than with Russia, the European Union's enthusiasm for further enlargement has also greatly declined.

Russia now explicitly and aggressively objects to enlargement of any kind, not just of NATO but also of the European Union, and in any form. It claims to be afraid of being encircled by hostile states,

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and to have been humiliated by the West's supposedly triumphalist expansion into its backyard (its 'sphere of privileged interests'). This is largely a propaganda myth; the Western expansion was reluctant and apologetic and caused, above all, by the desperation of former Soviet vassals for protection from any Russian recidivism. Russia's volatile opinion polls suggest, however, that after years of intense propaganda most of Vladimir Putin's subjects have come again to believe the hostile encirclement narrative, which closely follows a traditional Soviet propaganda theme.

Some who spend a lot of time talking to Russian officials and propagandists start to repeat these claims of encirclement and humiliation, and present them as their own superior insight into the Russian mind. They would do better to reflect on them more critically. Why, for example, has Germany never felt 'threatened' or 'encircled' by its inclusion in multilateral organisations of countries on its borders, set up to 'keep it down', and which include as members several countries that had secured territory from Germany in recent conflicts?

In response to Russia's coercive approach to its neo-imperial restoration project, the European Union has tried above all to use diplomacy and persuasion. When it felt forced by Russia's increasingly brazen actions to turn to sanctions, it found consensus difficult to achieve. Were it not for the downing of Flight MH17, serious EU sanctions might never have been enacted. And even those sanctions might not have made much difference to Russia were it not for the unrelated fall in the price of oil and its consequential effect on the stability of the ruble.

It is also apparent that, as each successive sanctions package was adopted, there were dissenting voices from EU member states and among senior politicians, who in some cases embrace publicly Russophile positions. Federica Mogherini, the successor to Catherine Ashton as the 'foreign minister', leans towards that camp. Going beyond sanctions to use force, even to the extent of supplying Kyiv with weapons to defend itself against the heavy weaponry supplied to the 'separatists' by Russia (along with special forces, 'volunteers', intelligence and huge diplomatic and propaganda support), is anathema to Brussels and Berlin.

Putin can see the hesitation and the divisions in EU decision-making, and feels confident that by divide-and-rule tactics he will sink sanctions well before they seriously damage him.

Since the global financial crisis, de facto leadership of the European Union has settled decisively on Chancellor Angela Merkel, as leader of the biggest and healthiest EU economy. After long decades of erring on the side of militarism, Germany has now become a programmatically pacifist power. Most Europeans are glad of this, as are most Germans. But, how does that square with being in a leadership role dealing with a severe security challenge from an aggressive would-be superpower in the East?

President Obama, having 'pivoted' to Asia and struggling with Middle East problems from which he has undertaken to extract the United States, has been keen to outsource the lion's share of the Russian security problem to Brussels.

Europeans have learned to find laborious compromises to solve all their internal and most of their external problems. They have great experience in such processes, and are very good at them. But they rely on their partners to refrain from violence and practise honesty. The Putin regime, on the other hand, makes threats and uses force and lies (not spin or misrepresentation, but constant outright, barefaced lies).

Thus, for example, Moscow claimed emphatically, if implausibly, that it wasn't involved in the invasion and occupation of Crimea, merely in its annexation. Putin later acknowledged Russia's role, once the lies had served their purpose. But the Kremlin has continued to lie endlessly about its involvement in East Ukraine, lies that are essential to Russia's strategy for disabling the Ukrainian state and bedding down its own violently established occupation, directly or by proxy, of a significant part of the country. Amazingly, mainstream Western media continue to slavishly repeat those denials as though they represent a genuine point of view and not unscrupulous propaganda.

EU leaders still behave as though they assume Putin shares their interest in peaceful solutions. But, while he may sometimes welcome a short-term ceasefire, Putin has no interest in peace, per se. What he

wants is victory and a wholesale restoration of the post-Yalta security system. He regards major loss of life and total dishonesty as legitimate tools of statecraft in the pursuit of these lofty patriotic goals.

Worst of all, many in the European Union seem to be checkmated by Russia's increasingly naked nuclear intimidation. These champions of compromise, who would like to solve the Russia problem by offering it inducements to be nice, work towards dismantling sanctions or, with their NATO hats on, to block or dilute measures of security 'reassurance' to exposed member states. This activity, increasingly conducted openly by visits to and from Moscow, gives Putin ample opportunity to drive wedges into the European Union.

Merkel has worked tirelessly and, so far, apparently successfully, to defend the EU sanctions regime from would-be diluters, including at the EU summit on 3 March. But it was also she who told Baltic leaders that they would not be getting permanent NATO boots on the ground. And it is she who endlessly repeats the incantation that 'there can be no military solution' to Ukraine's problems. The Kremlin, while maintaining the pose of a well-meaning mediator in someone else's conflict, begs to differ, repeatedly sending nuclear-capable aircraft into European civilian airspace with transponders turned off, to underline the message.

EU weakness is part of a broader Western weakness on Russia. The Obama administration enacted effective sanctions earlier than the European Union, and has worked hard to hold Brussels's feet to the fire to maintain and extend them. But that is easier for one decision-making structure than for a federation of 28. And Washington has been missing from much of the diplomatic action on Ukraine. Despite what looks to the naked eye like overwhelming advice from senior military figures and bipartisan support in Congress in favour of arming Ukraine, the administration continues, after well over a year, not to do so. Various arguments are heard, perhaps most often that arming Ukraine would only provoke a further escalation from Moscow and increase Ukraine's suffering.

If that is true, it would seem that the only remaining option is to sit down and discuss the terms under which Putin can continue to rearrange the post-1990 security order to his own liking. The rest

of Ukraine, the largest country in continental Europe, is there for the further dismembering, as are Georgia and Moldova. Even the Baltic states, despite being both NATO and EU members, may not be immune.

In a more robust scenario, it would be made abundantly plain to Putin that any further moves against Ukraine would lead to lethal military supplies to Kyiv sufficient to nullify any advantage Russian-backed forces had gained, full disclosure of the Putin entourage's financial interests, with other measures threatened offstage but held in reserve. The European Union should also be sending a message to those dissenting members who would betray European values by overtly cheering for Putin, like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Czech President Miloš Zeman, that the gates of the main capitals of Europe will be closed to them till further notice. But we shouldn't be holding our breath.

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