

Postmodern Europe goes to War

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Abstract:

The Western response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine was significant in its provision of weapons, imposition of sanctions, and support for refugees. This essay argues that a postmodern attitude can explain not only why Putin instigated the war, but also why European NATO and EU member states were unprepared for it. This lack of preparedness presents a significant obstacle to the creation of a new European security order. The postmodern attitude, characterised by a rejection of objective truths and a focus on individual experiences and interpretations, has led to a lack of consensus and a fragmentation of the European security community. As a result, member states were unable to effectively respond to Russia's actions and were caught off guard by the invasion. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine highlights the need for a renewed focus on the importance of objective truths and a unified approach to security in Europe.

Key words: Postmodernism, Russia, Ukraine, EU, NATO

The Western response to Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine was unprecedented in its weapons deliveries, sanctions, and the asylum provided to refugees. Putin had likely expected the same reaction as that following the annexation of the Crimea: The West protested, imposed minor sanctions, and implicitly accepted the new status quo. This time was different. The Ukrainian president Zelensky successfully turned his war into a war of the West against Russia. The Baltic States and Poland argued that they could be the next victims of Russian aggression. This fear was not unfounded. Because of Putin's rejection of Ukraine as a sovereign state, Western leaders concluded that their interests were at stake and that Russia must be stopped. This essay explains that a postmodern attitude explains not only why Putin started this war, but also why European member states

of NATO and the EU were completely unprepared for it. Finally, this essay explains why this postmodern attitude is an important obstacle for the creation of a new European security order.

Rising Tensions

In December 2021, Putin presented two documents: one addressing the United States (MFARF, 2021) and the other one, NATO (MFARF, 2021). He demanded the end of NATO enlargement and the withdrawal of foreign troops from the former Warsaw Pact countries. However, putting pressure on both Ukraine and also on the West was a high-risk strategy. If the adversary does not comply, it would have no other choice than to attack. This explains the harsh tone of Putin's speech on 24th of February; when he argued that 'in response to our proposals, we faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail'. (Bloomberg News, 2022) In his view, this was not new, but the consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin feared the eastward expansion of NATO and saw the organization as a 'tool of US foreign policy' aimed at containing Russia. In Putin's view, this was a matter of life and death for the Russian state. Subsequently, he announced the special operation aimed at 'protecting people' in the Donbas. It later turned out that he had more ambitious objectives.

President Putin's grievances are well known. Not only did he see the collapse of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical catastrophe, but he also believed that the West took advantage of Russian weakness. The enlargement of NATO moved its 'military infrastructure to the Russian border,' threatening vital Russian interests. Putin viewed Western support for Colour Revolutions as a threat to Russian interests. Meanwhile, the enlargement of the EU was seen as an attempt to draw countries into the Western sphere of influence.

Putin protested against interventions without an UN-mandate (Kosovo, 1999) and breaking the promise that in exchange for a UN resolution the West would not implement regime change in Libya (2011). For Putin, the death of the Libyan leader Muammar Ghaddafi proved that the West could not be trusted, a conclusion he had first drawn after the intervention in Iraq in 2003. However, Putin himself intervened in Chechnya (1999), where U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright found that the Russian leader was guilty of genocide. Years later, Putin fought a war with Georgia (2008) and

carried out the annexation of the Crimea. In 2015, he sent troops to Syria in support of President Assad. The gradual accumulation of these events resulted in the deterioration of Putin's relationship with the West, with the latter party hardly understanding the consequences of this decline.

Western Ignorance

However, all understanding of Russian grievances was lost when Putin launched his limited military operation against Ukraine. Unfortunately, the EU and the United States could not react in the same way to Putin's aggression against Ukraine. For the United States, it is China – not Russia – that is its main competitor. The Russia – U.S. trade relationship has always been negligible, as the new National Defense Strategy (2022) made clear. The document prioritised 'the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific, then the Russia challenge in Europe.' For that reason, the United States 'will collaborate with our NATO Allies and partners to reinforce robust deterrence in the face of Russian aggression' (U.S. DoD, 2022).

For Europe, especially Western Europe, the situation is completely different. For geographical reasons, they cannot ignore Russia and put their trust in interdependency and effective multilateralism. The latter strategy was possible in past years due to the success of US extended deterrence and the success of European integration. Together, these created unparalleled prosperity and security in Europe. As a result, most member states became postmodern. The former British diplomat Robert Cooper observed that postmodernity is about mutual interference in each other's domestic affairs. As a result, the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs became blurred, borders became irrelevant, and the concept of sovereignty was weakened. In addition, force as an instrument for resolving disputes became obsolete. Security in Europe was now based on transparency, mutual openness, interdependency, and mutual vulnerability (Cooper, 2002).

The desire to have no more wars in Europe reflected the thinking of the founding fathers of European integration, the French politician Jean Monnet and French Minister of Foreign Affairs Robert Schuman. As a peace project, European integration became immensely successful. This was underscored by the fact that countries could only join on a voluntary basis and had to make great efforts to become members. New member states had to

accept the *acquis* of the EU, including its values, which included the concept of effective multilateralism and the rejection of the use of force.

Postmodernity as a Trigger for Dissent with Russia

The obsolescence of the use of force within the postmodern system explains Europe's risk aversion. A Win/Gallup poll found that few Europeans are willing to fight for their nation: 'Globally, 60 per cent said that they would be willing to take up arms for their country, while 27 percent would not be willing. Western Europe proved the region most reticent to fight for their country, with just 25 per cent saying that they would fight while about half (53 per cent) stated that they would not fight for their flag'. (WIN/Gallup, 2014) Only 18 percent of the Germans, 27 percent of Britons, and 29 percent of the French said that they would defend their country. Putin saw this as a sign of decadency and degeneration.

Europe's postmodern stance was tested by Russian aggression against Georgia and Ukraine. The success of European integration, the widespread belief that values are universal, and the view that the EU was role model for the world have all led to naivety and misperceptions about security and the world outside the EU and NATO. Traditional modern states like Russia and China consider security in terms of territorial integrity. However, since the end of the Cold War, European members of NATO and most EU member states have considered the idea of territorial integrity outdated and focused instead on values-based human security. In Europe, the use of armed force was only contemplated to protect human rights and democracy.

However, EU soft power and the idea of human security became a trigger of dissent with Russia, and consequently a source of instability in Europe. President Putin considered EU and NATO enlargement, support for democratisation movements, and peace support operations as attempts to increase the Western sphere of influence. He believed that, for its protection, Russia requires a buffer zone of neutral or likeminded states. This is rooted in the belief that Russia has no well-defensible borders. Both Napoleon and Hitler tried to capture Russian lands, but they failed because of the harsh winters and the logistical challenge of the buffer zones and the vastness of the country.

The implications of the different political and strategic cultures became apparent when the crisis escalated into an US proxy war in support

of Ukraine and an economic war between the EU and Russia. When announcing his 'partial mobilization' on September 21, Putin said that Russia was fighting against 'the entire military machine of the collective West'. But with the notable exception of Poland, the Baltic states, and the Nordic countries, there was little awareness in Europe of the true nature of the threat posed by Russia.

These different cultures have created a permanent misunderstanding that has contributed to the crisis. An important lesson learned is that EU and NATO member states must make a clear distinction between internal and external relations. Instead, the success of the EU as a peace project has created political leaders incapable of dealing with external crises and war.

In postmodern Europe, the fundamental concepts of nuclear deterrence, coercion, and counter-coercion were forgotten. Politicians who were to blame for decades of budget cuts on defense, who have little affinity for power politics, and no experience whatsoever with war now found themselves in an awkward position. In many capitals, including Brussels, the knowledge of dealing with such crises had disappeared. The military had also lost such knowledge, having focused on peace support operations and not on sustained combat operations and warfighting.

The consequences of this lack of experience became apparent in one of the most worrying debates during the crisis: neglect of the principles of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Due to the risk of nuclear confrontation between Russia and NATO, such a confrontation should have been prevented at all costs. Instead, during the Ukraine war, MAD was now considered as an insurance against further escalation of the conflict. Due to his long experience, President Biden was probably the only Western leader who understood the dynamics of the conflict. He skillfully played the escalation-de-escalation game. Biden was initially reluctant to send large numbers of weapons systems, especially long-range systems, which could reach Russian territory. Putin also tried to limit the war to Ukraine. However, in Europe, the danger of nuclear escalation was largely ignored, especially in non-nuclear states.

The lack of experience also led to counterproductive policy choices that could undermine European unity. Economically, the EU could put pressure on Putin, but the gas crisis demonstrated that both the European Commission and the national governments had little idea how to do it effectively. First, the objectives set could hardly be achieved with the instruments at hand. The EU Council Conclusions of the 24th of February demanded that

‘Russia immediately ceases its military actions, unconditionally withdraws all its forces and military equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine and fully respect its territorial integrity and independence within its internationally recognized borders’. (European Council, 2022)

By imposing sanctions, the EU invigorated these words, but it was unclear how the sanctions could coerce Russia to accept those demands. The sanctions were designed to cripple the Kremlin’s ability to finance the war, to impose clear economic and political costs on Russia’s leadership, and diminish its economic base. In another document, the EU wrote that the aim of the sanctions is to ‘impose severe consequences on Russia for its actions and to effectively thwart Russian abilities to continue the aggression’. (European Council, 2022) ‘To cripple’ the war effort were the words used by high Commissioner Borrell on numerous occasions. Von der Leyen spoke rapidly about destroying the Russian war machine. The US president spoke similar words, but Defense Secretary Austin broadened the discussion by adding the condition of weakening the Russian economy. A Yale study revealed that the Russian economy was effected markedly, but it could not explain whether this contributed to the achievement of objectives. (Sonnenfeld et al. 2022)

That sanctions did not stop the ‘war machine’ was to be expected. The formula for successful sanctions, or coercion in general, is simple: the costs of defiance borne by the target must be greater than its perceived cost of compliance.¹ Studies on sanctions have shown that, in recent history, the disruption of a military intervention impairing the military capabilities of the target country has never succeeded. Decades of sanctions did not significantly reduce the threat of Iran and North Korea. On the contrary, heavy sanctions cannot stop Iran and North Korea from continuing their missile and nuclear programs.

The effectiveness of sanctions was weakened by the fact that they were only supported by some 40 countries. The lack of support for the West became also clear in the UN. As the UN Security Council was paralysed, a Uniting for Peace procedure transferred the voting to the General Assembly in early March. A majority voted in favor of the resolution, but the number

¹ This is an important conclusion of a study by Gary Clyde Hufbauer (PIIE), Jeffrey J. Schott (PIIE), Kimberly Ann Elliott (PIIE) and Barbara Oegg (PIIE) June 2009, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*, 3rd edition, Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE), 2009. I reached similar conclusions regarding the effectiveness of coercive in Rob de Wijk, *The Art of Military Coercion: Why the West’s Military Superiority Scarcely Matters*, Amsterdam University Press. 2014

of abstentions (35) including major players such as India, South Africa, and China, was worrying.

Success can only be achieved by a combination of sanctions and military force. However, Europe had little to offer militarily. Equipment was sent to Ukraine, but Borrell stated in September that there was little left. (Preussen, 2022) Thus, the burden was almost entirely on US shoulders and on the small front line states bordering Russia. Therefore, the European member states had no other choice but to rely on sanctions and other measures and leave the heavy lifting to the US. The notable exception was the UK that teamed up with America and played an important role in the training of 10,000 extra Ukrainian soldiers. Only in October did the EU decide on a training program in Germany and Poland for some 15,000 Ukrainian soldiers

The Weaponisation of Energy

There is absolutely nothing wrong with sanctions. They send a signal to the adversary that his behavior cannot be tolerated. However, it is crucial that the lessons learned from previous episodes are considered so that the use of power tools does not cause self-inflicted wounds. As has been argued above, if the costs of the sanctions are high for the sender, then considerable risks are taken. A clear example of this is the EU's energy policy. Here, the coercer got coerced. The cause is in the past.

In 1968, because of détente, the state-owned enterprises ÖMV and VÖEST and the steel manufacturers Mannesmann and Thyssen started negotiations with the Soviets on gas deliveries. They reached an understanding and on 1 September 1968, and the export of the gas to Austria, Italy, West-Germany, Finland, and France quickly followed. Remarkably, the Soviet Union's attempt to crush the liberalisation movement in Czechoslovakia, called the Prague Spring, did not have a negative effect on the negotiations. In those days, there was little discussion about the potentially negative consequences of the gas deals. On the contrary, in the increasing energy dependence, Germany especially saw an opportunity to influence the Russia politically and to build peaceful and stable relations. During the Cold War, *Wandel durch Handel* became a guiding concept that was based on the belief that a healthy trade relationship could even overcome ideological

differences. These assumptions remained unshaken despite the annexation of the Crimea in 2014.

In 2007, the EU presented the energy and climate change objectives for 2020. It was agreed 'to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent, rising to 30 percent if the conditions are right, to increase the share of renewable energy to 20 percent, and to make a 20 percent improvement in energy efficiency'. Until 2014, the dependence on Russia played a limited role. But on 16 June 2014, Russia halted gas deliveries to Ukraine for the third time in eight years. According to Russia, Ukraine failed to repay its debt to Gazprom. (Farchy and Hille, 2014) As the EU received 30 percent of its gas from Russia and half thereof is transited through Ukraine, Brussels feared that the flow of gas to Europe could be affected as well. This already happened in 2006 and 2009 during similar 'gas wars' between Russia and Ukraine. (CIEP, 2014) However, this did not lead to less gas being taken from Russia.

The role that Ukraine plays in the transit of Russian natural gas supplies to Europe has for many years been viewed by the Kremlin as problematic. As a result, plans were hatched to construct alternative pipeline routes that would allow Gazprom to diminish its reliance on Ukraine. The first of those plans was the Nord Stream pipeline that connects Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. Construction began in 2005, and the two parallel pipelines were finished by October 2012. Under EU competition law, energy companies are not allowed to simultaneously own production capacity and transmission networks. Gazprom has long tried to acquire an exemption to these EU rules, but ultimately it had to back down in the face of continued opposition from Brussels. Also, the bilateral agreements that Russia struck with several EU member states along the South Stream route were found to be in breach of EU law, as Gazprom intended to be the sole supplier of the gas, as well as own the pipeline infrastructure. (EURACTIV, 2013)

Furthermore, in April 2015, after years of investigating Gazprom's practices, the European Commission published its formal 'statement of objections' accusing the company of price fixing, hindering the free flow of gas in EU member states, and of muscling out competitors. (Barker, 2015) Despite these initiatives and the acknowledgement that Putin was willing to use energy as a weapon, little happened. Gazprom remained crucial for the gas supply in Europe.

The second plan, Nord Stream 2, caused considerable frictions between Germany, the EU, and the Trump administration. The US President imposed sanctions on any firm that helped Gazprom finish the pipeline. He

pointed angrily on the discrepancy of the United States' pledge to the defence of Germany and other European allies and the energy trade that could be used to build up Russia's armed forces. In his view, Europe would become a 'hostage of Russia'. Trump was right. Russia's aggression against Ukraine demonstrated that *Wandel durch Handel* was an obsolete concept founded on the wrong belief that interdependencies would cause stability and prosperity.

In March 2022, the Commission decided to cut gas imports by two-thirds before the end of the year. It was feared that due to a complete import ban European countries would not survive the winter. In doing so, the EU made itself blackmailable by Russia, just as Trump predicted.

Technically, the decision to reduce gas imports was not a sanction, but part of a plan to become greener faster and less dependent on Russian gas. As the plan, REPowerEU Plan, was the EU's response to the global energy market disruption caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this was considered a sanction by Russia so that counter measures could be expected.

The decision to reduce the flow of gas by two-thirds turned out to be a self-inflicted wound. Putin began to use energy as a weapon by closing the pipeline 'for technical reasons', then opening it again. Germany in particular panicked about the consequences for its citizens and industry.

In Prague, thousands went into the streets to protest against the soaring gas prices. In the United Kingdom, the 'Don't Pay UK' movement was a direct attack on the high energy prices. In Italy, energy bills were publicly burned. In almost all EU-member states except for Spain and Portugal, which are outside the European energy grid, governments took emergency measures to help the population and protect the industry. The sanctions policy of the EU had turned into economic warfare, the consequences of which could only be mitigated by draconian measures such as a proposed price cap on oil and gas.

A better strategy would have been to impose sanctions if Putin would use gas as an economic weapon. The counter argument is that reducing energy revenues would 'cripple' the Russian war machine and that this could contribute to the withdrawal of all troops from Ukrainian soil. But, as has been explained above, this assumption was unfounded. Alternatively, the EU could have decided to completely stop the import of gas, despite the hardships this would cause.

Containment 2.0

The lack of experience with coercive diplomacy and war are important obstacles to turn the EU into a credible political player as well. Of course, the EU is a regulatory superpower capable of imposing rules and regulations through trade agreements on countries that seek access to the integrated European economic market. However, the offensive use of both economic and military power is not related to trade policies but to the forgotten concept of coercive diplomacy.

This is problematic because the European EU and NATO member states have no other choice but to develop a new European security order which is *not* about constructive multilateralism, soft power, and détente. As long as an anti-Western regime is in power, the Europeans have no other choice but to erect a new iron curtain and adopt a concept of containment 2.0. The original concept was aimed at containing the Soviet Union and served the West well until the end of the Cold War in 1989. It was introduced by the Moscow-based US diplomat George Kennan in *Foreign Affairs*, the famous X article.

Kennan argued in *The Sources of Soviet Conduct* that the “main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union (...) must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” To that end, he called for countering “Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world” through the “application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy.” In his view, such a policy would “promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power.” Kennan considered the Soviet threat to be primarily political.

Therefore, he advocated economic assistance through the Marshall Plan and overt propaganda and covert operations to counter the spread of Soviet influence. Paul Nitze, Kennan’s successor as director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, saw the Soviet threat primarily in military terms. He suggested that the administration should act accordingly. In 1950, this conception prevailed. National Security Council (NSC) 68 signed by the Truman administration demanded a drastic increase of the U.S. military budget.

Containment was not the only strategy for dealing with Russia. Roll-back was another one. John Foster Dulles declared during the 1952 election

campaign that the United States' policy should not be containment, but the 'rollback' of Soviet power and the eventual 'liberation' of Eastern Europe.

Containment 2.0 bears within itself elements of classic containment and rollback. The proxy war in Ukraine is nothing less than rollback. Granting Ukraine and Moldova the status of EU Candidate Country is an economic measure comparable to the Marshall Plan. A breakthrough was the application for NATO membership by Sweden and Finland that was a severe blow for Putin, who saw further enlargement of NATO almost as a war declaration. The memberships facilitate military containment by the erection of a new Iron Curtain running from the north of Finland to Turkey and supported by collective defence and extended deterrence, or the US nuclear guarantee.

This means that the old European security order is dead. The old order was founded on the 1991 Charter of Paris that accepted that all countries could freely decide their political and economic system and could also freely decide on joining the institutions of their choice. The Charter in turn was based on the Helsinki Declaration that was approved in 1975 during the first meeting of the Convention on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The declaration codified the principles for mutual cooperation and respect. Gradually, a body of confidence and security building measures were developed, most recently codified in the Vienna Document of 2011. All principles were violated by President Putin. Détente and a cooperative security order cannot be ruled out if containment 2.0 is successful. However, this can only happen after a regime change in Moscow.

A Shifting Mind-set

Postmodernity is at odds with containment 2.0. Consequently, it requires the EU to develop into a geopolitical player that knows how to use its military and economic power instruments effectively. This requires European unity, a shift in mindset, and a shared attitude towards Russia and other systemic rivals. The biggest threat is domestic politics. It is too soon to predict the effects of the crisis with Russia on the internal stability of the member states. Societal and political stability in the individual member states is the biggest threat to unity and the biggest boon for Putin who tries to stir up unrest through hybrid warfare. Putin uses institutions such as the troll factory, the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg, as an outlet for fake

news and information operations in the social media. He has spent 300 million euros on ‘buying’ support from pro-Russian parties. (Wong, 2022) Russia probably facilitated the mass protest on energy prices that happened in Prague. Putin could continue weaponising the use of energy and raw materials. His success will depend on his ties with like-minded countries, most notably China. Nonetheless, Putin’s success as a disruptor and his support by allies will depend on the outcome of his war with Ukraine.

Putin’s success also depends on a new geopolitical role for the EU. Jean Monnet wrote in his memoirs that ‘Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises’. Indeed, the financial crisis that lasted from 2009 to 2012 accelerated financial integration with a Banking Union and instruments for sovereign debt relief. Brexit facilitated Franco-German leadership and made possible unprecedented solutions for the debt crisis following the Covid-19 crisis which started in 2019. A rescue package of 750 billion euros would be financed by common loans and guarantees by the member states.

European taxes were introduced for paying back the loans. Not only was the Rubicon of Eurobonds crossed, it also created an opportunity for the EU to become an important player on the global capital market and strengthened the euro. The Covid-19 crisis itself led to a common vaccine policy even though healthcare is a national responsibility. The refugee crisis, in particular the provocation of Belarus in 2018, showed that refugees can be used as weapons and led to a tougher policy of pushbacks. The crisis in trans-Atlantic relations caused by President Trump has led to the understanding that reliance on the United State is no longer a certainty. All crises mentioned contributed to the conclusion that Europe should be an autonomous economic, military, and political player. The humiliating retreat from Afghanistan in 2020 has led to the conclusion that the EU should have a rapid deployment force for similar contingencies.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has had similar effects. In an unprecedented move, the Commission announced the European Peace Facility in March 2021, an off-budget instrument that enhances the EU’s ability to act as a global security provider. The facility reimbursed national weapons deliveries to Ukraine. Moreover, the president of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen announced in her State of the Union 2022 a Critical Raw Materials Act to become less dependent on China and Russia, who control, along with the Democratic Republic of Congo, crucial raw materials for the semiconductor industry. She also announced a “specific set of measures that

take into account the specific nature of our relationship with suppliers and measures to ‘decouple the dominant influence of gas on the price of electricity.’ These measures are part of “new ideas for our economic governance.” In this way, not only more steering power for Brussels came into view, but the contours of an energy union became visible as well.

Crucially, a shift in mind-set was visible in Germany, Europe’s most postmodern country. At the start of the war, the new Chancellor Scholz talked about a *Zeitenwende* that would require major policy decisions. Subsequently, he announced that Germany would spend 100 billion euros on defence. During a speech in Prague in August 2022, he pleaded in favour of an autonomous and sovereign Europe and deepened geopolitical Union, one that includes Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans, thus creating one geographical space that clearly fits the concept of containment 2.0. In sum, despite hesitations about arms deliveries to Ukraine, a general understanding emerged that Germany is ‘condemned to lead.’

Conclusion

Despite failures at the start of the war, Russian aggression against Ukraine had similar effects as previous crises. It broadened and deepened integration and pushed the Union into a more geopolitical role. The biggest threat to its new role is domestic societal and political stability of the member states that are the subject of hybrid attacks by Russia. Enhancing domestic resilience is therefore crucial. Shifts in mind-set are visible, most notably in Germany, which is abandoning its longstanding proclivity towards pacifism and acknowledges that it is condemned to lead. This brings the whole EU closer to US political and strategic culture. In summation, this will make it easier to implement a containment 2.0 strategy needed to protect, together with NATO, a large part of the continent from Russian aggression.

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