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## Russia's War on Ukraine: Two Inconvenient Truths for the EU

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# Russia's War on Ukraine: Two Inconvenient Truths for the EU

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Following a spectacular counteroffensive and the retaking of Kherson, the war in Europe's east has moved into a new phase. The immediate focus is now shifting to the chilling effects of winter – both on the frontline and on Western morale. However, this must not prevent the EU and its member states from confronting two key – and unavoidable – strategic questions.

## The continued risk of escalation

The first is short-term. Russia's partial mobilisation may help to slow its territorial losses. But if Ukraine has indeed acquired "irreversible momentum",<sup>1</sup> this raises questions over how far Kyiv can continue to press its advantage before Moscow chooses to escalate even further, possibly employing non-conventional means. Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to annex four Ukrainian territories has already demonstrated his penchant for escalating in the face of setbacks, especially when the benefits of de-escalating are unclear.

A complete Ukrainian victory on the battlefield may engender such dynamics as political instability within Russia or even the use of nuclear weapons, which present

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Rudenko, "Retired US General Ben Hodges: 'We've Reached Irreversible Momentum for Ukraine'", in *The Kyiv Independent*, 19 September 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/national/retired-us-general-if-russia-used-nuclear-weapon-in-ukraine-us-would-have-to-get-directly-involved>.

an arguably greater security threat than Putin's current near-total disregard for the established norms of the European security system. It should be recalled that Putin made the decision to invade Ukraine *before* the country obtained NATO membership. Nominal (as opposed to concrete) promises of eventual accession for Kyiv were said to be a concession to Moscow given that few (if any) steps were taken to advance its membership prospects. It turns out that the West misread Putin's red lines. Similarly, it is difficult to know for certain where Russia's red lines will be when it comes to nuclear use.

Despite its recent losses, Russia continues to occupy a sizeable portion of Ukraine's territory. Thus far, the EU has effectively outsourced its foreign policy to Kyiv regarding when the fighting should stop. But addressing the risks of escalation may require a deferred process for resolving the question of Ukraine's territorial integrity, especially as it relates to Crimea. This obviously puts the EU in an uncomfortable position, given that a rules-based order lies at the core of its worldview. Nor does growing usage of the Manichean "democracies vs. autocracies" framework lend itself to cooler heads prevailing.

The High Representative for EU foreign and security policy, Josep Borrell, has long insisted on the need for the EU to learn to speak the "language of power".<sup>2</sup> This expression demonstrates an understanding that international law, multilateral institutions and rules-based cooperation are not the only mechanisms which shape today's international relations. Some scholars have long recognised this, conceptualising the balance of power and the special role of great powers as pillars of the international order on a par with diplomacy and international law, with the latter often unable to function without the former.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that one cannot have a functional international order in which great powers invade their neighbours, annex their territory and threaten nuclear strikes against those who stand in their way. Yet during the Cold War, the United States consciously privileged a strategy of containment over attempts to roll back the

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<sup>2</sup> European External Action Service, *HR/VP Borrell in India: "Europeans are Beginning to Realise that We Have to Learn to Talk the Language of Power"*, 16 January 2020, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/73087>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1977.

Soviet Union's sphere of influence in Europe. We may reject the notion of spheres of influence today, but the years-long standoff – with devastating consequences – between Russia and the West in a country situated on the former's border illustrates how legal principles alone cannot substitute for a basic modicum of great power consensus in ensuring a stable international order.

Overemphasis on the “rules-based” components of the international order has come with consequences for EU foreign and security policy. For example, it has helped to privilege reactive and easy-to-accomplish actions such as sanctions – which over the past eight years have not made Russia any less of a problem for Europe – over the development of a more substantive paradigm for EU–Russia relations which transcends the lowest common denominator among member states.

## **EU–Russia relations after the war**

This leads to the second and longer-term question of what sort of relationship the EU wants to have with Russia after the war. In the wake of Putin's illegal annexations, a complete political settlement between Moscow and Kyiv has become unlikely if not impossible. A likely scenario is a cessation of hostilities in several months' time and the establishment of a Korean-type line of control between the two parties, the exact location of which is yet to be determined.

The EU's approach to date of sanctioning Russia, assisting Ukraine and using the opportunity to pursue defence integration are not a substitute for addressing the security dilemma that would follow such an outcome, which may be prone to periods of escalation that are unpredictable and difficult to control. As such, even if the most immediate escalation risk described above is averted, the EU will likely face a volatile situation on its eastern frontier for some time.

It bears mentioning that Putin's removal from power is unlikely to change this dynamic. His successor could be even more committed to seeing Russia's war aims through than he is, blaming Russia's military failings on Putin's incompetence as a pretext to escalate the war. Even if Putin's successor wished to bring current hostilities to an end, which may be difficult given the domestic political climate in Russia, Moscow's security concerns vis-à-vis the West – widely shared among the

Russian elite – will remain unresolved.

Is the EU's desired outcome a new equilibrium with Russia based on strategic containment? Arrival at some form of peaceful coexistence? Full-blown regime change? This has yet to be explicitly spelled out. But any one of these three options would require a massive investment of thought, energy and resources.

Given its significant military setbacks, some may now dismiss Russia's great power status. But it remains Europe's most populous country, retains significant capacity for disruptive power and has rebuilt its national strength after many defeats and collapses throughout its history. Russia is an empire, historically prone to oscillating cycles of centralisation and decentralisation of political power. Its transformation into something capable of fully integrating into a Western-led order is likely to take decades, not years. The status of Ukraine is therefore an issue which the EU will have to address in the context of an unfriendly Russia for the foreseeable future. This highlights how one cannot delink the issue of Ukraine's future from the task of building a stable European security order.

If the EU wishes to be taken seriously as a "geopolitical actor", then there is no alternative to substantively determining what sort of paradigm should structure the continental security system. And unlike the challenge of a rising China, where the unfolding geopolitical dynamics comprise traditional EU competencies such as trade, ensuring that Europe's security order is not determined largely by the United States and Russia will require the EU to speak with a collective voice on hard-power issues where core political questions are at stake. This is less about regulations and standards and more about fundamental norms, military deterrence and the scope of legitimate state behaviour.

The EU's adoption of its Strategic Compass last March was a positive step. But member states need to move beyond common threat assessments and towards more concrete discussions over what (realistic) future they envision for the continental security order – and how best to manage the dangerous road from here to there.



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