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Euro-Atlantic Security in an Era of Self Defence

Karl-Heinz Kamp

Historians may one day consider the year 2014 as a turning point for international security policy, arguably comparable to the dramatic implications of 2001. Like the terrorist attacks of September 11, which changed priorities in security and defence policy not only in the United States but in large parts of the world, Moscow's expansive steps in Eastern Europe profoundly altered perceptions and policies in the Euro-Atlantic realm and beyond. Moreover, security and stability in Europe's southern neighbourhood was equally challenged by the mushrooming of Islamist violence practically destroying domestic order in large parts of the Middle East and of Northern Africa – the so called MENA-region. Whereas in the first two decades since the end of the Cold War, the number of major interstate conflicts (those with more than 1000 direct casualties per year) decreased significantly, this trend reversed in the last half decade. Since 2008, the number of major conflicts tripled from four to twelve – the vast majority of them in the MENA region.

The implications of these two developments – for the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO), the European Union (EU) and the international security order at large – are worth considering.

The Russia Problem

With Russia seizing Ukrainian territory in 2014 and with Russia's president Putin publicly stating that he could conquer neighbouring states in a few days, international observers frequently characterised

the situation in Eastern Europe as a new Cold War. Like the Soviet Union, Russia appeared to be an over-arching military and political threat keeping an entire region under vassalage. However, as catchy the term “Cold War” may be, it is historically loaded and does not suit well as a characterisation of the current period, which differs significantly from the old East-West conflict. There is, today, neither a global competition between two political systems – Communism and Capitalism – , nor a Soviet dominated “Eastern Block” militarily at pair with the US-led NATO. Instead, Russia today is a regional power with an admittedly large nuclear weapons capability. It is also a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Alas, despite strong rhetoric of its leadership, Russia has been incapable of re-establishing lasting global influence or attractiveness, demonstrating a lack of these soft-power skills.

Instead of a global rivalry, there is a specific conflict with Russia – already simmering for a while but visibly breaking out in 2014. It is a conflict with three dimensions:

First, for a couple of years now Moscow positions itself as an “anti-Western” power, regarding the Western way of life as a degenerated model in which too much liberalism has led to deformations such as the erosion of religious values, materialism or homosexual rights. President Putin, in turn, emphasises orthodoxy and nationalism, even expressing ideas of Slavic superiority. Such rhetoric is not good or bad per se but appears from a Western point of view slightly bizarre at best.

Second, the Russian leadership thinks in terms of spheres of influence and of the limited sovereignty of countries located in the “near abroad” of a leading power. Hence, the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union are regarded as imminent threats for Russia as they have expanded to the East thereby destroying the former Soviet Union’s cordon sanitaire. Following this logic, Moscow dismisses Western reasoning that NATO and the EU *responded* to the membership applications of sovereign countries which have the right to choose their alliances. In Russian thinking, NATO should not have accepted new members so as not to endanger the overall stability in Europe.

To emphasise its ambitions of restoring imperial greatness and exerting control over its neighbours, Moscow increasingly includes the mention of nuclear weapons usage as a means of intimidation. Russian threats to deploy more nuclear weapons in its Western regions or the cruising of Russian nuclear bombers close to NATO territory should be read as signs of Moscow’s great power aspirations. Since 2009, Russia has even included the use of nuclear weapons against NATO capitals in its regular military exercises.

Third, with the illegal annexation of Crimea and the active support of separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine, Russia violated international law and broke international treaties it had signed years ago. More importantly, Moscow crossed a threshold which was long-regarded as sacrosanct in Europe: it modified its borders by way of military force. This is why the Russia-Ukraine dispute is not just a regional crisis but a game changer in international security relations. The result will not be a temporary bad weather period but a fundamental ‘climate change’ between Russia and what can be called the “political West”, i.e. liberal democracies in NATO, the EU and beyond.

Russia is no longer regarded as a partner and the idea of a Euro-Atlantic security order including Russia has ceased to exist.

It has been difficult to imagine what the Russian leadership intended to achieve with the seizing of Ukrainian territory and with its aggressiveness to neighbours and (former) partners. Neither Crimea nor the Ukraine is an economic or strategic “jewel” justifying the price of ruining Russia’s relationship with NATO and the EU. If it was Russia’s intention to prevent the Ukraine’s orientation towards the West, this idea failed completely: regardless of the outcome of the crisis, the part of the Ukraine not remaining under Russian control will doubtlessly strive for a close association to NATO and the EU. Moreover, the cost (political and economic) of sustaining the annexation of Crimea as a Moscow-controlled entity geographically separated from Russian territory has been significant. The sanctions imposed by the EU and other democratic countries are biting for a Russian economy which is already strained due to its lack of competitiveness and its overly strong dependence on energy exports. Since low oil prices are likely to last, Russia will suffer from a significant dearth of income. Other countries will hardly be of help: the idea of forging an alliance with China proved to be a pipe dream as Beijing regards Moscow as a junior-partner at best, being instrumental only as regards its own strategic interests. A potential unification of the rising powers in the BRICS format (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) also seems less likely than Moscow might have expected – not only because the BRICS form a dispersed assemblage of countries, but also because some members underperform substantially with regard to initially hoped-for growth and prosperity.

Many observers expect that Moscow will sooner or later seize other parts of the Ukraine in order to establish a land-bridge between Russia and Crimea in order to keep the cost of the occupation bearable. Hence, it seems likely that Russia will continue to either indirectly support secession movements in the Ukraine or to use direct military force for this purpose.

The Putin-regime evidently reaps the rewards of its new world-power ambitions rather more in the soft area of political perceptions within Russia than in that of hard economic and strategic realities. Domestic support for President Putin has climbed to unexpected heights as the Russian political and military sabre rattling soothes the still prevalent ghost pain of having lost the erstwhile Soviet Empire. The narrative of a Russia which has risen from its knees now finding its appropriate place among world powers – triumphing against the bullying of the United States – is one which sells well in a country which even 25 years after the end of the Cold War still brings no other products to the world market than weapons and energy. From that perspective, President Putin seems doomed to act forcefully on the international scene in order to keep up his national image of indomitability. The trouble is that these global power ambitions don’t pair with economic realities. Given that Russia has missed at least two decades of political, economic and societal modernisation, the long term perspectives for the Putin regime to deliver sufficient public goods to satisfy the society’s needs are bleak. Unlike many competitors, Russia is not a rising power but a power on the decline, living, in economic terms, off its past savings and, in political terms, from the

fiction of being the leader of the anti-American world. As this business model cannot be sustained eternally, in a decade from now the problem might be a destabilised, dis-integrating Russia rather than an over-aggressive one.

Apparently, President Putin and his advisors did not expect a strong international reaction to the annexation of Ukrainian territory. In their perception of a degenerated West which is not able to stand up for its values, Moscow hoped to get away with some harsh verbal reactions and political condemnations from Washington, Brussels or Berlin. Surprisingly, NATO and the EU acted immediately by applying an entire spectrum of political, economic and military counter-measures. In a division-of-labour approach, the EU has been in the driver's seat with regard to the non-military crisis management efforts. Tough political and economic sanctions were issued swiftly and were fully supported by the United States and by many democratic countries in the Asia-Pacific region (Japan, Australia etc.). Moreover, economic support for both the Ukraine and for other nations in the European neighbourhood which are threatened by Russia's neo-imperial policies was issued in order to increase these nations' domestic stability and societal resilience. Even an agreement between Russia and the Ukraine for further energy supplies was negotiated under the auspices of the EU so as to ensure the physical survival of the Ukraine.

NATO did its share by focussing on its core task according to Article 5 of the NATO treaty (the so-called Washington Treaty signed in 1949) which is to protect all its member states against military aggression from abroad. Hence, NATO did not intend to take action against Russian military operations in Eastern Ukraine as the Ukraine does not belong to the North Atlantic Alliance. Instead, the Alliance took a number of measures – subsumed under the headline Readiness Action Plan (RAP) – to improve its defence capabilities against a potential future Russian aggression against NATO itself. As such, it created a new rapid response mechanism to ensure quick military reactions to regional crises at NATO's borders; it augmented its military presence in Eastern Europe; it significantly increased military training and exercises; and it guaranteed the storage of military equipment in Eastern Europe in order to have the means to act decisively on very short notice. In addition, individual NATO members provided military support and training for Ukrainian forces on a bilateral basis.

The purpose of these measures was twofold: first, to send a signal of resolve to any potential aggressor that NATO is willing and able to protect the territorial integrity of its member states. Second, NATO conveyed a message of reassurance to its members in Eastern Europe which feel threatened by Moscow's assertiveness. It was obvious, though, that all these military preparations would require significant financial means. Thus, NATO members agreed to increase their defence spending to finance the steps agreed under the RAP. Other countries in Europe – outside NATO but close partners to the Alliance, such as Sweden or Finland – increased their defence spending as well.

It is worth noting that up to the time of writing this piece, governments in NATO and the EU remained remarkably coherent in their reaction. Both institutions stuck to their tough measures, even if some electorates – not least in Germany – were partly willing

to swallow Russian propaganda justifying Moscow's illegal actions as understandable if not called-for in view of the supposed attempts of "the West", particularly of the United States, to deny Russia its appropriate position on the world stage. However, particularly after the downing of a Malaysian civil aircraft in July 2014 allegedly by Ukrainian separatists supported by Russia, the international backing of Russia's reasoning faded significantly. From that moment on, public polls indicated a growing number of Europeans viewing Russia as the main spoiler of European stability. This shift in public opinion was amplified by the fact that the Russian leadership continuously stimulated the conflict by expressing blunt military threats against the Baltic States or against their neighbours in South Eastern Europe. The more belligerent the tone in Moscow became, the more support NATO and EU governments found for upgrading European defence and for aiming restrictive measures at Russia's economy.

Turmoil in the Middle East

Another worrisome trend which started years ago but accelerated significantly in 2014 was the turmoil in Islamic states south of the Mediterranean Sea – the already mentioned MENA region. The level of violence and the depth of the various conflicts in the area indicate that these events go beyond ordinary crises or revolutions, which sooner or later fizzle out and/or lead to the reestablishment of order. Instead of following this path, the region appears to be suffering from a lasting erosion of statehood in which countries like Iraq, Libya or Syria fall apart and newly founded Caliphates transcend existing borders. Myriads of extremist groupings, some of them labelled as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) or ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and Levant), fight each other – many of them supported by regional powers like Iran or the Gulf states. Estimates indicate that in 2014 about 1500 armed non-state groups existed in Syria alone.

Given the magnitude of the conflicts and the size of the region involved, some observers already draw comparisons to the Thirty Years War of the 17th century which led to a fundamentally new order in Europe after a third of a century of fighting.

The chances for stabilising the situation from outside – be it by civil and military intervention or by partnership efforts to support existing governments – are extremely low. Where state structures cease to exist, it seems impossible to define a party against or in favour of whom to intervene. Moreover, recent international attempts to pacify ongoing crises or to help in building functioning state structures have hardly been successful. The NATO intervention in Libya – albeit effective in its operational implementation – has not lead to more stability on the ground. On the contrary, since the end of the brutal dictatorship of the Gadhafi-regime, the country has fallen to pieces. In Afghanistan, the jury is still out as to whether the results of 13 years of intervention and nation building efforts by 50 nations and numerous non-state organisations will in fact lead to lasting positive results. Current assessments do not leave much room for optimism: one of the core lessons of Afghanistan seems to be that medieval societies cannot be easily jump-started into the 21st century.

It is no surprise then that a strong “intervention fatigue” has been spreading among the NATO members – particularly if it comes to military action. Even if NATO, as the strongest military alliance in the world, seems a natural candidate for crisis interventions, members get increasingly hesitant to risk the lives of their soldiers in conflicts where any action from abroad leads to more chaos on the ground rather than to more stability.

There are three reasons, however, why NATO cannot ignore the developments south of the Mediterranean Sea: firstly, many NATO members are geographically located in Southern Europe and naturally expect that the security alliance to which they belong will take care of the threats and challenges extant in their neighbourhood. Secondly, the NATO members in Northern Europe as well as those in North America (the United States and Canada) will equally be affected by a lasting instability of an important region like the Middle East and Northern Africa. What is more, Islamist terrorism transcends borders and poses a domestic threat to many NATO and EU countries. Currently, about 4000 European citizens are estimated to have left their countries and joined one of the numerous terrorist groups in the Middle East in order to fight for what they perceive as a just cause. Many of them will sooner or later return and might use their fighting skills for terrorist acts in their home countries. Thirdly, NATO member Turkey directly borders two states affected by civil war – Iraq and Syria – and is a neighbour of Iran, a country which is strongly fuelling the unrest in the MENA region. Hence, an attack on Turkish territory cannot be excluded and would invoke the afore-mentioned Article 5 which activates the solidarity of all NATO members in favour of the country under threat. In other words, via Turkey, NATO might become a direct participant in the conflict.

Given the complex situation, NATO is confronted with the double challenge of, on the one hand, not getting directly involved in the MENA region fighting even if the brutality of Islamist groups contravenes every humanitarian value NATO upholds. On the other hand, NATO has to be prepared to react swiftly and decisively if its member Turkey comes under attack. This is why NATO had long deployed Patriot anti-missile sites in Turkey to protect the country from any threat from the air.

Europe in a New Era of Self Defence

The fundamentally modified security situation in the Euro-Atlantic area, characterised by immediate threats from the East and from the South, has led to a number of new trends in Euro-Atlantic security policy – some still under development.

- › After decades of NATO and EU attempts to build up a partnership with Russia, the Euro-Atlantic community finds itself back in a situation resembling the old days of the East-West conflict: facing the existence of a specific military threat. The implications for NATO are profound. In its current strategic core document, the so-called Strategic Concept of 2010, the Alliance defined three core missions: military self-defence, crisis management through intervention, and cooperative security via close partnerships with non-NATO countries all around the world. Even if this task list was perceived as a hierarchy with self-defence on top, in practice most NATO members could not then

imagine an opponent to defend against. In consequence of this, NATO kept Article 5 as its rhetorical *raison d'être* but de facto reduced its self-defence capacities. It had, at this time, significantly reduced its military capabilities in Europe and scrapped almost all of its defence plans. Instead, NATO forces fought in Afghanistan or Libya and the Alliance evolved a dense net of partnerships in Europe, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific. Today, NATO is back to the 'Article-5-World' in which military protection against aggression is not only a rhetorical task but needs to be bolstered by credible military means.

- › Nuclear weapons are now back on the international security agenda – if it is that they were ever off it! Popular ideas of a nuclear free world, regarded by some as pure fiction, are no longer guiding Euro-Atlantic security policy. Instead, past lessons of nuclear deterrence have to be re-learned.
- › It is worth noting, though, that protection from Russia and cooperation with Russia are not mutually exclusive. Despite the bellicose policies of its leadership, Russia is an important country that needs to be included in a number of common efforts aimed at tackling imminent challenges. The agreement with Iran on its nuclear program, the need for close cooperation in the Arctic or the ongoing civil war in Syria are concrete examples regarding which cooperation with Russia is instrumental in solving common problems. Therefore, lines of communication with Moscow were kept up, notwithstanding the conflict in the Ukraine. The German government in particular made sure that Russia was not fully excluded from the security dialogue in Europe.
- › NATO and the EU proved to be efficient security policy actors mutually augmenting their efforts towards defusing the crisis in the East. In fact, they developed an efficient division of labour with the EU focusing on the non-military dimensions of crisis management and NATO dealing with the deterrence aspects of strengthening its military capabilities to dissuade aggression against its members. Moreover, both organisations kept up their coherence despite the fact that economic sanctions against Russia and costly military improvements have been difficult to sell in those European countries which are already heavily hit by economic crisis. Hence, Russia's new aggressiveness has been met by a steadfast front of democratic countries not willing to take threats to European stability.
- › With respect to the violence in the Arab world, the report card is less positive. NATO and the EU refrained from getting militarily involved in the various crises. There is a very selective and low profile engagement in a few trouble spots like the EU training mission in Mali or NATO support efforts for Iraqi military forces. Moreover individual NATO and EU nations take UN mandated military action in the region, like France's "Operation Serval" in Mali. There also appears to be another dimension to the division of labour in the sense that the United States is focussing more on the trouble spots in the Middle East, whereas Europe is dealing more with the challenges coming from the immediate East. Still, progress in hedging Islamist violence and the disintegration of large parts of the MENA region has, so far, been very limited. Neither the United States nor their European allies seem to have a quick solution at hand.

The West Against the Rest?

The implications of the fighting in Europe's Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods go far beyond these respective regions and are wider than the mere posing of security policy challenges. Instead, they indicate the erosion of the current liberal and rule based international order, constructed after the end of the Second World War. Russia's annexation of parts of a sovereign state or the ISIS declarations of an Islamic Caliphate break with everything the liberal world order was made of: the relevance of international law, the invulnerability of external borders, the recognition of national sovereignty and the validity of signed treaties. It is not by chance that President Putin's annual speech at the so-called "Valdai Discussion Club" late 2014 was given under the headline displayed on a banner: "New Rules or No Rules". Following this slogan Russia is willing to accept rules, but not those the current international order is based upon.

In other regions of the world, the post-World War II order is equally eroding. China challenges it in the Asia-Pacific region by creating artificial islands in order to expand its control over the South China Sea. However, unlike Russia, Beijing seems aware of the fact that China's further economic and social evolution is highly dependent on international stability, free trade and reliable legal structures – in short upon a rule-based, liberal international order. There is, as such, a degree of ambivalence in China's position with regard to the future of the current international order. Other rising powers, be it in Asia, Africa or Latin America will face this question of which kind of an international order to support as well.

Given this mutable situation, it is worth debating whether the endurance of the liberal and democratic world order requires a coherent effort from the political "West" to defend its values and principles. The question arises as to whether there is a need for Europe, North America and politically like-minded democracies around the globe to align in order to support an international system based to a large degree on the international institutions created after the end of World War II. Should the answer be positive, the political "West" must then deal with the potential reaction from other rising powers, which might see such a thing as a form of paternalistic domination.

It is worth mentioning that efforts to rally "the West" around this flag are not new. One of the proposals which gained most traction was the idea expressed by the then US presidential candidate John McCain in 2007 to create a "League of Democracies". However, most of the proposals of uniting or even re-creating the political West are met with immediate criticism of being directed 'against' someone or something: if there is a "West", then there must also be an "East" or a "South" to be excluded or regarded askance. Hence, proposals of this kind were in the past mostly dismissed as attempts to build new walls against other entities – such as Russia or countries in the Middle East.

In 2015, though, the situation seems profoundly different. It is Russia which positions itself explicitly against the West and its political principles. It is the extremist Islamic groups mostly in the South which violate not only Western values but ravage basic standards of human civilisation. Hence, an effort to safeguard Western values would not be an active move of excluding others but a protective reaction to preserve its own set of values against those who reject them. Were such a project to go forward “the West” would be construed as a political as opposed to geographical category and would be a self-selecting entity based on a consensus on the basic pillars of liberal democracy. The core would be NATO and the EU, to be amended by fully fledged democracies, market economies and politically like-minded countries independent of their geographical location.

Historians may one day consider the year 2014 not only as a watershed for international security policy but also as the beginning of a comprehensive attempt to uphold the order and structures which have maintained stability in large parts of the world for the last quarter of a century.