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As tensions over the Ukraine worsen, is the West on the wrong track?

The best deterrence against Russian aggression lies outside conventional thinking

Fighting the last war is always said to be the weakness of generals. But is fighting the last confrontation emerging as the weakness of Western governments, as they seek to counter growing Russian aggression against Ukraine?

It is the Atlantic alliance team, led by the American president and followed by the other NATO members, that is leading the riposte and threatening dire consequences if any of Vladimir Putin's nearly 100 thousand troops, assembled near the border, dare set foot on Ukraine's territory. The challenge is seen almost entirely as a West versus Russia matter, just as it was back in the last century. It is a lineup and a landscape with which all the old brigade of Cold War warriors can feel thoroughly familiar.

But there are a few snags to this simplified scenario. The first is that in the 21st century, world power has shifted. In the 21st century it is the pan-Asian and African powers, plus the big players in the Middle East, who increasingly hold the cards. When Moscow feels the rough edge of opinion, expressed through all sorts of channels, from sources such as Japan, Australia, India, the African Union and, yes, even from their "sort-of" friends, the Chinese — that is when it will pause, rather than being deterred by a NATO military lineup which, as U.S. President Joe Biden rather tactlessly pointed out, is less than solid.

Asia contains 60% of the world's population and it is where 90% of global economic growth over the next 10 years will take place. It is where the technology required to master the new battlefields is pulling ahead and where conventional defense capabilities are also building up fast. It is where completely new trade and financial arrangements are beginning to find a way around dollar dominance.

Today's more economically powerful Asian nations definitely have skin in the game from the security point of view. It is in no state's interest — whether democratic, authoritarian or something in between — to start a world war and encourage the practice of big countries invading and crushing their smaller neighbors, as Russia seems poised to do. China also has the imminent Olympic Winter Games to consider.

A second aspect was raised by Biden's unfortunate NATO comment. The Alliance is not what it was. Germany is fast becoming the weak link in the chain, with deeply divided political opinions on how to confront Russia, or even whether to work with its allies. And under the new German government, all suggestions of military involvement are completely out.

Meanwhile another NATO member, Turkey, is well on a path of its own, as it feeds off Russian weapons while the president of France is on record as saying that NATO is becoming “brain-dead” — hardly a solid lineup.

The third new factor is that the nature of war itself has changed. Sending more weaponry and ships to Ukraine may be a marginal deterrent, but the real conflict is going to be fought out in the dark realms of cyberspace and the labyrinths of financial sanctions — and to some extent on the global energy front. This is where Russia can be made to feel the pain and the Kremlin bosses can be personally touched, especially if their enormous funds tucked away in Western banks can be frozen.

Here, too, the approach requires solidarity — and not just between Western allies but globally. Both German and British policy and strategy in this area is open to criticism and needs to be strengthened. Many believe that London is the center of the money laundering world and is full of dirty Russian funds.

As for Russian energy exports, the new Nord Stream 2 pipeline is now completed and ready to be commissioned to carry gas directly from Russia to its German customers, bypassing Poland. Russia clearly wants it open to increase European gas sales. There are Western threats to delay that, but it could be a two-edged sword. European gas prices are currently through the roof and reliance on gas to generate electric power is far too high, especially in the U.K.. Much more gas is desperately needed to ease the current price strains.

Besides, a richer Russia could well be a less aggressive one. This is not where the pressure is best applied.

Even when the Western perspective is taken into account on this many-sided situation there is the rest of the world to consider. Cutting off Western financial transactions may hurt, but if Chinese support is simply stepped up instead, the impact will be simply canceled out. And if the West’s demand for Russian gas and oil is shut down there are plenty of thirsty Asian customers to be had.

In sum, the best deterrence against Russia’s ugly moves and the best protection for countries wanting international stability, whether East or West, almost certainly lies outside NATO altogether and outside all conventional defense thinking.

To stop Vladimir Putin demands a different kind of alliance in the digital era, a different membership from the old Western camp and clever tactics based on a different kind of conflict strategy.

When that sinks in, but not before, the chances of Putin changing his mind and withdrawing his soldiers from their so-called manoeuvres along Ukraine’s borders begin to improve.

But we are nowhere near that point yet.

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