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A call for a security order in Europe based on collective security instead of balance of power

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A call for a security order in Europe based on collective security instead of balance of power

Tom Sauer *

Abstract

Two kinds of security constellations are imaginable among great powers: the classic balance of power (Realism) or cooperation in the form of collective security (Liberalism). This article posits that the latter has more chances to prevent wars than the former. The case-study that is developed is the relationship between Russia and the West after 1989. The West failed to integrate Russia (on an equal footing) in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture after the Cold War. NATO did not only remain into existence; it also expanded on a regular basis, with the promise in 2008 to include Georgia and Ukraine. The result was the continuation of the balance of power game between Russia and the West, finally ending up with the war in Ukraine, something that could have been predicted on the basis of the theory, and that was actually predicted by experts like George Kennan already in the 1990s.

Key words: Collective security; Balance of power; Russia; Ukraine

Abstract

Due tipologie di costellazioni di sicurezza sono immaginabili tra le grandi potenze: il classico equilibrio di potere (realismo) o la cooperazione sotto forma di sicurezza collettiva (liberalismo). Questo articolo postula che quest'ultima tipologia abbia maggiori possibilità di prevenire le guerre rispetto alla prima. Il caso di studio che viene sviluppato è il rapporto tra la Russia e l'Occidente dopo il 1989. L'Occidente non è riuscito a integrare su un piano di parità la Russia nell'architettura di sicurezza euro-atlantica dopo la Guerra Fredda. La NATO non solo è rimasta in vita: si è anche ampliata costantemente, con la promessa nel 2008 di includere la Georgia e l'Ucraina. Il risultato è stato il proseguimento del gioco degli equilibri di potere tra Russia e Occidente, conclusosi con lo scoppio della guerra in Ucraina: un esito prevedibile in via teorica e che, in realtà, era già stato previsto da esperti come George Kennan negli anni '90 del secolo scorso.

Parole chiave: sicurezza collettiva; equilibrio di potere; Russia; Ucraina

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Introduction

Since the start of the war by Russia in Ukraine in February 2022, the European public is confronted with its grave humanitarian consequences: dramatic images on television of death and destruction, and millions of Ukrainian refugees. Western organizations like the EU and NATO are more united than ever against a common enemy, something President Putin may not have expected. The West has also imposed a panoply of severe economic sanctions against Russia, including in the sphere of energy. Consequently Russia gets less income (despite the fact that the gas price has risen tremendously), but Europe also receives less gas from Russia. The West, especially the US, also delivers heavy arms to the Ukrainian army, so that Ukraine can defend itself and ideally push back the Russian army. By sending arms, one could make the argument that it prolongs the war.

Most conflicts are finally resolved at the negotiating table. To start imagining possible outcomes, we should at least answer the question what drives President Putin. To be clear: an explanation does not equal a legitimization. The Russian war cannot be justified in any way. The core of the UN Charter (art. 2), agreed upon right after the Second World War, is that states do not attack each other – except for self-defense or if agreed upon by the UN Security-Council, in terms of collective security.

1. Three explanations for Russia's attack

Why did Russia attack Ukraine? Nobody (apart from President Putin) knows for sure. But based on the literature, three explanations for the Russian aggression can be distinguished: 1) Russia has never accepted the implosion of the Soviet Union; it would like to expand and become more powerful again; 2) the Kremlin is afraid that Ukraine becomes a democracy, which may result in a so-called colour revolution in Moscow; the latter would equal the end of the current Russian regime; 3) Russia feels pushed into a corner by the different rounds of NATO expansion; it wants to prevent Ukraine to become part of NATO out of security concerns.

The first explanation – power and expansionism – is the most popular one in the West (Snyder, 2022). According to this theory, there is only one actor to be blamed for the war: Russia, and more in particular President Putin. Putin is even compared to Hitler (Herman, 2022); others believe that he is ill (Cole, 2023) or became crazy (Roth, 2023). According to the advocates of this

explanation, Russia will not stop once it has achieved its objectives in Ukraine. For the readers familiar with the theories of International Relations, this explanation corresponds to the theory of Offensive Realism, according to which big states want to have as much power as possible (Mearsheimer, 2001). A sub-variant relates this 'will to power' to cultural roots. Following this theory, it can be predicted that the Baltic States may be next in line to be attacked. It is therefore not surprising that this theory is dominant in the West, and especially in Central Europe, both because of geographical and historical reasons. One proponent of this theory is Radislav Sikorski (2022), member of the European Parliament and former Minister of defense in Poland.

This explanation is certainly plausible, also because some of President Putin's declarations run parallel with this thesis (Al Jazeera, 2022). On the other hand, apart from the take-over of the Crimea in 2014, there are no indications of this Russian expansionist behaviour after the Cold War until the beginning of 2022. Regardless of the intentions, Russia has not the military capabilities to occupy more states, let alone NATO member states. A good indicator is the defense budget. While the Europeans spend annually more or less 300 bn \$ on defense, and the US adds another 700 bn \$ in the framework of NATO, Russia's defense expenditures are limited to 60 bn \$. It is therefore hardly imaginable that Russia will attack and occupy NATO member states. The war has also shown the relative weakness of the Russian army. It could not even conquer Kiev. That said, it is understandable that given the proximity with Russia that the Baltic states are afraid. The reason that they say so also helps to convince the US and Western Europe to provide more military support in the form of defense and deterrence, so that the Baltic states can feel more secure. In addition, the US for their part have a geostrategic interest to blame solely Moscow. But all that does not demonstrate that the first theory is the best to explain President Putin's motivation.

The second explanation – rooted in domestic politics – is more plausible than the first. The current leadership in the Kremlin has everything to lose in case Ukraine and Russia become democratic. An adept of this theory is Michael McFaul (Person and McFaul, 2022), former US Ambassador in Moscow and currently affiliated with the University of Stanford. Already during the colour revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the period 2003-2005, when Western NGO's (funded by Western states) were involved in organizing and financing these protest meetings, the Kremlin protested (Nikitina, 2014). In the period 2011-2012, there were again massive protests in the streets of Moscow, this time against the prolongation of Putin's reign. Since then the Kremlin hardened its stance against domestic protest movements. Media came under stricter control of the government, which explains the absence of heavy societal

(let alone political) contestation in Russia despite the misgivings about the war (although that may still change). Nevertheless, all this can – according to my analysis – still not explain why Russia attacked Ukraine.

The most plausible explanation for Russia's behaviour is the third one, shared by John Mearsheimer (University of Chicago), Stephen Walt (Harvard University) and Anatol Lieven (Quincy Institute). This Realpolitik explanation holds that Russia acted re-actively, more in particular because it felt humiliated, neglected and not respected by the West after the Cold War. The West has indeed refused to integrate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture after the Cold War, at least on an equal level to the US. NATO remained into existence and has been expanded in the direction of Russia. Consequently, Russia felt insecure. The war should be regarded as a reactive behaviour by Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014; Sauer, 2017; Walt, 2022).

Let us elaborate on the security explanation by digging deeper into the domain of international politics, and more in particular into the relationship between great powers.

2. Balance of power vis-à-vis collective security

Two types of security constellation amongst the great powers can be distinguished: balance of power (Realism) vis-à-vis collective security (Liberalism). The former is the best known and is the one that corresponds to the theory of Realism that posits that states want to have enough (or more than enough) power (Waltz, 1979). Power can be operationalized in the form of economic growth (GDP), defense budget, level of armament (conventional and nuclear), territory, size of the population, etc. As many of these indices change on a permanent basis, the balance of power amongst the big powers is also continuously changing, and sometimes these balances become imbalances, which is dangerous. The great power that is currently on the rise is China; others like the US are on the decline, at least relatively.

Furthermore, feeling secure is a very important, if not the most important, need of any state. As there is no overarching hierarchical authority in world politics (in contrast to the national level), states have to defend themselves. If they do not, there is the risk that they are attacked, defeated and possibly annexed by another state.

Mechanisms that help to secure oneself are arms, alliances, buffer states and spheres of influences. A balance of power approach can therefore be regarded as a hard power approach, better known as a “the struggle for life” and “survival of the fittest”. Realists believe that this is the core of international politics, and that there is no alternative. The only choice that exists is between trying to get as much power as possible (which corresponds to the sub-theory of Offensive Realism) and getting enough power to be able to defend oneself (which corresponds to sub-theory of Defensive Realism). If great powers are prudent, they can postpone a violent conflict for a long time thanks to this balancing behavior. But proponents of the Realist school believe that in the end it is hard to escape wars. Today, Realists feel emboldened in their thinking as a result of the Russian war.

A more idealist or Liberal approach posits that one could aim higher. More in particular a Liberal approach claims that despite the differences in power, great powers could cooperate (Keohane, 1984), also in the field of security and by doing so diminish the chances to go to war. The objective of such a collective security regime, as it is called, is to agree on rules on war and peace (Kupchan and Kupchan, 1991; Kupchan and Kupchan, 1995). The advantage of a collective security organization is that it comprises all states, or at least all states within a region without excluding states. This idea stands in contrast to alliances (= collective *defense* organizations) that by definition exist against an external enemy that is not included in the system. Under a collective *security* regime in contrast states do not have the same need to arm itself or ally itself with other states as in a balance of power mode. Nor do they feel the need to have buffer states or spheres of influences. What instead is needed is a collective security organization that establishes the rules and that looks after its implementation.

Examples of collective security organizations are the UN (at a global level) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (at a regional level). The UN was established right after the end of the Second World War. While it was to a large extent paralysed during the Cold War, it started to function better thereafter. The OSCE is the extension of the CSCE (where the C stands for Conference), better known as the Helsinki process that started its gatherings in the 1970s. The OSCE comprises all states between Vancouver and Vladivostok, including the US, Canada, Russia, and Europe. But it is a safe prediction that, as long as NATO exists, the OSCE will stand in its shadow.

The ideal moment to switch from one (less ambitious) security constellation to another (read better or more ambitious one, e.g. from balance of power to collective security) is right after a large (world) war (Ikenberry, 2001). At such

historical junctures fundamental questions about the future of the world order are asked such as: how to explain so many deadly victims? How to prevent similar wars in the future? How could we do better in the future?

3. Four historical junctures in the past 200 years

In the past two centuries, there have been four such historical junctures: 1815 (after Napoleonic wars); 1918 (after the First World War); 1945 (after the Second World War); and 1989/1991 (after the Cold War). At some of these junctures, the international community has managed the transition period better than at other moments.

In 1815, the major European states, including France (that had lost the war), gathered at the Congress of Vienna. In order to prevent that 'another Napoleon' would conquer Europe again, this '*concert Européen*' agreed on rules with respect to European security, which yielded security and stability for decades in contrast to the period before. This is an example of a successful collective security (and therefore Liberal) regime, at least until the French-German war in 1870 (with earlier cracks in the wand due to the Crimean War in 1853-1856).

After the First World War, the League of Nations was created as the first global collective security organization. Structural deficiencies at its start, more in particular the absence of major states like Germany and the United States themselves, made that the League did not function well. Germany had to pay for its wrongdoings, something that was perceived as a 'Diktat' in Berlin (Berber, 1939). The latter created grievances that led to the start of the Second World War.

The United Nations, the successor of the League of Nations, was established in 1945. Lessons were drawn: big states were yielded more power, as permanent members of the UN Security Council and having a veto. This probably made that nowadays all of them are still around. While largely paralysed during the Cold War, the UN started functioning better thereafter. The international reaction during the Gulf War in 1990-1991 is a successful example of how collective security organizations (and therefore Liberalism) could (or should) work in practice. In addition, the losers of the Second World War – Germany and Japan – were integrated in the international community (with certain reservations), in contrast to Germany after the First World War. Germany and Japan are nowadays two of the most industrialized, democratic and stable countries in the world.

The main question that we have to tackle next is: how did the international community manage the transition period after the end of the Cold War? Did it include or exclude the USSR/Russia, the loser of the Cold War? Is the answer more in line with 1918 or with 1815 and 1945? The answer is the former.

The West declined to include Russia, at least on an equal footing. Russia became a partner of NATO and the G-7, but not on an equal footing (Mearsheimer, 2014; Sakwa, 2016; Hill, 2018). President Bush Senior chose to keep NATO alive in peacetime, while alliances are supposed to be temporary organizations, meant for times of war or major crises. This can be regarded as an aberration in world history. Alliances are indeed useful in a balance of power constellation, and certainly in times of war or times of great contestation, and more in particular for smaller states. But in 1991 both the USSR and the Warsaw Pact – the counterpart of NATO – imploded, and it was peacetime. NATO ought to have halted to exist or at least ought to have adapted itself from a collective defense organization (= alliance) to a collective security organization that included Russia. This has not happened. On the contrary, NATO remained into existence (as a collective defense organization), excluding Russia, something that Russia regarded as a humiliation. Russia asked three times whether it could become member of (a transformed) NATO, the last time in 2001 by President Putin; the West refused each time.

Furthermore, high-level politicians in the West – more in particular West German Minister of Foreign Affairs Hans-Dietrich Genscher as well as his American colleague James Baker – promised Gorbachev on more than one occasion in February 1990 that NATO would not expand to the East. These (oral) promises were given in the framework of the German reunification talks. After having heard these promises, Gorbachev gave the green light for the German reunification (Sarotte, 2014; Shiffrinson, 2016; Sarotte, 2021; for a different view see Kramer, 2009). But after Germany was reunified, the West – more in particular US President Clinton – ditched its promises. Russia did not appreciate the fact that NATO remained alive, as well as the different rounds of NATO expansion (1999, 2004) despite earlier Western promises, and Russia had made that abundantly clear. But the real red line for Russia was Ukraine.

We should remember that Western troops had invaded Russia and had reached Moscow via Ukraine on two occasions, under Napoleon and Hitler. It is therefore not very difficult to understand that Russia regarded Ukraine as a buffer state, especially in the absence of a collective security organization with the West. Russia had warned many times that it would never accept Ukrainian's membership to the NATO. Nevertheless, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in

2008, President Bush Jr. pushed the decision through against the wishes of the European heads of states (including Merkel and Sarkozy). The bad compromise was that both Georgia and Ukraine 'will become' members of NATO. Putin, who was present at the summit, was very irritated. He had threatened at the same summit to annex the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in that case, a threat that was wrongly called 'bluff' by the West (Roshwald, 2008).

Putin's war in Ukraine cannot be approved, but given the analysis above, one could or should at least be able to better understand why he has taken this decision. The West has refused to include Russia in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture after the Cold War on an equal basis. Though Russia joined NATO as "a partner for peace" and the G-7 (+1), it felt excluded from the inner deliberations of NATO and the G-7. NATO (without Russia) remained the most important security organization. It is therefore not completely abnormal that Russia in the end reacted, just like it had been predicted by many American experts including George Kennan (1997), Paul Nitze (1998), and retired General John Galvin already in the 1990s (Brown, 1995).

4. Towards a durable solution

The least bad solution is that Ukraine becomes neutral (like Austria, Sweden and Finland during the Cold War). That is something that Zelensky agreed with in the beginning of the war, but as Ukraine became stronger thereafter he switched positions on this issue again. Neutrality means that Ukraine cannot join a Western or Russian collective defense organization, and that no foreign troops would be allowed on its territory. Ukraine would receive security guarantees from both the West and Russia and these guarantees should be legally binding (in contrast to the Budapest Memorandum in 1994).

Whether the annexation of the Crimea by Russia can be reversed is unclear. The annexation of Eastern Ukraine by Russia will also make it harder to undo Russia's military expansion over there. That said, it should all be part of the negotiations that should result in a peace treaty that is acceptable to both parties (if not, it will in all likelihood be the trigger of further rounds of violence in the future). In principle, the idea of providing more autonomy to the eastern regions – as foreseen in the Minsk agreements in 2014-2015 – could become part of the deal as well.

To believe that Ukraine could join the Western camp without approval of Russia is naïve. This naïvety of the West – or did the West consciously act to provoke

Russia? – is also partially responsible for the situation we are in for the moment. As stated above, many experts like George Kennan had already warned in the 1990s not to expand NATO because it would lead to serious frictions, if not war, with Russia.

Today, however, we apparently have still not learned our lesson. The West continues to supply Ukraine with more and heavier weapons. The latter is very risky, especially if Russia is on the losing side. In the worst-case, Putin could order the use of nuclear weapons (Sauer, 2023).

The question that will ring louder in the coming months is whether defending Ukraine should be the highest priority of European decision-makers. What about other goals like the negative economic and social consequences of the war for the European citizens? What about the food shortages in Africa and the rest of the world caused by the war? What about the climate issue that gets less attention? And, more fundamentally, should there not be a bigger push – also by the West (including Europe) – for starting peace negotiations?

Only if both fighting parties recognise that they can gain more by stop fighting, the war may end. It is clear that at the time of writing (April 2023), Russia and Ukraine are not there yet. But all wars do end at a certain moment. External actors can stimulate both actors to come to the negotiating table.

In the longer term, the most stable situation consists of creating a new European collective security organization that includes Russia. As long as that is not realised, it is not abnormal that Russia regards Ukraine as a buffer state.

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