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# Russia disregards Europe at its peril

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Russia has come to perceive Europe as an irrelevant and despicable actor, a mere US vassal, at least with regard to security. This vassal has been sidelined by Washington, coming under commercial attack and brutal, unpredictable communication about the military protection the Atlantic alliance is supposed to provide. Moscow has also got the message that for Europeans, Russia is an enemy now and will remain so for the long term. It regards Europe as weak and hostile, an entity it should therefore disregard and sabotage. What 'Europe' stands for here is an interesting issue. Is it the

European Union, which the Russian authorities regularly insult? Or is it the states of Europe, both those within the Union and those, like the UK, outside it?

This disdain for Europeans and their power is paradoxically to ignore both history and today's reality. It is a misperception that could lead to strategic errors – one that has already induced Russia to launch its 'special operation' to invade and 'denazify' Ukraine. Europe's reaction probably came as a surprise.

Were it to contemplate other aggressive moves now or in the future, against either EU or NATO members, Russia should seriously reassess the balance of power between itself and the Europeans, including in scenarios without the US. It seems to miscalculate the combat capabilities of Europeans acting together, whether in an EU or another framework that could encompass the UK, Norway and possibly Turkey.

History has demonstrated that Russia cannot disregard Europe. Russia has never fought a direct war with the United States, whereas it has been embroiled in a succession of appalling wars with Europeans for centuries. During the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis was arguably the closest the US and the Soviet Union came to an all-out confrontation, but the logic of mutually assured destruction halted its escalation; the strategic confrontation was instead played out in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Ideological competition and superpower rivalry took various forms, but not that of direct military aggression.

On the other hand, Russia has been involved in repeated military confrontations with European nations. Napoleon's and Hitler's invasions are seared into Russian collective memory. At other points in time, Russia fought long and short wars with Sweden, Poland, Lithuania, Britain and Turkey, to name just some of its adversaries. All were carnage on a grand scale. Russia was often victorious, not just thanks to 'General Winter', its seasonal ally, but

also to its military effort and human sacrifice. But Russia was always part of a coalition; these were wars between allied European nations. When the troops of Tsar Nicholas I entered Paris in 1814, they were in a coalition comprising Prussia, Austria, Britain, Spain, Sweden and others. When the Red Army invaded Berlin in 1945, the Soviet Union was acting in concert with the US, the UK and France. By contrast, in 2022 Putin acted alone, and his army was unable to take Kyiv as planned.

Today, for the first time in history, all the European States that lie to Russia's western and south-western borders are allies. NATO nations are committed to the collective defence clause of Article 5, and the EU members to the more binding article 42(7) of the EU Treaty. In its disdain for the EU as an organization, Russia ignores the collective power of the assembled states of Europe, if they are faced with a situation of aggression. Prime Minister Donald Tusk rightly wonders how it can be that '500 million Europeans are begging 300 million Americans for protection from 140 million Russians who have been unable to overcome 50 million Ukrainians for three years'.<sup>1</sup>

But Europe's collective military strength is downplayed by Europe itself. In assessing our capabilities, we read and hear more about shortfalls than about resources. It is legitimate to urge states to do more and to gain political support for investment in defence. Nevertheless, it blurs the message. It is not easy to find reliable data about the resources we have at our disposal to fight a war, whereas lists of shortfalls abound.<sup>2</sup> Of course, both means and shortfalls are expected to be confidential; Russia certainly ensures theirs are.

Today's NATO summit centres on defence spending as a percentage of national GDP. Such figures might be politically attractive, but they are largely irrelevant when it comes to measuring real capacity. Budget numbers cannot be translated into fighting capacity. The main objective should be not how much to spend, but how to spend effectively to enhance our defence capability and our freedom of action. Military power is derived from military

hardware, software and soldiers: both in number and in quality. It encompasses criteria such as readiness, agility in applying innovation, maintenance, autonomy, security of supply and interoperability, in addition to the availability of enablers such as space assets, AI, cyber networks and the combat cloud. The war in Ukraine provides lessons on how the balance of power can tilt on the battlefield, notably through the innovative use of cheap, often civilian devices such as small drones, and the ability to immediately ramp up the production of such weapons. But it confirms the relevance of high-technology enablers, too. It also shows that when you are invaded and fighting for your survival, you wage war according to your means and your own operational approach. The shortfalls advertised in public speeches are about NATO interoperability demands, about fighting the American way.

Another way in which Europeans miscommunicate their own potential strength is by already talking up a 'war economy'. Although determined to ramp up their rearmament capabilities fast, Europe is obviously not 'at war' and not mobilizing the full strength of the nation as a whole. Were that to change, the industrial, technological, economic, financial and human potential of the European states is formidable, as Russia would then discover.

The only military element that could balance Europe's conventional force superiority – potentially an overwhelming superiority – is Russia's nuclear arsenal. It raises major issues for the Europeans themselves, whether they are nuclear powers (France and the UK) or not, but also for the other two members of the formal 'nuclear club',<sup>3</sup> America and China.

Considering history and Europe's current agency, the Russian contempt for the Europeans is far from rational. The way the EU presents itself is largely responsible for this misperception, and it puts us at considerable risk.

French or German diplomats are not accustomed to being disregarded. Russian authorities do not despise the European states individually but have

regularly revealed their scorn for the European Union, which they do not see as an agent of collective European will. Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov publicly humiliated High Representative Josep Borrell. During the 2006 Finnish presidency of the EU, officials in charge of crisis management and defence visited Moscow, including the chair of the political and security committee and the head of the EU military staff; as director for defence affairs at the Council, I participated in the trip. The Finns were seeking a sound relationship with Moscow on common security and defence policy. The visit was a perfect fiasco. There was no proper participation by the Russians from either their foreign affairs or defence department. A few years later, Germans organizing the Berlin Security Conference intended to manage a separate discussion between the Russian deputy minister for defence attending the event and the chief executive of the European Defence Agency, which was me. There was absolutely no interest on the Russian side, not even a modicum of politeness. National diplomats confirm this Russian disregard of the European Union, which is explicitly acknowledged in private discussions they have (had) with their Russian counterparts.

To be fair, the Russian representative to the EU for 17 years, Vladimir Chizhov, was the exception. He obviously understood the EU, its strengths and limitations and its possible future developments. He tried to establish links with the new EU crisis management and defence structures. Russia participated in the EU force in Chad and the Central African Republic in 2008, contributing helicopters under a French force commander. But an ambassador does not determine the view from the capital when other factors contradict its message.

As Europeans, we share the responsibility for this state of affairs. Russia's attitude to Europe is hardly to be wondered at, when in our own capitals, probably few diplomats and no military authority ever explained to their Russian interlocutors, when they had them, that the EU could be a real military actor, for the simple reason that, most of the time, they don't believe

or support it themselves. As other key partners have found, the distribution of roles and competences between the president of the European Council, the president of the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy are inscrutable to Moscow.

NATO is seen as the sole relevant military entity. And Moscow has no doubt that NATO is led by the Americans. The relationship between Russia and NATO failed not least because of the ‘theatre’ of the NATO-Russia Council, established in 2002 as a forum for consultation (which last met in January 2022). The Russians did not appreciate sitting before the plurality of NATO nations and found their suspicions confirmed that European nations are not real players and that all power lies in Washington.

The mantra in NATO and in Washington, which is growing louder by the day, is that the Europeans are not up to the task: they are free riders, unable to act on their own, totally dependent on the American security umbrella. A focus on five per cent of GDP for defence spending will not alleviate the issue: most European allies will fail to meet this arbitrary target; the shame-and- blame game will continue, as will the pressure and blackmail of US non-commitment to Article 5.

We are now in a situation where Europeans and Russians could end up in a stand-off on our continent. With insecurities prevalent on both sides, because there is no longer an overarching security architecture in Europe; because of other threats we try to forget in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine; and because the US president is a man whom neither Moscow – whatever the camaraderie at the top level – nor the Europeans, G7 or G20 leaders can predict. This is a situation that could last well beyond the next US presidential election.

The so-called post-Cold War ‘disarmament’ of Europe should not be exaggerated. But critically the current ‘rearmament’ should not be misunderstood by the Russians as an act of aggression. There is no reason to

entertain the spectre of a hostile and aggressive Europe. The interest of all states on the continent is to be at peace and to pursue common security and prosperity. We face similar challenges and need to work together to overcome them.

Europe should show resolute and quiet strength. The decisions for military action and investment remain a national responsibility and a matter for the head of state or government. The EU supports funding and modalities of cooperation. Russia should not draw hasty conclusions from its perceptions of its Brussels interlocutors, but should look to what Germany, Poland, Sweden, France and the UK as well as other states will do today and tomorrow for their own and Europe's collective defence.

## Notes

- 1 In Jan Cieski and Wojciech Kość, 'Poland seeks access to nuclear arms and looks to build half-million-man army', POLITICO, 7 March 2025. ↩
- 2 For some institutional and think-tank examples of such 'shortfall' lists, see Andrej Burilkov, Kira Bushnell, Jorge Mejino-López, Taylor Morgan, and Guntram B. Wolff, *Fit for war by 2030? European rearmament efforts vis-a-vis Russia*, Kiel Report, No. 3, June 2025; European Defence Agency, *The 2023 EU Capability Development Priorities*, 2023; Justin Bronk, *Regenerating Warfighting Credibility for European NATO Air Forces*, Whitehall Report 1-23, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), London 2023 ↩
- 3 The P5 consists of the US, UK, France, China and Russia, the five signatory states to the non-proliferation treaty which are nuclear powers. ↩

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