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A new security order for Europe

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Europe's security order has collapsed in the wake of the Ukrainian conflict. The very idea of rethinking this particular European framework raises doubts when faced with a Russian regime unable to admit the futility of its imperial dream. However, Europeans cannot afford not to think about the future of stability in Europe in response to the Russian question, which has been troubling our continent for too long[1].

Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine has put an end to the European security order as it was established in 1975 in Helsinki. By launching his "special military operation", the Russian President has gutted the whole edifice that had lasted as well as it could since its foundation.

HELSINKI: A CHALLENGED BUT ALREADY WEAKENED ORDER

Today, the results are incontrovertible. With the war in Ukraine, the fundamental principles of the European order established in Helsinki have been openly ignored by the Russian authorities. The two most important of these, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of European nations, have been violated, even though they were the very basis of the balance that was so hard to achieve in 1975. Economic cooperation, which had been nurtured over more than four decades, has been hit hard by the economic and financial sanctions imposed by Western countries. Relations between civil societies, which formed the third part of the Helsinki agreements, are now being challenged by a conflict that is leading to calls for a boycott of Russian culture and society.

However, it did not take the war in Ukraine to reveal the European order as an outdated framework.

Following the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the continent's balance was profoundly altered: old states regained their independence, new ones emerged through the break-up of the Soviet empire or as a result of the war in the Balkans. All of these countries, which were not signatories to the Helsinki agreement, were often critical of a process that had ignored their own national situation. In addition to this, the treaties on transparency of military movements in Europe (Conventional Forces in Europe, Open Skies, Vienna Document) and on the limitation of intermediate nuclear weapons were called into question.

European countries continued to believe that the Helsinki framework, backed by the establishment of the OSCE, could still serve as a common compass. But these hopes proved to be in vain. And if further evidence of this deterioration were needed, the Russian intervention in Georgia (2008) followed by the annexation of Crimea and Moscow's support for the separatist leaders of Donbass (2014) definitively convinced all Europeans that times had changed.

EUROPE'S FAILURE TO RETHINK THE SECURITY MODEL

However, on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine, the need to reflect on a new European security framework did not find unanimity amongst all Atlantic Alliance members, let alone the European Union. Everyone was undoubtedly prepared to acknowledge that the principles defined in Helsinki were still relevant, even if they were becoming increasingly hollow. But every time the idea of resuming work on Europe's security order came up, debate was short-lived. In the eight years between the war in Donbass and Vladimir Putin's

[1] This text was originally published in « Schuman Report on Europe, the state of the Union 2023 », Maire B Edition, Paris, 2023

decision to attack Ukraine, there was no substantive discussion to break the deadlock on this issue between European partners.

This observation should come as no surprise. It reflects the close link between the question of European security and the nature of the relationship to be developed with Russia. Russia is indeed central to the quest for stability in Europe. Yet European leaders have had many fruitless exchanges when it comes to addressing this subject. Given Russia's ideological and strategic hardening, there has been strong opposition within the European Union to cooperation with Moscow. Even prior to the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, where the transatlantic partners disagreed regarding the prospect of membership for Ukraine and Georgia, there was never a consensus on proposals for engagement between the EU and Russia. Between those member states who argued that dialogue with the Russian regime was impossible because they would be seen as weak interlocutors and those who argued for an openness that would overcome the lack of trust between the two sides, the gap proved impossible to bridge. In fact, these two positions were - and still are - the expression of different historical and geographical realities and experienced as such by each of the European actors: the perception of Russia is seen in Warsaw or Tallinn as an existential threat; it is nowhere near as dramatic in Madrid or Dublin.

EUROPE IS TORN BETWEEN RUSSIAN INFLEXIBILITY AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

By multiplying its external interventions (Georgia, Ukraine, but also Syria, Central African Republic, Mali), Russia has not made Europe's task any easier. Moreover, by promoting in his speeches and writings a Greater Russia with strong imperialist overtones, Vladimir Putin has left little room for a return of trust. For the European states themselves, the situation has been a dialogue of the deaf with a regime that is impervious to the slightest concession, while the European Union has developed, with little geopolitical flair, a neighbourhood policy that is perceived in Moscow as an attempt at encirclement and submission.

Having failed to overcome this dilemma, the Europeans have progressively locked themselves into a sterile discussion. From Federica Mogherini's roadmap in 2016, which was never implemented, to the efforts of her successor, Josep Borrell, who proposed a fresh start in 2021 without succeeding to convince, or the ill-fated effort of German chancellor Angela Merkel in the summer of 2021 to organise a summit with Vladimir Putin, one attempt after another has failed. It was Russia that finally took the initiative by proposing in December 2021 two draft treaties aimed at defining a new European security order in line with its views and, consequently, unacceptable to the Europeans.

THE NEW REALITY CAUSED BY THE UKRAINE WAR

In all events, the war in Ukraine brought that debate to an end. The Russian President's assertion of his determination to conquer territory in a clearly colonialist-inspired conflict has meant that Europe has closed ranks. And his vision of a European order in which Russia's neighbours would have to submit and reintegrate into Russian territory just does not fit with that of the EU member states. The Russian invasion was therefore bound to provoke an unequivocal reaction on the part of Europeans. This response was surprisingly swift and effective, and this newfound unity is now reflected in the conviction that Russia must not win this war. This firmness is not without ambiguity, as some European countries want the Russian army to be defeated outright, while others envisage the possibility of peace negotiations when the time comes. However, they all agree that Russia's use of force cannot be rewarded with illegitimate and unacceptable gains in territory.

In any case, this convergence reflects a certain idea of stability in Europe based on respect for borders and the law of nations. It also confirms that the political situation that will prevail after the end of the war will be largely the product of the developments that will gradually take shape on the military front. Once again, the need to reflect on the relationship to be defined after the conflict with Russia is evident.

A NEW MULTI-DIMENSIONAL EUROPEAN ORDER

Whether it is possible or impossible, under what conditions and with which interlocutors, the resumption of a form of dialogue with Moscow once again plunges the European Union into the debate that it was unable to resolve before the Russian invasion. This question, which remains central to the definition of a new security order in Europe, involves several dimensions.

First of all, is the debate premature? Many in the European Union think so, arguing that the still uncertain outcome of the conflict makes it difficult to anticipate the course of future events. But procrastination is often an excuse in Brussels' discussions to avoid choosing. Past examples also seem to invalidate this approach: in the United States, Franklin Roosevelt did not wait for the end of the Second World War to put forward his ideas regarding a new system of international governance; in Europe, the Founding Fathers began to sketch out their federal project well before 1945. Experience generally shows that in foreign policy, the ability to anticipate and define a long-term strategy remains the best recipe for success.

Secondly, is dialogue with today's Russia still possible? The negative answer is an increasingly common view among many Central and Eastern European countries: they believe that, faced with a Russia that is incapable of accepting the end of its empire and still confined within its 1991 borders, it would be unrealistic to resume any form of dialogue. Beyond Vladimir Putin, the same people argue that this impossibility extends to the whole of Russian society, which is guilty of having followed its leader without really challenging him. A way out of this impasse could therefore only come from a long exercise in the process of political memory and reform in Russia as a prerequisite for any resumption of contact.

In all events, it is not up to Europeans to decide what political changes might take place in Russia. Such developments are the sole responsibility of the Russian people. But there is a risk that by waiting for the hypothetical appearance of genuine Russian

democracy, Europe will have to resign itself to living in a perpetual state of instability. Yet it is the quest for stability that must guide European countries in their approach once the war is over. Expecting Russia to return quickly and smoothly to the path of the rule of law seems risky, to say the least; in this respect, the Europeans would do well to learn from the failed experience of the end of the Cold War, when their clumsy interference in Russian political and economic life only contributed to the disorder. On the other hand, the choice of pusillanimity may mean Europe missing out on a key moment when opportunities for recovery exist. It would therefore be regrettable if, in the event of an outcome favourable to Western interests, Europe chose a wait-and-see approach rather than a more ambitious one.

Finally, there remains the question of the content of this future dialogue and of a new structure for security in Europe. It is premature to imagine at this stage the precise contours of a new European order, which will inevitably depend on the conditions that will govern the end of the conflict in Ukraine. But there is no reason why Europeans should not start thinking now about what the constituent elements of future European security should be. The strategic upheavals introduced by this conflict in all areas of activity require reflection extending to multiple fields of action.

Security in the strict sense of the term must remain a priority, with the aim of recreating a reference framework for the entire European area. The security guarantees demanded by the Ukrainian authorities must be considered carefully. New agreements regarding the transparency of military activities should be negotiated and supplemented by treaties in the field of arms control. The recent attacks on gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea should also be taken into account in establishing rules and actions to protect infrastructure critical to the economies of European nations. Similarly, the solution of the current frozen conflicts (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh) should be a prerequisite. Finally, discussions on nuclear deterrence doctrines will be necessary to learn the lessons of the war in Ukraine. These initiatives, conducted with all the transatlantic

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partners, will not rapidly restore confidence, but they will constitute milestones on the road to a stability that must be patiently rebuilt.

This new security framework will also have to take on board the many challenges that have emerged during the Ukrainian conflict: cyber-attacks, disinformation, threats to energy supplies, food security and maritime transport. The risks of the instrumentalization of certain issues for military purposes, as seen in the case of the immigrants taken to the Belarusian border, will also have to be put on the agenda.

Institutional aspects should not be ignored. The revival of the OSCE, with an updated mandate, and within which Russia will have to demonstrate its goodwill, will also be a priority. As for the European Union, it will have to look at its neighbourhood policy from a new angle by lucidly defining the type of cooperation it intends to offer Russia and by adapting its relations with the countries still covered by the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus) and also with the nations of Central Asia on a case-by-case basis.

Is it utopian to want to start thinking about a new security order in Europe now? Despite appearances, this discussion is long overdue. It should have taken place much earlier, when the Soviet Union collapsed. The crises that have multiplied in Europe over the past thirty years have ultimately gone hand in hand with the slow, still ongoing dissolution of the Soviet empire. By failing to agree on how to talk to Moscow, Europeans have locked themselves into a diplomatic vacuum that has harmed their interests. No one doubts the difficulty of dialogue with authoritarian regimes, but the obstacles encountered in recent years in negotiations with other equally difficult but more distant interlocutors, such as China or Iran, show the need for European diplomacy to meet this challenge. In the case of Russia, as we emerge from the war in Ukraine, there will be an urgent need to do this if the objective is to prevent the repetition of such a conflict at all costs and if we are to guarantee the long-term stability of Europe.

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