How to end the spiral of escalation

The West's show of strength against Russia was necessary. Now, however, we need an emphatic effort at de-escalation

As Vladimir Putin's Russia has chosen the worst-case scenario with its large-scale aggression, the collective shock runs deep. Critical observers were stunned by his martial and cynical war rhetoric. His stated goals are the demilitarisation of Ukraine – whose right to exist is being denied –, the unsubstantiated idea of 'denazification', and the barely coded threat of nuclear escalation should the West stand in the way of the invasion.

Face with such brutality, what is the right way forward? How to deal with despot who blatantly breaks international law and makes imperialist claims? A good twenty years after 11 September 2001 and more than three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we are witnessing the third turning point since the Cold War. Three things are necessary: Firstly, a ruthless analysis of the situation, including our own mistakes. Secondly, a clear sign of strength that goes beyond symbolic politics. Thirdly, an emphatic effort to de-escalate in a situation that requires sobriety instead of moral superiority.

It seems idle to reflect on mistakes in retrospect. But there is no way around it if we want to understand the causes of the war and prevent a further escalation beyond Ukraine. The West's missteps have been discussed extensively: a twofold political irrationality was at play when NATO, firstly, did not make all the necessary efforts to strive for a European peace order including Russia after the end of the Cold War; and, secondly, when it opened the doors to membership for Georgia and Ukraine at its summit in Bucharest in 2008.

It was a clear case of thinking us superior when we attempted to ascribe a regional status to the nuclear power Russia and to deceive it in the Libyan war, when it had already been relegated to a spectator in the wars in Kosovo and Iraq that violated international law. And why was there no moratorium on further NATO accessions when it became clear that Putin had got himself into an escalation trap in 2021/22? We will never know whether a moratorium could have prevented anything. But it

would have been worth a try.

The Cold War logic is outdated

At the same time, the Russian leadership – who shouldn't be reduced to just Putin – also committed countless mistakes. It began with the reluctant acceptance that the Yalta order became obsolete with the fall of the Berlin Wall. And it continued with the attempt to carve out a sustainable social model by combining Soviet-style domestic control and oligarchic capitalism. Last but not least, the Russian success in propping up the Assad regime in Syria – combined with the Western debacle in Afghanistan – seems to have gone to the Kremlin's head.

Many observers doubted that – at least since the annexation of Crimea – we had entered a new Cold War. Now the sceptics are coming around. But this takes place a time when the metaphor of the Cold War no longer describes the current state of affairs.

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The logic is outdated because, firstly, we are experiencing a war of aggression in Europe unprecedented since 1945. Secondly, Putin's hasardeur-like logic no longer corresponds to the risk-averse, very predictable calculations of the CPSU apparatchiks in the post-Stalin era – even though the majority considered Putin to be a cool strategist. Thirdly, however, things have also changed in the West: With Donald Trump, the US has for years become a symbol of calculated unpredictability and violence-coded rhetoric. The parallels to Putin's recent speeches are more than striking. And fourthly, there is China, which could offer a fallback option for the economically vulnerable Putin regime in the event of the looming, sanction-ridden East-West ice age.

This different framework doesn't allow us to simply return to the policy recipes of the first Cold War. These were largely characterised by mutual predictability, in which both sides cautiously avoided the spiral of escalation during many crises and gave room to saving face for the other side. Today, in times of real-time and online rhetoric, we are miles away from that. Moreover, to test how risky something is and because of technological innovations, the boundaries between cold and hot war have become increasingly blurred. Mercenaries from private military companies and paramilitary units are being deployed below the threshold

of hot war. Vulnerabilities on both sides haveincreased – not only because of economic sanctions, but also in the field of cyber warfare.

Can we still combine deterrence with détente?

Now, these times require sober politics that can withstand tensions and refrain from maximalist positions. The Putin regime's neo-imperial way of thinking has left the path of rationality. But this was not always the case with the Russian autocrat. Any chance to get the leadership in Moscow back on that path must be used. This means, however, that the West will have to renounce the principle of being willing to accept all states into NATO. There is no moral obligation to do so, and certainly no ethical imperative. A more responsible approach would be economic and value-based integration through the EU, combined with a renunciation of military integration, as has been the case with Sweden, Austria, and Finland for decades.

The formula of the East-West conflict – combining deterrence with détente – is no longer sufficient in an acute crisis, since short-term crisis management must go beyond long-term confidence-building. However, the basic idea of the formula remains important. The West cannot avoid a clear signal of strength, such as sanctions. But we must not succumb to the mistaken belief that they can bring Russia to its knees economically without generating massive resistance.

In this respect, Germany's long reluctance to agree to exclusion from the SWIFT system was justified. Certainly, the West is vastly superior when it comes to economic sanctions. But Russia will predictably counter these steps with further provocations that will take us to the next ladder of the spiral of escalation. And who will be in a position at some point to prevent further escalations?

The right signs of strength

Instead, strength means rapidly expanding national and alliance defence. This includes an increase in military funds, as announced by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, for instance. However, in Germany, the lack of a strategic debate and the structural inefficiencies that characterise the procurement system, but also the military-industrial apparatus, should be put to the test. Before any budget is increased, it should be clear what tasks the German military is supposed to fulfil. Last but not least, the military has suffered from having been geared towards failed intervention adventures over the past two decades – and that has taken its toll.

Will this help us to end the war against Ukraine? Perhaps not immediately.

Therefore, signs of strength that go beyond the symbolic are indispensable. But the West should not become intoxicated with them. As painful as this realisation is today, we will not achieve security in Europe – or in the Middle East, for that matter – against Russia, but only with this state that will not allow itself to be forced into the role of a pariah. Those who rant today about the end of diplomacy must explain what should take its place. If one wants to prevent a further expansion of the war, it remains important not to completely close channels of communication now.

In Europe, the Franco-German tandem didn't work well when the crisis came to a head. Under the new government, Germany was not yet an equal partner for France, headed by the diplomatically experienced Emmanuel Macron. Moreover, despite years of declarations to the contrary, there was never a functioning EU Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The consequence has been that Western Europe has all too often left crisis management to the US, which inevitably sees the situation in Europe through different eyes than the governments and populations on the ground. It would be worth considering a package that redefines Common Security. Its cornerstones are clear: a withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine in return for a NATO moratorium on admission; an informal format to discuss Europe's future security architecture – in analogy to the OSCE; no severance of diplomatic relations; renunciation of inflammatory and humiliating rhetoric.

Will this help us to end the war against Ukraine? Perhaps not immediately. But the art of diplomacy is to think and initiate the next step, even if it seems hopeless at the moment of escalation. Dare to try: that's the ethical imperative arising from a logic of peace.



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