FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 06.03.2025 | Roland Popp

The lost art of statecraft

Rearmament is increasingly replacing diplomacy — blindly steering Europe toward another confrontation with Russia

Henry Kissinger was considered one of the most influential figures in international politics — admired for his strategic foresight, criticised for his opportunistic manoeuvrability. Even his numerous miscalculations did not diminish his reputation as the 'grand old owl' of world politics. Despite all the justified criticism, it is now clear that Kissinger had a deeper historical understanding than those who were able to decisively determine the relationship with Moscow in the years that followed.

The former US Secretary of State recognised Russia's enormous resilience — an ability to recover and make a geopolitical comeback that had been evident for centuries. For Moscow, defeats and crises rarely meant the end, but often the prelude to the next phase of strategic reorientation. Accordingly, in the last decades of his life, Kissinger pleaded for an integrative approach towards Russia. He tirelessly warned against an excessive expansion of American influence into the immediate Russian periphery and against the risks of a confrontational policy.

Kissinger realised as early as 1990 that the period of weakness of the Russian superpower – at that time still cloaked in the larger Soviet costume – would probably be short-lived. In contrast to the majority of the so-called strategic community in the US, he saw the long-term dangers associated with the temptation to exploit Moscow's weakness. In this attitude, he was strongly reminiscent of the great American strategist George Kennan, who – often misunderstood by posterity – had already warned in the early Cold War not of the strength, but of the weakness and fear of the Soviet Union. Kennan vehemently resisted the militarisation of his containment concept — so that he was soon pushed into political obscurity. This comparison with Kennan would hardly have pleased Kissinger, for that matter.

At the latest with the invasion of Ukraine, the belittling of Russian power has come to an end. The initial confidence that the West's huge economic and military superiority would inevitably lead to the failure of

the Russian adventure has given way to outright panic.

Servants without masters

Now it is worth taking a closer look at which voices among the commentators and the German 'strategic community' are currently warning of Russia's superior armed forces and Moscow's alleged imminent intention to attack NATO countries. In fact, almost exactly the same players who previously advocated a confrontational Ukraine policy and a promise of NATO accession for Kyiv — thus accepting the risk of escalation. The same voices vehemently argued in favour of Western intervention and arms deliveries after the outbreak of war, while at the same time fantasising about an imminent military collapse of the Russian armed forces, which at the time were still portrayed as being far inferior.

The fact that the simultaneous invocation of a military victory in Ukraine – due to Russian weaknesses – and the warning of a direct threat to the NATO alliance from an allegedly all-powerful Russia contradict each other to such an extent that even unbiased observers doubt the actual expertise of these experts seems to bother the German media little. No talk show on television can do without the members of this group — at times they are even completely among themselves.

A Europe that has been socialised for decades to look for confirmation in the lip-reading of American politicians in order to avoid having to make any independent decisions about its own defence now feels abandoned.

A glance across the pond also provides little clarity — to speak of chaos there is almost an understatement. Trump has stopped the 360-degree turnaround that Germany might have hoped for dead in its tracks, and the new administration in Washington seems to be focusing on a policy that seeks a deal with Moscow to end the war — at whatever price.

From a European perspective, one could at least hope that this involuntary and forced peace would lead to a general stabilisation of the continent. Yet, at the same time, Trump is openly questioning America's security guarantee for Europe — indeed, his statements have already devalued it noticeably. A Europe that has been socialised for decades to look for confirmation in the lip-reading of American politicians in order to avoid having to make any independent decisions about its own defence now feels abandoned. Advised by a thoroughly transatlantic 'strategic

community', the security policy technocrats in Brussels now look like 'servants without masters' — as the British journalist Aris Roussinos put it, with appropriate malice.

Perhaps the most important step in restoring European military credibility is to emancipate itself from these voices. And to reflect on the continent's tradition of what was once referred to as statecraft. A closer look at the working papers, reports andanalyses of Anglo-American security policy think tanks quickly shows that many alarmist forecasts are based on the same sources — those that have already significantly influenced Western reporting on the war in Ukraine. In view of the enormous economic and social stakes involved in a large-scale European rearmament programme, more well-founded analyses should be relied upon — and not the often-fictitious numbers churned out by armoured 'experts' in the so-called open-source community.

A credible defence?

It is indisputable that Russia has largely switched to a war economy and that the scale of the effort extends beyond the current operations in Ukraine. Rational military planning would be expected to do no less. The high material losses in Ukraine will likely be compensated for in the foreseeable future — which could lead to a technologically more modern armed force in the long term than the one that existed before the war.

The planned increase in the target strength to up to 1.5 million soldiers will take a long time, but even if this goal is not fully achieved, the Russian armed forces would remain by far the largest and most powerful on the continent. Unlike the armies of European NATO members, they are also battle-hardened in high-intensity combat — and may be more self-confident than ever if the war in Ukraine ends in a Russian victory. Such a victory would mean that Russia would have defeated Europe's second-largest armed forces, despite the fact that they were massively supported by 'the most powerful and successful military alliance in history' — as US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin grandiosely put it. However, the latter was hardly one of the most successful defence ministers in American history.

It may be true that the combined defence budgets of the European NATO states are many times higher than Russia's, but ultimately this is irrelevant. The failed Western military strategy in Ukraine should have taught us how little such figures say about the actual balance of power in a war.

Nobody can seriously predict Russia's intentions. But there is no question that Europe's attitude can have a significant influence on them.

The same applies to various cross-comparisons between weapons systems, which the media likes to use to embellish its analyses. All of this would be relevant — if it weren't for geography. From a geographical perspective, however, a military confrontation in the Baltic, on Poland's eastern border or along the NATO border in the north, which has now been greatly extended by Finland's accession, would be most likely. However, even before Putin's Ukrainian adventure, it was already known how difficult it would be to effectively project military power there in an emergency.

The probability of a new Nordic War has undoubtedly increased as a result of the Ukraine conflict, the expansion of NATO to the north and the *de facto* termination of the American security guarantee. And even an immediate doubling of the defence budgets of Germany, France and Great Britain would not, from a military point of view, enable a credible defence of this periphery.

Unsurprisingly, NATO planners are therefore relying on a new edition of the Cold War's forward defence — only this time on the alliance's new eastern border. In military terms, this may seem logical, but in view of the enormous distances involved and the technological changes of recent decades, it is hardly feasible — and, moreover, politically ill-conceived.

The 'state artists' of the 19th century, who are so readily despised in today's seemingly moralising times, would probably have reacted quite differently to such an assessment of the situation. Nobody can seriously predict Russia's intentions. But there is no question that Europe's attitude can have a significant influence on them. The current European course – the continuation and deepening of the confrontation with Russia, even beyond a possible end of the fighting in Ukraine – could indeed lead to a future military conflict, even if only for lack of alternatives.

Statesmanship must be more than mere rearmament.

The security policy elite operating in Brussels – long decoupled from the public opinions of the European populations – may consider the establishment of a purely European military deterrent system to be feasible and fundable. But in doing so, they overestimate the willingness of Central and Western Europeans to unconditionally support Eastern European

pipe dreams once again after Ukraine.

The blowback of the war in Ukraine will expose the numerous conflicts and fault lines that remained hidden behind the illusion of European unity during the war. In this case, statesmanship must be more than mere rearmament. The latter will be unavoidable given the dilapidated state of Europe's armies, which have been starved of funds. But it should not be geared primarily to extreme scenarios of a forward defence in a temporary mobile war at the Suwałki Gap — the only land connection between the Baltic states and the rest of NATO territory. After all, the more credible such a European capacity appears, the more likely it is that precisely this scenario will materialise.

Even for a militarily resurgent Russia, the Polish and Finnish armed forces would be just as much of a challenge as the Ukrainian ones — especially since in such a case they would receive massive support from a Europe that would by then be prepared for a war of attrition. Moreover, the urban centres in the Baltic States would be far less attractive as an area of operations. At the same time, a limitation – or even better, a non-presence – of other armed forces in the northeast could help to take the wind out of the sails of the Kremlin's encirclement theorists. But all of this, as old statecraft teaches, could only be promising if it were accompanied by what was once a European speciality: diplomacy.



Roland Popp
Zurich

Dr Roland Popp is a researcher at the Military Academy (MILAK) at ETH Zurich on military and overall strategic issues, nuclear arms, technological innovation and international history. He is a historian of the Cold War and a scholar of Islamic studies.