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Invasion of Ukraine

Shaking Europe Out Of Complacency

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

Europe's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is something Europe is usually not: united, determined and re-energised. The Ukrainian tragedy marks a watershed moment for EU integration and European defence. But as previously unshakable taboos suddenly fall, Europeans must plan long-term.

COMMENTARY

IT IS futile to debate whether Russian President Vladimir Putin had anticipated the determination and unity of Europe or was surprised by it. But as a matter of fact, the European Union (EU) and its member states are currently untying several "Gordian Knots" at once.

Take Germany as an example: Russian aggression has achieved what decades of US diplomacy could not: Berlin is finally realising that Germany must take care of its own, and by extension European, security. For decades, Germany's European neighbours, from France to Poland, as well as successive US administrations have tried – and failed – to put an end to German free-riding on the NATO and US security umbrella. Berlin had long been lacking to both equip its armed forces, the Bundeswehr, adequately and to think strategically about the defence of and challenges for Germany and Europe.

The Historic German Volte-face

Despite being the second largest NATO economy, hitherto, it was hopeless to expect Germany to meet its NATO defence budget obligations of 2% of GDP. Berlin's [strategic culture](#), domestic politics and an entrenched public pacificism made [raising](#)

[the defence budget](#) as difficult as developing a realistic security strategy appropriate for a country so prone to geopolitical challenges.

Likewise, the “special relationship” with Moscow was long a “holy cow” of Berlin’s diplomacy, preventing both the export of arms to Ukraine as well as unambiguously joining its NATO allies in hard-balancing Russian influence. For example, the much-discussed gas pipeline [Nordstream 2](#) was, despite its obvious geo-strategic nature, long described as a “commercial project” by successive German governments.

In a series of dramatic moves within just a few days, Chancellor Olaf Scholz [announced](#) a historic volte-face that seemed to take even members of his own government by surprise. Upending decades-old fundamental principles of German foreign and security policy, Berlin is now delivering lethal weapons to Ukraine, announced a one-off tripling of the defence budget as well as the intent to henceforth meet NATO’s spending target.

Likewise, to reduce Germany’s significant dependency on Russian energy imports (every fourth household relies on Russian gas for heating), even Green party leaders agree that Berlin will now likely have to postpone its exit from both coal- and nuclear-energy, and *Nordstream 2* is now all but finished.

New EU Unity

The President of the European Commission announced a series of measures that denoted a similarly remarkable shift in EU Common Security and Defence Policy. Most astonishing for an organisation that self-identifies as a “normative actor”, the EU will now for the first time finance lethal weapons. To that end, €450 million will go towards Ukrainian armament – a country that is not even a member.

Beyond defence, member states demonstrated unusual unity in agreeing to substantial sanctions against Russia, including the long-resisted removal of Russia’s leading banks from SWIFT. Not only will this come at significant costs for European economies themselves, but this agreement also bridges the traditionally significant divergence in European perspectives on economic and diplomatic relations with Moscow.

No less remarkable, only six years after the so-called refugee crisis brought the EU close to breaking point, even those member states that long resisted EU-wide refugee distribution, indeed were opposed to receiving any migrants at all, are now welcoming Ukrainian refugees with open arms.

Never Waste A Crisis: Europe’s Moment of Truth

“Europe will be forged in crisis”, Jean Monnet, one of the EU’s founding fathers, famously asserted. Indeed, there seems to be nothing quite like a geopolitical crisis to remind member states of the mutual security imperative of regional integration, to galvanise and unify Europe. Indeed even Boris Johnson shows a renewed interests in cooperation with the EU. This momentum should not be squandered.

In the medium-term, there might be a welcomed spill-over effect, possibly solving one

of Europe's most intractable problems: creating a functioning migration regime. If the rest of the EU shows now this forthcoming solidarity with its Eastern member states that these states lacked during the 2015 refugee crisis, Europe might once again find the cooperative spirit to progress with deeper integration and policy reform, strengthening Europe's collective capacity.

Similarly, substantial German investment in defence can significantly enhance Europe's defence capacity and work towards Europe's ability to implement own strategic objectives. Mindful that a shortage of money was never the *Bundeswehr's* primary problem, greater defence spending must be accompanied by structural reforms and strategic embedding of German capabilities in a European framework.

A Re-energised Europe?

Lastly, part of the truth about Europe's new unity is the fact that for the first time in decades, Washington very closely cooperated with both NATO allies and the EU institutions on a collective response to a security crisis.

This cooperative spirit is, however, highly dependent on personalities rather than permanent structural change of US foreign policy. It is indeed likely that a second Trump administration had reacted very differently, side-lining rather than galvanising European cooperation, which would likely have led to political inertia rather than resolve in Europe.

It is time to seriously consider advancing Europe's "strategic autonomy". This does not mean competition with NATO. Rather, strategic autonomy should be a European capacity to determine own strategic interests with the means to achieve them – complementary with but independent from NATO.

Putin has unwittingly shaken Europe out of complacency. The previously unimaginable is suddenly reality, and the EU is already stronger and more effective and attractive than before Putin's war against Ukraine. A second "Brexit-like" scenario seems unlikely now, and if there is only one good thing that may come out of this tragedy, it might be a re-energised Europe.

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