

NICK HARVEY SPEECH ON RUSSIA – LIBERAL REFORM – 18.3.17 – YORK

Do Brexit, Trump and the rise of populism in Europe signal a disintegration of western institutions? Has NATO become irrelevant or do we need it more than ever at a time of Russian expansionism?

Two notable quotations are of relevance to this question: Mao Tse Tung's assertion that, "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," and von Clausewitz's observation that "War is the continuation of politics by other means."

It is a sobering thought that the UK's real defence spending figure is now below 2% of GDP, and across the EU it is much less. By contrast, Russia spends 5.4% of its GDP on defence. Be in no doubt that President Putin is now involved in a major power play on the global stage.

Some people misread him entirely and believe him to be mad. He may be bad, but he is certainly not mad. Seen through Russian eyes, his actions are perfectly logical. It took Russia 150 years to secure its naval base in Crimea. How did we expect them to react to the possibility of suddenly finding it located inside the EU and NATO? Similarly, their only Mediterranean naval facilities are in Syria – were they likely to welcome finding them under the control of an American puppet regime?

I believe that Russia has no serious ambition to recover its stranglehold over Poland, Hungary or the Balkans. But, by moving our sphere of influence right up to its border, as Russia perceives it we have 'moved our tanks onto their front lawn'. Small wonder they react badly.

Putin invaded Crimea, using force, not diplomacy, to achieve his objectives. He succeeded by calculating correctly that the West hadn't the will to repel Russia.

Russia has made the decisive difference in Syria by backing Assad, and is increasingly seen worldwide as a powerful and determined military force, which sticks by its allies and gets the job done. Note that Russia flew missions into Syria from an airbase in Iran; and observe its rapprochement with Turkey: their shooting down of a Russian plane all forgotten now.

A Russian-Turkish-Iranian alliance is an essential piece in Putin's jigsaw. There are serious dangers of such an axis. Erdogan's increasingly Islamist Turkey is at odds with the West, abandoning its EU ambitions and potentially even withdrawing from NATO (a possibility, rather than a likelihood).

Note too, that addressing the 95th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party last July, President Xi Jinping delivered a speech in which he called for a military union with Russia that would render NATO 'powerless' and 'put an end to the imperialist desires of the West.'

So, what might be Putin's overall strategic ambitions? An editorial in Italy's La Stampa newspaper reckoned that Russia's policy on Ukraine, its actions in Syria and its reconciliation with Turkey show Putin's determination, "to create a new international order and slash the clout of the United States."

La Stampa continued: "In Ukraine Putin wants to weaken Washington's credibility as guarantor of Eastern Europe, in Syria he shows Russia's greater capability to fight jihadists than a US-led coalition of more than 60 countries, and in Turkey he seeks to prompt divisions in Ankara-NATO relations." It portrayed the image of the West as torn by contradictory approaches to migration and terrorism and exhausted economically.

Mounting threats from the arc of instability around Europe's south: terrorism and unmanaged migration; the return of foreign fighters; humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, all contribute to strains within Europe. Eastern Europeans focus on threats they feel from Russia, while Russia responds to threats it feels from NATO.

Cold winds are blowing through Europe's security cohesion: the web of treaties, arrangements and understandings developed since WW2 to ensure that Europe, the bloodiest place in the twentieth century, avoids tearing itself apart.

Russia and NATO blame each other. Moscow points to abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the introduction of destabilising new military technologies. NATO points to Ukraine, Russian snap military exercises and irresponsible threats. Miscalculation or accident between nuclear Russia and nuclear NATO is Europe's greatest risk. The growing volatility of 'the global atmosphere', giving rise to fear, could easily cause situations to escalate – with potentially disastrous consequences.

Might the Baltics be the showdown? The credibility of NATO's central tenet: 'an attack on one is an attack on all,' could be on the line. And attacks include those by rabble-rousers, unbadged combatants and in the cyber domain. The West had better mean what it says: if we are found wanting, NATO will be a dead duck.

Three things are needed to stop the rot:

First, Europe's leaders must recognise the security problems to be as grave as they are, not as they might wish them to be. The optimism following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 bred complacency. The focus has been too much on European construction and not enough on problem-solving. The EU and NATO must attend more to unfinished, neglected, business in the western Balkans. The Minsk agreements on Ukraine are sticking plasters on wounds that will not heal. Leaders must give deeper attention to how to manage the high-risk competition for spheres of influence.

Second, Europe must do far more on its own account – and the UK, despite Brexit, must remain centrally involved. Europe has legitimate expectations of President Trump, but in believing that Europeans must do more for their own defence, he is not alone: the US has got a bad deal. Much depends on how isolationist Trump's America wants to be, and how far the EU is serious about the pursuit of 'strategic autonomy' – the ambition to which its leaders have committed.

Not all is bleak: counter-terrorism collaboration has grown, and cyber defences are slowly improving. And for all the lack of solidarity on migration, Europe may increasingly find collective solutions that better address migration's root causes. But it's a safe bet that, for several decades, even with increased effort Europeans will remain heavily dependent on the US for their own security. And both sides are basically stuck with that.

Third, and crucially, we must develop tri-partite dialogue between Europe, America and Russia, to work to restore the rules of the game – or establish new ones. An agenda might include:

- An end to the idea of expanding NATO to countries close to Russia, at least while there is mistrust between NATO and Russia.
- NATO anti-ballistic systems in Poland and Romania, addressing their real roles and efficiencies.
- Assess the true impact of the economic sanctions against Russia, which are at least as penalising for the EU as for Russia (but not for America!)
- Economic exchanges: reliable supply of oil and gas to Europe from Russia and the Middle East.
- Strong and open collaboration between the West and Russia against terrorism and the behaviour of certain Muslim countries.
- The West accepting Russia-Syria agreements (eg on bases), and agreement on Syria, including on Assad.
- Reflection on Turkey's role, including in the problems of Middle East and Daesh.

But, in concert with ceding ground on some of these points, Europeans in return must wake up. They must acknowledge that allies and national security must be constantly earned through their own efforts and increased investment. European leaders need to explain to their publics that Europe is not the safe place they have dreamt of since 1989, that Europe's defence will remain dependent on US military capabilities for a long time to come, and that this is not just a necessary but a good thing.

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