

Will Crimea herald a new post-Cold War era world?

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The end of the Cold War twenty-five years ago brought about a difficult but manageable world in which Russia, the US, and European countries cooperated to manage common problems. There have been difficult times, with the break up of former Yugoslavia, the NATO intervention for Kosovo, and in 2008 when Russia's intervention in Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia nearly led to a head to head with the West. On the whole, the cooperation between old foes which framed the end of the Cold War, resisted these tests. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the agreement not to redraw the map of Europe was never so evidently ignored as today.

Has Crimea changed this for good? As the United Nations General Assembly confirmed on 27 March, the annexation of Crimea is interpreted as a fundamental breach of international law, without the shades of uncertainty that other cases have had. Russia only managed to get 11 countries to support its position (though the 58 countries which abstained should raise some concern).

Putin's speech to the Duma on 18 March also suggests that Russia's position is backed by an ideology based on the protection of Russian interests outside Russia in the name of ethnic, historical and even religious ties. His disregard of both European diplomatic attempts and of the threat of sanctions suggests that Moscow no longer sees cooperation with the West as a value in itself, as most in Europe had assumed. Putin's nationalist assertiveness seems coupled with a fundamental challenge to the West's legitimacy.

Russia's next steps could define the end of the post-Cold War era. While Putin has accepted the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Russian military is increasing its presence on the borders with Eastern Ukraine, and trouble in the East of the country has started. It increasingly looks like Crimea is just the beginning of yet another sad chapter in the history of Eastern Europe.

But will these events push Europe to take a leap as an international actor? Can Crimea be interpreted as a 'fall of the Berlin Wall' moment which will drive the EU to take a strong lead in foreign policy?

The EU has been praised for managing to agree both to a package of sanctions and to supporting Ukraine through various financial and political means. It rapidly put together a substantial financial package of 11 billion Euros, a significant amount if compared to what it managed to provide to support the revolutionary changes in the Arab world though still far from meeting Ukrainian needs. It also pledged to accelerate the signing of the political and trade agreements with the Kiev. Indeed, it was the failure of ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to sign the agreements which had sparked the Maidan protests after the Vilnius summit at the end of November 2013. A crisis induced by contested relations with the EU, requires EU solutions.

In addition, it has not forgotten the regional dimension by committing to accelerate the process of signing these agreements with Moldova and Georgia, two small countries with breakaway regions under Russian control which are now particularly vulnerable to whatever Putin's next steps will be.

The other side of the coin is the relations with Russia. How the EU will manage these in the months to come will be the real test case for the future of the Union as a global actor. Pursuing its policy of signing these agreements with Eastern European countries will continue to antagonize Russia. Is the EU prepared to stick to this line?

Given that EU-Russia relations have always developed through the prism of national European capitals, one needs to trace the shifts within the EU countries. Here it really depends on which country you look at, as perceptions of Russia and expectations from the EU as a global actor colour the interpretation of the degree of change.

The German press has closely followed a mutation in German Chancellor Angela Merkel's perception of Putin. Merkel was no friend of Putin, but Germany is a strong partner of Russia, so much so that Putin even referred to Germany's understanding of his motivations in annexing Crimea in his speech to the Duma. Coming from East Germany, thus understanding the world in which Putin too grew up, and fluent in Russian, Merkel has been observing Putin's recent behaviour. At the 20 March summit she told European leaders that Putin could no longer be trusted.

Merkel has pushed a tougher line in her Parliament too. This shift is not to be taken lightly. The Chancellor is known for having a special instinct in following public opinion – one of the reasons her popularity continues to be so high after so many years in office. In this case, German public opinion and the business sector are not with her, and have explicitly said so. Opinion polls show that the majority of Germans believe that Ukraine should belong to the Russian sphere of interest and do not see the Crimean annexation to Russia as a big deal; big business have warned of the costs of economic sanctions and the risks that Russian retaliation to economic sanctions would have a disastrous impact on the German industry and economy.

This shift on Russia also fits in with other recent developments. Last January the German President Joachim Gauck, another Eastern German, gave an unprecedented speech at the Munich Security Conference calling his country to take greater responsibility in global affairs critically arguing that 'while there are genuine pacifists in Germany, there are also people who use Germany's guilt for its past as a shield for laziness or a desire to disengage from the world'.

This speech was taken seriously. The Defence Minister spoke about a stronger commitment to Common Defence and Security Policy. The Foreign Minister has been liaising with his French colleague and fellow socialist on foreign policy. Together with the Polish Foreign Minister, this trio showed entrepreneurship and crisis management when it flew to Kiev to negotiate a deal back in February. The deal did not last more than 24 hours, but it stopped the killing which had shocked to world into action. All these suggest that a shift in Germany is taking place, even if it continues to move at a slow pace compared to the rapidity with which Russia acted in Crimea.

However, seen from Tallinn or other parts of Europe, especially in Central Europe, this is simply not enough – just a 'slap on the wrist', according to Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves. He is not alone in criticizing the EU's response for being too soft; below expectations; too slow and not incisive enough. The compromise found around Merkel's three-pronged approach (threat of sanctions, targeted sanctions after the Crimean referendum, and a stage three of economic sanctions only if Russia further destabilizes Ukraine) was a compromise, not a synthesis.

Germany is not the only country with a tradition of strong relations with Moscow: Italy, France, Belgium, Bulgaria, and Hungary all see Moscow through different lenses. The informal meeting of Foreign Ministers organised last week by the Greek Presidency of the EU showed that the preference for keeping an open dialogue with Moscow remains. Finding the right balance between condemnation and diplomatic dialogue focused on resolving security and sovereignty issues in Eastern Europe will be the key challenge, in the short and long-term.

On a positive note, it is clear that the EU member states have moved closer together, on Eastern Europe in particular, but also on Russia. The pessimist will remark that this is still not enough. But agreeing on how to deal with this newly assertive Russia is an imperative. While Europeans think about how to deal with Russia, Putin seems quite content to deal directly with super power US rather than with these fastidious European states. The moment of Europe may be yet to come.

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