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NATO and Russia after Crimea:
From Failed Socialization to Renewed Containment
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Executive Summary

- Russia's aggressive steps against Ukraine constitute a grave threat to the territorial integrity and political sovereignty of the country, simultaneously undermining its new, post-Yanukovych government and instigating secession of Crimea. Moreover, Russian actions also pose a serious challenge to the post-Cold War international system as such. The Euro-Atlantic community cannot afford to accept either.
- Out of many available historical analogies, the remilitarization of Rhineland by Nazi Germany in 1936 offers the best contextual guidance for the understanding of the current situation. Like Hitler eighty years ago, Putin is deliberately testing the limits of the system and wishes to use the resulting chaos and confusion to his advantage. This does not make him a totalitarian dictator, but it does warrant labelling Russia as a revisionist power.
- Current revisionist posture is a direct result of failed socialization of post-Soviet Russia. Just like in Germany after WWI, incomplete victory of the West bred resentment over the results of Cold War which has been cleverly manipulated by Putin's regime. What mattered for Russia, apparently, was the lack of invitation to join the new European order as equal, in the vein of post-Napoleonic France after 1815 or West Germany after 1949. Without trying to assign blame, it is now clear that the partially accommodating approach by NATO and other Euro-Atlantic institutions was insufficient to irrevocably integrate Russia to the new system.
- At this stage of the dynamics of Russia-West relations, the risks of inaction outweigh the fear of escalation. Putin's moves must be resolutely countered. Ukraine's territorial integrity and political sovereignty should be firmly upheld through diplomatic and economic support and defence assistance. NATO and the EU should reconsider their lukewarm position on possible accession of Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries. International community needs to be reaffirmed that the basic tenets of post-Cold war international order still apply.
- The goal is not to unnecessarily antagonize Russia but to signal to its rulers (and other would-be challengers) that rules of the game cannot be changed by force. After the current round of confrontation ends, the Euro-Atlantic community should reconsider its overall stance towards Russia and contemplate more effective ways to retry its socialization into the system.



NATO, Russia and the Crisis in Ukraine

With the benefit of hindsight, we will perhaps be able to judge the current developments in Ukraine, including Russia-backed attempted secession of Crimea, more dispassionately than the heat of the moment allows us. Or maybe not. No matter what perspective we adopt, it seems clear that Russian actions present the gravest, most profound challenge to the European order which came into existence since the end of Cold War. Much more is at stake than territorial integrity of a medium-sized country torn by grave internal struggles over its internal constitution and foreign orientation.

In the face of these developments, NATO (and the Euro-Atlantic community in general) faces difficult questions and tough choices. Before making them, it helps to realize the context of recent developments and seek inspiration from comparable historical situations which can provide some insight into the dynamics of the conflict and offer guidance for necessary action.

This paper will first assess the impact of Russian behaviour not only on Ukraine but on the European international system in general. Since the recent crisis provoked the emergence of several historical analogies, it will then critically assess their relevance and seek to locate the one with the best promise of useful inspiration. In order to understand the current situation, it is necessary to grasp the logic of previous development, which is closely connected with the reconstitution of the West-Russia relations after the end of Cold War. In this regard, experiences from previous resolutions of systemic conflict are most illuminative. Finally, and most importantly, the paper will assess the options NATO and the Euro-Atlantic community as a whole have at their disposal, and weigh their possible impact.

Shock and Awe, Russian Style

Conflict studies typically recognize two basic forms of incompatibility in interstate and internal conflicts – government and territory. With its recent actions against Ukraine, Russia has apparently instigated conflict in both domains, meddling into the fight between Yanukovich's regime and its opponents and, after its protégé fell, starting a military action in support of Crimean separatists. Europe has not witnessed such an example of naked assault on the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity since the end of Cold War. To those willing to compare the situation in Crimea to Kosovo fifteen years ago, it is worth highlighting the differences: the Yugoslav province saw international military action only after years of brutal internal armed conflict (nowhere to be seen in Crimea); the intervention was not motivated by territorial claims (anyone recalls the US wanting to annex Kosovo?); the humanitarian intent may have been controversial but was manifestly not based on national affinity (where Russia talks of protecting “our people”, NATO talked of saving



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“people”, full stop); the intervention was multilateral and backed informally by the UN Secretary General (hard to imagine in the present context); and, finally, the separation of Kosovo came about as an unwanted outcome not welcome by many (NATO members remains split over this issue). This list does not make the Kosovo intervention less controversial, but sufficiently explains how starkly it contrasts with the current Russian actions and rhetoric.

To predict the impact of Russian aggression on Ukraine itself is difficult (apart from the obvious conclusion that it can hardly be positive), given the internal cleavages which split the country. While Russia has proved surprisingly inept at keeping its man in charge of the country, it has enough resources and influence to mar Ukraine’s efforts (if they come) to mitigate the division between its pro-Western and pro-Russian factions. From the notorious Roman dictum *divide et impera*, Russia is only able to fulfil the first half. Putin’s regime’s intentions are in fact not clear: Apparently, it would like to keep Ukraine on close Russian orbit, yet this might not be achievable for the country as a whole – and will be less possible with every further Russian aggressive action. It is highly unlikely that Ukraine’s pro-Western forces would bandwagon, to use Stephen Walt’s term, which leaves the possibility of further fracturing of the country in play. Whether Moscow can expect pro-Russian feelings in eastern Ukraine strong enough to repeat the Crimean scenario is questionable, and so is Putin’s willingness to risk open military action whose gains, after all, would be highly uncertain. Better than direct control of part of the country might be an ability to influence the whole of it through continuous blackmail.

This situation threatens to turn Ukraine into a major complication in Russia’s relations with the rest of Europe and the United States. Depending on the form of Russian meddling, Ukraine can fear to become a major problem anywhere on the scale between a frozen conflict à la Transnistria to a full-fledged combat zone resembling Yugoslavia at the beginning of 1990s. In the long term, Europe cannot tolerate either. Ukraine is not on the outskirts of Europe’s international system, as Yugoslavia was two decades ago, and it is pivotal to Europe-Russia relations from many perspectives (including, but not limited to, geopolitics, identity or energy security). Its territorial integrity is vastly more important than that of Moldova, and even a ‘frozen’ conflict in its territory would be too ‘hot’ to tolerate.

Moreover, Russian (or Russia-backed, which is not substantially different) grab of Crimea runs counter the principles which have long been cultivated as the backbone of European normative space – and to which Russia itself formally subscribed, even during the Soviet period through the Helsinki Final Act. Material implications of the new ‘Putin doctrine’ which claims the right for military protection of Russians in neighbouring countries, have direct relevance for the three Baltic states, thus touching on mutual security and defence commitments within NATO and the EU. Even if his doctrine is proven bluff, Europe cannot



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ignore a man willing to directly challenge constitutive elements of its international order which his predecessors expressly acknowledged.

It does not end with Europe. All other states will be watching closely how Europe and the US deal with the challenge which Russia staged. State-to-state armed conflicts, including those over territory, have almost become extinct over the past two decades – one of the most promising trends in the contemporary international system. But international relations is not physics, there are no laws immune from change, no processes which cannot be thrown off course. The US faces an increasingly difficult constellation in East and Southeast Asia where China has raised several territorial claims which can easily become new geopolitical flashpoints prone to further escalation. Conflicts in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait or the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have so far been contained at the level of diplomatic and legal wrestling. However, the restraint exhibited by the countries concerned does not only reflect the delicate balance of power in the region, it also stems from an adherence to the international norm prohibiting territorial aggression. If, however, China and other potential challengers of the established international order deem the US (and their European allies) unwilling or unable to insist on the compliance with this norm, the global consensus on the matter may quickly dissipate. In its own interest, the Euro-Atlantic community cannot afford to tolerate such an outcome.

We Have Seen This Before – or Have We? Search for the Right Analogy

Nothing stimulates a search for suitable analogies like an unexpected, shocking use of force in international relations. Political, popular, even academic discourses are littered with comparative example from recent and more distant past which are used to explain the situation and suggest a proper course of action. While not necessarily harmful, the use of analogies can lead to misleading suggestions which, if proven sufficiently catchy, can drag the public and political debate to unfortunate conclusions. What follows is a critical reflection on the recent discourse, wrapped up with an analogy deemed most suitable to fit the mould of current developments in Ukraine.

Going counterclockwise, the first analogy which caught public imagination was the previous Russian military engagement in the near abroad, the 2008 war with Georgia over the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While it is almost too easy to link the two to paint Russia as an inherently aggressive, territory-grabbing power, there are significant differences. Of course, Russian intent of securing the de facto independence of the two regions, underlined by the subsequent recognition thereof by the resolution of the Duma, was clear. However, the setting of the Russia-Georgia war had been established decade and half before, during a bloody and mutually brutal separatist war. While the insistence of President



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Saakashvili on territorial integrity of his country was understandable, it was the Georgian military action which attempted to change the long established (if legally non-sanctioned) status quo. Russia eagerly jumped on the opportunity which opened before her and clearly exceeded the scope of purely defensive reaction, but it would be difficult to categorize its action as unprovoked territorial aggression.

In March 1999, NATO started aerial bombing of selected targets across the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Despite the fact that the operation was carried out without the UN Security Council authorization, it resulted in the establishment of a UN mandated peacekeeping mission and international administration. While none of these officially supported the separation of Kosovo from Yugoslavia, they undoubtedly created the necessary conditions for the declaration of independence in 2008. Is it enough to warrant an equation with the recent developments in Crimea? Hardly. The fight for independence in Kosovo was incited by the curtailment of its autonomy by Milosevic's regime after 1989. On the contrary, Crimea has enjoyed an autonomous status since its incorporation into Ukraine in 1954, which was in fact greatly expanded during 1990s, with Russian involvement and agreement. After all, current motion for independence is formally promoted by the elected officials of the autonomous republic.

Secondly, and more importantly, NATO's intervention in (or rather, over) Kosovo came after several years of armed skirmishes and a year of intense fighting which resulted in a brutal Serbian campaign against the Albanian population. While we can endlessly discuss the legitimacy of NATO's campaign, armed force in Kosovo was used to protect civilian population against state-sanctioned violence and none of the intervening countries had any territorial claims against or disputes with the target of the operation. Russian invasion of Crimea cannot credibly claim any comparable justification – to which its propagandistic effort to fabricate one is in direct proportion.

In Central and Eastern Europe, current Russian behaviour revived the analogy of Soviet interventions in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Hungary in 1956. While understandable and useful to channel the moral outrage, both are inaccurate when it comes to understanding the strategic context. Czechoslovakia and Hungary were not only in the Soviet Union's sphere of influence (as Ukraine was until the recent turmoil), they were ruled over by effective branches of the Soviet communist leadership. It does not make these attempts to cast away the yoke of obedience to Moscow any less daring and the subsequent resistance against occupation (especially in Hungary) any less respectable – quite to the opposite. However, in terms of established rules and norms of the Cold War system, the Soviet actions did not threaten the basic tenets of international order. The Soviets effectively called the US "rollback" rhetoric bluff in 1956 – but given the balance of military power, cemented by the deployment of nuclear weapons, such an outcome was hardly surprising or challenging. The strategic context in 2014 is different and Ukraine can hardly be considered an unquestionable



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part of Russian sphere of dominance where the use of force is expected and at least tacitly accepted. In short, Crimea is not Chechnya.

Munich Agreement has probably become the most favourite of analogies supplied by the tumultuous 20th century. Aggressive territorial claims by a neighbouring power against a weaker opponent and rhetorical protection of national brethren seemingly make Munich an ideal candidate for shedding light on the current conflict. But the analogy does not withstand closer scrutiny. It is of course the ‘agreement’ part which makes the difference. Munich was a great power compact to accommodate territorial claims of one of them at the expense of a third party. While the seemingly hesitant reactions of some European and US leaders provide welcome ammunition for their opponents and critics, they have not resulted in anything akin to a mutually agreed acceptance of the results of Russian actions. Sceptics might point out that this may still be the result due to an inherent weakness of the West, but such an outcome is in fact highly unlikely. Even if the international community, headed by prominent NATO and EU members, fails in its effort to return to *status quo ante bellum*, such a failure does not automatically equal formally sanctioning the situation on the ground. Moreover, while the Munich Conference took place under an imminent threat of general war in Europe, no such outlook realistically exists today.

Before concluding that we have run out of helpful analogies, it is worth considering another case from Hitler’s playbook, the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936. While the event does not offer much insight when it comes to details (to Germany, Rhineland, unlike Crimea to Russia, was not a foreign territory), it is extremely important for the assessment of strategic implications. Remilitarization of Rhineland sent a clear, unequivocal message that Hitler was not willing to respect the essential rules and norms of the international order built after 1919. Putin has done exactly the same during the last weeks. This does not make him or his regime comparable to the 20th century’s ultra-villain, but it does put contemporary Russia in a position of a revisionist power. Quarter century after the end of Cold War, this is a disconcerting discovery which begs further explanation, without which it is hard to arrive at the right conclusions concerning desirable counteraction.

Days of Future Past: Russia as a Revisionist Power

Soviet Union unilaterally ceased control of its Central and Eastern European satellites in 1989 and dissolved in a largely peaceful manner two years later. In the same year, Russia started its cooperation with NATO through the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (later renamed Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council) and in 1994 it joined the Partnership for Peace. One year later, a Russian brigade deployed alongside US, Turkish and Nordic-Polish counterparts in the Multi-National Division (North) in Tuzla, as part of the IFOR operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 1997, NATO and Russia signed a Founding Act on Mutual



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Relations, Cooperation and Security, elevated to the NATO-Russia Council in 2002. Despite opposition to NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia, Russian soldiers participated in the ensuing KFOR mission and Russia also supported the coalition and NATO-led operations in Afghanistan after 2001. In the light of current developments, a question is inescapable: what went wrong?

Numerous analyses, articles and books will be written in the years to come about the current crisis – that much is certain. With the benefit of hindsight, they will be able to pin down specific reasons, motives, circumstances and processes which converged in the escalation of events into a full-fledged confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine. It is precarious to attempt explanations while the fray is still in motion. However, in strategic terms, the general logic of the run-up to the crisis looks surprisingly clear – especially when compared to similar situations in the past.

The aforementioned events from the recent history of the NATO-Russia relationship form an integral part of the conclusion to the preceding systemic conflict – the Cold War. Over the course of two previous centuries, there are three additional examples which fit this category: the reconstitution of the concert of great powers after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, the set of peace treaties and the establishment of the League of Nations following the end of World War I, and the new global order established after World War II.

With the risk of oversimplification, it is possible to claim that the events and their aftermath offer a singularly persuasive argument: indecisive victories are followed by hesitant socialization of the defeated side which in turn resorts to revisionist policies in an effort to return to its 'rightful' position. On the contrary, decisive victories are followed by successful socialization of the losing party, including further integrative impulses. The defeats of Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany can be regarded as total and definitive. Not only were their armed forces crushed in battle, but the countries were subsequently occupied (partially, in the case of France after 1815) and, most importantly, the constitutive ideas of their previous regimes were resolutely uprooted. While this development went much further in the case of post-WWII Germany, in both cases the victors gained enough confidence to show considerable amount of largesse. Soon after the end of war, reconstituted royalist France and democratic West Germany returned as equals to form important components of the newly constituted international order. Above all, this solution allowed the one-time enemies to reach new, sometimes surprisingly robust levels of mutual trust.

Situation after World War I offers an entirely different picture. Germany was defeated and its wartime regime fell, but subsequent efforts to subdue it during peacetime through reparations, territorial curtailment and limitations of military power failed to achieve the desired end-state. Even though the negotiations for readmission of Germany to the system



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started only several years after the end of war, it was too late – the seeds of discontent already took hold there and blossomed after the rise of the Nazis.

It seems the initial humiliation just after the war stimulated too much resentment to be balanced by the relative openness of the second half of 1920s. Perhaps the crucial lesson from the mismanagement of German revisionism is the importance of timing: Both socialization and retribution had their place in the construction of the new international system, but both seem to have been applied at exactly the wrong time. More generosity was clearly needed just after the war, to support those elements in German society and politics willing to join in. When France and Britain finally showed willingness to renegotiate the deal in 1925, their action was already perceived as weakness, not good will. After 1933, the effort to finally accommodate Germany's demands proved tragically naive in the face of Hitler's intentions.

Soviet Union suffered a 'soft defeat' in 1989 which was unlike anything experienced in the three aforementioned cases. However, the logic of incomplete victory and insufficient socialization still applies. Despite all institutional and procedural overtures from NATO and the West in general, Russia was never treated with the respect of a defeated but still great power – at least in Russian eyes. It was relegated to a relic of the former superpower, a leftover from a failed idea. On the whole, the Western approach could be described as haughty neglect. The idea that Russia should be integrated to the system as equal (like France was after 1815) would have seemed outrageous to those countries which have just shed the Soviet rule – and yet it was probably the only meaningful way of socializing Russia fully into the new system. Like in the case of post-WWI Germany, the window of opportunity was very narrow and lasted for just several years at the beginning of 1990s. At that time, Russia was offered equal treatment similar to other post-communist societies but unlike the countries in Central and Eastern Europe it was denied the vision of EU and NATO membership. Perhaps it would have rejected it anyway, but the option was never seriously considered.

Just as the end of Cold War was tamer by several orders of magnitude than the carnage of WWI, so is Putin's Russia only a shade of threat which crystallized in Germany under Hitler. What matters, however, is not the intensity but the overall direction of Russia's external policies. At this moment it is clear that they have reached the level when Moscow is willing and able to test and challenge the established rules of the game – just as Berlin was during the first years of Hitler's rule. The historical context has shifted and makes it hard to imagine large military confrontation between Russia and Europe/NATO, but the logic of revisionism remains the same. Russia's socialization into the new European system built since the end of Cold War has failed, and NATO and other components of the Euro-Atlantic community must find ways of dealing with this unhappy state of affairs.



Beyond Ukraine: Containment as the Next Step in NATO-Russia Relations

Unfortunately, the dominant element of the discourse in the face of recent Russian aggression against Ukraine is the fear of escalation. Based on the previous analysis, such stance fits the current stage of development of Russia-West relations very poorly. Russian leadership has willingly opted for the revisionist strategy, so escalation already happened – from their side. Negotiations can and must be part of the reaction to the developments, but they should not be regarded as an end in its own right. Like Germany in 1936, Russia has just knowingly breached one of the key norms of the international order – and those attacked, including NATO and the EU, must respond accordingly. If the West does not push back, it will end up being pushed aside.

The international community, led by the US and prominent EU members, should first and foremost signal to Russia that its heavy-handed meddling in Ukraine's internal affairs will no longer be tolerated. Preferences and well-being of the pro-Russian segment of Ukrainian population, including the inhabitants of Crimea, must be of course duly taken into account. To handle the current crisis, international negotiations are needed and Russia can and should participate in them – but not while it simultaneously militarily supports a secessionist movement in the country.

While Crimea is effectively lost to Russian control at the moment, Europe and the US should make it perfectly clear to Moscow that by siding with the separatists it shuts itself out from future influence in Ukraine as a whole. Full territorial integrity of Ukraine free of all external military interference must be claimed as a starting point, not an outcome of the negotiations. Russian offensive must be contained with financial (instant economic support), diplomatic (political support to the new Ukrainian government) and strategic (reformulation of Ukraine's prospects vis-à-vis the EU) means.

NATO – as a military alliance and defence organization – can and should play a pivotal role in the reaction. The Alliance must offer necessary training, financial and advisory support for the Ukrainian armed forces to be able to secure the territory of the state. Demonstrative strengthening of NATO's posture and level of alertness should be automatic components of the overall reaction.

Ukraine's internal divisions complicate things greatly, but the crisis offers the European Union and NATO a strong opportunity to rethink their reluctant stance towards its (as well as other countries') membership. The main thesis of the European Neighbourhood Policy, that post-Soviet countries between the EU and Russia can integrate into Europe without the prospect of future membership, has taken a serious blow. Time has come to support the pro-European forces in the neighbourhood by reconsidering this position.



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In a wider international context, Russian aggression should be presented and raised as an issue at appropriate international fora, including the UN Security Council and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. If Russia does not reverse its course, members of its ruling elite should be subjected to targeted sanctions. Extensive trade embargo is hard to imagine, but there are other means to convey the depth of Europe's and the United States' dissatisfaction. For instance, even if the ongoing operations of Russian companies are not directly targeted, the Euro-Atlantic community could agree on a 'closure' that would exclude Russian businesses from any further extension of their activities which is mandated by a public policy decision. In other words, Russian companies would not be allowed to participate in state-organized tenders, including those in the energy sector. Russia may be an important market for European companies, but the logic is even more relevant the other way round. Europe should muster enough courage and solidarity to make Russia, and the Russians, feel that the continuation of Putin's adventures relegates the country to an international pariah.

The risks of escalation are not negligible, but at the moment the risks of inaction or feeble response are much greater. If unopposed, Putin's regime's next move will clearly consist in undermining the new Ukrainian government, thus either plunging the country into an even deeper crisis (potentially ending with its separation), or tie it to the Russian orbit under much stricter terms than it ever has been since its independence. Neither result is acceptable to Europe and the US.

Like Stalin, Putin does not act out of insatiable thirst for aggression; his motives are likely primarily defensive, realizing that the successful overthrow of Yanukovich's regime might spell trouble for his own rule. From this perspective, his moves can easily be understood as preventive distraction of the domestic audience from internal problems to external threats. But even if this explanation is true, it does not warrant lenience on the part of the Euro-Atlantic community. Putin is not the only, and maybe not even the most relevant audience of its actions. The current international order is still 'Western' in many of its key characteristics and it is in the utmost interest of the Euro-Atlantic community to fight for its preservation.

Like his one-time KGB mentors, Putin's strategy relies on fear, including the fear of the costs of the defence measures. One of the general ways through which NATO communicated its resolve to the Soviet Union during the Cold War was by demonstrating its willingness to bear the expenses of the competition. The US, NATO and the European Union stand at an important crossroad, one that seems to come at exactly the wrong moment. The public is tired of previous military operations like Afghanistan, the economy has just barely recovered from the previous recession and the resources for decisive foreign policy action are diminishing. We should, however, heed the warning of the 1930s, when economic malaise and political fatigue eased the way for Hitler's rise. Putin is not nearly as menacing as Hitler and Russian power should not be exaggerated, but not opposing the revisionist tendencies



could still empower other actors who seek to undermine the international consensus built since the end of Cold War. Despite the apparent costs, the Euro-Atlantic community should muster all its will and resources to counter such trends.

Conclusion: Victory through Strength, Peace through Integration

It does not end with the show of resoluteness. The ultimate goal is not to ‘defeat’ Russia (after all, the Soviet Union was already defeated) but to defend the current international system against a serious breach. The West should recall NATO’s double-track decision from 1979 which combined explicit resolve to counter the Soviet moves with an offer to negotiate the critical issues. There is no *a priori* reason why Russia’s economic, cultural and even political influence should be completely shut out from Ukraine, or the rest of its near abroad. However, it must conform to the established European and international standards. In other words, everything should be negotiable, but never under duress.

If the West wins this round of confrontation (and there is much to fear if it does not), the worst thing it could do would be to subsequently label Russia as an irreconcilable, perennial enemy. History of international relations does not offer many clear-cut lessons, but the one from post-WWII Western Europe is evident: The only known form of perpetually overcoming enmity, distrust and fear of war in interstate relations is deep integration. Once the current phase of conflict between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia is over, victorious West will have to start handling an even more challenging issue – how to stimulate Russian socialization and integration into Europe which so manifestly failed in the previous two decades.

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