

RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

This war is the defeat of Western political realism

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**Eugenio
Capozzi**



With the invasion of Ukraine, Putin's Russia has crossed a border that leads it towards a total break with the West, and forces it to be fatally sucked into a Eurasian axis with China from which it has everything to lose in the long run, since it can only play the role of vassal. It is the end of a long season in which the country, after the adjustment following the end of the USSR, has tried to find a balance between inclusion in the

globalised economy and maintaining its status as an imperial power, albeit on a smaller scale than in the past.

But this increasingly radical political, military and economic fracture also represents an enormous damage for the West and for the reasons of liberal democracies. And it is the result of a resounding failure of US and European policy towards Russia over the last thirty years. A failure based on the inability of the Western political classes to understand the challenges of a world in which the West is no longer, and perhaps never will be, the undisputed protagonist.

What to do about Russia? This is the question that the US and its allies have never addressed organically and comprehensively since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In the 1990s, marked by the general belief that the world had become unipolar and was ineluctably becoming Westernized, their ruling classes viewed Yeltsin's Russia as a country in turbulent transition to a market economy, no longer dangerous or a potential military and strategic antagonist, despite remaining the world's second nuclear power and second army.

In this context, the enlargement of NATO with the accession of many former 'satellite' countries or members of the USSR - driven precisely by the experience that those countries had had in the past of Russian and Soviet imperialism, and by their desire to protect themselves in the future against it - appeared as a natural fact, not likely to create problems in relations with Moscow. In the meantime, Moscow was admitted into the system of global governance with the enlargement of the G7 into the G8 and with the negotiations for entry into the WTO, and was attracted into the NATO area with its involvement in the Partnership for Peace of the alliance (1994) and with the foundation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002.

But in the meantime, something had changed with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin, and the Westerners did not grasp the significance of that change. After a phase of disorder but also of disintegration, Russia was beginning a process of regrouping of power and state centralisation, and was trying to regain a role as a world power in the wake of its centuries-old imperial tradition. The consolidation of political and economic relations with Russia should have implied, for the United States and its allies, the ability to rethink the entire system of security and Euro-Western alliances, abandoning the idea of a necessary 'western-centric' globalism and instead taking due account of both the laws of geopolitics and the inevitable pluralism between civilisations that a few years earlier Samuel Huntington had eloquently illustrated.

Faced with the different challenges brought by Islamic fundamentalism and the Chinese political and economic model, the Western interest would have been to overcome the old NATO approach in favour of a 'constellation' of alliances with multiple subjects, from Russia to the Indo-Pacific area. This meant, as far as Eastern Europe was concerned, guaranteeing both the security of the former satellite states and the status of Moscow as a Eurasian power, redefining areas of influence, convergences and common objectives.

But the United States - with the Clinton, Bush Jr. and Obama administrations - went in the opposite direction. On the one hand, they threw open the doors to Beijing's rise with China's admission to the WTO in 2000 and the creation of an extremely favourable global environment for it. On the other hand, they disregarded Russian geopolitical concerns and regarded them as hostile acts in themselves. In the Middle East, US interventionism after 11 September 2001, especially since the Iraqi conflict, led the American superpower to collide in many cases with Moscow's positions.

In the meantime, in the East European and Caucasian arena, the process of NATO enlargement or the rapid rapprochement of former Soviet states with the West fuelled a reawakening of the encirclement syndrome in the Russians, which provoked increasingly decisive reactions. The conflicts triggered by Russia in Georgia (South Ossetia, Abkhazia) and Ukraine - in a long sequence stretching from 2004 to the latest developments - were the most striking cases of Moscow's imperialist reaction, with respect to which the US and Western attitude has been the increasing isolation imposed on it, and its downgrading from potential ally to quasi enemy: culminating in the sanctions imposed on it since its annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The only Western leader who in the last two decades has perceived the dangers

of this progressive degeneration of trust and relations between the West and Russia has been Donald Trump, who has always argued, in his realist and bilateralist vision of US foreign policy, the need for a rapprochement between the two sides in an anti-Chinese function, and by virtue of a higher degree of possible compatibility. But during his presidential term it was impossible for him to carry out this strategy because of the opposition of almost the entire ruling class of his country, as well as the state and military apparatus. His failure to be re-elected, and the return to power of the democrats with Biden, has fuelled the new escalation of tension with Moscow that has now culminated in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as the ever closer rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing.

At this point in time, any chance of reknitting the threads of dialogue seems compromised, and Europe is becoming the theatre for a showdown that will inevitably call into question the continent's structure, with unpredictable consequences. But if a minimum of political rationality survives in the West, it should be used to get out of the logic of head-on opposition, which recalls ideological divisions that have now disappeared, to realistically and prudently reopen, without abdicating its principles of freedom and democracy, spaces for mediation based on the minimum guarantees of mutual security between the parties.