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The war in Ukraine holds two lessons: Russia isn't an imminent threat, and Europe must rearm regardless

Only a Europe truly able to defend itself can break its dependence on a US whose policies damage its security

Two years into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, [warnings of war](#) between Russia and the west have reached [fever pitch](#) in Europe and Britain. The explicit intention of these warnings is to create public support for massive spending on rearmament, on the [old principle](#) of “scare the hell out of them”.

The goal of European rearmament is laudable; the arguments being used to bring it about are not. As long as the war in Ukraine continues, there is a real risk that Nato and Russia will [stumble into war](#) as the result of some unintended clash. But the chances that this will come about as the result of a premeditated Russian invasion of a Nato country are minimal.

Russia simply doesn't pose a serious threat of conventional attack on the EU and Nato. Vladimir Putin has [often said](#) – most recently in his [interview](#) with Tucker Carlson – that Russia has no intention of, and no interest in, an attack on Nato unless Nato attacks Russia. For a whole set of objective reasons, on this at least we can believe him.

For one, Russia has revealed itself to be a much weaker military power than was thought – and than Putin assumed – before the invasion. Since its defeats in 2022, the Russian army in Ukraine has recovered, and the balance of forces is [swinging in its favour](#); all the same, the

only Russian successes over the past year have been the capture of two small towns in the Donbas, and these advances have taken months and cost the Russians tens of thousands of casualties. Meanwhile, the Ukrainians have inflicted [severe damage](#) on the Russian Black Sea fleet.

Given this dismal record, why would any Russian planner expect victory in an offensive against Nato? Even without the US, European countries combined [heavily outweigh](#) Russia in terms of numbers, weaponry and military spending (the greatest problem is the failure to pool these resources); and the Ukraine war has shown the great advantages currently enjoyed by the side that stands on the defensive. Moreover, in the event of an attack on a Nato country, western countries would certainly impose a complete and crippling naval blockade on Russian maritime energy exports.

Putin's nuclear threats have been meant to deter the US and Nato from intervening directly in [Ukraine](#). In terms of its own actions against Nato, however, the Russian government to date has been very cautious, despite the massive assistance Nato has given to Ukraine.

Remove the threat of a Russian invasion, and the real argument for European rearmament is almost the diametrical opposite: that it is necessary to make peace with Russia. For only a Europe confident of its ability to defend itself can break the circle – not only vicious but increasingly absurd – by which it is desperately afraid that the US will cease to guarantee its security, and therefore supports US policies that gravely damage its security. It is also, of course, obvious from [recent comments](#) by Donald Trump and his supporters that US military commitment to Europe cannot, in fact, be guaranteed in the long term.

If European countries were confident in their ability to defend themselves without the US, they – or at least the French and Germans – could have summoned up the will to block the US push for Nato expansion, and made a real effort to reach compromise with Russia over Ukraine. This self-confidence would also allow Europe to extricate itself from embroilment in the growing confrontation between the [US and China](#).

Even more importantly, it would allow [Europe](#) to oppose disastrous US and Israeli policies in the Middle East, which threaten a return of terrorism and ethno-religious strife with Europe's large and growing Muslim minorities.

Consider the case of Germany, which exemplifies the inability of leading European countries to think seriously about economic and military security over the past generation. The end of cheap Russian energy supplies and the possible disruption of Chinese markets for German technology are a serious threat to its industry and social and political stability; and German

liberal democracy is a linchpin of the EU. This is a threat to European democracy that vastly outweighs what happens in eastern Ukraine.

There was nothing wrong in principle with maintaining German industry on the basis of cheap Russian energy, and limiting the German armed forces to those necessary to deter an attack on the country itself. But this only made sense if it was also willing to act decisively to stop Nato and EU expansion where this impinged on what Russia viewed as its vital interests. To [combine both approaches](#) – relying on Russia while at the same time taking a US-led hawkish stance against it – was an invitation to disaster.

In 2007, this would have involved Germany and France vetoing – not just deferring – Ukraine’s Nato membership. In 2013, it would have involved seeking an economic agreement with Russia that would have left Ukraine open to both EU and Russian trade and investment – as was [urged at the time](#) by the Italian prime minister and European Commission president Romano Prodi, among others.

Today, with the prospect of complete Ukrainian victory disappearing, a wise European course independent of Washington would involve defying the Biden administration – and preempting a possible Trump administration – and taking Putin up on his offer of peace talks. For without such talks, it will be impossible to explore what Russian terms for peace are, and therefore whether a compromise peace is possible.

It is true, as the proponents of rearmament say, that the world is a more dangerous place than Europeans over the past generation have imagined; and in a dangerous world countries and alliances need to be able to defend their interests. But these military advocates talk only about military defence; they miss or deliberately ignore the other essential need of nations living in a dangerous world: cool-headed, prudent, self-interested and realistic diplomacy. The two are absolutely interdependent. Without confidence in its ability to defend itself, a country or region will always be subservient to the wishes and interests of a military protector.

Ever since the issue of Nato expansion first appeared in the mid-1990s, Russian officials, journalists and foreign policy intellectuals [have told me](#) that while they did not really care about eastern Europe or even the Baltic states, their fear was that Nato would not know how to stop; and that if it threatened to take in Ukraine, Russia would have to fight. In all those three decades, no establishment Russian has ever said to me that Russia might attack Poland; and the only time this has been raised with reference to the Baltic states has been if [Lithuania blockaded](#) the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.

Given the absence of an imminent Russian threat, Europe has time to conduct a measured programme of rearmament. This should involve limited increases in military spending, but

much more importantly the pooling and coordination of military production, the unification of military forces and their deployment to eastern Europe to reassure EU members there. This rearmament will, however, be utterly pointless unless it forms the basis for strategic autonomy and the defence of the real interests and the real security of Europe.

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