



EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS Great-power confrontation and competition

24 January 2023

Highlights

- The US, Russia and China cannot assume the others will decline; this is wishful thinking. So they have to find ways to manage their confrontation peacefully.
- A scenario of restraint and conflict management might suit the great powers but could mean a lot of instability for middle powers and smaller countries. Some will extract benefits by acting as “swing states” or “manoeuvring states”.
- Western countries are likely to double down on deterrence: they see Russia as riding roughshod over every rule, leaving deterrence as the only option. Russia sees things somewhat similarly.
- The trend in Russia and many Western countries is increasingly to portray the war in Ukraine as part of a “clash of civilisations”. Between Russia and the West, “each side believes that one is out to destroy the other”. Such a clash is unwinnable.
- Moments of opportunity may emerge unexpectedly, like after the death of Stalin. Western countries need to be prepared to seize them.

Summary

The Contact Group convened in January to discuss the growing dynamics of great-power conflict, and the similarities and differences between the hardening geopolitical division of today and the Cold War.

It was argued that today’s multipolar competition is less stable than the US-Soviet one, not least because emerging and disruptive technologies are making it possible for countries to wreak havoc on each other with little or no warning. Nuclear deterrence cannot be regarded as fool-proof.

Could the underlying conflict between major powers be restrained or transformed? Could there be a reconfiguration of relations in the face of common existential threats? The group discussed options for how the risks could be reduced or mitigated, with a senior US expert who is soon to publish a paper on the subject.

The roles of major powers

A Russian expert said they could not see anything stopping China's rise. This meant it was not smart of the US to head towards a new cold war with China. A rising China would also be a challenge for Russia because of the asymmetry of their relationship. All three countries would have to deal with one another and could not assume the others would decline; this was wishful thinking. They had to find ways to manage their confrontation peacefully.

Can such restraint be sold domestically in the US? A US speaker said that after the war on terror, there is a more chastened view than some outside the US would believe. It was not necessarily a choice between restraint or imperial overstretch. Another scenario is "understretch" and isolationism. Some of this was seen under Trump. But US decline has been predicted repeatedly and the US has batted it away.

Another participant asked how Western countries could prepare for a declining Russia. Some predicted it would become "a super North Korea", an embittered and isolated actor on the world stage with resources to make trouble around the world, meddling in regional politics. This is one possible scenario, but not yet set in stone. One participant felt personally worried by the trends in sentiment among Russia's foreign policy intellectuals, with a number expressing hawkish and sobering views.

Where does great-power competition leave Europe?

A scenario of restraint and conflict management might suit the great powers, but could mean a lot of instability for middle powers and smaller countries, argued another participant. As for the rest of the West, the discourse about a new cold war between the US, Russia and China seems to ignore Europe. Looking at international politics through a great-power lens usually means Europe is left out. But looking at the international economy, the EU is significant. Moreover, anyone wanting to support the logic of restraint, mutual security and win-win outcomes should examine the EU, as this is precisely its model. But it has hit some walls.

Germany is in the process of redefining its foreign policy, because of Russia. Traditionally, Germany considered Russia, France and others as "realistic powers" who were given priority and treated differently from small countries. "Yet the smaller powers around us, organised in the EU and NATO, are perhaps in fact more important to us," it was suggested.

Middle powers won't be marginalised, argued another participant. In the Cold War, small and medium powers were often the "tail that wagged the dog", by acting as "swing states" or "manoeuvring states". Many countries internationally, especially in the global south, don't want to take sides but do want to extract benefits where they can, while also fearing the costs of great-power competition. In some cases, they can nudge the major powers to do the right thing and the major powers can use them as conduits for sensitive policies.

But it's not just states that are breaking down our international order. Rogue AI was mentioned. The role of non-state actors is very different from the Cold War, including big tech companies that may not be constrained by international rules.

Has Western deterrence failed in Ukraine?

Many would say that the West wasn't able to deter Russia from invading Ukraine. But, argued one participant, it hardly tried: Ukraine was not a NATO member, nor was it under a US security umbrella. There is a stark contrast with NATO's ongoing ability to deter Russia from attacking NATO territory.

However, specific failures of deterrence at particular times do not mean deterrence in general has failed. The US and its allies failed to deter Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic in recent memory, or to deter Putin in multiple places. But Western countries are likely to double down on deterrence: they see Russia as riding roughshod over every rule, leaving deterrence as the only option. However, there are inherent tensions between deterrence and warfighting. Retaining or increasing readiness for warfighting could be misread.

"Clash of civilisations" rhetoric and its dangers

"When a war is taking place, the language escalates", it was said. One participant noted that when Russians start to portray this as a war for the survival of Russia, it is an extreme escalation which can have dangerous consequences. In the US too, rhetoric intended for domestic consumption can have very negative effects and diplomats are not necessarily disciplined in their comments about China. In response, a Russian participant observed that many in Russia's foreign policy circles are not happy with what is happening, but political scientists need to understand the causes of the conflict and the links with identity politics.

The outcome of the Ukraine crisis will be key. One approach is to see it as a regional conflict. But both in Russia and in the West some portray it as a clash of civilisations. Between Russia and the West, "each side believes that one is out to destroy the other". Such a clash is unwinnable. It will damage both sides, it was said, and arms control specialists should seek to end it as soon as possible, in such a way that it will not provoke more hot conflict. Moreover, threats to stability may arise from any point in the globe. In the face of future threats, will the great powers be able to act collectively through the UN Security Council? And how can this be achieved without something catastrophic happening first?

Keeping future doors open

The question of how to produce a more stable European security system was vital. "It may seem a distant dream but if we don't have ambitious goals in front of us, even some small goals may not be achieved.". Moments of opportunity may emerge unexpectedly, like after the death of Stalin. Western countries need to be prepared to seize them. There are many ways for each side to signal its intention for a different kind of relationship – in terms of strategic stability talks, risk reduction, military communications, and public rhetoric. This will come down to leadership and inspiration.

Feedback? Questions? Please reach out to Jane Kinninmont –

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