

The New Age of Force

How Can Europe React without Losing its Principles?

by Loïc Simonet

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On January 26, 2025, Donald Trump posted a picture of himself on Instagram, wearing a Borsalino hat in the style of Al Capone, the American gangster and businessman who attained notoriety during the Prohibition era. Behind him, a poster that read “FAFO” for “Fuck Around and Find Out”. Published in the midst of Trump’s tug-of-war with his Colombian counterpart, Gustavo Petro, over the deportation of migrants expelled from the United States, the photo symbolizes a new reality: the current American administration is imposing a brutal worldview based, as that of the 19th century, on force, transaction and power, which must serve national interests above all else. “America first!”

The use of force has become a commonplace *modus operandi*. Far from Hemingway’s “Farewell to Arms,” our era is witnessing a resurgence of state violence. Geopolitical relations now resemble a food chain: predators overwhelm prey, hard power crushes soft power, and martial virtue eclipses diplomatic finesse. The return of Bismarck’s “Blut und Eisen” (“Blood and Iron”) policy in the 21st century exposes the flaws of our democratic systems.

The shadow of war

We thought that after two world wars, peace had become the natural state of Europe and war an exception. On February 24, 2022, as the first Russian missiles rained down on Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odesa, Europeans saw what they had refused to anticipate for years: that a country on their continent could launch its armies against a neighboring country to satisfy its imperial ambitions; that a nuclear power could brandish the threat of atomic apocalypse to achieve its ends; that a permanent member of the UN Security Council could trample on the cardinal principles of world peace and flout international law in

favor of the law of force. Although ‘war’ is still a ‘taboo’ word (hence Putin’s ‘special military operation’), the use of military force is once again seen as a conceivable, even acceptable political practice among the tools of state power. The use of force is not ‘chosen’ any longer by our democracies—like in Afghanistan, in Kosovo, in Iraq in 2003, in Libya in 2011, although we made a very bad use of it—but imposed on us.

Conflict is expanding into new areas, with the militarization of space and the proliferation of cyberattacks. It is also taking on increasingly hybrid forms. The military and the non-military are intertwined. Margarita Simonian, editor-in-chief of RT (formerly Russia Today), describes her channel as an “army corps”. Everything becomes ‘weaponized’: food supply, trade and tariffs, migration, energy flows. It is part of what Thomas Gomart, Director of the Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri), calls the “invisible wars”. The tools for regulating strategic competition are disappearing one by one. As U.S. historian Mary Elise Sarotte assessed, the Cold War’s tacit code of conduct, rooted in patterns of predictable behavior, does not prevail any longer. In this context, a small incident or miscalculation can trigger escalation.

Strongmen: the age of predators

I wonder whether Margot Wallström’s ‘feminist diplomacy’ has ever materialized. What is sure is that hypermasculine and hubristic performance is the ‘new modern’. Nayib Bukele of El Salvador, who calls himself the “world’s coolest dictator” or the “Philosopher King”, and Javier Milei of Argentina, whose contempt for the state is “infinite”, were both invited to Trump’s inauguration. Coined by Joe Biden a “pariah” after the assassination of the dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Crown Prince

Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia made a remarkable comeback as a reformer and mediator. The personalization of power and populist politics embodied by these leaders clashes with our European conception of democracy, representation and moral values.

In his *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus says, “it’s natural to kick the one who’s down”. “Bro-Politics in Action” (A. Csobánci) is weak with the powerful, and powerful with the weak. According to Edward Luce, columnist at the Financial Times, Donald Trump “believes the world is a jungle in which the larger predators eat the smaller. He has great respect for other large beasts, namely China and Russia, and a sense of *carte blanche* towards the smaller ones.” With Ukraine, the U.S. uses its strength to subjugate the one who has one knee on the ground. That was already the meaning of the Abraham Accords, negotiated in 2020 to the detriment of the Palestinian people.

21st century ‘strong men’ share a revisionist approach. There is a lot in common between the MAGA / Monroe 2.0 ideology, Vladimir Putin’s Soviet nostalgia, Xi Jinping’s ‘China Dream’ and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s neo-ottomanism. Trump seems to align with Putin when he promotes a spheres-of-influence policy as practiced by his predecessors William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, the only two he cited in his opening speech on January 20, 2025. This unholy autocratic alliance is the antithesis to the United Nations Charter.

‘Bulldozer’ diplomacy: I want it, I take it

Donald Trump’s brutality against Ukrainian President Zelensky in the Oval Office on February 28, 2025 and Vice President JD Vance’s condescension toward Europeans at the



Munich Security Conference, are unprecedented. No holds barred. 'Allies' receive no special treatment.

As we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Yalta Conference, the Mar-a-Lago imperial doctrine sets the tone. In his inaugural address, Trump made clear that the "The United States will once again consider itself a growing nation – one that increases our wealth, expands our territory, builds our cities, raises our expectations, and carries our flag into new and beautiful horizons". The 47th President of the United States does not feel bound by any international norm and certainly not by the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, which Article 51 prohibits coercion. No agreement, even a formally ratified one, is in his eyes an obstacle to the assertion of American power. "We'll get Greenland. Yeah, 100%," Trump said to NBC's Kristen Welker on 30 March 2025, adding that there is a "good possibility that we could do it without military force" but that he wouldn't "take anything off the table." "Protector America becomes predator", Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director of the French Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, assesses. In 1803, the United States bought Louisiana from Napoleon Bonaparte. In 1867, they bought Alaska from the Russian Empire. The good old 19th-century methods are back. Except that Greenland is not for sale.

“Protector America becomes predator [...]”

The domino effect is underway: Russia has long eyed Norway's Svalbard archipelago, and it will be increasingly hard to oppose China's declared intent to reclaim Taiwan by force. The "Trump factor" unleashes the wildest ideas: Dutch parliamentary speaker Martin Bosma recently suggested carving up Belgium, attaching Flanders to the Netherlands and giving Wallonia to France.

'Red lines' are crossed one after the other

With tens of thousands civilian casualties and survivors condemned to anarchy and dereliction, the conflict in Gaza is an extreme example of the breakdown of the law of war, but it is not an isolated one. ICRC President Mirjana Spoljaric repeatedly points out the erosion of the respect of the Geneva Conventions. States' tolerance with regards to forbidden weapons has been growing. Germany turned a blind eye to the transfer of U.S. cluster ammunitions to Ukraine through its territory. NATO members Poland and the Baltic States announced their plan to withdraw from the Ottawa convention banning anti-personnel landmines due to the military threat from their neighbour Russia. New technologies and artificial intelligence introduce serious risks when weaponized.

We are entering "an era of rearmament" (Ursula von der Leyen). In 2024, global military spending rose by 7.4% to \$2.46 trillion, the International Institute for Strategic Studies indicates in its Military Balance 2025. Russian President Vladimir Putin and other high-level Russian officials have heightened nuclear rhetoric, calling into question longstanding global norms against the use and testing of nuclear weapons. Nuclear arms control and disarmament are losing traction amid the current focus on deterrence. The issue of proliferation is

coming to the forefront: Poland, South Korea and Japan are considering gaining access to nuclear weapons.

Collateral damage to multilateralism and democracy

Criticized from all sides, the UN system is powerless and obsolete. This time, the challenge comes 'from within', from the country which had been most important in setting up the postwar international institutions and had supported them throughout the decades as a hegemon. On January 15, 2025, during his hearing before the U.S. Senate, Secretary of State Marco Rubio was clear: "The post-war global order is not just obsolete; it is now a weapon being used against us."

Across the world, liberal democracy is on the defensive in the face of what Grzegorz Ekiert and Noah Dasanaike, in the Journal of Democracy, call the "dictatorial drift." According to the V-Dem Institute, based at the University of Gothenburg, autocracies outnumber democracies for the first time in 20 years. After decades of weakening borders, or even denying them, the rudder is suddenly reversed: "People want to see borders" (D. Trump). Globalisation as we have come to know it is over.

And the loser is... Europe!

Europe is the big loser in this new configuration. Because of its values, its institutions and its way of life, Europe is viewed as a common enemy by autocrats, starting with Donald Trump and his vice-president. "It is a common fault not to anticipate storms when the sea is calm", Machiavelli said: our societies have been completely unprepared psychologically for the events we are experiencing today. Over the course of just a few days in February 2025, two of the worst European fears were confirmed. First, the Trump administration is pushing ahead with its idea

of a U.S.-Russia deal to end the war in Ukraine. Second, all the signs are that Washington plans to leave Europe out of any negotiations and to its own devices when it comes to post-cease-fire security arrangements. "Europe's era is over", former Russian President and Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev, triumphantly said early 2025; "It is weak, ugly and useless."

A garden in the jungle, as High-Representative for foreign affairs Josep Borrell coined it, the EU strives to "speak the language of power" and hastily and massively boosts its defence spending. But the EU is not a military power and the massive surge in capabilities announced in the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 (March 2025) is quite a change in its DNA.

What can we do?

Our democracies lost the peace after 1989; they cannot lose the war to authoritarian empires. In the present circumstances, weakness, whether perceived or real, is a risk for our societies. "Les tyrans ne sont grands que parce que nous sommes à genoux devant eux" ("Tyrants are great only because we are on our knees", Alexis de Tocqueville).

The priority is to restore our ability to guarantee our security, which we have long neglected. Let us take Dmitry Sergeyevich Peskov, Vladimir Putin's spokesperson, at his word: romanticism is over, we must be pragmatic. We need to have a global vision, and perhaps a more strategic one, to grasp the complexity of this environment. We need to be ready in all areas of power: diplomatic, military, economic, cultural, educational, sporting, etc. We must identify our dependencies and overcome them. In Europe particularly, we need to think about the

uniqueness of our identity, our institutions, and showcase it. This will not go without sacrifices; there will be a price to our values. However, in this multipolar world, we can find possible mediators and allies, including within the so-called 'Global South'.

We must also say no to vassalization and blackmail. We must point the finger at the unacceptable, first and foremost at violations of state sovereignty and territorial integrity and other egregious breaches of the UN Charter. Allowing the United States to move its borders against the will of neighboring countries would be contrary to the principles formulated as early as 1941 by Churchill and Roosevelt in the Atlantic Charter, on which the post-war multilateral order was built. It would validate predatory behavior such as that of Russia toward Ukraine.

War and coercion are never inevitable. As poet Friedrich Hölderlin said: "where the danger lies, also grows the saving power."



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