

# The West and Russia

## Western Europe and European Security: Rational actions and obvious mistakes<sup>1</sup>

*This article and the following two articles form a thought-provoking conversation on the state of East-West relations between two distinguished practitioners of international relations. Dr Erik Holm from Denmark is a former Principal Adviser to the European Commission. Godert de Vos van Steenwijk was Dutch Ambassador to Moscow from 1993 to 1999. The starting point is an article by Dr Holm to which Ambassador de Vos van Steenwijk reacts. Dr Holm takes up the gauntlet in a further exploration of some of the issues raised. Board of editors.*<sup>2</sup>

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At times one can get the impression that European politicians are longing to return to the Cold War, to the time when the world was so simple, the enemy was apparently easy to define, and the American umbrella covered all of us, at Bornholm and in Berlin as well. What seems to have been forgotten is that the European Project, which has now been named the European Union, began after the Second World War as a project of security policy, initiated by the USA through the Marshall Plan and the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation, the OEEC, and followed up by France through the Schuman Plan and the European Coal and Steel Community, the ECSC. Therefore, when we today take a position on the challenges in security policy after the termination of the Cold War in 1989 and the terrorist attacks in Europe after September 2001, it can be instructive to recall the situation and the developments in 1946-48.

At that time people had definitely not recovered from the shell-shock of the War. Despite the fact that the adversary had literally been crushed in political as well as in economical terms, Germany was still seen as the enemy. Although Churchill found that an Iron Curtain had come down in Europe, he described in the same breath the Germans as Teutons and Germanic hordes that had harried Europe. The Western Allies had plans and proposals for Germany to be de-industrialized and laid out as agricultural pasture. Some thought that it should be cut up into small states as was the case before Bismarck. In any case, humiliated it should be, so that it lost the ability to recover and rise again as a European Power. Great Britain and France concluded the so-called Dunkirk Treaty committing them to mutual support in case of future German aggression — a commitment which shortly afterwards was extended to also include the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a slightly edited translation of an article in the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, 25 February 2008. The article is reprinted with permission from *Politiken*.

<sup>2</sup> The articles were edited by Rob Zaagman, former editor of *Security and Human Rights*.

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Benelux countries in the West European Union. Stalin appropriated Eastern Europe, convinced that he had the right to do so because it was the Russians who had won the War in Europe much more than the Western powers — it had cost them millions of casualties to advance from Stalingrad to Berlin, compared to a few hundred thousand lives lost by the Western Allies going from Normandy to the Elbe. He expected that capitalist Western Europe would collapse due to inner strain, while Churchill held on to the idea of a ‘special relationship’ between the USA and Great Britain, something which far from all Americans were aware of.

### **Rational actions**

The American Secretary of State George Marshall took part in a fruitless conference in Moscow in April 1947 and on his way back he spent some days in Germany where he saw with his own eyes the devastation and misery which reigned here. Upon his return to Washington he immediately summoned the State Department's best expert on the Soviet Union, George Kennan, and asked him without delay and ‘avoiding trivia’ to prepare a programme for tackling the problems of regeneration in Europe. Less than three weeks later Marshall had the result, and already on June 4 he could present his plan in a speech at Harvard. The Europeans reacted positively and negotiations began soon afterwards.

With his solid knowledge of the Soviet Union and the Communists, Kennan was convinced that there was no immediate danger of a massive military advance against Western Europe from the East. First of all, the Soviet Union and its military forces were exhausted after ‘the Great Patriotic War’ and, secondly, it was not the Communist strategy to make a bid for world dominance through open warfare. Stalin was convinced that Communism would win according to the logics of Marxism which promised the inner collapse of Capitalism, and this process could best be promoted by the popular appeal and subversive activities of the Communist parties in the liberal democracies.

Considering the broad support that the Communist parties had immediately after the war, particularly in Italy and France, this was not unlikely. The narrow circle of far-sighted Americans around Marshall and Kennan were therefore convinced that it was necessary to get the European economy moving quickly with the help of massive American aid. The threat that emanated from the Soviet Union and international Communism had to be met by a policy which repelled the danger by way of economic regeneration, not least the economic regeneration of Germany. When economic growth had gained force, the basis for Communism in Western Europe would disappear, while the Communist system in the East would be contained and would sooner or later implode due to its own weakness.

The Marshall Plan was an offer to all the European countries, but already during the early negotiations Stalin prevented the East Europeans from receiving the aid under the Plan. However, on February 25, 1948, before the

US Congress had passed the law, a coup took place in Prague where the Communists, supported by Moscow, seized power from the democratically elected government. This coup resulted in shock waves in the West which can today be compared with the effect of 9/11 in 2001. The reaction was an appeal from the West Europeans to the USA to establish a common defence alliance, which led to the creation of the Atlantic Treaty in 1949.

It is crucially important to underline that Kennan's 'doctrine' on containment was not a matter of enclosing, by military means, a military threat from the East. He was concerned first and foremost with creating a political bulwark against a political threat. It was therefore an enormous disappointment to him to see how the reaction to the Prague coup was a military arms build-up, later strongly increased by the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 which led to an absurd arms race that in the following decades brought the whole world to the brink of a global catastrophe, if not complete extinction.

It is an open question what and how much can be learned from history. It is impossible to know how it would have developed if other decisions or actions had been taken in certain crucial situations. But viewed with hindsight it is nevertheless possible to distinguish between rational actions and obvious mistakes, and on that basis it is possible to draw a lesson than can be helpful for actual decisions that can be decisive for coming developments.

### **Avoiding obvious mistakes**

Looking back sixty years there are two issues, first a rational action and second an obvious mistake, that can be discerned as lessons for the present situations in security policy in Europe. First, how a beaten enemy should be treated and, second, how we should relate to the new threat. Both issues are important if we are to win peace after war.

Let us deal with the last issue first: the new threat. It does not consist, as is often maintained, of climate change, globalisation, terror, collapsed states or regional wars. These issues do not constitute a security threat to Europe as a political system. Everyone acknowledges that an attack on Europe on a large scale is quite unlikely, whether it is a question of Iran or the rest of the former frightening enemy, the Soviet Union. Major wars such as those in the twentieth century will hardly take place anymore.

The new threat facing Europe is actually of the same character as the threat that George Kennan pointed out in 1947, namely a politico-ideological threat. It is a threat which, moreover, is of even greater force than the Communist threat was, because it is based on religion. It is the threat of Islamic fundamentalism; but note, not of Muslim civilisation. It has a political character and can therefore not be met by military defence, let alone military attack. It must be met by a political bulwark, a political project which is able to contain it. The 'Europe' of today is such a political project, but whether it will be possible to pursue a decisive policy of containment is far from certain. For the time being we have only seen weak and wavering signals from the European

leaders. However, listening to the best experts on Islam who study the history and the development of modern Muslim civilisation, and pursuing the line of thought of George Kennan, it seems highly likely that the theocratic-totalitarian forces operating in the Muslim world will, in the long run, suffer defeat within their own political systems, just as the totalitarian Communist systems collapsed due to the weight of internal inconsistencies.

The great majority of people in the Middle East wish nothing more than to live within a liberal politico-economic system as in Europe, quite like the people in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. For that very reason many of them seek refuge in Europe. And we can be sure of one thing, this drive towards Europe will continue and intensify in the future. Walls and barbed wire cannot keep them out. Most likely, by far the largest part of these immigrants, although they may be quite conscious of being Muslims, have no or only slight contacts with fundamentalistic-political Islam, let alone any sympathy for such a system. There were also only very few socialists in Western Europe who in 1948 had sympathy for Stalinistic Communism. However, if we in Europe are not able to integrate them into our political culture, but instead repudiate and possibly turn hostile towards them and their religious position, some of them can fall victims to fundamentalist ideology, just like some of the far left in the West during the Cold War. In that way we shall ourselves create terrorists among us. If we are not able to hold this first field due to weakness in our own secular-liberal culture, but instead join the 'war on terror', then we start a self-increasing spiral of military arms build-up and possibly direct attacks on societies in the Muslim world, thereby making these people our enemies.

Apart from including the Muslim immigrants in our socio-liberal economic culture, the strategy behind an up-to-date policy of containment for Europe must also be to encourage and strengthen the "being part of Europe" forces, which exist in our neighbouring countries. This can be illustrated most clearly by relations with Turkey where we in Europe have difficulties in sending a clear signal as to whether or not we aim to include the country in the European project. By failing to send a clearly positive signal to Turkey, we shall strengthen the fundamentalistic-political forces not just in Turkey, but also in Iran and other countries in the region. The threat to Europe will increase.

### **Winning peace**

The second important lesson from 1948 is the rational way in which the Western allies — with some delay — dealt with the beaten enemy, Germany. They actively decided to undertake a political regeneration of the country instead of humiliating it, believing that they could destroy its national identity. But European policy towards Russia since 1991 has been characterized by attempts to humiliate the country and to eradicate any idea that it could again become a big power in European politics. One issue was that no one in the West in the early 1990s neither could nor would form a conception of how

Eastern Europe, and Russia even less, could be assisted in regenerating its economy. All of that part of Europe descended into an economic abyss which was even deeper than the big crisis in the early 1930s. Then, depression, mass unemployment and poverty had serious consequences for the weak democratic systems. There are good reasons to believe that the feeble democratic forces in the East were weakened to a similar degree due to neglect by the West.

Worse, however, was that Europe's reaction to this weakening in the mid-1990s was a security policy, headed by the USA, which led to a speedy enlargement of NATO in 1999-2004 with ten countries all having been part of Russia's 'near abroad'. It is, of course, understandable that these countries in light of their bitter historical experience, not least in the Balticum, were eager to accept this offer of security, particularly after the European Union had proved to be unable to pursue any kind of security policy. But there seems to have been no other obvious reason for this enlargement than to humiliate the Russians and to demonstrate that they should not again dream about becoming a European power. Nor did the reaction fail to appear, most clearly at a conference in Munich last year where President Putin sharply criticised the USA, later followed up by accusations against the West for starting an arms race when planning to install a missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. The Western answer has been that it is Russia that pursues a policy of confrontation by acting only according to its own interests. As if anything else could be expected from a sovereign country.

At the same time Putin is being accused of suppressing the development of a democratic culture in Russia and of not showing respect for human rights. Considering Russia's long history and immediate past one ought rather to be relieved that he has managed to create relatively stable conditions and a sizeable degree of freedom in this enormous and complex country.

Putin is also being accused of taking advantage of his country's large resources of energy in a confrontation of power politics in Europe, a matter that the EU is quite reluctant to address. However, thinking back to the situation in Europe in 1948-50 and recalling the motives behind the proposal by Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet to create a European Coal and Steel Community, one might get the impression that the EU and Russia have a common interest in establishing a similar technocratic project of cooperation in the field of energy and commerce. But such an idea seems to be utterly naive in the present discourse of security policy. The fact that the Russians have an equally strong interest as the EU in containing the threat from Islamic-totalitarian fundamentalism, which has favourable conditions for growth in Central Asia and the Caucasus, is a further reason for considering a strategy for a European security policy compatible with the challenges that Europe faces in the twenty-first century. Instead, old dogmatic enemy images modelled on the historical situation a few centuries or just a few decades ago are cultivated. Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes. But is it not possible at least to learn from its rational actions?