

The false promise of continental concert: Russia, the West and the necessary balance of power

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Hans Morgenthau felt compelled to refer to Winston Churchill in the opening to his assessment of what the United States should do at the point—in 1951—when it stood on the brink of an enduring conflict with the Soviet Union. ‘There is no worse mistake in public leadership than to hold out false hopes soon to be swept away,’ the British statesman was quoted as saying, after which Morgenthau went in search of the intellectual strength and political will that a successful balance of power policy necessitates.¹

Six decades on, false hope and mistaken leadership are again a main concern. While war in Ukraine is raging, the hope for concerted power in Europe remains vibrant. This hope and indeed desire for concert is mainly western in origin and historically loaded. It draws on the early nineteenth-century concert that for decades conferred legitimacy on political leaders and ensured geopolitical stability, and it is connected to the policy of continental partnership established through the 1990s, culminating in the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act. To repudiate such partnership would be dramatic; to hope for its continuation is human. A case in point is the painstaking search for ways of breathing life into the stillborn Minsk ceasefire agreement of September 2014.

The situation calls for a renewed enquiry into the conditions for a successful balance of power policy. The balance should concern Russia on the one hand and the western concert of nations on the other. This western concert is 60 years old, institutionalized in both NATO and the EU, and serves to coordinate western power for the purpose of Euro-Atlantic governance. Its achievement in tying the United States and Canada to Europe’s security order and embedding Germany in a collective defence framework is indisputable. Its challenge of accommodating Russia is undeniable, though, and in fact increasing along with the hope that continental concert can defuse the Ukraine crisis. A continental concert cannot coexist with a western concert: one or the other must have primacy. NATO is more important than the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) in Europe because it has primacy.

* For constructive criticism and comments the author is grateful to John J. Mearsheimer, Carsten Søndergaard, Andrew Dorman, an anonymous reviewer and the engaged public at the ‘Future of NATO’ panel at the International Studies Association convention in New Orleans, February 2015. The title of this article draws on John J. Mearsheimer, ‘The false promise of international institutions’, *International Security* 19: 3, 1994–5, pp. 5–49.

¹ Hans Morgenthau, *In defense of the national interest* (New York: Knopf, 1951).

The political desire to have it both ways, to ignore or paper over issues of primacy, is both striking and dangerous. Perhaps the desire emerges from the globalized and connected decision-making arena of our time which, as Henry Kissinger writes, is destructive of ‘personalities with the strength to take lonely decisions’.² Perhaps this deficit is reinforced by the toxic blame game related to Ukraine: who lost Kiev; who lost Russia; who, indeed, lost control? What should concern us more is the potential for major conflagration, which was also the concern of Morgenthau six decades ago. We can mismanage any number of political, military and moral issues, Morgenthau argued, but if we mismanage all of them and allow each issue to reach a revolutionary state, major conflagration will inevitably follow.³

This article follows in Morgenthau’s footsteps and traces the revolutionary potential of political, military and moral issues in Europe’s security order in an effort to help delineate preconditions for a successful balance of power policy. It is not the first such effort: John J. Mearsheimer has notably advocated a restoration of Europe’s balance of power through the creation of a Ukrainian buffer zone.⁴ However, the most pressing need, as this article will argue, is not to rethink the eastern borderland but to rescue the western concert. In particular, the Ukraine crisis demonstrates that a solid Euro-Atlantic concert capable of anchoring Germany in western institutions should never be taken for granted but in fact should be a primary political concern.⁵ The article makes this argument in an assessment of political, military and moral trends.

Political revolution: contested restoration

The idea of post-Cold War concerted power was enshrined in the Charter of Paris for a New Europe of November 1990. In this document, European and North American states of the CSCE/OSCE area—Cold War adversaries—professed a desire to build a Europe liberated from its past.⁶ The future belonged to democratic and human rights values; a new era of unity had apparently dawned. However, unity depended on the ‘restoration’ of cordial relations, and restoration was and continues to be essentially contested—defining the heart of the matter when it comes to continental order.

One of the Charter signatories, Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—a state and a presidency that would cease little

² Henry Kissinger, *World order* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), pp. 352–3.

³ Morgenthau, *In defense of the national interest*, p. 40.

⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, ‘Why the Ukraine crisis is the West’s fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin’, *Foreign Affairs* 93: 5, Sept.–Oct. 2014, pp. 77–89. Stephen F. Larrabee foresaw this return of geopolitics in ‘Russia, Ukraine, and central Europe: the return of geopolitics’, *Journal of International Affairs* 63: 2, Spring–Summer 2010, pp. 33–52.

⁵ As reflected in the recent debate between Hans Kundnani and Elizabeth Pond: Hans Kundnani, ‘Leaving the West behind’, *Foreign Affairs* 94: 1, Jan.–Feb. 2015, pp. 108–16; Elizabeth Pond, ‘Germany’s real role in the Ukraine crisis’, *Foreign Affairs* 94: 2, March 2015, pp. 173–6; Hans Kundnani, ‘Kundnani replies’, *Foreign Affairs* 94: 2, March 2015, pp. 176–7.

⁶ Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), Charter of Paris for a New Europe, 19–21 Nov. 1990, <http://www.osce.org/mc/39516?download=true>, accessed 8 April 2015.

over a year after the signing of the Charter—is frustrated when looking back to this moment of creation. Unity did not prevail, Gorbachev asserts, because the United States opted not for peace but for ‘global empire’ and the ‘surrounding’ of Russia, which would be better off had the USSR remained intact. This echoes Russian President Putin’s 2005 argument that ‘the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster’ that placed ‘tens of millions’ of compatriots outside Russian territory and infected Russia itself with ‘the epidemic of disintegration’.⁷

The candour of these leaders illustrates all the ambiguity of ‘restoration’ in post-Cold War Europe: did it concern the USSR/Russia or rather the European system? To most western countries it implied the former, and they could point to historical precedents in so far as restoration had meant the reform of Germany and Japan following the Second World War, and also the restoration of France following its flirtation with imperial nationalism between 1789 and 1815. In contrast, to Gorbachev and the Soviet elite, restoration was systemic in character. It implied concerted power, irrespective of the underlying erosion of the balance of power that accompanied the collapse of the USSR and the corruption of communist thought. By ignoring this division, the Paris Charter became a ‘paper agreement’ as opposed to an agreement ‘which register[ed] the existing facts’.⁸ It nourished the political revolution to come—a divide of the continent.

Restoration had a different and distinctively clear meaning in early nineteenth-century Europe, when it applied to France, the instigator of geopolitical havoc. Whatever else happened in Europe’s diplomacy, it emerged from this fear of revolutionary France and the damage it could cause. Europe’s ‘concert’—which did emerge—was explicitly built on the balance of power generated in the first instance by fear. The Treaty of Chaumont, signed in March 1814, was the first of the post-Napoleonic treaties and it bound the adversaries of France (Britain, Austria, Russia and Prussia) to remain in alliance for another 20 years to maintain the status quo they had fought so hard to defend. Next came the settlement of the frontiers of France, which were defined by two Treaties of Paris—in May 1814 and November 1815, respectively—and were drawn with the intent of restoring France within the status quo ante.⁹ In short, the victorious powers did not see concert as an outcome of systemic reform but first and foremost as an outcome of the reform of the revolutionary power, France.

Europe’s moment of change in 1990 skipped this critical first step and instead fast-forwarded to the collective peace—the Paris Charter of November 1990, analogous to the Treaty of Vienna of June 1815. At Vienna in 1815 the congress system was laid down, which meant a combination of safeguards against French

⁷ Mathias Shepp and Britta Sandberg, ‘Gorbachev interview: “I am truly and deeply concerned”’, *Spiegel Online*, 16 Jan. 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/gorbachev-warns-of-decline-in-russian-western-ties-over-ukraine-a-1012992.html>; Vladimir Putin, ‘Annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation’, 25 April 2005, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml (both accessed 8 April 2015).

⁸ Morgenthau, *In defense of the national interest*, p. 147.

⁹ The second Paris treaty was harsher on France as punishment for Napoleon’s short-lived return to power in 1815.

aggression, consensus on the legitimacy of monarchical rule and a commitment to balance of power stability, which at the time implied managed territorial change. The Paris Charter of 1990 is strong only on the latter two dimensions—legitimacy (liberal values) and power stability (collective disarmament)—and largely silent on the first dimension (potential Soviet/Russian aggression). This omission is attributable to multiple causes—including the desire not to derail, and indeed to further, Soviet reforms under way since the mid-1980s, the belief that the USSR/Russia could truly transform itself, the political preoccupation with wider geopolitical changes (such as Germany's unification and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait), and the sheer difficulty of engineering western unity at a moment of upheaval. None of these issues were easily managed; combined, they caused 1990 to differ in a fundamental way from 1815.

Instead of addressing Russia, Europe's constitutional diplomacy in early 1990 turned to Germany and NATO. Germany's future relationship with NATO was of monumental importance for Europe's security order, and to achieve Germany's unification inside a NATO framework western (and particularly US) leaders on the one hand prodded German leaders to offer the Soviet leadership financial carrots and on the other prepared NATO for a political 'transformation' that promised to ease Soviet pain at watching the alliance continue. NATO 'structures' would not extend to the territory of what once was East Germany, they promised. Moreover, NATO would 'build new partnerships with all the nations of Europe', strengthen Europe's commitment to non-aggression and friendship, revamp its military strategy (moving from flexible nuclear options to a nuclear strategy of 'last resort') and strengthen conventional arms reduction and control.¹⁰

In retrospect, the message put out by the NATO allies was ambiguous: were they telling the USSR/Russia that they were providing a hospitable framework for reform envisaged as taking place mainly in the USSR/Russia, or inversely that they were reforming NATO to offer the USSR/Russia space and influence? Did restoration refer to the USSR/Russia or the continental order? A set of Chaumont and Paris treaties would have clarified the issue. Instead the ambiguity lived on, infected the question of NATO enlargement and got built into the NATO–Russia Founding Act of 1997.

The Founding Act applies the concept of 'transformation' to both NATO and Russia: 'NATO has undertaken a historic transformation—a process that will continue' while 'Russia is continuing the building of a democratic society and the realization of its political and economic transformation'.¹¹ The two parties signed the Founding Act in May 1997, in part in preparation for NATO's July 1997 invitation to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary to be part of NATO's first eastward enlargement (not counting German unification).¹² The compatibility

¹⁰ NATO, 'Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance', 5 July 1990, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23693.htm, accessed 8 April 2015.

¹¹ NATO and Russian Federation, 'Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation', 27 May 1997, http://www.nato.int/cps/tr/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm, paragraph 4.

¹² Specifically, the three countries were invited to begin accession talks following their preceding request for membership.

of NATO–Russia partnership and NATO enlargement was based on a shared commitment to ‘a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security’.¹³ The military foundation for this vision is spelled out in some detail in the Founding Act, especially in relation to NATO’s collective defence forces and nuclear weapons. In particular:

- NATO does not foresee any geographical extension of its permanent military structures;¹⁴
- nor does it foresee any need to deploy nuclear weapons eastwards.¹⁵

NATO was, in effect, arguing that the potential tension between partnership and enlargement did not necessitate a military policy; that the potential for continental transformation was strong enough to limit the extent of military engagement. In 2014–15 things have changed, and NATO is designing a military policy that aims to be an effective deterrent but is also compatible with the boundaries set by the 1997 Founding Act. We shall address this challenge shortly. The larger point is that the military policy is a result of an unresolved tension with respect to post-1989 ‘restoration’ in Europe. A military policy is in place, given current circumstances, but its purpose must be to advance a clarification of the continent’s political order.

Military revolution: the geopolitics of hybrid warfare

In mid-March 2014 Russia annexed Crimea, after which the focus of Ukraine’s troubles shifted to the eastern portion of the country, particularly the urban centres of Donetsk and Luhansk and also the coastal city of Mariupol that overlooks the Sea of Azov. To date, refugee numbers total more than a million; at least 6,000 people have been killed, according to the UN; and recurrent fighting and mobilization in the region nullify the Minsk ceasefire agreement.¹⁶

The unfolding of this war matches the ‘hybrid war’ logic that has preoccupied analysts of war for a decade or so. The main idea is that the distinction between symmetrical/regular and asymmetrical/irregular war is being overtaken by ‘a fusion of war forms’ according to which ‘all forms of war and tactics’ will be employed and coordinated within the main battle space to achieve synergistic effects.¹⁷ Hezbollah was among the first to practise this new art of hybrid warfare;

¹³ NATO, ‘Madrid Declaration on Euro-Atlantic Security and Cooperation’, para. 11, <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1997/p97-081e.htm>, accessed 8 April 2015.

¹⁴ ‘NATO reiterates that in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces’, para. 12, section IV.

¹⁵ ‘The member States of NATO reiterate that they have no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO’s nuclear posture or nuclear policy—and do not foresee any future need to do so’, para. 2, section IV.

¹⁶ United Nations Office in Geneva, ‘Death toll in eastern Ukraine crosses 6,000, High Commissioner Zeid says’, 2 March 2015, [http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/\(httpNewsByYear_en\)/CF4E39797129A0ECC1257DFC00343556?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/(httpNewsByYear_en)/CF4E39797129A0ECC1257DFC00343556?OpenDocument), accessed 8 April 2015.

¹⁷ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st century: the rise of hybrid wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Nov. 2007), pp. 7–8.

Russia is now following suit. According to Heidi Reisinger and Aleksandr Golts, Russia's hybrid war involves an impressive range of capacities.¹⁸

First, it involves a façade of legality which Russia has systematically cultivated and exploited—even if it is essentially contested internationally. Its Federal Council has authorized the President's use of force; Crimea's wish for secession and attachment to Russia was organized by referendum; and the accession of Crimea to Russia happened by the signing of a treaty on 18 March 2014. It also involves snap military inspections and military exercises defined in such a way that they deny the predictability and foreign observation otherwise stipulated in the OSCE Vienna Document. Such a snap exercise prepared the takeover of Crimea, and others have followed, serving to maintain a culture and organization of mobilization—of up to 65,000 troops—as well as a foreign policy of surprise and intimidation.

The capacity then also involves deniable force in the shape of Russian special forces—Spetsnaz—dressed in unmarked uniforms. Their incognito appearance in Crimea ahead of annexation allowed President Putin to deny Russia's formal involvement. No one was fooled, but the nature of the intervention complicated matters. Moreover, Russia has backed local militias in eastern Ukraine fighting the Ukrainian central government, offering significant logistical support (including the BUK missile launcher that most likely shot down Malaysian Air MH17 in July 2014) and Russian force structures to train, advise, equip and also to command and support militias in the field. Finally, Russia has significantly ramped up its public diplomacy, especially with its international RT television channel but also with the recent organization of a global network of news bureaux running under the name of Sputnik.

This hybrid war capacity runs in the veins of limited wars where the key question is the ability to manipulate crisis escalation. Russia has not mastered this to perfection, as Lawrence Freedman notes: its command and control organization is complex, and the intricacy of mastering the local situation in eastern Ukraine threatens to undermine Russia's (alleged) strategic goal of preventing Ukraine's westward turn.¹⁹

Western policy has likewise sought to master crisis escalation and deny Russia escalation dominance. On the one hand, western countries have sought to inflict pain via multiple layers of sanctions targeting the Putin leadership group, Russia's financial institutions, and its oil and gas exploration industry. Moreover, acting through NATO, they have developed a Readiness Action Plan (RAP) that strengthens the immediate reaction forces of the alliance and thus counters Russia's capacity for surprise. On the other hand, they offer partnership through de-escalation. Sanctions can be lifted if diplomacy improves, and NATO's RAP is explicitly developed in the context of the Founding Act of 1997, which means NATO partnership is still on offer.²⁰

¹⁸ Heidi Reisinger and Aleksandr Golts, 'Russia's hybrid warfare: waging war below the radar of traditional collective defence', NDC Research Paper no. 105 (Brussels: NATO Defense College, Nov. 2014).

¹⁹ Lawrence Freedman, 'Ukraine and the art of limited war', *Survival* 56: 6, 2014, pp. 7–38.

²⁰ NATO will rotate forces for training in and out of the region, bolster the support infrastructure, and encourage individual allies to enhance their national or multinational force structures in support of the collective

While the challenge of escalation dominance is widely acknowledged, the broader question concerns the relationship between military strategy (hybrid war) and diplomacy. Hybrid war in Ukraine has a flavour of grand confrontation strongly reminiscent of the Cold War, but its very hybrid nature—its fluidity and therefore unpredictability—denies it the stability that the Cold War strategic arms race acquired. We saw the same phenomenon at certain points of the Cold War: when military strategy is fluid and changing, it will tend to capture diplomacy rather than being directed by it. Militarized diplomacy is a poor guide to balance of power policy, and its prospect provoked Morgenthau to put pen to paper and advise a more profound engagement with the concept of national interest.

We should similarly put hybrid war in context. It is one of two force options that Russia can employ, and both are in fact options of weakness. Russia has neither the innovative society nor the muscle to match the ‘revolution in military affairs’ that western (mainly US) forces have pursued since the mid-1990s. Instead, it relies on ‘old’ technologies—irregular warfare on the one hand and nuclear forces on the other. These ‘old’ capacities should not be treated lightly: clearly, Russia’s skill in innovating irregular warfare is considerable, and its nuclear capacity remains overwhelming and a potent tool of strategic policy. Russia’s new security doctrine of December 2014 hardens the view of NATO as a threat, just as its nuclear modernization might signal a lowering of the threshold for the use of nuclear force.²¹ The political danger for the West lies in a narrow focus on these Russian capacities and what they can do along Russia’s borders.

There are broader issues of continental order to consider—in particular, the opportunities that dynamic balance of power politics can offer Russia. Such dynamism could erode the purpose of power as anchored in NATO and the EU, and establish a new reality of power, namely that power must be flexibly aligned. Ultimately, it is a question of Germany’s role in Europe’s order. Germany’s western allies are keen that Germany should continue in the political tradition established in 1945, that of *Westbindung*, which gives NATO and the EU alike a durable continental presence. In contrast, Russia is tempting Germany to return to the role as the *Mitteeuropäische* balancer of East and West—a tradition that goes back to Germany’s foundation as a nation-state in 1870, famously associated with the great chancellor Otto von Bismarck.

These grand options hover on the horizon of the Ukraine crisis, notably as the United States and Germany begin to divide on the big issues—specifically with regard to the question of arming Ukraine and more broadly with regard to

policy; however, neither ‘major combat forces’ nor nuclear weapons will be moved permanently eastwards: NATO, ‘Wales Summit Declaration’, 5 Sept. 2014, paras 5–12, http://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm; ‘NATO’s readiness action plan’, Fact Sheet, Dec. 2014; also Jan Techau, ‘A battle plan for NATO’s new secretary general’, Carnegie Europe, 30 Sept. 2014, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=56796> (both accessed 15 April 2015).

²¹ Agence France-Presse, ‘New Russian defense doctrine labels NATO as main threat’, *Defense News*, 29 Dec. 2014; Adrian Croft, ‘Insight: Russia’s nuclear strategy raises concerns in NATO’, Reuters, 4 Feb. 2015. In a much noted speech in 2007 at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, President Putin unequivocally criticized the US ‘unipolar’ system as ‘illegitimate’ and ‘unacceptable’, just as NATO’s enlargement was described as a ‘serious provocation’: http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml, accessed 8 April 2015.

Ukraine's prospect of NATO membership. Germany, along with France, is staking a middle ground and leading negotiations with Russia; the mood in the United States is for defending Ukraine and its foreign policy freedom (in December 2014 the Ukrainian parliament repealed a law proscribing NATO membership). These western moves 'may or may not have been coordinated', as the *New York Times* noted, but the risk of a 'split' alliance is real.²²

At this point it is instructive to recall how Germany's original tradition of flexible diplomacy came about as a result of a frustrated effort to achieve concert, and how the turn to flexibility proved disastrous. Chancellor Bismarck was forced into a hardened version of *realpolitik* because of the deep enmity between Germany's two allies—Russia and Austria-Hungary—that dated back to the Crimean War of 1853–6. He attempted to concert power in 1878—by settling Balkan spheres of influence—but failed: neither ally would be drawn into a structure of legitimacy.²³ Flexible *realpolitik* was then the only option left. It resulted not in the harmony of 'invisible hand' coordination, but the frozen alliances and unrestrained contestation of national legitimacy that led to the Great War of 1914.

In spite of Russian or other assurances that a *Mitteleuropäische* option would enable an all-European concert, the reality is that it would deny it. It would return Europe to an era where Germany's capacity for balancing slowly but surely is overwhelmed by geopolitical antagonisms. These antagonisms are already expressing themselves in the contest over 'restoration', as we have seen. Russia's enduring capacity for asymmetric intimidation is containable, but a political spinoff in terms of German frustration with western diplomacy and an awakening of the *Mitteleuropäische* tradition in German thought may not be.

Germany's institutional engagement in NATO and the EU gains its full geopolitical flavour from this situation. It is not a question of outright abandonment, as in Germany leaving NATO and the EU, which is virtually unimaginable. It is rather a question of Germany's willingness and capacity to invest in and sustain these institutions. In NATO Germany has taken a first step in the direction of investment by offering concrete support for the RAP.²⁴ However, it is the long-run sustained commitment to the eastern policy behind the RAP that matters, because Russia's military challenge is ultimately geopolitical. The next question is whether western allies, if they manage to cohere, can offer Russia a deal that would cause it to respect western institutions, or whether it is too late for that.

Moral revolution: Europe's contested legitimacies

If Europe's political and military trends are alike pointing in the direction of continental division and an underlying contest for German alignment, the remaining question is whether the contest can be contained and managed by way of diplomatic

²² Celestine Bohlen, 'A gamble on peace in Ukraine', *New York Times*, 9 Feb. 2015.

²³ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Knopf, 1994), pp. 146–57.

²⁴ Germany has signed up as an interim lead of NATO's new spearhead force and is also committed to serve as a framework nation in the longer run. See NATO, 'Statement by the NATO defence ministers on the Readiness Action Plan', press release 2015 027, 5 Feb. 2015.

agreement. This will be impossible if the continent experiences the ‘rise of political religions’ conflating political crusade and salvation.²⁵ In that case, a new Cold War fought between two hostile and incompatible systems would ensue. Though such ‘political religions’ are visibly present, a Cold War petrification of relations is not inevitable.

What is required is a renewed policy focus on the balance of power and principle—a type of ‘liberal power politics’ that charts the narrow path between liberal expansion divorced from power realities on the one hand and power retraction divorced from political purpose on the other. One would lead to continuous institutional enlargement, provoke Russia further and result in a Cold War; the other would see the West draw back in favour of a larger eastern buffer zone, cause a crisis of purpose in the West, and result in the flexible balance of power system that Russia seeks. To pursue ‘liberal power politics’ is to recognize the asymmetry of power, to draw a line, and to invite partnership on unequal terms.

Liberalism is the well-known political ‘religion’ of western states. It suggests that the spread of individual liberty and democratic governance will be of universal benefit, and it has infused purpose into the enlargement of both NATO and the EU. Its less well-known counterpart is Russia’s emerging ideology of ‘sovereign democracy’, which in broad strokes is shared by a number of authoritarian states resisting western intrusion, and which is built on executive power, populist mobilization and opposition to foreign influence. Russia’s version of this ideology was given coherent expression in 2005–2006 when ‘key members of Putin’s ideological special forces’ pulled various speeches by President Putin and his closest associates together in a single work on sovereignty.²⁶ More broadly, sovereign democracy has been a recurrent theme behind the efforts of Putin’s chief ideologue, Vladislav Surkov, to reconcile Putin’s rule and Russia’s history and to offer an alternative vision of political modernization.²⁷

This veneer of ideology does not in and of itself lead to Cold War. Any modernizing country is in need of an ideological *leitmotiv* that resonates with its history. In Russia, leaders have historically had a ‘short supply’ of coherent ideas that could mobilize the country in a modernizing direction, and President Putin, like his predecessors, has not been able to simply import western liberal prescriptions and put them to work.²⁸ Moreover, the ideology of sovereign democracy does contain an element of political pluralism, which falls short of the idealistic standard of Russia’s 1993 constitution but which came into play when Dmitry Medvedev, currently Putin’s prime minister, became Russian president from 2008 to 2012.

However, Russia’s ‘sovereign democracy’ has gone the way of ‘competitive authoritarianism’ more generally: to the extent that populist regimes have been

²⁵ Morgenthau, *In defense of the national interest*, pp. 62–3.

²⁶ Ivan Krastev, ‘Sovereign democracy, Russian-style’, *OpenDemocracy*, 16 Nov. 2006, https://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/sovereign_democracy_4104.jsp, accessed 8 April 2015.

²⁷ Andrey S. Makarychev, ‘Russia’s search for international identity through the sovereign identity concept’, *International Spectator* 43: 2, 2008, pp. 49–62; Masha Lipman, ‘Putin’s “sovereign democracy”’, *Washington Post*, 15 July 2006.

²⁸ Andrei Okara, ‘Sovereign democracy: a new Russian idea or a PR project?’, *Russia in Global Affairs* 5: 3, July–Sept. 2007, pp. 8–20.

able to resist western democratization policy, as Russia has, they have gravitated towards purer versions of authoritarianism.²⁹ In the end, Medvedev's short-lived presidency illustrated not a pluralist opening but the absolutist streak and elite cronyism of Putin's rule.³⁰ The sanctions imposed on Russia by western states are likely to draw the elite closer together. Western sanctions target the elite (including chief ideologue Surkov), and the elite's capacity to regenerate its economic power is, as a result of sanctions as well as declining oil prices, wholly dependent on the instruments of state power. It is possible, even likely, that Putin's political project never favoured 'competition' but only a version of 'authoritarianism' which dates back to the KGB security elites' frustrations with Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and which is alien to pluralist, liberal thinking. The restoration of Russian state power under Putin has thus benefited the old security elite—and especially those close to Putin—rather than the Russian state as such.³¹

Continental repercussions follow when a predatory elite, bereft of easy oil and gas revenues, is tempted to channel popular frustration into foreign affairs and play up the ideological confrontation between East and West. This drift towards ideological confrontation can be traced back to 2005–2007, when Putin's criticism of NATO became distinctively explicit, and it continues in the shade of the Ukrainian crisis in the growing affinity between Russia on the one hand and sovereignty or neo-nationalist parties in Hungary, France, Greece, the United Kingdom and other west European countries on the other. Most of these are fringe parties, but they are gaining momentum due to a crisis of governance and legitimacy within the EU—and they have ominously likened Crimea's 2014 'referendum' to their own anti-Union struggle.³²

We thus arrive at yet another point where Russian interests and Germany's role intersect, though this time in relation to the EU, where Germany is struggling to develop its political leadership and where some EU members hesitate to endorse it. Where NATO's RAP represents the security dimension of Germany's *Westbindung*, the EU's single currency represents its political-economic dimension. In particular, the eurozone crisis has exposed a vacuum of political union—or common political leadership—at the heart of the EU construction. The federalization of fiscal and economic policy is necessary but politically loaded. Two scenarios could cause the euro crisis to play into the hands of proponents of 'sovereign democracy':

- *German withdrawal*: Germany could lose faith in a system increasingly controlled by critics of traditional monetary policy—notably a southern bloc including France in alliance with the European Central Bank, emboldened by weak north European representation inside the euro (Britain, Denmark and Sweden

²⁹ Lucan Way and Steven Levitsky, *Competitive authoritarianism: hybrid regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁰ Ray Sontag, 'The end of sovereign democracy in Russia: what was it; why did it fail; what comes next and what should the United States think of this?', Center on Global Interests working paper, July 2013, <http://www.globalinterests.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/The-End-of-Sovereign-Democracy-in-Russia.pdf>, accessed 8 April 2015.

³¹ Karen Dawisha, *Putin's kleptocracy: who owns Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

³² Alina Polyakova, 'Strange bedfellows: Putin and Europe's far right', *World Affairs Journal*, Sept.–Oct. 2014, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/strange-bedfellows-putin-and-europe's-far-right>, accessed 8 April 2015.

are outside the eurozone). With Germany alienated, markets would drive the euro down and could cause the development of a split in economic governance between a northern bloc led by Germany and a southern bloc led by, perhaps, France. It is the least likely but most dramatic scenario—the monetary equivalent of flexible balance of power politics.

- *German insistence:* Germany might charge ahead in an effort to take control of euro politics, asking for structural reforms in the periphery in return for its central leadership. Germany's political leadership knows better than to charge abruptly ahead, but German domestic politics is not kind to the idea of Germany footing the bill for other countries' deficits. Abrupt euro leadership could thus become the least bad option for the German leadership. Its perverse effect would be to fan the flames of national resentment in hard-hit countries, such as Greece, which could turn the eurozone into a technocratic umbrella underneath which populist sovereign democracy could nourish itself.

In the search for ways to avert a continental crisis and Cold War the option of hope—that scenarios such as these will simply go away—has lost all appeal. It simply defies credibility that Russia's leadership does not mean serious business, and the challenge to Europe's geopolitical order is too stark to ignore. A better option than hope is to shape policy more explicitly to realities of power. It holds greater promise, though it is fraught with risks of its own.

There is above all the risk of pinning blame on the powerful, the West. George Kennan once characterized NATO expansion as 'the most fateful error of American policy in the post-cold war era'.³³ He is backed by Mary Elise Sarotte, whose detailed historical investigation of the high diplomacy of 1989–91 leads her to the conclusion that western policy was 'aggressive'. 'By design, Russia got bribed out and left on the periphery,' Sarotte writes, and 'we are still experiencing the consequences of this 1990 strategy today.'³⁴ Prominent analysts Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry have reached a similar conclusion. Western countries somehow forgot in the course of the 1990s that continental stability emerges from 'mutual vulnerability'—as in the doctrine of mutually assured destruction established all the way back in the 1970s and supposedly revived with the Paris Charter. Reverting to a policy of strength, western nations let their Russian policy 'atrophy' and left Russia out in the cold.³⁵ In short, if the West wanted to enlarge NATO, they should have invited Russia in.

Power is best managed with a dose of restraint, undeniably, but it does not necessarily follow that western policy is the root cause of the Ukraine crisis. As

³³ George F. Kennan, 'A fateful error', *New York Times*, 5 Feb. 1997.

³⁴ Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: the struggle to create post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 229.

³⁵ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'The unravelling of the Cold War settlement', *Survival* 51: 6, Dec. 2009–Jan. 2010, p. 51. See also Michael Mandelbaum, 'Preserving the peace: the case against NATO expansion', *Foreign Affairs* 74: 3, May–June 1995, pp. 9–13; John Lewis Gaddis, 'History, grand strategy, and NATO enlargement', *Survival* 40: 1, Spring 1998, pp. 145–51. In December 2014 a number of prominent Germans, including former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, publicly appealed for a European order based on the 1990 Paris Charter and thus the 'inclusion' of Russia: 'Wieder Krieg in Europa? Nicht in unserem Namen!', *Die Zeit*, 5 Dec. 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/2014-12/auf-ruf-russland-dialog>, accessed 8 April 2015.

we have seen, the issue of 'restoration' has never been adequately addressed and continues to hover as an ongoing source of revisionism. This goes for Russia as much as the West. There is simply too much uncertainty attached to the 'sources of Soviet conduct'—to borrow from Kennan's famous 1947 text—in the late 1980s and into the 1990s to render the easy faulting of the West credible. The Russian state that emerged in late December 1991 did not represent a clean slate: its legacy was Soviet, and its leadership was widely disappointed with the turn of events. Perhaps western diplomacy in 1989–90 rubbed up against their sensibilities, but the Russian predilection for a 'near abroad' zone of privileged influence was well established at this point and fed by the loss of communist lustre. The state security elite out of which Vladimir Putin emerged charted a new course for Russia once it gained the reins of power, but it was a course rooted in the history of the state, not an improvised response to 1990 diplomacy.³⁶

Nor does it follow that western states can agree to a durable policy of dispassionate restraint and, in fact, liberal denial. It may be that political leaders in the West will lose their appetite for supporting Ukraine and Georgia when costs rise—and liberalization in Ukraine will involve significant long-term costs and certainly be a risky business. Less certain is the capacity of political leaders to articulate and durably support a policy of liberal denial. Inevitably, liberal constituents—from human rights groups to trade associations—will push for foreign policy influence, and it simply defies credibility that all western leaders will be able to deny them influence all the time. The liberal impulse will make itself felt, therefore, and it will have an impact on the big institutions, NATO and the EU.

Finally, there is a wider geopolitical argument to take into consideration. A western decision to treat Ukraine as a buffer zone would unmistakably be a victory for Putin's Russia, considering the trajectory of the crisis over the past couple of years.³⁷ It will take some political imagination to feel confident that Russia—or other states opposed to western policy, for instance in Asia—will not feel emboldened by such a turn of events. In the hectic diplomacy of February 2015 to revive the Minsk ceasefire agreement, which took Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande to Moscow and then to Kiev for meetings with President Putin—the result of which is without a doubt a gain for Putin—this type of political imagination has been in short supply.³⁸ Reputation and resolve matter in foreign policy, and Russia has pushed the Ukrainian crisis to a point where the geopolitical consequences of climbing down—irrespective of what might have happened in 1989–90—are vast.

The alternative to abandonment of Ukraine and liberal denial is to articulate a different policy where—to paraphrase another classical power analyst, E. H.

³⁶ Dawisha, *Putin's kleptocracy*; Dmitri V. Trenin, *Post-imperium: a Eurasian story* (Washington DC: Carnegie Foundation, 2011); Robert Legvold, ed., *Russian foreign policy in the twenty-first century and the shadow of the past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

³⁷ This is the policy option favoured by Mearsheimer; see 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault'.

³⁸ On Putin's gain, see Ian Bond, 'Russia's war in Ukraine: is Minsk the end, or just the start?', Centre for European Reform Insight, 13 Feb. 2015, <http://www.cer.org.uk/insights/russias-war-ukraine-minsk-end-or-just-start>, accessed 8 April 2015; also Neil MacFarquhar, 'World leaders meet in Belarus to negotiate cease-fire in Ukraine', *New York Times*, 12 Feb. 2015.

Carr—‘utopia and reality’ combine differently to stabilize continental power.³⁹ This is a type of ‘liberal power policy’ that seeks to anchor western policy not in ‘pure realism’, which would not resonate with political reality and therefore would not last, but in a durable compromise between liberal values and power politics.

It must begin not with Russia but with Germany. Its purpose should be to ensure the continuation of the institutions that tie Germany to a western concert of power, namely NATO and the EU. German choices matter tremendously, and it is a geopolitical fact and challenge that Germany is a *Mitteleuropäische* country pursuing a policy of *Westbindung*. It is a tenuous balance, and Germany will by the sheer weight of geography be pulled to accommodate events to the east even while remaining anchored in the West. If Russia is pulling hard on the cord to the east, it must be up to Germany’s partners to adjust policies so that Germany’s balancing act remains possible within a western framework.

For the United States, Germany’s primary anchor, this means driving NATO strategy and military reform in a direction and at a pace that enable Germany to participate; it also means a responsibility not to break with Germany on Ukraine or to escalate matters to a point where the relationship falters—for instance, on the issue of arming Ukrainian forces. For France, Germany’s other strategic anchor, it means notably investment in the economic reforms that make a federalization of eurozone leadership possible, just as it means an unequivocal commitment on the part of the political leadership to Franco-German leadership. For Britain it means confronting its inner yearning for an outdated offshore balancing strategy that imperils its EU membership and threatens relations with Germany; Germany’s *Westbindung* is best served by both a strong NATO and a strong EU, and it is in Britain’s national interest to invest in both.

An explicit decision to permanently deny Ukraine membership of western institutions—which would involve a repudiation of the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 that offered Ukraine assurances with regard to its territorial integrity and political independence—would not seem compatible with this policy. Western states could and should desist from expressing their desire to reform Russian institutions, because this is both a dangerous policy and not central to the policy of continuing the western concert. However, outright denial in the case of Ukraine would cause a split in the western alliance for the reasons examined above. Denial is a recipe for turbulence, not stability, therefore. The better option is to exploit the long run—to hedge Ukraine’s westward opportunity on its capacity for domestic reform, which is sure to be a slow affair, and to seek agreement with Russia that Ukraine remains an unsettled issue: a diplomatic ceasefire of sorts.

Conclusion

Events in Ukraine constitute a crisis of proportions Europe has not experienced since the fall of the Berlin Wall. It has led to political soul-searching among those who feel that the crisis is the fault of the West, and it has mobilized a general desire

³⁹ E. H. Carr, *The twenty years’ crisis, 1919–1939* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 89.

for renewed consensus and therefore a diplomatic search for ways to reinvent the concert that once reigned on the continent. At moments like this it becomes an ethical obligation for intellectuals to engage in the tradition of political realism and speak truth to power.⁴⁰

The analysis presented in this article has emphasized that not only is concerted power in Europe unlikely, but its pursuit could be dangerous in so far as it could herald the type of unrestrained or flexible balance of power politics that presaged the great wars of the twentieth century. This paradoxical connection between the desire for concert and the likely unrestrained balance of power is rooted in the absence of a structure of legitimacy that restrains policy. Europe's nineteenth-century concert was explicitly anchored in a set of principles to which all major powers subscribed and which was made the object of a balance of power that enabled the concert. Its target was France, the revolutionary instigator; the control of France was both the object of the balance of power and the precondition for concert.

Europe today has neither object nor precondition. There is no balance of power designed to control Russia, and Russian reforms—its liberal 'restoration'—were never made a precondition for concert. Russia's will and capacity to challenge underlying western conceptions of 'restoration' have since increased. Russia intervened in Georgia in 2008 but went a step further in 2014 when it unlawfully annexed a portion of Ukraine. Russia's hybrid war capacity should command respect not merely as a military strategy but as a tool for exploiting underlying systemic differences on the meaning of 'restoration'. The centre of gravity of Russian policy is not Ukraine's Donbass region, but the western institutions that anchor Germany's *Westbindung* policy and extend eastwards.

The desire for concert under these circumstances is impregnated with the risk of upheaval. Unrestrained liberalism on the part of western states would be a provocation; inversely, a rollback policy that weakened Euro-Atlantic partnership would invite continuation of Russian revisionist policy. Policy, it seems, must be premised on two facts: that concerted power is a characteristic of the Euro-Atlantic zone that cannot easily be exported; and that East–West relations for the foreseeable future do not have the capacity to move beyond unconcerted balance of power politics.

The desire for concert, therefore, ultimately reflects either an aspiration to convert Russia or a willingness to abandon western liberalism. Neither will result in long-term stability. Henry Kissinger wrote in 1994 that Europe's order rested on a western policy designed to affect Russian calculations and strengthen the moral bond across the Atlantic.⁴¹ Some two decades on, that remains the case.

⁴⁰ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among nations* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), and *Truth and power* (New York: Praeger, 1970).

⁴¹ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, pp. 818–19.