

A New Cold War, But Hopefully Different

By Ferry Biedermann, Amsterdam

The chickens have come home to roost. The West's more than three decades of self-absorbed indulgence in unbridled greed and increasingly petty self-interest that brought us the likes of Brexit, have now left it powerless to face the threat of authoritarian regimes that seek to encroach on it and subvert it. Because whoever thinks that Ukraine will be the end of it is sorely mistaken and whoever thinks that Brexit and other divide-and-rule-based projects have nothing to do with our current weakness, is even more misguided.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine has made clear, for those who were still in doubt, that both Russia and China will not only have to be kept in check, they will need to be confronted. If we still consider some Western ways worth preserving, and this in itself is a contested question in many quarters, we'll have to mobilise on the scale of the Cold War to keep these two nationalist-authoritarian regimes at bay. Post-Cold War triumphalism saw the West shorn both of a unifying social and political purpose and of the economic and political prudence that helped rein back naked capitalism.

Granted, the 'West' has always been a vague concept and even at the best of times it has been deeply flawed both in the way it treats its own populations and in how it treats the rest of the world. But for those in any doubt under which system they'd prefer to live, I'd quote Timothy Snyder on the invasion of Ukraine: "Russian speakers in Ukraine are far more free than Russian speakers in Russia."

The biggest damage venal Western politicians and agitators have done over the last couple of decades has been to undermine the idea that there are real and deeply meaningful differences between the democratic model and 'successful' authoritarian regimes. Overtly anti-democratic behaviour especially from far-right and nationalist politicians both in the US and Europe has served to erase the distinction for many between the real choices we still have in the West and the mock-compliance of populations in Russia and China, the world's two largest ethno-nationalist empires. Some fellow travellers on the left have helped stoke the fires by indicting the whole Western system while turning a blind eye to the excesses of its alternatives.

What is needed now is a rapid new Western mobilisation, not a return to Cold War paranoia and extremes. Times have, at least in some ways, mercifully changed and nobody is waiting for a return to such golden oldies as shelters in our back yards and McCarthyism. Yet, a new military build-up in Europe seems inevitable. And this time it will have to be the Europeans themselves who take the lead. The US has become too unreliable to be counted on for a restoration of its once comfortable protective umbrella. The Americans all by themselves are military strong enough in all likelihood to confront both China and Russia at the same time but politically they're much weakened. Biden has clearly failed to keep Putin from invading and he will likely pay the political price for it during this year's mid-terms and probably also if he runs for re-election in two years' time. The Republicans look like they will indulge Russia and China while envying those countries' authoritarian practices.

More important than European re-armament, and needed to guide it, are a number of drastic economic and political re-alignments in the West. I mention the economy first because there are two things that will need to be started right away: Ending Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies and ending the West's reliance on Chinese manufacturing. These will require a massive adjustment of supply chains and conceptions of global trade. It will not be simple nor can it be done overnight but these two policies probably amount to the strongest instruments in the West's economic arsenal at the moment. They certainly pose a much stronger threat to both Russia and

China than sanctions. Both policies can also have a beneficial effect beyond the geopolitical. Developing more local, green power supplies should be a priority anyway. Shifting production away from China can also help clean up manufacturing and possibly create jobs, in theory anyway, if not in practice if there is no strong political will to re-regulate Western capitalism.

From financial deregulation to the gig economy, from widening wealth gaps to cost-of-living crises, the West's socio-economic policies have disastrously undermined social cohesion over the past decades. This has inevitably facilitated political polarisation and the rise of nationalist and populist extremes, often cheered on by Russia. No new global economic re-alignment can be successful if not accompanied by a political willingness to redress this situation. Also during the Cold War, Left-Right differences and political discourse existed, that is exactly what we were led to believe was what the West was defending. But at least in most Western European countries and even in the US for a while there was a consensus that in order to compete with the Communist Bloc, they'd have to curtail the worst excesses of capitalism and offer both working and middle classes a decent existence. Even though the economic situation in most Western countries might not yet be disastrous for most people, the social fabric is starting to get stretched by glaring unfairness and increasing feelings of precarity.

The West will have to clean up both its economic and political acts, and fast, if it is to stand up to Russia and China, who will aim to reshape the world in their image. Neither can stand a successful alternative model next to them, witness China's extinction of Hong Kong's relative democracy and Russia's war on Ukraine's statehood. It's not a comforting idea to go back to a world-encompassing competition of systems but it's better to live with an uncomfortable deterrent than to risk all-out conflict. The first thing on the long to-do list is to foster unity, inside Western countries and between them, let's call it an anti-Brexit.