Living Among Predators

CHINA ECONOMIC STATECRAFT EUROPE IN THE WORLD RUSSIA SECURITY TURKEY

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Europe was built to transcend power politics through law, markets, and integration. As war returns and the liberal order fractures, it must relearn the language of power.

'Europe is a laboratory in which we are trying to invent the future.' Luckily for him, Jacques Delors is no longer around to face a future that looks distinctly un-European. The world order that European integration was designed to extend – underpinned by multilateral governance and jointly agreed norms – is no longer en vogue in a world where strongman-led great powers vie for influence. Liberal democracy and the rule of law are in retreat, including on the continent that invented it. Once a lynchpin of the old order, the United States now has more in common

with Viktor Orbán's Hungary than with Scandinavian countries enamoured with democratic accountability. Meanwhile, nativists and populists are making electoral gains across the EU – but also in the United Kingdom – calling for renationalizing politics and undoing globalization and European integration. Discord between the US and Europe coupled with the populist challenge from within has certainly blunted Europeans' ambitions and capacity to act externally. Europe once set out to change the world in its own image. These days, its inherent vulnerability makes it fair game to outside poachers. That is well understood by European leaders. 'Our Europe is mortal', French President Emmanuel Macron warned his audience at the Sorbonne in 2024. "It can die, and it all depends on our choices".

Russia's "Special Military Operation" is Exhibit A of what the new Europe looks like.. Up to 140,000 Ukrainian military personnel have lost their lives defending their country. Tens of thousands of civilians have been murdered too. Russian casualties are estimated at over 1,000,000, of which a third have been killed in action. Swathes of eastern Ukraine have been reduced to rubble. Ukraine's economy, resilient as it is, has been hit hard. The environmental degradation, on land as well on sea, is yet to be factored in. The bid to subjugate Ukraine has caused destruction and suffering on a scale not seen in Europe since 1945. A military conflict of such proportions demonstrates the lengths to which Russia is prepared to go in order to impose its fiat on parts of Europe it considers its own by historical right. This has reintroduced concepts that European statesmen had convinced themselves were obsolete: the logic of hard power, state-to-state war, deterrence by force, and territorial conquest. A departure from the order EU and pre-Trump US built in the heyday of Western hegemony in 1990s and 2000s.

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China has not fired a single missile at Ukraine and, drawing a contrast with Trump's US, loves to talk about multilateralism and rules-based order. Yet, while professing neutrality, Beijing delivers economic and political support to Russia. Strikes against Ukrainian cities would not be happening without Chinese electronic components and fibre cables needed to assemble and operate ballistic and cruise missiles as well as swarms of drones. This shows that China is not necessarily supportive of EU-centred regional order in Europe. China is also using its vast economic leverage to dictate trade conditions: its stronghold on European manufacturers through rare earth export bans is just an example. Similar to Russia, it engages in influence campaigns and other forms of subversion. China wants Europe dependent. That in turn puts Europeans in a bind: they have to craft a response that pushes back against China and strengthens resilience without precluding cooperation in areas where interests overlap.

Ukraine has exposed Turkey's dual role too. Ankara has condemned Russia's annexations starting with Crimea in 2014. It delivered weapons to Kyiv, nurtured diplomatic and political ties, and played an important role in Black Sea security. At the same time, it has refused to join Western sanctions, continued buying Russian gas and oil, and maximised the commercial benefits of its middleman positioning. The current political elite in Turkey believes in charting an autonomous course on Russia – and in that respect mirrors the attitude of other "middle powers" such as India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa. Turkey has embraced multipolarity and decided that being fully

Western is no longer in its interest.

What Russia, China, and Turkey share is more than authoritarianism, though they share that too. All three are former empires and, to various degrees, retain imperial features. Legacy of empire is Janus-faced: it includes memory of grandeur but also grievance over decline and loss, typically with the West playing the part of historical villain. For many commentators, the authoritarian strongmen leading these countries – Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – are emblematic of a new era of great power politics that is upon us.

They have all contested Western dominance in global affairs. Russia has done that by military force: in the former Soviet Union but also in the Middle East and even Sub-Saharan Africa, far from its "near abroad." All in the name of recovering its great power status within the context of a multipolar world order. China has sought to do this by seeking to transform its economic might into political influence across all parts of the globe to rival the West, championing an alternative governance model blending authoritarianism and technocracy, and amassing hard power to enforce its primacy in East Asia. Turkey's path was by effectively abandoning its long-standing aspiration to be part of the West and reinventing itself as a power centre in its own right, as well as claiming leadership over Sunni Muslims in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Eurasia.

All three have moved from being on the receiving end of Europe's order-building, and they are now active participants in reshaping or subverting it. The mechanisms vary. Russia backs "Trojan horses," that is Eurosceptic and populist parties. China acquires assets across strategic sectors such as telecoms, car manufacturing, energy, and transport infrastructure to broaden its market access, spread its technology, and lock in Europe's position of dependency. Turkish politicians campaign within diaspora communities in Germany and Netherlands, and the omnipresent Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) exerts its influence over Sunni Muslims throughout the continent.

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Countries on the EU's periphery are movers and shakers in this story – not passive objects of predatory great powers – and they no longer see Brussels as the only game in town. The new normal, in places like Serbia, is hedging between the EU (and the West more generally) and its rivals and competitors such as Russia, China, or Turkey. Even ambitious and dynamic new players, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have entered the fray. And in post-Soviet Eurasia, multi-alignment—playing off Russia against the West in order to gain as much internal autonomy as possible— has an even longer history than in the Western Balkans. As a rule, the increased Russian, Chinese, and Turkish influence allows illiberal leaders to tighten their grip on the state, as the European foreign policy shifts from the promotion and enforcement of democratic values to coming out on top in a geopolitical race. Overall, hybrid regimes combining democracy and authoritarian features have greater traction to the point of becoming the predominant type on Europe's edges.

At this point, students of Russia, China, or Turkey may argue that this account makes some overgeneralisations which miss important differences between the country they know in detail and the other two. That is certainly a

fair objection. A substantial part of the discussion to follow is about contrasting the three challenges as well as contextualizing them with a view of Russia, China, and Turkey's complex histories of engagement with Europe and, not to forget, of actually partaking in the European order in the Russian and Turkish cases.

Geography matters too: in contrast to China, Russia, and Turkey, there are other European powers that also belong to other regional complexes, to borrow an IR term, such as the Middle East, Eurasia, etc. As we shall see, Russia's and Turkey's stories in the post-Cold War era boil down to attempts to integrate meaningfully in a Western-dominated regional order—and their failure to do so. China's relationship with Europe has been mediated through its broader integration with the West, with Washington setting the terms. EU membership was never a theoretical possibility for Beijing. For China, the relationship with Europe is not a critical node in identity construction. Sure, it carries the humiliations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism, with European universalism and Europe as a blueprint for modernity. But fitting or not in a regional order structured around the EU and informed by notions of Europeanness is not "a thing" in the Chinese political imagination.

For Russia and Turkey the situation is quite different. Both have spent centuries in an uneasy relationship with European civilisation: the tension between the need for recognition and resentment driven by the failure to obtain it in full measure are key to the Turkish and Russian context and have been so since at least the eighteenth century. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russian liberals looked to European institutions as legitimate models. Even hardliners like Putin could imagine a workable arrangement – something resembling the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, where Moscow would sit at the top table alongsideGermany, France, and the United Kingdom, and mend the power imbalance with the US. The EU, in this vision, played a secondary role at best, beholden to its senior members and to American hegemony. But later on Russian elites discovered, to their dismay, the profound effects of European integration and enlargement on Ukraine and other corners of the "near abroad." Putin's response hardened incrementally, and by the time of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he had reframed the entire conflict as civilizational struggle between Russia and a decadent, declining West – one with deep roots in Russian history. Notions of Europe – but also the West more broadly – lost their status as ìstandard-setters, because Europe was no longer a model to emulate or a table to join, it was an adversary to outlast.

China's view of Europe has been cooler and more transactional, but no less shaped by history. Memories of "the century of humiliation" at the hands of European imperialists resonate strongly, but China has adhered to a more benign view of Europe as partner, export market of critical significance, and fellow stakeholder in multilateral institutions. In the words of strategist Zhou Bo, "China is the largest beneficiary of globalization, which relies on the existing international order." At the same time, Beijing vigorously opposed efforts by European actors—be it EU bodies, governments, or civil society—to exert pressure or hold it accountable for human rights violations and authoritarian practices. Putin's Russia, like China, rejects the idea that Europe could legitimately establish norms, spread them beyond its borders, and enforce them on others. The European financial crisis of the early 2010s, watched closely by Beijing, reinforced an idea of a declining West, a transition to multipolarity, and China's moment as a peer power to the US. This reawakened memories of Sinocentric political orders of past ages. Europe's growing dependency on Chinese trade, technology, and capital fits neatly into that same narrative.For most of its modern history, Turkey wanted to gain full membership in the EU – the crowning achievement of a

Europeanisation and Westernisation journey that had been underway since the early nineteenth century. Today, Ankara no longer wants in. Under Erdoğan, Turkey has moved on to seeking recognition as a power in its own right. The Ottoman past was rehabilitated rather than apologised for, political Islam rose and fused with Turkish nationalism into the official state doctrine of Yeni Türkiye – New Turkey – the assertion that Turkey is a budding middle power whose fortunes are set to improve in a post-Western world. The EU has adjusted accordingly, shifting from the role of democratic tutor to, transactional partner. Still, Turkey hasn't walked away entirely. It still expects a place in the broader European order – on its own terms, and with considerably more leverage than it once had.

China's reasons for contesting the European order are different from Russia's which are different from Turkey's. The temptation, when surveying all of this, is to reach for a single narrative: liberal Europe besieged by authoritarian powers. You can even add Trump's America to the cast of predators, and the picture becomes almost too neat – democracy on one side, strongmen on the other. Yet all these rivals have different goals and different visions as to how the European order should change to meet their needs. Methods and instruments for contestation vary too: it is not the same thing to threaten nuclear annihilation—to give an extreme example— and to castigate Europeans' sanctimony or double standards in upholding their values.

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What follows, then, is not a unified theory of European vulnerability but a map of three distinct challenges and three distinct possible responses.

The argument, stated plainly: Russia wants to demolish the European order. China wants to profit from it while hollowing it out. Turkey continues to seek inclusion – but on its own terms. All three are interested in altering the power hierarchy by obtaining influence. They reject the EU's self-appointed role as a setter and enforcer of political standards. . They want to accumulate leverage, undermine institutions, or simply making themselves indispensable. Russia is posing the most fundamental challenge: undermining cornerstone norms, such as the post-war order prohibition of acquiring territory by military conquest and using hard power to subjugate neighbours. China has gone after institutions, building parallel structures like the 14+1 forum to draw European states into a hub-and-spoke arrangement centered on Beijing.

Different challenges have produced different responses containment, consolidation, and co-optation. Against Russia, Europe has chosen containment: military deterrence, lethal aid to Ukraine, the slow and painful work of rebuilding collective defense . Against China – and Trump's America – the strategy is consolidation: reducing dependency, diversifying supply chains, building economic sovereignty and resilience against a partner that has shown it will weaponize trade. With Turkey, Europe is going for co-optation: ad hoc deals, institutional ties, and new, looser multilateral platforms, such as the European Political Community. The European order looks, from the outside, like a rigid system under siege. What is less visible is its capacity to adapt to the headwinds.

Ironically, in adapting to its challengers, Europe has absorbed something of their logic. The continent that built its postwar identity on the rejection of hard power is now spending €150 billion on collaborative defense. These days,

an EU commissioner tracks the development of satellites, sensors, cruise missiles, air defences, drones. This is a profound shift, not just in policy but in self-conception. The same is true economically. Europe is diversifying supply chains away from China in electronics, , critical minerals, and pharmaceuticals. The Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI) which entered into force in 2023 gives Brussels tools to push back when foreign powers – China but potentially the US too – from leveraging dependency to extract political concessions. At a time when the US is turning protectionist and China is eager to achieve full self-sufficiency, Europe is likewise singing praises to "strategic autonomy". And Europe has grown more comfortable using the language of power in its own neighbourhood . The Ukraine war settled an old debate: enlargement is not an altruistic exercise but a matter of security. Ukraine is already acting as a bulwark against Russia – and it is likely to stay that way for decades to come.

None of this is grounds for complacency. Europe still faces the task of holding together its alliance with the US, managing Chinese dependency, and stopping Russia's attempt at re-imperialisation – simultaneously, with imperfect tools and significant internal discord.It may fail on one or more fronts. A doomsday scenario is not unthinkable, to echo Macron's words. Even if it muddles through, it will not rescue the liberal international order, and it will not graduate to great-power status. But it is learning, faster than its critics expected, how to protect itself in a world which runs counter to its values and interests. There is no other choice. As Mark Carney, Canada's prime minister, reminded the audience at the World Economic Forum in Davos: 'middle powers' need to join forces in order to be on the table. Or else, they will be on the menu.

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