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*The 1st in our 2022 occasional series of expert comment and analysis, by the **Rt Hon the Lord Howell of Guildford**, Minister of State at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2010-2012), Chairman of the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee (2016-2019) and GSF Advisory Board member. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

Is The West On The Wrong Track?

Fighting the last war is always said to be the weakness of generals. But is fighting the last confrontation emerging as the weakness of Western governments, as they seek to counter the build-up of Russian aggression against Ukraine?

It is the Atlantic Alliance team, led by the US President, and followed by the other NATO members, which is leading the riposte and threatening dire consequences if any of Vladimir Putin's hundred thousand troops, assembled nearby, dare set foot on Ukraine's territory. The challenge is seen almost entirely as a 'West versus Russia' matter, just as it was back in the last century. It is a line-up and a landscape with which all the old brigade of Cold War warriors can feel thoroughly familiar.

But there are a few snags to this simplified scene. The first is that in the 21st century

world power has shifted. In the 21st century it is the pan-Asian and African powers, plus the big players in the Middle East, who increasingly hold the cards. When Moscow feels the rough edge of opinion, expressed through all sorts of channels, from sources such as Japan, Australia, India, the African Union and, yes, even from their 'sort-of' friends, the Chinese – that is when it will pause, rather than being deterred by a NATO military line-up which, as Joe Biden rather tactlessly pointed out, is less than solid.

Asia contains 60 percent of the world's population and it is where 90 percent of global economic growth over the next 10 years will take place. It is where the technology required to master the new battlefields is pulling ahead and where conventional defence capabilities are also building up fast. It is where completely new trade and financial arrangements are beginning to find a way round dollar dominance.



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And as well as more economic power Asian nations definitely have 'skin in the game' from the security point of view. It is in no state's interest at all, whether democratic or authoritarian, or something in between, to start a world war and encourage the habit of big countries invading and crushing their smaller neighbours, as Russia seems poised to do. China also has the imminent Olympic Winter Games to consider.

A second aspect is raised by Joe Biden's unfortunate NATO comment. The Alliance is not what it was. Germany is fast becoming the weak link in the chain, with deeply divided political opinions on how to confront Russia, or even whether to work with its allies. And under the new German Government all suggestions of military involvement are completely out. Meanwhile another NATO member, Turkey, is well away on a path of its own, feeding off Russian weapons, while the President of France is on record as saying that NATO is becoming 'brain-dead' - hardly a solid line-up.

The third new factor is that the character of war itself has changed. Sending more weaponry and ships to Ukraine may be a marginal deterrent, but the real conflict is going to be fought out in the dark realms of cyberspace and the labyrinths of financial sanctions, and to some extent on the global energy front. This is where Russia can be made to feel the pain and the Kremlin bosses can be personally touched, especially if their enormous funds tucked away in Western banks can be frozen.

But here, too, the approach requires solidarity - and not just between western allies but

globally. Both German and British policy and strategy in this area is open to criticism and needs to be strengthened. Many believe that London is the centre of the money laundering world and is full of 'dirty' Russian funds.

As for Russian energy exports the new Nordstream 2 pipeline is now completed and ready to be commissioned, to carry gas direct from Russia to its German customers, and by-passing Poland. Russia clearly wants it open to increase European gas sales. There are Western threats to delay that, but it could be a two-edged sword. European gas prices are currently through the roof and reliance on gas to generate electric power is far too high, especially in the UK. Much more gas is desperately needed to ease the current price strains.

Besides, a richer Russia could well be a less aggressive one. This is not where the pressure is best applied.

Even when a Western grip is taken on this many-sided situation there is the rest of the world to consider. Cutting off Western financial transactions may hurt, but if Chinese support is simply stepped up instead the impact will be simply cancelled out. And if Western demand for Russian gas and oil is shut down there are plenty of thirsty Asian customers.

In sum, the best deterrence against Russia's ugly moves, and the best protection for countries wanting international stability, whether East or West, almost certainly lies outside NATO altogether and outside all conventional defence thinking.



To stop Vladimir Putin demands a different kind of alliance in the digital era, a different membership from the old 'Western camp', and clever tactics based on a different kind of conflict strategy.

When that sinks in, but not before, the chances of Putin changing his mind, and withdrawing his soldiers from their so-called manoeuvres round the Ukrainian borders, begin to improve.

But we are nowhere near that point yet.

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House of Lords official portrait

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