The Crisis over Ukraine

A Conceptual Watershed in Western Defence Policy

Inaugural speech to the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences on 20 May 2015 by Jyri Raitasalo

Résumé

Krisen i Ukraina som pågått sedan sent under 2013 har överraskat flera analytiker i säkerhets- och försvarsfrågor och likaså flera statsmän i Europa och på andra håll. Förhoppningarna om ett positivt facit efter det kalla kriget av en värld med färre globaliserade konflikter har inte förverkligats. Snarare är det så att vi bevittnat "återkomsten" av stormakternas sätt att hantera internationell säkerhet och det därmed tillhörande krisläget mellan Ryssland och väst. På samma sätt som slutet på det kalla kriget blev en begreppsmässig vattendelare som "tvingade" alla internationella aktörer att omdefiniera sina tillvägagångssätt avseende internationell säkerhet, så är den pågående krisen i Ukraina med sina stormaktsrivaliteter och tusentals offer en liknande vattendelare. Den belyser de traditionella statsbaserade militära hoten i Europa som många stater i väst har "försummat" under de senaste tjugo åren.

THE ONGOING CRISIS in Ukraine ever since late 2013 has been a surprise to many analysts of security and defence policy as well as to statesmen in Europe and elsewhere. This article will probe what could be called the "root causes" concerning this strategic surprise that particularly Russian actions have caused within the West. As a backdrop – or a starting point – this article looks at the clear *conceptual watershed* related to the end of the Cold War. It was this abrupt change of the international security system some 25 years ago that ushered Western states and others into the still ongoing and evolving process of redefining security, security and defence policy and the very principles according to which the West uses military force within the international system.

The above-mentioned theme will be approached from two perspectives – or layers – of international security. First, on the level of what has happened in the international security environment during the last 25 years of the post-Cold War era. This is the level of "events" or "incidents", so to speak. Also, the article concludes that from the perspective of Western states – or Northern Europe for that matter – we have witnessed many positive developments during the last 25 years. In many ways, we are safer today than we were during the threat-penetrated years of the Cold War.[1] Second, this article will examine the way that Western states – European states with the United States as the lead agent – have changed their perspective on international security and defence matters during the post-Cold War era.

This second layer reveals the dynamics and processes which have guided a change in the way that the West conceptualizes security, namely: 1) whose security are we talking about when we say "international security", and 2) how do we define the bound-

aries or contours of international security? And this relates directly to the formulation of defence policy within the West and ultimately to the decision on when, where and how Western states develop and use their military forces in the world around us.

It is argued that the politically expedient and politically useful definitions of the post-Cold War era Western security and defence policy have not been based on a sober and sound analysis of the international security landscape. Rather, there have been politically motivated attempts to redefine the rules of the international security architecture based on Western standards, which seem to have become contested in Ukraine – mostly by the actions of Russia. Thus it will be argued that just as the end of the Cold War was a conceptual watershed event "forcing" all international actors to redefine their approach to international security, the ongoing military crisis in Ukraine – with its great-power rivalries and thousands of casualties – is a similar kind of conceptual watershed moment, bringing to the fore the traditional state-based military threats in Europe that the West has been "neglecting" for the last two decades.

In short, the argument in this article posits that there has been a strategic myopia or short-sightedness in the West concerning the conceptualization of international security during the last 20 years.

It is noteworthy that even before the military crisis in Ukraine began to escalate, calls to re-examine the foundations of the post-Cold War era Western strategic thinking were voiced. This mostly occurred with the ending of the ISAF-operation – a decade-long Western military operation which has so far not produced too many positive outcomes in the post-Cold War or post-9/11 international security system. After all, Western states have been engaged in state-building, stabilization operations and crisis management for two decades. And for almost ten years, ISAF was NATO's main effort. Now this operation is over and Afghanistan remains a failed state.

It is argued that in tandem the limited utility of the Western expeditionary military operations during the last 20 years and the "surprise" that Western statesmen have witnessed in Ukraine provide ample material for Western strategic analysts and statesmen to rethink security, security-policy and defence policy. Thus the Western strategic community could be approaching a conceptual watershed in its shared understandings of what threatens the security of Western states and how they should be respond to these threats.

The end of the cold war as a strategic problem

The end of the Cold War was much celebrated. For most observers of international politics, it was a positive outcome in world affairs. The West literally won the Cold War. At the same time, Russia – the successor state of the Soviet Union – was deemed into a decade of internal problems, including a military crisis in the Caucasus region.

With the abrupt and unexpected end of the Cold War during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the cohesive power of the Soviet threat that had been there for decades faded quickly. At least Western states acted as if the existential threat was over and new rules of the international security needed to be defined.[2] When leaving the Cold War behind in the early 1990s, the West needed a new strategic narrative about the new security logic of the emerging international system. There were no ready-made easy alternatives to the pre-existing strategic narrative of the threat-penetrated Cold War that had

for decades guided how international security was conceptualized and how states responded to the security threats that needed no interpretation.

Thus the end of the Cold War was highly problematic for the West. The old system of confrontation was over. No-one knew what the future rules of the game would be. These rules had to be envisioned and imagined – and most importantly – executed. In other words, they needed to be put into practice. And this needed to be done rather quickly, as states were spending billions of dollars on security and defence every month. Thus, what we witnessed during the 1990s – after the Cold War was over – was a process of states creating these new rules of international security and military matters with their concrete and rhetorical actions. But this was not done under the conditions of the Western states' own choosing.

The new strategic narrative of the systemic logic of the international security game accepted widely in the West during the 1990s was that of globalization. It depicted a world system of interconnectedness, cooperation and interdependence. As we are all in this world together, and as our connections have been increasing by the advances of technology and by political decisions, the proponents of globalization advanced a position that the new security architecture of the post-Cold War era is based on positive-sum outcomes and cooperative solutions to common security threats. Interdependence was – and still is – the force behind this logic.[3]

Embracing globalization and a policy of engagement and cooperation, the West started to muddle through the first decade of the post-Cold War era. With the superpower confrontation gone and with the demise of the Soviet threat, non-state armed conflicts were raised to depict the new reality of conflicts. These were also said to challenge the stability of the global system. These "New Wars",[4] "Low Intensity Conflicts"[5], or however one wishes to describe them, were raised to the focus of Western security and defence policy. This happened despite the fact that the number of these conflicts started to decline in 1991, and the same happened also to the number of casualties in these conflicts. When the West began to underscore the importance of armed conflicts within states, the number of them and their deadliness started to decline. As the Human Security Report 2009/2010 noted:

> In the new millennium, the average international conflict killed some 90 percent fewer people a year than the average conflict in the 1950s. In the 1950s, the average international conflict killed some 20,000 people a year on the battlefield. In the post-Cold War 1990s, the average annual battle-death toll was less than 6,000; in the new millennium that figure has halved.[6]

The same report also noted that "nationwide mortality rates actually fall during most wars…today's armed conflicts rarely generate enough fatalities to reverse the long-term downward trend in peacetime mortality that has become the norm for most of the developing world".[7] And the language of the 2012 Human security report is even more blunt. As the report notes, "in 2009 the number of deadly campaigns against civilians was the lowest recorded since 1989 – the earliest year for which the UCDP (*the Uppsala Conflict Data Program*) has data. The conventional wisdom that civilians are increasingly being targeted in today's wars is simply incorrect."[8]

At the same time as the West was trying to engage Russia and expanded the membership-base of the EU and NATO in accordance with the new vision of coopera-

tive security, it also started to manage some emerging new wars with military force: in Iraq after Operation Desert Storm, Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, Burundi, Bosnia, Kosovo, and East-Timor.[9]

New conflicts to be dealt with were there, although none of them had direct security-related effects to the West, and the West was willing to deal with them. Many states in the West needed a new framework – any framework – for defence policy and military operations as deterring the Soviet Union – or Russia – had lost its significance. Also, there was no shortage of candidates for describing the "new" rules of the post-Cold War era international security reality: "The New World Order",[10] "the End of History",[11] "an Agenda For Peace"[12] and "the Clash of Civilizations"[13] are all examples of the proposed post-Cold War era new reality that statesmen or academics presented in attempting to change or to describe the post-Cold War era international security situation.

Thus, during the 1990s the new broad and comprehensive framework of security in a globalizing world was accepted and simultaneously a military framework of going out-of-area was embraced.[14] The following examples demonstrate the pace of Western security and defence policy redefinition after the end of the Cold War.

In 1988 NATO member states stated that:

> The Soviet Union's military presence in Europe, being far in excess of its needs for self-defence, directly challenges our security as well as our hopes for change in the political situation in Europe.[15]

In 1990 NATO member states declared in London that:

> Europe has entered a new, promising era. ... The Soviet Union has embarked on the long journey towards a free society. ... The Atlantic Community must reach out to the countries of the East which were our adversaries in the Cold War, and extend to them the hand of friendship.[16]

The 1991 Strategic Concept of NATO noted that:

> The Alliance is purely defensive in purpose: none of its weapons will ever be used except in self-defence.[17]

And in 1996 – the new role of NATO was presented in a different fashion:

> The new NATO has become an integral part of the emerging, broadly based, cooperative European security structure....We have... reconfigured our forces to make them better able to carry out the new missions of crisis management, while preserving the capability for collective defence.[18]

The gradually emerging new Western security framework broadened the sectors and the referring objects of security from state-based military security towards environmental, economic and societal questions touching upon human security and the stability of the international system as well. This new framework did not for long favour the military security of states, as had been the case throughout the Cold War and, arguably, centuries before that.[19]

Stability of the global system, terrorism, climate change, cyber threats and others have been included in the new security-political framework within the West. Western security perspective – one could argue – expanded quickly, and so did the Western security-political perspective, i.e. the view of what threatens the interests of the West and what kind of crises all over the world that really are security questions for the West. As for this security:" political expansion has led to

the active use of military force in the post-Cold War world. I call this the "Western expeditionary frenzy".[20] Participating in military operations out of national or alliance territory has become associated with the new and what could be called the post-modern Western security-political identity. Participating in different operations has become important – more important in many cases than the actual results that these operations produce. Within the West, solidarity in participation has become important.

Obviously, there were processes that facilitated this shift in Western defence and security-political focus. States need some framework to guide their policies of how to maintain or develop their militaries. NATO also needed a *raison d'être*.[21] In addition, the increase in the ability of the mass communications media to report from locations all over the world with graphic pictures and live footage also provided momentum for the articulation of the Western humanitarian military agenda. The 24/7 media thus put pressure on statesmen to do something to alleviate humanitarian suffering and the media also defined the agenda of what needed to be addressed in the security-political framework in Western states of the post-Cold War era. In later years, the exponential growth of Internet communications and social media has increased the possibilities of international security agenda-setting to many new actors. As Strobel noted already in 1996:

> Virtually every official interviewed agrees that the rise of Cable News Network has radically altered the way U.S. foreign policy is conducted. Information is everywhere, not just because of CNN, but through other developments, such as the increasingly sophisticated media systems in developing nations and the explosive growth of the Internet. "It's part and parcel of governing.[22]

Thus, throughout the 1990s, Western statesmen were in a reactive mode, taking incremental steps in redefining their national and alliance-wide perspective to international security and the use of military force. Throughout the 1990s Western states reconstructed – intentionally and in many cases unintentionally by reacting to world events – new rules of when and where to use their armed forces and how to develop them.[23] And they did so based on the crises that we understood to depict the new realities of the globalizing world order: small interstate or non-state armed conflicts.

And as the United States enjoyed its "unipolar moment",[24] the rest of the West was appreciating its ability to almost free-ride in solving the new security problems of the globalizing world. It was enough for many Western states to participate minimally in expeditionary military operations – to show political support – when the US was the only actor harnessing credible offensive military capabilities ready to be used all around the world. The United States was, then, the only superpower with a great power tradition for the use of military force. European states were – and still are – small or medium-sized states with either no tradition to use force outside their territory, or in the case of some states, they have the tradition to use force, but not really enough military capability to operate on their own.[25]

Forwarding a globalization-based and positive-sum cooperative view to security, Western states were thus in the 1990s redefining international security architecture on their own terms. These Western terms, I argue, almost ignored the more traditional expressions of state security and military affairs and focused instead on new expressions of comprehensive security framework.

Western defence policy in the post-cold war era

Taking what could be called a great-power perspective to military affairs – based on US lead and the emerging Western expeditionary mindset – many European states have had problems in articulating a coherent and credible logic for developing national militaries and participating in multinational military operations.

Firstly: a US-led process in redefining Western military approach has been the adoption of a high-tech perspective to armed forces. The Revolution in Military Affairs and military transformation became the military "hype" or buzzwords in the late 1990s and also during the decade after that.[26] This process of "going techno" is very expensive and has meant a need to cut military manpower heavily and has resulted in small European states developing tiny or "Lilliputian" armies with only a few high-tech systems, as these states really cannot afford to develop balanced militaries with at least a critical mass of modern systems.[27]

European militaries are becoming dysfunctional and can only operate cooperatively. The problem with this is that there is no collective European strategic outlook or European-wide common security interest. States from the Mediterranean see security differently from those facing the Atlantic Ocean or those located close to Russia. Europe is too fragmented to form a credible and coherent military policy. In reality, a view of Europe as a military actor is mostly a fiction – it does not exist. Furthermore, the transformed militaries of European states cannot operate except in cooperation with others. And they have been preparing for operations against poorly equipped and ill-trained third-rate states during the last twenty years. Counter-insurgency operations, based on high-tech force protection, state-building and counter-terrorist operations have become the bread and butter of many Western armed forces. They are the kind of operations that small and expensive militaries of Europe can carry out. More large-scale deterrence and hard warfighting is a capability lost in Europe – or at least in many parts of Europe. It is noteworthy, however, that based on the redefined security and defence framework adopted in the West – most notably in Europe – during the post-Cold War period, this development is fully logical. If one does not believe in state-based military threats, why should one prepare against them? On the contrary, this new Western security outlook offered a promise for cashing in on the so-called "peace dividend".[28].

The second aspect of the post-Cold War Western military development is based on this high-tech understanding of war. This second aspect touches on the professionalization of Western militaries. Since the early 1990s, many Western states have abandoned conscription-based military systems and have moved to all-volunteer professional militaries. This line of development has meant an increasing pressure to cut down military manpower. Small European states cannot afford to maintain soldiers on readiness without constant duties and operations in which to participate. European militaries have moved from division-based structures to battalion-based organizations. The end strengths of European militaries can be counted in tens of thousands of soldiers – at best.[29]

The second aspect of this professionalization has been the process of creating a "push" to contribute forces to operations out-of-area. This has been a way of showing the society that the armed forces are in a way earning their salaries and that taxpayer Euros have been wisely spent. For small states profes-

sional militaries mean "use it – or lose it". It is difficult for small states to have credible professional forces for the mere prestige they bring, as is typical for great powers. Imitating great power militaries is most probably not the best way to develop a small-state perspective on armed forces.

The third aspect related to post-Cold War Western militaries is associated with the shift in geographical focus. There has been a move away from own territory – at least in many European countries – and according to the extensively widened security framework Western states have been actively engaged in military operations in faraway locations. The "new normal" of the West is to commit troops into multinational operations for humanitarian and other reasons.

For many European states it has been as important to participate in the new crisis management operations as it has been to succeed in them. Participation has become a matrix, according to which European states measure themselves vis-a-vis other European states. This is the reason why many states send only token forces – symbolic forces – to many different operations simultaneously. As Katharina Coleman has demonstrated in her research, in the post-Cold War troop contributions to UN peacekeeping operations the share of token forces – military contributions less than 40 persons – have risen from 10 % in the early 1990s to 55-65 % in recent years.[30]

It is argued here that in many cases *participation* in crisis management operations has become an end in itself. Following this line of argument, Western states would benefit from more extensive research on the successes of our expeditionary military operations. How has the West performed? There is much evidence for concern: the situation in Afghanistan is still not very settled despite the fact that several elections have been conducted; the American-led military operation in Iraq that lasted for more than 8 years did not produce very promising results – when evaluated from the framework of the cost of operations in blood and treasure; and the news from Libya today makes it very difficult to evaluate NATO's 2011 operation in Libya a success.

Of course reality is not as simple as this. There are naturally many reasons for Western military operations, whether in Afghanistan or Libya. But it should be acknowledged that not all operations have succeeded or that not all operations have actually decreased the violence in the target country. As the Human Security Report 2012 noted, outside interventions in armed conflicts may actually add to the cost in human lives. The report noted that:

> Internationalized intra-state conflicts are, on average, twice as deadly as intra-state conflicts where no military intervention occurs. ...with interventions comes the increased risk of conflict escalation, which means that even humanitarian military interventions may not be helpful. On the contrary, one-sided support for rebel groups actually correlates with intensified and prolonged conflicts.[31]

The potential negative feature that needs to be discussed in public about post-Cold War era Western intervention policies is related to the often ignored long-term effect of lowering the threshold on the legitimate use of force in international affairs. When in Kosovo Western states intervened without a UN Security Council mandate, they created a first precedent of doing so – even when the motivations were good and noble – saving human lives amid humanitarian catastrophe. But as cases accumulate and the West and Russia and China disagree on the merits of humanitarian intervention

and the so-called Responsibility to Protect (R2P)[32] over and over again, it is possible that the playing field has opened for more and more active use of military force in world affairs in the future – not only in Europe but more broadly.

Why Was the Crisis Over Ukraine a Surprise to the West?

The violent events in Ukraine gained momentum in December 2013 when President Yanukovych refused to sign the association agreement with the EU. After protests and riots, the Yanukovych regime was ousted and a pro-Western government was appointed. Following this, Russia grabbed the Crimean peninsula, a strategic piece of land which Russia has been interested in controlling ever since the Ukrainian independence.

In early 2014 Ukraine fell victim to a violent civil war between the separatists in the Eastern parts of the country and the military forces of the government. Russia has been backing the separatists with money, military personnel and material whereas the West has been supporting the government of Ukraine, although not with robust military capabilities. The West has also imposed political and economic sanctions on Russia – officially making the crisis over Ukraine a traditional political great-power conflict between Russia and the West.

So, why have many Western statesmen and security analysts become surprised with the conflict in Ukraine? Firstly, when Russia was trying to survive the post-Soviet survival game during the 1990s and even during the next decade, struggling for existence literally, the West was forging the new tenets for the post-Cold War international security architecture. And in this process the West paid little attention to the arguments of Russia. One can argue that this happened for a good reason: Russia's power was exhausted by internal issues during that time.

There have been many factors, where the West has been defining with "exclusive rights" the new rules of the game. Examples of the disagreement between Russia and the West include: NATO enlargement on several rounds of expansion, Western expeditionary military activity (Kosovo, Iraq, Libya and lately also about the case of Syria), the nuclear case of Iran, what was at stake in the Arab Spring, missile defence in Europe and the War in Georgia (2008), to name some recent examples.

In 2012, Russian president, Vladimir Putin, expressed his own views on the differences of security perspectives between Russia and the West. He noted that:

> NATO [is] an organization that has been assuming an attitude that is inconsistent with a "defensive alliance." It seems that NATO members, especially the United States, have developed a peculiar interpretation of security that is different from ours.[33]

Echoing the message of President Putin, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Sergei Lavrov, noted in February 2015 in a speech at the Munich Security Conference that:

> European security is based on the UN Charter and Helsinki Declaration principles, long sabotaged by the actions of the US and its allies. … We would like to understand if our partners share our point of view or if they prefer to continue the course of deepening the split in the pan-European space and contrasting fragments. Do they want to create an architectural security with Russia, without Russia, or against Russia?[34]

Thus after some two decades of post-Cold War redefinition of the international security architecture mostly by Western states, in Ukraine Russia has stepped up and

drawn a red line. Secondly, the West has been forging a new security outlook based on the policies of cooperation, engagement and enlargement. This has been a political project to see the world and international politics in a new light – vis-a-vis the grim outlook of the Cold War era superpower confrontation. Now when this vision has been publicly contested in Ukraine, with rhetorical and politico-military action, the West has for the first time received the message that some have argued for several years should be taken seriously.

In other words, the West and Russia do not have a common language or a shared framework to discuss and solve matters of international security. For the West, and moreover for Europe, denouncing power-political thinking and action has been a key in the process of redefining the security rules of the international system. Russia has not followed suit, and even the United States has reverted to policies that have been typical for great powers of the day for centuries. The most surprised parties in the crisis over Ukraine are the Europeans. The globalized world of new wars, humanitarian interventions and terrorist threats is just one – and a limited – interpretation of what are the core features of today's security arrangements in the world.

Where should we be heading?

Next, some very preliminary thoughts on the potential avenues of the development of the Western security perspective and associated security and defence policies will be presented. Firstly, the potential rethink of Western security perspective could mean that the analytical usefulness of the comprehensive approach to security would be separated from the implementation of states' security *policy*. Many of the "problems" that we can pinpoint with our comprehensive approach to security, conceptually, do *not* meaningfully fall within the sphere of state security policy. Thus, for example, the effects of climate change would best be dealt with within the sphere of environmental policy – not security policy at all. The same applies to many cyber threats and energy security threats as well. Security-political logic is a special branch of state policy where decision-making and tools of statecraft differ from normal politics – as has been noted by the Copenhagen school within International Relations theory.[35] Securitization, i.e. dealing with "normal problems", such as security threats and even potential militarization of non-military issues such as climate change, terrorism or developmental issues, may actually increase the occurrence and level of international violence.

Second, one should critically examine whether the globalization-based strategic narrative on security – "pressuring" Western states to manage global problems with different means, including military ones – is actually conducive to the pursuance of national interests of European and other Western states, or international stability and peace.

Thirdly, it has been suggested, one could critically consider the adverse side-effects of managing the contemporary international order with military means. The active use of Western militaries in expeditionary operations during the post-Cold War era have not produced too many impressive security-related outcomes. In addition, small Western states are using their militaries in the same fashion that great powers have been doing for centuries.[36] I call into doubt that this will actually increase the politico-military security of Westerns states in the long run. At least it is possible that the continued use

of military force today in many different kinds of crises and operations could backfire in the future – when we could witness the return of more traditional great-power logic of world affairs. If such a development were to occur, the lowered threshold on the legitimate use of military force in world affairs could call into question the security of Western, or at least European, states. Thus, we should ponder the usefulness of the more traditional roles of military forces – being prepared, emphasizing deterrence and being ready to defend territory. At least we should acknowledge the potential adverse side effects of expeditionary military operations to a greater degree than we have done so far. Furthermore, we should also prepare to manage these negative outcomes of our military commitments abroad more actively than we have done so far.

It has not been the intent of this article to suggest that the West or some other actors has got it all wrong when they pursue their security interests in the contemporary security environment. The aspects of Western security perspective and the use of military force that has been presented are only some preliminary thoughts on the matter. What we need in the near future is more critical discussion about the future of Western security and defence policy, concerning both the practice executed by statesmen on a daily basis and the analytical constructs at our disposal for analysing the world around us.

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Notes

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