

## THOUGHTS ON RECENT READING

Those who follow the international news can hardly fail to be aware that the world seems to be spiralling out of control and that the regulatory systems put in place after the Second World War are struggling to keep pace. We live in a world in which the media is chock-a-block with analyses, inflamed debates, experts in both information and disinformation, forecasts swiftly debunked by facts and rational argument so laced with pure emotion that we may be forgiven for being confused.

Of late, the texts I have been reading have rarely left me indifferent. But I will spare you my indignation or enthusiasms and simply offer you an obviously subjective selection of some of the points I noted as I was read.

Writing about the irrationality of wars, the Prussian General and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz held that it was the human factor that was responsible for their escalation, since the horrific toll on human life generally made the troops even more determined to battle on rather than weakening their resolve. They tended, therefore, to double down on their positions and refuse to negotiate a rational settlement. Unfortunately, this is precisely what is happening in the war between Ukraine and Russia, dashing hopes of a rapid end.

Whilst the Western world is treated almost daily to bulletins on the war in Ukraine, elsewhere reactions are more mixed. By diverting attention from other geopolitical issues, the war has opened a Pandora's box of hitherto repressed desires, with some countries taking advantage of the situation to advance their political, economic and military pawns and pursue their desire for emancipation. The war has shattered the taboo over the use of force to shift national boundaries, producing effects already emerging in parts of Caucasia and calling older mechanisms into question throughout the world.

Our traditional multilateral approaches seem now to be in disarray with major divisions over the Ukraine war within the UN Security Council suggestive of a more general rift between nations (*the West and the Rest*), the emergence of new leaders within the G20 (India), and the expansion of the BRICS. Against this, NATO's star is back in the ascendant and nations are once again investing more in defence than ever before in recent times.

While its members may not all have the same priorities and are not agreed on their analysis of the situation, the European Union has been discovering unexpected resources of its own. Pre-existing instruments, such as the European Peace Facility, have become the main channel for supplying arms to Ukraine and consolidating Europe's armies. New initiatives have been launched to facilitate and simplify joint procurement. Operational structures are being reinforced and missions urgently being put in place. Unprecedented measures such as sanctions, embargoes, moves to lessen dependency and begin a process of gradual re-industrialisation are taking shape. Last but not least, the speed, unanimity and determination with which decision-making systems and procedures are being adapted almost beggars belief.

But there are two sides to every coin. For the Europeans, the war has had enormous economic implications, with rising energy and raw-material costs, the threat of food shortages and diminishing markets. In addition, America's political, economic and military supremacy has been given a new boost through its ability to supply arms off the shelf, which automatically undermines Europe's concept of strategic autonomy. And when it comes to EU enlargement towards the east, there is the twofold risk of the process being ill-prepared and too rapidly expedited, and of enlargement decisively altering the balance of power within the EU, which would exacerbate ethnic nationalism and put paid to efforts to stamp out the historical antagonisms between nations. Last but not least, while the Europeans may be stepping up their defence efforts, they are collectively guilty of failing to coordinate or agree on objectives, share tasks and set common investment priorities for want of proper military planning (allocating responsibilities for issues such as deterrence, the interceptor missile defence programme and battle tanks).

To conclude, I will leave you with two contrasting thoughts with regard to truth and lies. While, for Kafka, "it is difficult to speak the truth, for although there is only one truth, it is alive and therefore has a live and changing face", for Napoleon Bonaparte "history is a set of lies on which people have agreed"!

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*Translated by ISIT students - Edited by C. Cross*