TA Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Is Europe overplaying its weakness?

NATO's – or rather, Europe's – response to the incursion of a swarm of Russian drones into Poland might have been adequate had there not been a war going on in Ukraine for more than three years.

As it is, and taken together with ongoing Russian provocations, it appears underwhelming. Shortly after the NATO response, Romania reported another drone incursion.

The lower side of the power spectrum has become depressingly familiar terrain over the past nine months to both the EU and the UK, whether in the realm of defence, trade or overall geopolitical wherewithal.

The old continent is clearly being squeezed, both by its adversaries and its supposed main ally, to such a degree that questions of collusion would not be unimaginable.

What's certain is that the interests of those currently in power in Moscow, Beijing and Washington DC appear to align to an unprecedented degree when it comes to Europe.

Apart from conspiracy theories, there's one simple reason why this should be the case: A perception of Europe's relative weakness in crucial areas.

Europe's dismal state of affairs

This is evident in the realms of security and defence, is becoming more apparent in areas such as productivity, innovation and competitiveness, and more weakness is looming in terms of financial strength.

Most surprisingly, even on trade, the trade bloc's supposed forte, the EU is in danger of becoming a paper tiger.

While the UK has more than its share of the blame for the current dismal state of Europe's affairs, it's the EU that is underperforming most. Even if that is only relative to expectations, because nobody outside the Faragist fringe expected Britain to emerge strengthened from Brexit.

> Defence, an area in which the UK is expected to make a meaningful difference, is particularly affected

The EU is unique in having sent a bevy of its foremost leaders to grovel to Donald Trump over Ukraine just weeks after having an unfavourable trade framework imposed on them. At least Keir Starmer was perceived to have landed a better deal.

Still, the perception of weakness on all fronts is Europe-wide. Defence, an area in which the UK is expected to make a meaningful difference, is particularly affected.

Attempts to cover this up by foregrounding EU-UK defence pacts, or coalitions of the willing, can in fact be counterproductive if there's no follow-through.

How far will Putin go?

The large-scale drone incursion is widely interpreted as Russia testing Europe. It offered a legitimate chance for more forceful common action, red lines or maybe even projecting some air defences forward into Ukraine.

Instead, the UK and its EU partners are sticking with a NATO response that was mostly shaped by a loud 'meh' coming out of the Trump White House.

The American dereliction of duty, by now wholly in character, appears to have stymied a more forceful European response. That this has not materialised now, after years of war in Ukraine and mounting Russian provocations towards the EU, only increases the perception that Europe does not have the wherewithal to do anything about it.

The question is not whether Vladimir Putin is seeking a full-on war with other European countries, it is how far he will go in probing and exploiting his neighbours' weaknesses

It's one thing to weigh a measured reaction in order not to escalate the situation unnecessarily. It's another to mount so weak a response as to invite further provocation.

On current form, Europe can expect more Russian interference. This might at some moment cause major carnage. But mainly, it will continue to nurture the generalised feeling of uncertainty and chaos that both the Kremlin and its pack of like-minded political allies around the world seek to exploit.

The question is not whether Vladimir Putin is seeking a full-on war with other European countries at this point. It is how far he will go in probing and exploiting his neighbours' weaknesses. It is precisely because these are currently so pronounced that the situation is becoming more dangerous.

From Cold War drawdown to current weakness

It's quite possible that Europe is focusing too much on rebuilding its military capacity without taking adequate measures in the meantime to bolster its defences at once. It is creating a narrative that it will be vulnerable for the coming decade or so, especially without full US backing.

This might be a realistic assessment if compared to the kind of overwhelming force that the American military can bring to bear. But it ignores the not inconsiderable forces at the disposal of the major European countries, especially vis-à-vis a Russia that is unable to easily overcome Ukraine's defences.

While Europe's defence drawdown since the end of the Cold War looks irresponsible in retrospect, the current weakness is being accentuated by political and economic factors.

European countries are not able to agree among themselves on how far NATO's reliability has been eroded

One of the main political restraints for projecting defensive determination is uncertainty over the reliability of the whole NATO alliance caused by the US administration's equivocations.

European countries are not able to agree among themselves on how far NATO's reliability has been eroded. Some are focused solely on 'keeping Trump aboard', despite recurring evidence that such efforts tell us very little about the eventual course of action that the American president will take.

With NATO in the twilight zone, it remains difficult for Europe to set up its own defences. Despite the by now obvious unreliability of the US, there's still a lot of hesitance, apart from in France, to have European defence structures duplicate NATO's.

A revanchist Russia, opportunistic China, and a solipsistic US

All of these issues are exacerbated by the continent's current bout of economic and financial troubles. From low growth to high debt, Europe is in an unfavourable position to be having to crank up its military spending.

Higher debt and less money for other crucial expenditure also fans the stark political divisions that might bring more Putin- and Trump-friendly parties to power in some major countries.

There is blood in the geopolitical water, and the sharks are circling to tear pieces off a floundering Europe

In this context, the EU's perceived capitulation on trade to Trump this summer might be understandable but is likely a mistake. It certainly makes sense at this point to avoid the cost of an ugly trade war. But it further feeds the narrative of European powerlessness, both towards its rivals and its own electorates.

There is blood in the geopolitical water, and the sharks are circling to tear pieces off a floundering Europe. Some 35 years ago, it appeared that it was the old Soviet Empire that was being dismembered. A revanchist Russia, in conjunction with an opportunistic China and a solipsistic US, is now attempting to turn the tables.

Projecting strength where there is none could be dangerous. But failing to set clear red lines, effectively counter provocations and show real strength in the areas where you have it could also cost Europe dearly.