



The other winner in the U.S. election—Russian President Vladimir Putin at the UN Security Council in January 2016. UN Flickr photo/Eskinder Debebe

Trump and the Erosion of the Western Consensus

Yaroslav Baran

In just one year of headlines—the narrow Brexit referendum result, the election of a U.S. president who has questioned both NATO’s relevance and European unity, doubts about Russian involvement in the results of his election—a narrative has emerged that would rationalize what former Conservative adviser and Ukrainian community activist Yaroslav Baran suggests may be an irreversible shift in the world order.

Two thousand seventeen may well go down in history as the year the post-war global order was scrambled irreversibly. The last year’s major electoral events amount to a loosening of the Western liberal-democratic consensus to an unprecedented degree, and to a weakening of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization never before experienced since the alliance was formed in 1949 as a common front against totalitarianism.

Ukraine’s deputy prime minister and minister for Euro-Atlantic integration, Ivanna Klymush-Tsinsadze, made an astute observation during a recent speech in Ottawa. She noted that if

anyone were to have suggested, five years ago, that a nuclear-armed Russia would imminently invade a major European country, they would have been laughed out of the park as a hawkish loon or conspiracy theorist.

Indeed, we all recall the guffaws endured by Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney in 2012 for naming Russia as the greatest threat to global security.

Yet, here we are, at the beginning of 2017, with a now openly irredentist and revanchist Russia having bared its teeth, occupied the Crimean Peninsula in contravention of international law, and nearly three years into a prolonged hot war against Ukraine on a second front in the east.

Five years ago, the European Union was thriving and widely considered the most shining example of international cooperation and integration within a peaceful rules-based framework. The EU project was itself a proof point of the superiority of liberal-democratic values.

NATO was strong and knew its purpose: it was the teeth behind the bark of the liberal-democratic bloc of like-minded Western nations. It was an essential pillar of the global security order. And it was indivisible.

Today's EU faces growing anti-union movements from isolationist and chauvinistically nationalist parties. EU-skepticism is on the rise and the confederation is preparing to embark on divorce proceedings with one of its most powerful members, the UK.

For its part, NATO is facing a crisis of confidence. Despite unquestioned supremacy in military capability, the alliance has remained largely idle as a resurgent Russia repeatedly checkmates the West's diplomatic manoeuvres over global flashpoints.

The glue binding the Euro-Atlantic alliance has been weakened through rows among member states.

Greece and Turkey, both NATO members (and both traditionally wary of one other), have both cozied up to

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Russia, albeit for different reasons: Greece in reaction to EU austerity impositions, and Turkey in the wake of its own authoritarian post-coup crackdown.

The erosion of NATO unity is evident in the contrasting tone between Brussels itself and a growing number of the alliance's member states. While it traditionally reflected the foreign policy of its united members like a mirror, NATO Headquarters' official geopolitical pronouncements are now often contradicted at home with relativist, isolationist and increasingly populist tunes coming from its national capitals. At best, its positioning now comes off as aspirational, and the office of the Secretary-General behaves more as a press office than the central command of history's greatest military force.

Almost everywhere we look, the Western consensus appears to be crumbling. An isolationist May government in the UK is opting for a “hard-Brexit”, eroding British-EU relations in the process. Proto-fascist Marine Le Pen is outpolling competitors for the upcoming French presidency, while the only “reasonable” alternative with a winning chance appears to be Putin-apologist François Fillon.

Hard-right, Euro-skeptic or nationalist governments and heads of state have been elected in Hungary, Poland, Moldova, Bulgaria, Estonia, and counting—and Kremlin-backed movements and parties are on the rise in other countries such as Czech Republic, Netherlands, France and Austria.

The *coup de grâce* came with the election of NATO-skeptic Donald Trump as the next president of the United States. Trump's worldview, as distilled from his campaign-time pronouncements, holds

that Vladimir Putin is an admirable leader with whom the U.S. should mend relations, that NATO is an obsolete anachronism, and that the U.S. should not necessarily live up to its Article 5 obligations should belligerent Russia invade the Baltic states.

Indeed, Trump's populism is rooted in a fundamental iconoclasm that is challenging the major institutions underpinning the stability of not only the United States but of the geopolitical order: with a message track that may as well have been lifted from RT, he has challenged the integrity of elections and democratic processes, the merit of trade liberalization, and the relevance of NATO. He has pledged to end the mutual wariness vis-à-vis Russia, and to work with Russia to tackle ISIS.

As Canadian ex-pat and Atlantic editor David Frum noted on U.S. election night, “We may be living through the most successful Russian intelligence operation since the Rosenbergs stole the A-bomb.”

The picture has changed, the rules have changed, and the global geopolitical balance increasingly bears no resemblance to the values-based distinctions to which we have become accustomed: the clear dividing line between rule-of-law democracies and pseudo-market tough-guy autocracies.

How has such a dramatic shift occurred in such a short period of time? The clues have been around us for some time, but have all become evident through the U.S. presidential campaign. Three significant factors have coalesced in the current recipe for global instability: a blind eye among many trade-liberalizing countries to the demographics adversely affected by globalization; an information age that facilitates fake news and fabricated dissent; and the emergence

of non-state terrorism as a global boogymen. And all three have been actively harnessed by the one country with the most to gain.

As with every economic revolution, globalization has left some people behind. One of the greatest political failures of the last three decades has been an inability of many governments to sufficiently transition workers from the old economy to the new. While governments focused on the *net* benefits of liberalized trade, along with the GDP and job growth statistics that would accrue, they tended to neglect the human side of the equation: the two workers displaced so that the seven new jobs could be created. And while trade liberalization is empirically a positive economic phenomenon overall, it is also very real for the mine worker whose mine was shuttered or the manufacturer whose factory was moved offshore. This aggregate, legitimate, discontent has become an irresistible raw ingredient for the populist iconoclasts who lack the scruples about dabbling in the dark waters of stoking mass anger.

Likewise, the Information Age, for all its economic and social benefits, has provided critical infrastructure for dissemination of anti-establishment thought. Discontent, dissent, propaganda and fake news have superhighways to reach audiences instantaneously. Nothing short of a digital front has opened in the geopolitical contest. Actors such as Breitbart, RT and paid troll farms are now just as much a reality in political discourse and opinion formation as traditional media and methods. Aided and abetted by the closed-loop communities of interest formed by social media, and the effects of propaganda and fake news can be micro-targeted and amplified.

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The emergence of ISIS and other non-state terror entities are the fi-

nal ingredient in the cracking of the world order. These third parties have perpetrated such atrocities that they have forced state actors to look to non-traditional tactical allies. An early example of this phenomenon came when Obama and Putin set aside their differences over Russia's war against Ukraine to deal with the Syrian crisis. Just as the menace of Nazi Germany provided a necessity for the Allies and the Soviet Union to work together in the 1940s, Islamic terror is now creating a pretext for re-engagement between liberal democracies and predator states.

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What next?

Where is NATO headed, then, and what can be done to reverse the rapid decline or its clout? First, the uncompromised members of the alliance will have to set this as a conscious goal, and both Canada and Germany will have to play a major part.

Projects such as Operation Reassurance and Operation Unifier have to continue, with their mandates renewed. Canada is about to deploy to Latvia to run one of four NATO battalions in the Baltic region. These deterrent projects must proceed, and NATO should build contingencies should either of the major partners such as Britain or the United States reassign their resources.

While a difficult budgetary pill to swallow, we must also get used to the idea of investing more in defence. NATO guidelines call for member

states to invest 2 per cent of GDP on defence, while Canada has consistently been coming in under half that value. If Poland, Greece and Estonia can hit the target, certainly there is no excuse for a G7 country like Canada not to, although it would admittedly add significantly to the federal deficit and debt.

The countries on the front lines of risk—such as Ukraine, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Georgia—must also step up their diplomatic game in framing the current Russian threat for what it is, and countering the deluge of “cultural” and “informational” projects flooding the West from the Kremlin and its many proxy institutions.

Finally, counterintelligence must be stepped up across Europe. Almost all of the EU- or NATO-skeptic movements of the last several years have had a strong monetary or info-war connection to the one country that stands to benefit most from a decline of these two liberal-democratic institutions. Earlier detection, realistic assessment of threat, and stronger legal frameworks that allow prosecution are required, lest the divide-and-conquer trend continues.

The year ahead—not to mention the next four in their totality—will be a critical test for the resilience of the Western consensus, and specifically, for the survival of the European Union and NATO. Let us pause to acknowledge Mitt Romney was right, and let us take the remedial steps to ensure the 21st century does not revert to 19th century norms. We are past the point of being able to do this easily, but it must be done to save the global hegemony of liberal-democratic values—values that have always defined who we are as Canadians. **P**

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