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History is brutally back, and Ukraine will test Europe's appetite for the consequences

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The EU's vocation was to tear down walls and promote peace. Should it be a party to a conflict with a nuclear superpower?

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History is like “a riderless horse, galloping through the night”. That was the image the then Spanish prime minister, Felipe González, used to depict the night the Berlin Wall fell. Since 24 February, when history stormed out of the stables, we have again been living in such a moment. Will we be able to bridle it again?

With the invasion of Ukraine the Russian president, [Vladimir Putin](#), has thrown himself into the unthinkable. He has crossed the Rubicon into a time of war. He has no way back. Fire and flames, all or nothing. Political will and cool-headedness on our side are now of vital importance. The first is present in abundance, but the latter is in short supply.

In times of great danger, unexpected forces are unleashed. [Ukraine](#) is fighting back, and in the opening battle for European public opinion it has achieved a stunning victory. We are no longer looking at a chaotic country on the Black Sea but a nation presenting itself as the bearer of Europe's democratic promise, with the president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, its hero.

At least as unexpected is Germany's geopolitical awakening. Massive defence investments, military support for Kyiv, the recognition of gas dependency as a strategic error: one surprise follows another. Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz, spoke in the Bundestag of a "*zeitenwende*" (historical turning point) for Europe, and [took his parliament and public](#) with him into that new era. It's how Helmut Kohl seized the moment in November 1989. Three weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall he single-handedly launched plans for German unification in that same Bundestag, astonishing friend and foe alike.

This spectacular second German *wende* gives the whole EU more unity and strength. Now that Berlin is no longer applying the brakes, [Europe](#) is suddenly deploying the power of its economic sanctions with full force.

It is also striking that the EU will be delivering [weapons worth €450m to Kyiv](#), something that would have been taboo until 10 days ago. To the EU, this feels like crossing a Rubicon of its own. The European alliance for peace is now a party in a conflict with a military and nuclear superpower.

The impact of Germany's awakening is more far-reaching still. As long as Europe's most powerful country remained militarily reluctant, Europe could not be strong. Now that Germany is accepting the realities of international power politics, a lot can change. France, which has always pushed for a more geopolitical Europe, will feel less alone. Other [defence-spending laggards](#) such as the Netherlands and Italy will no longer be able to hide behind Germany's back.

These events also empower Poland and the other central and eastern European member states. For years, their warnings against [Russia](#) were considered exaggerations in Europe's capitals of the west and the south (except, perhaps, London). This has now changed.

Just weeks ago, Poland was in the EU dock for offending against the rule of law. Today, peace and security trump such worries. But at a moment when Europe is fighting in the name of democratic freedoms, it should not lower its guard internally either.

Europe shows plenty of political energy, but strategic calm is sometimes lacking - which is worrying. Twitter triumphalism about Russian military miscalculation is premature. Keeping heads cool is now a matter of life and death. The absolute priority is to avert the danger of a nuclear war. Bravely insisting that Putin is bluffing when he threatens one is irresponsible.

But that fact does not seem to have got through to all the leading politicians. On the very day the weapons deliveries were announced, the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, rashly put the prospect of [EU membership for Ukraine](#) on the table. The next day, [Zelenskiy submitted an official request](#). Poland and other eastern European countries cheered in response, and the [European parliament applauded](#). Hesitant member states kept quiet or took a nuanced position for the time being; nobody begrudges the beleaguered Ukrainians a ray of hope.

In the recklessness of the *zeitenwende*, Von der Leyen appears to ignore the fact that for the Kremlin, which we are trying to bring to its senses, Nato's and the EU's promises to Kyiv since 2008 and 2014 are primary sources of conflict. Is this the best moment to feed the distrust of an opponent in full rage, and to add complexity to a situation already filled with dangerous ambiguities? Amid such high tension, diplomatic formulas of "long-term perspective" or "perhaps one day" are counterproductive. It is tragic but, at best, such statements have come too early. At worst, they will be another false promise. The upcoming EU summit in Versailles on 10-11 March would then repeat for the EU what the [infamous Bucharest summit](#) in

April 2008 did for Nato: open a door to aspiring members while knowing very well they will never cross it in one piece.

And how are we to envisage the outcome: the former Soviet Republic Ukraine joining the EU without becoming a Nato member at the same time? The latter is a geopolitical red line, since it would risk a nuclear war between the US and Russia. But without the US, can the EU rescue Ukraine from Moscow's clutches based on its own military assistance clause (article 42(7) of the Treaty of Lisbon), the untested counterpart to the Nato treaty's article 5, which says an attack on one is an attack on all? Unsurprisingly, [Georgia](#) and Moldova, two other countries eager to escape Moscow's grip, followed suit within days in seeking EU membership.

During the big EU eastward enlargement after the end of the cold war, Poland and the other new members entered Nato first. There was a gap of five years for some (like Poland), just a matter of weeks for others (like Slovenia), but the nuclear-security guarantee always came before the EU [acquis](#) - and not without reason. It is true that Finland and Sweden are in the EU but outside Nato (as are Austria, Ireland, Malta and Cyprus), but those states were neutral in the cold war, and not behind the iron curtain. Faced with the Russian threat, Finland and Sweden may now want to join. For the EU it might be more urgent to diminish the strategic ambiguity for these two current members by somehow extending Nato's nuclear umbrella to them, rather than dangerously increasing it for all. To the beleaguered aspirants, there are other ways to offer economic support and a prospect of rapprochement.

The example of Ukrainian EU membership shows that even this war has not freed Europe of its inbuilt strategic insouciance. Thinking in terms of power, interests and identity, in terms of history and geography, is at odds with Brussels' traditional self-image as a neutral and open space. The EU, after all, was built to overcome power politics, to tear down borders and walls, to disarm national rivalries. Its 1950s founders saw their community as the vanguard of world peace - not a player jostling with the rest but a moral beacon speaking the language of values, at once affable and haughty. This vocation was strengthened after 1989: Europe *was* the end of history.

Now that history is brutally back, it will take time to amend these deficiencies and inbuilt blind spots. Simply calling for a "[geopolitical commission](#)" (as Von der Leyen has done) or for more "European sovereignty" (language that made it into the [German coalition agreement](#)) is insufficient. As is delivering weapons to Kyiv. An angel with a sword is still an angel.

If Europe is to act as a power among powers, capable at some stage even of commanding destructive military force, it will need a different political language to speak about its place in the world. As Hans Kribbe writes in his book [The Strongmen](#), the EU will need to change its ethos and demeanour. In sum, it should no longer be the angel battling to liberate the continent and the world from evil and tyranny, but a mortal, more strategic and real-political actor, which also understands the limits of its powers and its own time.

In Versailles this week, EU leaders will discuss these matters. In the weeks ahead, one question will be: can we accept coexistence with a geopolitical adversary whom we despise, be it in Moscow or Beijing? Not crushing them as the devil incarnate, not trying to destroy them, not projecting ourselves (again) into a post-historical future of universal peace, but dealing with them as a rival? Politically, that is perhaps the real Rubicon that Europe needs to cross.

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