



And if Putin had already won...

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For many years, the West has been making a recurring mistake: that of defining and approaching international politics according to Western values, criteria and prisms, as if the whole world thought like us. Falling into the trap of wishful thinking and confirmation bias, we do not see the realities in front of us and refuse to explicitly name our adversaries before it is too late. Believing that Putin would not attack Ukraine has highlighted this naivety and blindness, as well as our ignorance of and inability to understand the Kremlin leader's vision of the world. The European reaction is very revealing, since neither the EU as a whole, nor its member states, were able to anticipate, nor even think possible, the scenario of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. The consequence of this: disjointed statements, lack of coordination, lack of preparation.

The question then arises: are we not in the process of repeating the same mistakes with regard to the Russian military intervention? This one, it is obvious, is not going as planned by the Kremlin. But does this mean that Putin is losing? Nothing is less certain. Here again, our cognitive biases are playing tricks on us. According to some commentators, politicians and researchers, Putin's defeat is already a foregone conclusion, as he is isolated and becoming a pariah. Such an observation ignores two realities: first, Russian objectives, and second, the reaction of the non-Western world.

Let's first look at Putin's objectives in this matter: elimination of the Ukrainian government, demilitarization and weakening

of Ukraine, and above all realization of the dream of controlling the entire Donbass, making the Sea of Azov an inland sea - which would imply eventually pushing the military invasion all the way to the Moldovan border and Transnistria. Let's assume for a moment that in the next few days Russia takes control of the entire Donbass, including the Sea of Azov, and wishes to stop the fighting. This would be followed by talks for a ceasefire, a new front line and a partial withdrawal of Russian forces from the Kiev region. This would result in a frozen conflict in which Ukraine, weakened and landlocked, would have lost part of its territory (assuming that the Russians manage to take Odessa; moreover, as with Crimea in 2014, the West will not fight Putin to recover the Donbass). This frozen conflict would last as long as an authoritarian regime ruled in Moscow. Ukraine's membership in NATO or the EU would then be excluded, since the country would be at war. In such a scenario, Putin would have achieved 2 out of 3 objectives, without forgetting of course that he could always try to assassinate President Zelensky - the assassination or attempted assassination of leaders being a common occurrence, let us recall the case of Viktor Yushchenko.

The second point raised is that of Putin's isolation, so sought after by the West. Is this isolation a reality? And if it is, will it remain so once the Ukrainian conflict has become a frozen conflict? According to some observers, Putin's Russia is now isolated on the international scene. However, if we look at the vote in the General Assembly, we can see that this isolation is far from being achieved: 141 countries condemned the

Russian invasion, but 5 countries voted against it, and 35 countries, including China and India, abstained. In other words, 40 countries did not condemn this intervention, not to mention those who, although having condemned it, will not impose sanctions. Unanimity is therefore far from being a reality.

Moreover, Putin has already succeeded in bringing Russia back to the table of the great powers, and in making his country an essential part of international politics. From Moscow, Putin has worked with China to push back the liberal order, and this strategy is working: democracies are in crisis and authoritarian regimes are more numerous today than they were 15 years ago - and constantly increasing. With Xi Jinping, Putin wants to be the vanguard of a contestation, of a destruction even, of this order born in 1945 and reinforced in 1990. The world is divided into three groups: democracies, authoritarian regimes, and countries that alternate between the two, sometimes aligned with the former, sometimes siding with the latter.

Furthermore, if we look ahead to 2024, Putin could very well succeed in bringing Russia out of its isolation, however relative. In such a scenario, the head of the Kremlin would place at the presidency one of his protégés, that is to say, from his generation, a close relative of the siloviki, or from the next generation, a child of siloviki. He would position himself at the head of the Security Council, which would ensure his control over major security issues and foreign affairs. Wouldn't a new Russian presidency send a signal for new relations with Russia?

For some, these scenarios are worthy of a science fiction novel. However, a good strategist must consider all possibilities, and avoid wishful thinking and the illusion that ignoring the most unpleasant scenarios will protect us from their realization. It is one thing to disagree with, or not to encourage, an international order along the lines of Russian or Chinese visions. Ignoring these same worldviews is another, which can only lead to more conflict and

even a third world war if we do not find a *modus vivendi* with our adversaries.