

"2/24"?

What Putin's war means for international cooperation

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Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is not simply a watershed moment for Europe and its security architecture; like the 9/11 terror attacks of 2001, it could change the entire international system. Back then, it was the efforts of the United States as a superpower to galvanise the world for a global war on terror that shifted the focus of security policy for years to come, setting a course for diplomacy, development cooperation and other forms of international cooperation to follow.

24 February 2022, or "2/24", could go down in history as a new turning point. There is a real risk of the world being divided up into a new geopolitical order. Liberal democracies in Europe and North America are being forced to face their own vulnerability once more. The Ukrainian population is experiencing untold suffering first hand, yet the threat extends further. Europe is at risk of seeing a new dividing line between Putin's sphere of influence and his Western neighbours. Meanwhile, Russia is far less isolated outside of Europe and North America, with over 50 states not voting to condemn its actions at the UN General Assembly on 2 March. These included global heavyweights such as China and India, along with most Asian states and Southern and East Africa. Concurrently, there is a growing danger that tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, stoked by China's interventionist policy, could rise and spill over into armed aggression.

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Consequently, it is not inconceivable that the international community will be divided up once again into "friends and foes". At the same time, the climate crisis continues to intensify, global inequality is mounting, and the coronavirus pandemic, still far from over, requires multilateral, cooperation-based solutions now more than ever. Faced with a new reality, in which a nuclear power is carrying out military revisionism and disregarding every rule of international relations, discussing armament and deterrence is not enough. There is still a need for cooperation, though this will require us to make adjustments to international cooperation mechanisms. There are three burning issues right now:

Political regimes: Russia's evolution over the last two decades should serve as a serious warning of how things can end up if authoritarian rulers are able to inoculate their power system against all domestic attempts to challenge it, often aided by

economic rents generated abroad. The greatest strategic challenge that liberal democracies will face in the foreseeable future will not be simply to contain Russia's aggression, but rather to curb this kind of unchecked exercise of power more generally. As such, despite the claims of some so-called security-policy realists, promoting and protecting democracy and human rights and encouraging diversity within civil society is not a naive approach, but a long-term and demonstrably-effective investment, provided it is not undermined by short-term economic and strategic interests.

Interdependence: Russia's flagrant violations of international law could give the impression that the concept of peace-building through interdependence has failed entirely. However, cooperation, and, by extension, interconnectedness between structures, interests and capital flows will remain essential for shaping global tasks in future. This makes it all the more important to specify the conditions for beneficial interdependence. Governments that brutally suppress freedom and human rights at home will also, if need be, disregard fundamental international rules. Any interdependence involving these governments must not be allowed to evolve into an arrangement that leaves their partners open to blackmail. We need to check far more carefully in future whether supply chains and raw material supplies are robust enough to withstand major political crises. The necessary system redundancies will incur costs, but this is the price we must pay for a resilient model of interdependence.

Development budgets: The German government has announced that it is to invest significantly more in its armed forces than seemed conceivable just a few weeks ago. There is also growing demand for humanitarian funding. On the flip side, however (as appears to be the case in the German cabinet's latest draft budget), there is a risk that this will lead to cuts in funding for development cooperation and other forms of structural collaboration. This would be a catastrophically short-sighted move that would hamper, if not preclude, efforts to curb conflict and prevent violence in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is true that we will need to radically overhaul the conventional model of development cooperation in the near future to avoid getting stuck in an outdated donor-recipient paradigm. However, the amount of funding required to shape constructive partnerships globally is set to increase, not decrease. Now more than ever, resources are needed for developing solutions to common global issues and strengthening diversity, cohesion and innovation within societies.

If we understand international cooperation as counteracting the consolidation of autocratic rule, shaping a more resilient concept of interdependence and investing in long-term structural development, then we will be able to make a key contribution to securing our global future, particularly in the wake of 2/24.