Europe and the problem of force

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In a timely opinion piece written prior to Russia's intervention in Ukraine, Res Publica Nowa editor-in-chief Wojciech Przybylski contends that should Europe rule out the use of force, it will clear the way for others who will not hesitate to use military might to achieve their political ends.

Naked brute force has the edge over talks. Violence remains the essence of power. In economic terms, Europe is undoubtedly a big fish; but if it is to cease to be small fry in political terms, it needs to understand these lessons. Only through the coordinated development of Europe’s military potential will we be able to bolster European standards around us and globally. It is appropriate that we do this only in the name of liberal principles: freedom, human rights and the rule of law. On the one hand these principles require that we condemn the use of force, including war. On the other, they require us to be prepared for war. Thus far, no attempt to rebuild European military strength has been successful. Neither has the world ever seen such a peaceful process as the creation of the European Union. Yet, it exists.

However, the essence of politics in today’s Europe is deteriorating. While it is true that the world has changed dramatically over the last centuries, this change has not been so profound that force has ceased to play the deciding role in the creation of political order. Quite the contrary. The sincere intentions of Europeans have done nothing to limit the level of violence in the world over the last few decades. The tragedy of another world war has been avoided but clashes are occurring with greater frequency even in the immediate neighbourhood. Syria is currently the site of conflict, Russian forces occupied part of Georgia in 2008, and it was not so long ago that blood was spilt in the Balkans. Europe is mindful of historical tragedies. But it is not so much that Europe is reluctant to use force as unwilling to admit that force remains at the centre of politics and that the use of violence is the essence of political power.

It is a bitter pill to swallow, to think that even as a continent we are small fry in political terms. That said, there is in modern political thought no resolute answer as to how violence should be placed at the heart of power and as to how it may be harnessed. This is why the leaders on our continent compensate for the sense of their own weakness by developing diplomatic instruments that they characterize as European “soft power”. They are unwilling to face the fact that the power of European countries is based on the same
law to which all of the world’s communities are subject. That is, it is necessary to be prepared to use force not only in the name of specific interests but also in the name of shared values. At times, European countries make limited, and thus pitiable, attempts at armed intervention, such as during the recent conflicts in Libya and Mali. We should, however, remember the Balkans and ask ourselves how many human lives were saved by all the pathetic babbling on about human rights at the time, and the resulting inability to intervene. Do we truly believe that tragedy will not return because we can defeat acts of aggression with words alone?

We live by the conviction that the European community can survive only if we renounce violence. The memory of the tragedy of war can provide a warning but the power of this warning is fading, while violence remains very much at the heart of political action. A case in point is the pressure that Germany and the International Monetary Fund applied on Greece when it had to accept the conditions of financial aid against its better judgment and common sense. Fortunately, in this case, no armed conflict ensued, but allusions were made to wartime violence and occupation in many statements.

**Europe: Power, but without force**

There are two terms that can be used to describe how communities end up taking a particular direction: power and force. It is possible today to be sincerely convinced that power, and political power in particular, is nothing more than braggadocio when held up against the means that other organizations have at their disposal: corporations, media giants, individual pressure groups, and even individual people often control the agenda in a country to a greater extent than parliament. The influence that this has on the lives of communities is enormous but incidental. Nevertheless, regardless of who the new “strongmen” are, their activity is straightforwardly political. They use the power of words and sometimes of money to shape the world order and to remove the monopoly on power held by governments and states.

The discord between power and strength is best illustrated by comparing Europe and the United States. Robert Kagan, in his 2002 article “Power and weakness”, [1] demonstrated this by use of two metaphors. He compared Europe to the stance of Venus, a stance that displays affinities with the peace-loving philosophy of Immanuel Kant. America was compared to Mars, the god of war, and is closer to Hobbesian ideas. At the time, the text caused great controversy, in part due to the fact that George W. Bush was using similar rhetoric when declaring war on terrorism. Ten years on, Kagan explained that the text had appeared prior to the war on terror and was not intended to be a justification for the policies of the White House. It had, though, been inspired in part by the notorious essay by British strategist Robert Cooper on the weakness of Europe. [2]

In this essay, Robert Cooper echoed the view of his countryman, the historian Michael Howard, who had noted the significant weakness of a Europe that is convinced of the primacy of liberal values and yet not prepared to take up arms to defend them. The civilized countries, argued Cooper, had given up the position to which they owed their strength. This did not always hold true. There are, though, few significant exceptions to the rule. Nobody would seriously claim that the power held by the president of the United States is mere braggadocio. We can add to the list of the powerful the leaders of Russia, Pakistan and China, but not the peaceful and prosperous Switzerland, Germany or
Denmark. Nobody suspects Russia, Pakistan or China of harbouring liberal tendencies. Nevertheless, soon enough other countries outside Europe may join the group of western/liberal powers. Lately, even Brazil has been arming itself in order to defend its wealth of natural resources and its modernization project. It is countries such as Brazil and India that will join America in shaping the free world.

**War, or: Being prepared for change**

The consequences of a political decision always ultimately determine someone else’s existence or lack thereof. The failure to take action can put decisions of existential importance into the hands of others. In extreme situations, this concerns conflicts that cost human lives. We are talking about crime, too, but above all, about war. We need to remember, though, that the essence of war is not death, but achieving a clearly defined political goal. Many armed conflicts naturally spiral out of control and leave casualties in their wake. And yet these armed conflicts are less lethal than road accidents and we are almost as indifferent to them as we are to detective shows. Road traffic accidents claim over a million lives annually worldwide. Armed conflicts from the second half of the twentieth century up to the present day have claimed ten times less lives annually. It is of course impossible to compare numbers of fatalities: each lost human life is a tragedy. Nevertheless, when considering the evil that armed conflict could potentially bring, it is worth bearing in mind that in times of peace we witness events both bloodier and crueler. It would not be entirely perverse to ponder the social benefits of warfare. What strength lies in preparedness for war? Strange as it may seem to say, war is above all an instrument of social change and, in spite of appearances to the contrary, of progress. Why then should liberalism not support wars on the understanding that participation in armed conflict is a motor for change in society? Robert Nisbet, a leading American sociologist, described in his 1988 pamphlet, The Present Age, [3] how America’s participation in the wars at the start of the twentieth century drove America’s progress as regards equal rights, new technologies and social change. This came about at the cost of tradition, the strength of local communities and religion. Nisbet, a dyed-in-the-wool conservative naturally bemoaned this. Shouldn’t liberals – not to mention socialists – seriously consider their stance in light of this?

I don’t wish to be misunderstood. I am not calling for war to be declared in the name of progress in the style of nineteenth century Marxists. I am, though, drawing attention to the fact that wars in principle bring fewer fatalities than may be commonly assumed and that the purpose of war is not to kill the enemy but to achieve political aims. Secondly, particularly in a democracy where an element of social awareness is involved, even in the context of participating in a distant combat mission, it is precisely warfare that is the main motor of the change that liberals, after all, are eager for.

**Force without power**

What will the consequences be of following policies that rule out the possibility of warfare? If we are not convinced that strength – including physical force – creates political power (and the countries of Europe do after all aspire to the possession of that power) then we will become a museum piece that is moved from corner to corner by rising powers who will not necessarily look favourably on our model of civilization. This
may be our undoing in the long term. It is not a question, though, of frantically building up our armies and demonstrating our readiness to fight. It is necessary to arm ourselves until such a point as Europe becomes a great power – we need to apply the tactics of a weak player who is indispensable to everyone but who threatens no one. That strength can also bring positive effects in the right circumstances – when the current European leaderships weaken and lose their power to set the agenda. The strength of conviction articulated in conversation is occasionally effective in setting the agenda. But in general, it needs to be backed up by force as it is traditionally understood.

Even in Poland, in discussions about politics we tend to prefer to use the word “power” to represent the concept of force. However, if the modern world is to be understood then it has to be recognized that it is force that creates power and which infuses it with meaning. Political power is at times toothless but, in the social world and especially in the world of politics, force never loses its bite. It was certainty about this that provided the catalyst for the democratic changes in Central Europe. Vaclav Havel’s concept of “the power of the powerless” made sense of an odd situation, in which the leadership in actual fact lacked the necessary strength to lead and fell as a result. It was the democratic social movements that possessed that strength. It was they that replaced the old leadership. Their weakness, though, was and still is the fact that they turn their backs on the essence of politics and thus on the scene of potential conflict.

The fate of democracy and the European model of society are dependent on whether we will be able to rise up and take advantage of force to create order in the name of liberal values. Violence and dictatorship are written into every level of state institutions anyway, no matter how democratic they are. We do not have to use them. If, however, we rule out the use of force then we are clearing the way for others who will not hesitate in the use of uncontrolled, unlimited force.

Footnotes


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