



Policy Notes

Russian foreign policy and the crisis in Western policy-making

I. The Putin vision

Putin's conduct of Russian foreign policy reflects several core assumptions about international politics.

First, the world is a harsh place, where the strong prosper and the weak get beaten. Geopolitical influence and military might are the primary virtues; the major powers run global affairs; and smaller states are objects of great power diplomacy. This is an amoral world, shaped by power and self-interest, not good intentions, weak international institutions, or pious notions of shared norms and values.

Second, the era of American global leadership and Western liberal universalism is over. The EU's European project is dead, sunk by its own moral excesses and complacency. Even the idea of a unitary West, with its associated institutions and norms, has become obsolescent. Instead, the world is now multipolar – or rather tripolar.

Third, Russia is one of three independent centres of global power, along with the United States and China. It is an indispensable player, not just in its neighbourhood and Europe, but globally – as developments in the Middle East have shown. It is central to the equilibrium of the international system, and there can be no true security without a prominent role for Russia.

As seen by the Kremlin, the refusal of the West – above all the United States – to accept these realities has further destabilized an already volatile international environment. It means that Russia must fight to defend its interests by all available means, including military force. For only by showing strength and resolve will it gain the respect of others, and defeat the West's attempts to weaken it.

II. Russian foreign policy – the balance sheet

So much for the Putin vision, what about the realities? Current international trends appear to favour Russia. For the time being, American president Donald Trump is well-disposed. His foreign policy focus, such as it is, is directed mainly towards China, North Korea, Islamic State, and Iran. This eases the pressure on Moscow to respond, let alone offer any meaningful concessions. Transatlantic unity over sanctions against Russia may erode in the face of growing Ukraine-fatigue in the West. Russia is once again a leading actor in the Middle East. And there is no mistaking the aura of self-confidence emanating out of the Kremlin.

Yet the conventional picture of a masterful Putin transforming Russia into a global power is misleading. While there have been notable operational successes, Russia's international position has deteriorated in key respects since his return to the Kremlin in 2012.

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With the evident exception of Syria, Russia plays only a peripheral role in global decision-making. Putin's efforts to promote the BRICS as the foundation of an alternative world order have achieved little, for all the pomp of its annual summits.

Putin seeks to reassert a dominant Russian influence across the post-Soviet space. But with few exceptions, this is in long-term decline. The intervention in Ukraine has been a fiasco, the Eurasian Economic Union is moribund, and the expansion of Chinese influence in Central Asia is undermining Russian primacy. Moscow has little to offer by way of a positive vision for the ex-Soviet republics, who fear an imperial agenda.

The 'turn to the East' has under-achieved. Despite several energy and arms agreements with China, Russia's footprint in Asia remains modest. Aside from the Sino-Russian partnership, its relationships in the region are weak and underdeveloped. And while Moscow and Beijing cooperate in areas where they identify common interests, the notion of an authoritarian entente against the West is bogus.

Russia's relations with the West are in a prolonged slump, with little prospect of recovery. While Putin has certainly succeeded in embarrassing Western leaders, Russia's capacity to influence their decision-making has been conspicuously lacking until now.

Early hopes in Moscow that a Trump administration would bring about a thaw in relations have given way to scepticism. Indeed, the American president's erratic behaviour has the potential to generate new crises from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. There is also a notable disjunction between Trump's view of the United States as the incontrovertible global number one, and Putin's vision of a tripolar order.

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More generally, Putin faces a major challenge in promoting Russia as a problem-solver. It is one thing to obstruct or undermine Western interests. It is quite another to implement a positive agenda of one's own. There are huge practical obstacles to Russia assuming a more ambitious global role – economic constraints, absence of moral authority, and limited influence on other major players, non-Western as well as Western.

III. The crisis of Western policy-making

Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, Putin has succeeded in promoting the image of a resurgent and globally influential Russia. Paradoxically, Western countries and organizations have 'achieved' just the opposite. Notwithstanding strong institutions, powerful economies, thriving civil societies, and well-established political and military alliances, they have managed to look much weaker than they are, riddled by indecision and lack of confidence.

So how has this looking-glass world occurred? One critical factor has been the ineptitude of Western policy-making towards Russia over a prolonged period. On just about every level – moral, political, and institutional – this has been an abject failure. To understand why and how, we need to look not only at recent events, but at the totality of the post-Cold War era.

Underestimating the challenges

Following the demise of the Soviet Union, Western governments underestimated the immensity of the challenges facing the new Russia. Contrary to popular wisdom, the problem was not their triumphalism, lack of generosity, or allegedly broken promises about NATO enlargement, but rather the mistaken belief that with the collapse of the Soviet system the job was largely done.

In particular, they underestimated the psychological impact of the end of empire, and the pain of democratic and capitalist transition. Almost overnight, Russia fell 'from hero to zero' – from being the world's second superpower into a reform project, a subject of pity and derision. There was little grasp in Western policy circles of the extent of this trauma. It was thought that Russia would become a 'normal' country – a view that overlooked the fact that for Moscow 'normality' meant Russia retaining its position as a great power with all the attendant prerogatives.

Western governments were no less deluded in thinking that geopolitics had become anachronistic in the post-Cold War world. They believed that Russia would abandon zero-sum thinking, and come to think and behave like the West, even if this process took some time. In subscribing to such illusions, they mistook Russian weakness for compliance. They failed to realize that for much of the Russian elite the demise of the Soviet Union and accompanying loss of superpower status was truly 'the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century', as Putin put it.

All this highlighted a larger complacency in Western attitudes. Russia, it was assumed, would either have to get with the program or become irrelevant. The possibility that it might re-emerge as a major power, let alone one capable of taking on the West, was all but ruled out. As a result, Western countries and organizations such as the EU never developed a practicable vision for strategic engagement with Russia, indulging instead in platitudes about common perceptions, values, and interests.

Political cringe

It is only in recent years that Western governments have started to take Russia seriously again. The trouble, however, is that they have lurched from one extreme to another – from complacency to something approaching panic. This has had a number of unfortunate consequences.

One outcome is a political cringe based on the mistaken premise that if only the West had been nicer to Moscow, we would be facing a very different Russia today – pro-Western, post-imperial, and fine upstanding member of the international community. Such judgements are no less naïve than the integrationist assumptions that preceded them. They reveal a profound ignorance of Russian strategic culture from Tsarist times to the present. Unsurprisingly, they dovetail with the self-serving Kremlin line that Russian actions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria were righteous responses to Western provocations.

Negotiating from weakness

The narrative of a Russia 'more sinned against than sinning' feeds into a centuries-old tradition of national victimhood – one that Putin has hawked to gullible Western audiences in seeking to extract a range of concessions. These include a free hand in Syria; acceptance that Ukraine and the post-Soviet space are part of Russia's 'sphere of privileged interests'; recognition of the annexation of Crimea; the unconditional lifting of sanctions; and the trashing of the existing international system and its substitution by a multipolar order in which the Great Powers decide and smaller states abide.

It is of course natural that Moscow should seek to exploit divisions and uncertainties in the West. What is extraordinary, though, is that many Western politicians and observers – wittingly or unwittingly – should abet it in this enterprise. They appear to believe that the Kremlin will view a softer line on sanctions, Crimea, or NATO as indicating a new spirit of good will and cooperation. They are seduced by mantras of 'cooperation' and 'engagement', without recognizing that these mean very different things to different people.

The record shows that Moscow regards Western concessions more often than not as born of weakness. For example, in 2009 it interpreted the Obama 'reset' as a mea culpa for the failures of the Bush administration; as evidence of US neediness in relation to Afghanistan and Iran; and as vindication of the Russian military intervention in Georgia six months earlier. Advocates of accommodation or 'engagement' with Russia are wont to cite classical realists, such as Henry Kissinger and John Mearsheimer, in support of their arguments. Yet it was Kissinger who in the 1970s understood the imperative of negotiating from strength. Western concessions over Ukraine and/or Syria would represent just the opposite – de facto acknowledgement that Putin has been right all along.

Mixed messages and confused objectives

Western policy-makers have often been unclear in their messages, reflecting confusion about objectives and how to achieve them. A particularly egregious example of this was NATO's mishandling of the question of Ukrainian and Georgian membership at the 2008 Bucharest summit. It is often alleged that the Kremlin undertook the Georgia war because it felt threatened by their impending accession. In fact, the opposite was true. The summit declaration stated that Ukraine and Georgia would become members, but offered no time-line or

Membership Action Plan that might have made this a practical (if distant) reality.

The resultant policy was a classic curate's egg: by mentioning membership for Ukraine and Georgia, it gave Moscow a reason to be outraged; but by demonstrating there was no appetite to follow through, it signalled weakness. The indecent haste of leading European states, such as France and Germany, to resume business as usual with Russia following the Georgia war only reinforced this impression.

The Bucharest summit highlighted the disjunction between high-sounding rhetoric and underwhelming outcomes. The EU, in particular, has been big on the 'vision thing', but has failed to invest sufficient political will, much less the material resources necessary to achieve real results. The Eastern Partnership exemplifies this shortcoming. Like the Bucharest NATO summit, it was high-profile enough to provoke Russian hostility, but too small to make a tangible difference in the target countries of Eastern Europe.

The problem has been aggravated by the failure of Western governments to hold the elites of other ex-Soviet republics properly accountable, which has meant that resources that have been allocated have often been wasted or misappropriated. Democracy promotion and economic assistance have become identified – for example, in Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova – with support for corrupt regimes, leaving the West open to the charge that it is less motivated by democratic ideals than by a desire to counter Russian influence.

Western feebleness and indecision have also been apparent in the failure to follow up assorted promises and ultimatums. This has cast doubt on the credibility of such commitments, and of the West in general. Thus, Obama's failure to act on his 'red line' in relation to Assad's use of chemical weapons in August 2013 indicated there was no real US intention to intervene in Syria. Crucially, it encouraged Moscow to believe that, if it acted decisively, it could do so with impunity.

Hypocrisy and double standards

Western governments are frequently accused of hypocrisy and double standards, with good reason. They talk up democracy and the rule of law, yet continue to support authoritarian regimes around the world, including in the post-Soviet space. They rightly condemn Russia's military interventions in Ukraine and Syria, yet embark on their own morally dubious ventures, such as the Iraq war and the Libyan intervention.

The United States speaks of international law, yet is unwilling to sign on to major international agreements and institutions, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the International Criminal Court. Such voluntarism has become much more pronounced under Trump, undermining efforts to combat climate change and trade protectionism, while reinforcing perceptions of American exceptionalism. It confirms the Kremlin in its view of the world as an essentially amoral environment, where truth and legitimacy are relativist and subjective notions.

Poor performance

Ultimately, the biggest weakness of Western policy-making has less to do with Russia than with the failure of the United States and much of Europe to manage their own affairs. The ongoing imbroglios in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya; the grotesque

spectacle of Donald Trump; and the collective European failure to address the refugee crisis highlight an acutely dysfunctional West whose moral authority and capacity for influence is at its lowest ebb in two centuries.

As long as Western decision-makers are unable to deal with such problems, they can scarcely hope to change Russian behaviour for the better. On the contrary, their failures have fuelled Putin's opportunistic tendencies, and further encouraged an intensely competitive strategic culture in Moscow.

IV. Lessons

So what lessons can be salvaged from the debacle of Western policy-making towards Russia? We should start by recognizing that there is no early prospect of a softening in the substance (as opposed to the presentation) of Russian foreign policy. Putin is convinced that it has been overwhelmingly successful, and few in Moscow disagree.

Western governments must understand that Putin is uninterested in cooperation for its own sake. This is only attractive if it serves his often narrow purposes. It is vital to keep this in mind when discussing with Moscow ways of managing the conflict in Syria, combating IS, or stabilizing Ukraine. On broader issues, such as the nature and rules of the international system, there is and can be no likemindedness. Russian and Western interests are rarely the same, and are sometimes in direct conflict – Syria being a notable case in point.

Putin will look to sustain the diplomatic and geopolitical momentum with tactical 'coups', both to realize concrete objectives, and as a matter of sound operating practice. He will bet on the weakening resolve of Western policy-makers, disillusionment of Western publics, and destabilizing effect of the Trump factor. In the face of such cynicism, Western capitals need to be less shockable, more tactically alert, and better prepared for the instability that lies ahead.

They must be as clear in their goals and as resolute and unapologetic as Moscow in defending their interests. It is naïve to imagine that 'understanding' the Kremlin's 'legitimate concerns' will somehow result in more reasonable behaviour on its part. Wishing away Russian aggression under the guise of 'engagement' serves merely to delegitimize Western institutions and norms, and undermine the international order.

It is important to keep open channels of communication with Moscow. Cooperation may be possible on a case-by-case basis. But the emphasis should be on small, concrete steps, such as strengthening deconfliction arrangements in Syria and the Baltic Sea, rather than indulging in fantasies about likemindedness and grand bargains (for example, lifting sanctions over Ukraine in return for 'cooperation' on Syria and IS). Even in the best case scenario, any progress will be limited, slow, and fragile.

Finally, the West needs to put its own house in order. This means doing much more to restore the credibility of its norms and institutions. For unless it fixes itself, it has no hope of influencing anyone else.

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