

# Russian Foreign Policy Risky Successes



**R**ussian foreign policy is undergoing an almost constant dynamic transformation. From the confrontation of the Cold War, Russia plunged into an attempt to integrate with the West. Yet Western interventions and disregard for Russian security concerns destroyed its faith in this process of integration. Russia is now basing its policy on the assumption that the new world is dangerously unpredictable. Due to this reason, and also due to its relative economic weakness, Russia puts emphasis on hard power. However, Russian foreign policy has yet to find a new balance if that is possible in a highly volatile world.

## **The world as seen from Moscow**

The foreign policy of Russia is essentially resurrected Russian Im-

perial and Soviet traditions married to specific assessments of new and unprecedented developments on the international scene.

From a traditionally Russian eurocentric view — a view that is increasingly being marginalized in Russian policy circles — the most important of these developments is the decline and multi-layered crisis of Europe since the mid-2000s, which has made it a more self-centered and less promising or reliable partner, if not a volatile potential security challenge in the future.

The European and Euro-Atlantic nations — which a quarter of a century ago seemed destined to dominate geopolitical, social, and political matters — have lost momentum. Today the West is declining in all these aspects, losing 500 years of historic leadership, while Asia and the non-liberal democracies seem to be winning the competition at

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least for the time being.

The main feature of the current and future world is the growing importance of non-Western countries, offering both challenges and possibilities for cooperation. Asia and Latin America offer most in terms of opportunities — the Middle East mostly threats but also windows of opportunity for creative diplomacy.

From Russia's — as well as many emerging powers'—point of

view, the world is not moving in a post-modernist direction. Therefore, it becomes difficult for more traditionalistic Russia, on the one side, and the West, on the other side, to come up with a mutually-shared vision of the global order. New emerging countries are playing the game which used to be played by old imperial countries.

Russia has retained and augmented its diplomatic mastery. Its foreign policy and diplomacy have been very successful over the past few years, especially in the two Syrian gambits: first, with Damascus' chemical weapons and, second, with military operation against Islamic State militants, then in keeping the Ukrainian crisis from escalating into wider geopolitical warfare with the West, and in an unprecedented improvement of relations with the West. To date, Moscow, which recreated its military might and has the will to use it if necessary, seems to be well prepared for this new brave world.

Multipolarity, in which the world has entered at the beginning of the twenty-first century, also seems to be a transitional model. The United States is semi-withdrawing consciously or unconsciously, leaving behind areas of lasting instability and crises. The Arab world is destroyed for decades. An area of continuous tension mounts around the eastern perimeter of China. It will take time, but this turbulence likely will evolve into a new quality. Geopolitical macroblobs will be formed. The United States, with its global capabilities and influence through the nascent Trans-Pacific Partnership and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, will be a pillar of one. China, Russia, India, Kazakhstan, Iran, and many other states will embody another geopolitical grouping — a Community of Greater Eurasia. Europe, against this background, will find itself economically and politically weakened and semi-ruptured.

All of this is happening amid an

unprecedented long-term rise of terrorism, unresolved traditional global challenges, a vulnerable international financial system, an increase in global economic competition, the emergence of new rivalry between China and the United States, and a fragile system of international law.

Beginning with the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, continued by the invasion against Iraq and de facto aggression against Libya with predictable consequences, Western interventions — including predict-

country (Ukraine), which declined to return credits to a foreign (Russian) government.

The picture is not all bleak from a Russian vantage point. The rise of Asia, particularly China, provides an alternative source of capital and technology, but above all a possibility to develop Russia's eastern regions using their new competitive advantages, including abundant mineral resources and the ability to provide Asian markets with energy — and water-intensive products. For the first time in history, Siberia

**“New emerging countries are playing the game which used to be played by old imperial countries.”**

able failure in Afghanistan — have left many in the Russian elite wondering not only about the motives of US behavior, but the competence of their Western counterparts. Reflecting this sentiment, President Vladimir Putin asked rhetorically during his speech at the 70th plenary session of the UN General Assembly, “do you at least realize now what you've done?”

It seems also that the West-led globalization, which brought great benefits to the whole world, is starting to crack as its leaders are starting to see that it is bringing more benefits to its competitors. The combined GDP of the BRICS, calculated according to purchasing power parity, has almost caught up with that of the United States and the European Union.

Sanctions, without the legitimization of the UN Security Council and against World Trade Organization rules, such as those imposed against Russia and also those imposed by Russia against Turkey, seem to have become the new normal. Even the International Monetary Fund recently violated its “golden rule” and thus its legitimacy by giving purely politically-motivated loans to a

is becoming a promising frontier of development rather than a geopolitical rear or an imperial burden.

Another source of Moscow's behavior is its experience during the last quarter of a century. The world from 1960 to the 1980s was very uncomfortable for the Soviet Union. With a group of highly unreliable but expensive allies, it had to balance simultaneously the West and China. For Moscow, the world was not bipolar but tripolar, with two poles against it. Now and for the foreseeable future, China remains a very valuable partner and maybe even a friend.

When the Cold War ended, most Russians believed that they were among the victors. Moreover, always achieving victory in the end and never accepting defeat has been a part of the Russian national character. A preoccupation with sovereignty and statehood is a keystone of a national identity built up over a millennium of a troubled history, particularly characterized by invasions of Russia itself. Yet these tenets were challenged in the 1990s.

Initially, Russia's Western partners spoke about “a common victory” — which was possible. Russia



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was admitted to the G7 and invited to other forums. But in reality, the West started to act as if Russia was a defeated country or at best a permanent junior apprentice.

NATO expansion was considered by Russian leaders as almost a treachery, a violation of unwritten agreements reached when the Soviet Union ceased confrontation and agreed to — and even assisted in — German reunification. Russia swallowed the bitter pill of NATO's eastward expansion, but it could not reconcile itself with possible Western expansion into Ukraine. That would have created a completely unacceptable situation with a more than 2,000 kilometer unprotected border with a semi-hostile alliance. Many in Russia regarded such a possibility as a potential *casus belli*.

There were numerous official and informal warnings to the Western colleagues not to get close to Ukraine in order to avoid the inevitable confrontation. Alas, these warnings went unheeded.

Against this background, Western support for the Maidan protests and the overthrow of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich triggered a partly preemptive, partly defensive strike from Russia. It seems that the incorporation of Crimea and support for rebels in Donbass were undertaken by Russia to prevent an even bigger geopolitical clash.

The Russian strike targeted the very logic of NATO and Western expansion, but it also impacted competitive yet quite peaceful relations with the European Union.

Relations with the European Union had basically failed. The enthusiasm of the first few post-Soviet years (the Russian prime minister even spoke about the advisability of joining the European Union, and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed in 1994) gradually gave way to growing estrangement and then to mutual irritation. Since the 1990s, the prevailing opinion in the EU seems to have



**A mural in Moscow depicts Crimea in Russian colors. The annexation of Crimea has gravely impacted Russia's relations with the European Union.**

been that Russia should remain a junior partner. Instead, Russia has sought to restore its sovereignty and establish equal relations.

Russia made its last attempt to build closer and equal relations by inviting the EU in early 2010s not only to establish a dialogue with the Customs/Eurasian Union — a Russian-led EU-like trading bloc — but also to build the latter within the European regulatory framework, *acquis communautaire*, in order to facilitate further integration. But Brussels refused to play along and instead tried to continue expanding its own zone of influence. Now it seems that the EU has agreed to start a dialogue, but only after the disaster in Ukraine.

In order to avoid a new split and the reemergence of a threat to Russian and European security, many initiatives and ideas were put forward by the Kremlin: Russian membership in NATO (first by Yeltsin and then, cautiously, by Putin), the erection of a pan-European security organization by building up

the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (in the 1990s) or a new security treaty (Medvedev in the 2000s), and the creation of a common European economic and humanitarian space (Putin in the late 2000s). All of these proposals were either repudiated or neglected or, at best, emasculated via bureaucratic machinery.

The Russia-NATO Council has turned out to be a perfunctory enterprise carried out largely for public relations. When it was needed the most (in the 2008 Georgia crisis), the work of the Council was suspended. The same happened after the crisis in Ukraine.

The OSCE, the only pan-European security organization where Russia has been fully represented, has been continuously emasculated for fear that it would compete with NATO. It has become mostly a talking shop dominated by its pro-Western majority. The OSCE proved useful for the first time during the Ukrainian crisis (which it failed to prevent, much like the

previous ones in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and in Georgia in 2008), when it sent observers rapidly to the field.

Over time, the Russian political establishment began to believe that the Western partners were imposing the rules of the game, yet at the same time were constantly breaking those rules and were unwilling to give Russia a place in the Euro-Atlantic system. Though the Western partners believe this arrangement to be secure and fair, efforts to build such a system through dialogue and persuasion have been so useless that they seem reminiscent of appeasement.

During the last 25 years, Russia and the West have made a fair amount of fundamental errors and/or misdeeds that have led to a new confrontation. From a Russian perspective, the Euro-Atlantic community takes the major share of the responsibility for the failure. The West decided (denying it in words) to expand its sphere of influence and control, pushing Russia back, limiting its European markets, and depriving its security buffers. This second “velvet” edition of the Versailles policy was bound to generate a bitter feeling of injustice and estrangement among Russians.

The expansion of Western institutions was followed by talk about the obsolescence of the notion of zones of influence. This was considered philistine at best.

Russia also bears its share of responsibility for the failure of building up a “Greater Europe” by being weak and entertaining illusions about integration with the West, while having no notion about either the Western development vector, nor having a precise conception of its own reforms. Apparently, it should not have de facto consented to NATO enlargement in 1997. Russia should not have turned a blind eye to the intervention in Yugoslavia in the hope that things would

work themselves out. They did not.

The endless expansion, as Russia believes, of the Western sphere of interests and control, including in territories believed vital for Russian security, coupled with an attempt to alter Russian values or its political system. We have already had a negative experience of such attempts to change the social and civil mentality undertaken by the messianic communist USSR. It is true that “democratic values” are much more humane. The communist ideology was also humane (at least in word). However, the imposition of “universal” values (whether communist,

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liberal, or any other) has historically led to human tragedies and disastrous political consequences. The latest examples are Iraq, Libya, and the whole Middle East.

### **Russian Foreign Policy in Search of a New Balance**

Russia has succeeded to fulfill a minimum task — to stop the expansion of the West without a large-scale war. After the intervention in Ukraine, the outside world was forced to acknowledge a new reality and implicitly accept Russia’s right to firmly defend its interests.

Without doubt, Russia took a great risk and paid a heavy price for it. The confrontation negatively affects the economic well-being of the country. However, a geopolit-

ical standoff between Russia and the West would begin even without Crimea and Donbass given that the objective factors, such as the previous policy of the West and the domestic needs of both sides, are the essence of the conflict.

The transformation of Ukraine into a semi-failed state, the turn of which towards the West is becoming even more structurally impossible, is another result of the current confrontation. The price of its aftermath is high not only for Ukraine but for Russia too. The mutual hostility of previously friendly nations has considerably increased.

Russia has openly challenged Western political, military, and moral dominance. In 2014 Russia monopolized the right of the West to establish the rules of the game. Thus, it has significantly reinforced its standing in other regions of the world.

Russia has demonstrated that compared to other states (apart from China, India, and some other countries), it has a strategic vision and perception of a fairer world order. A restoration of international law and strategic stability has again become a keystone of the Russian political philosophy.

One of the main goals of the Russian foreign policy is an economic and technological development aimed at strengthening Russia’s industrial, human, and military potential.

We have mixed results here: external sanctions, the rise of nationalism, the decline of oil prices, the devaluation of the ruble, and the repatriation of capital (it became unsafe for Russian business to keep it in the West) — all this creates favorable conditions for inner economic development and the restructuring of external economic links. Russian integration in the world economy took abnormal shape as a result of the collapse of the 1990s and the chaotic recovery of the 2000s. It was characterized by the exchange



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of oil and gas dollars for European manufactured goods, including those that were much more profitable to produce in Russia. Import substitution has started in several sectors of the Russian economy, especially in agriculture. However, economic policy has not changed significantly yet. The Russian political elite, which saved the country in the 2000s, still rests, replacing actions with talks about “modernization” and the necessity of diversifying the economy.

However, foreign policy is undergoing a fundamental transformation. For the first time ever, Russian elites have acknowledged the potential benefits and promising outlook of the “pivot to Asia.” Now more than ever, Russia, which belatedly has been turning eastward economically, is accelerating this turn because of the current rupture with the West.

In the latest edition of the Na-

tional Security Strategy of Russia, signed during the last days of 2015, the Asian and post-Soviet areas are for the first time placed first among foreign policy priorities, while the European and American spheres have been put well below even Latin America and African spheres. Probably that kind of placement is a bit overblown, but it reflects the irritation and disillusionment of the Russian security and foreign policy elites with the results of attempts at rapprochement in the previous decades. But it also adequately reflects new realities: Asia and the non-Western world are becoming more promising.

Relying on its diplomatic and strategic clout and its plentiful resources, Russia is helping to develop the other BRICS and create a potentially powerful economic and political grouping around the rejuvenated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with China, India,

Kazakhstan, Pakistan, other regional powers, and eventually Iran.

The emerging big Eurasian grouping, which will probably not be led by a single hegemonic power, unlike groupings built around the US, will have, nevertheless, two obvious leaders: China, as a leading provider of financial and technological resources, and Russia, leading in diplomacy and security building. This “labor division” grants equal partnership and balance in relations of the two countries, at least for the near future. This process of integration was greatly spurred when Russian and Chinese leaders agreed in May 2015 to couple the Chinese Silk Way Economic Belt and Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, which most pundits had gleefully predicted were destined for rivalry. From a Russian perspective, Greater Eurasia should be open for Europe. However, the basic political principles of this community — un-

questionable respect of sovereignty, economic cooperation, non-interference in domestic affairs and support of political and cultural pluralism — would differ from the current European ones.

For Russia, the turn to the East is becoming a fait accompli and the main path towards the world of tomorrow. In principle, the benefits of this turn outweigh the risks, but only if Russia on the way towards sovereign Eurasianism does not lose its traditional European cultural identity, historically connected with its drive towards modernization.

Considering the dynamics of the Russian foreign policy, it is possible that, after getting stronger as a result of a



**Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping shake hands at the 2015 BRICS Summit. The combined GDP of BRICS has almost caught up with that of the United States and the European Union.**



“pivot to Asia” and after developing a better understanding of its limits, Russia will come up with a more balanced policy. However, positive, fundamental changes on the Eastern track have already become irreversible.

For centuries, Russia did not have a Eurasian choice. Russian theorists of Eurasianism were driven by a desire to negate the West and Europe. The rise of Asia is creating a new reality. Russia, as a great Eurasian Atlantic-Pacific power, is potentially open for the West, the East, and the South, and can unify them. The question is — when?

The relative decline of Europe as a Russian foreign policy priority leads one to assume that the restoration of the pre-Ukraine crisis system of European security is impossible. It became a history when Europe failed to build a strong and united community after the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, despite a semi-confrontation with the West, Russia still believes a recovery of pragmatic economic, cultural, and humanitarian partnership with Europe is expedient. Ideally a partnership without ideology. On the European track, Russia will likely prefer to develop relations with nation-states. A meaningful dialogue with the European Union is possi-

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ble, but the “integration of integrations” will hardly become a reality. The dialogue with NATO is useful for its focus on military issues and conflict prevention. A “reset” of the NATO-Russia Council is hardly possible.

At this juncture, Russia’s return to the Middle East has been seem-

ingly successful. A very close cooperation was established with many of the key regional powers — Israel, Egypt, and Iran.

A massive air-force operation in Syria was launched to fight international terrorism as far from Russia’s own borders as possible.

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Russia is eager to develop long-range instruments to manage Middle East crises and open a way for a peace settlement, as well as to save the Syrian government, preventing the country from turning into an Islamic State militants’ bridgehead. Besides, Russia has increased its influence by strengthening ties with its regional allies and taking geopolitical advantage in the key region. As of this writing, Russia seems to be succeeding on all aims. However, there is still the danger that Russia be dragged into a deadlock. The first “black swan” has already come flying — the shooting-down of a Russian fighter by Turkey caused a

most important — on crisis and conflict prevention through intensive, multilateral dialogue on strategic stability.

Moscow, in spite of all its turns in foreign policy, is sticking to one of its key tenets — non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. That

is why it has been playing a key role in solving the Iranian nuclear problem and helping do away with Syrian stockpiles of chemical weapons. These are considered in Moscow among the best successes of its foreign policy. But it was a success of all and for all.

From our point of view, history teaches us that a win-win strategy works better. Attempts of our partners to win a zero-sum game have led to the current crisis. All the more, it is satisfying that the West increasingly understands that it is not possible to find a solution for global and regional challenges without Russia. At the same time, despite a very traditionalistic character of the Russian foreign policy and accumulated distrust, Russia perfectly understands that in the modern world with its numerous problems, a long-term confrontation leads to nowhere.†

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