



## Russian Grand Strategy and how to handle it

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**In many Western chancelleries, there still is a lot of hesitation and bewilderment on how to deal with Russia. A first step in defining a coherent policy vis-a-vis Russia, is trying to understand the motivation and objectives of Russian foreign policy, as well as its weaknesses.**

Churchill's famous phrase on an enigmatic Russia is often quoted when discussing relations with Moscow, and its allegedly unpredictable behaviour as a foreign policy actor. In fact, Russia is not so mysterious as it seems at first sight. But a better understanding requires that we leave our own way of framing reality behind, and try to understand the Russian leaders' world view and their perception of their interests (which is largely shared by Russian citizens).

At present, the relations between Russia and the West (the EU as well as the US) are in bad shape, with little perspective of improvement. The 2014 Ukraine crisis is often quoted as the breaking point, which it certainly was, but the deterioration of relations started much earlier. One may even ask whether relations have ever genuinely been

“good”. This paper will describe the evolution of Russian thinking on foreign policy, analyse how its foreign policy concept is being implemented, and assess how foreign policy hangs together with the domestic situation in Russia, before concluding with some perspectives on how the West could respond to Russian foreign policy.

### **RUSSIA'S EVOLVING FOREIGN POLICY CONCEPT**

The years 1989-1991 saw the downfall of Communism, the dissolution of Comecon and the Warsaw Pact, and the end of the Soviet Union and thus of the bi-polar Cold War era. The spirit of the new era was laid down in the Paris Charter of 1990, the founding act of the OSCE. The Charter stipulated that future cooperation between former Communist countries and the West would be based on market economic principles, parliamentary democracy, and respect for human rights. In the chaotic years of the first half of the 1990s, Russia was mostly preoccupied with its internal problems: the liquidation of the old Communist Party-dominated governance structure, the breakdown of the planned economy, and the changeover from public to private ownership.

Focussing on the formidable challenges of its internal transformation, it looked as if on the international scene Russia was accepting the reality of the unipolar global order and was effectively taking up its place in the (Western) international community – the only one left – dominated by the US. However, below the surface there were already indications that Russia was not terribly comfortable with this subordinate role. When in 1995 Foreign Minister Kozyrev was replaced with the veteran foreign policy expert Primakov, the change in tone and emphasis announced the future development of Russian foreign policy. The Primakov Doctrine holds that Russia is a sovereign actor in global politics and pursues an independent foreign policy. Within this concept, Russia's foreign policy is based on respect for international law and inspired by a multilateral approach. Russia is opposed to an eastward expansion of NATO and intends to enforce its primacy in the post-Soviet space and in Eurasia. This includes a partnership with China.

The change in approach between Kozyrev, faithful to the Paris Charter and accepting the unipolar world order, and Primakov, aiming at making Russia a regional and global power again, explains the increasingly difficult relations between Russia and the West. For those that had any doubts, Putin's speech at the 2007 München Security Conference spelled out clearly that Moscow rejects the post-Cold War US-dominated international order. The Munich speech marked the end of Russia's deference towards the Western powers. Putin claimed the right to defend Russia's own interests and stated his own (great power) ambitions. He expressed his displeasure with the US-dominated international order, attacked the existing European security architecture, denounced NATO expansion, and accused the US of global destabilisation and disdain for international law.

He described the liberal international order as a projection of the US will to dominate the world. With some variations in emphasis, this is the line that can be found in the November 2016 Foreign Policy Concept and the December 2015 National Security Concept of the Russian Federation. Other useful references are [Putin's speech](#) after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and his [speech](#) at the Valdai conference in October 2014.

Russia's foreign policy concept reflects a genuinely "realist" approach to foreign policy: great power interactions are not determined by moral principles or moral commitments, but by considerations of interest and power.

### FOREIGN POLICY IN PRACTICE

The aims of the Russian foreign policy concept are not secret, therefore; likewise, the way this concept is to be put into practice has been made abundantly clear for all to see. The foreign policy concept is implemented through all instruments at Russia's disposal: economic ("energy as a weapon"), political (interference in western democratic processes), and military (Georgia, Ukraine). This Russian concept of "hybrid warfare" has even been publicised by Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov in his 2013 article [The Value of Science Is in the Foresight](#), in which he states: "The very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character". The Kremlin's reliance on proxies, disinformation, and measures short of war are not distinct and separate from its military interventions, and only partially serve as a substitute for hard power. Russian military and hybrid activities are inextricably linked.

The Gerasimov doctrine is not a concept of grand strategy, but the development of an operational concept for Russia's confrontation with the West in support of the actual doctrine that has guided Russian policy for over two decades: the Primakov Doctrine. In Russia's grand strategy, the countries of the former Soviet Union are targeted as Russia's priority sphere of influence. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) plays a prominent role in Russia's foreign policy. The development of bilateral and multilateral relations in the CIS was the major thrust of Russian foreign policy after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Russia had to reluctantly accept that the European ex-Comecon countries and three former Soviet Republics slipped out of the Russian sphere of influence and joined the EU and/or NATO. As far as the other former Soviet Republics in Asia and Europe are concerned, political, economic, social, and cultural links bind these countries to Russia, which considers them either as a hinterland or as buffer states protecting Russia from possible invasion. Because of its size and the length of its borders, Russia has several vulnerable flanks: the Baltics/Nordics, East Central Europe, South East Europe, the South Caucasus, Central Asia. Foreign invasion is a real (or fake) preoccupation of the Russian leadership, and this calls for security arrangements on each of these flanks.

The two priority regions for Russia's foreign policy happen to overlap with the neighbourhood of the EU, which is the priority focus for EU foreign policy according to Article 8 of the Treaty on European Union.

In the first place, Russia's European "near abroad" coincides with the EU's "neighbourhood". In 2004, the launching of the European Neighbourhood policy was looked upon unfavourably by Russia, which refused to enter that framework. The creation of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 was considered an outright anti-Russian gesture, and perceived as the EU seeking to consolidate the extension of its sphere of influence at the expense of Russia. The result of the

competition in the neighbourhood/near abroad is bleak: of the 6 countries of the Eastern Partnership, five (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) have territorial conflicts, directly or indirectly linked to Russia. The sixth country (Belarus) is the scene a of popular revolt against the "last dictator in Europe". Russia pursues its interests using all the tricks in the book. Overt as well as covert interventions are intended to obstruct further rapprochement with the EU and, a fortiori, NATO. The Central Asian part of the Russian near abroad, is of less direct interest to the EU but is of direct importance to China – but that is another story.

A second region in Europe where Russia tries to re-establish its influence are the successor states of Yugoslavia on the Balkans. The 1999 Stability and Association Process offered the countries of the western Balkans the perspective of EU, and possibly NATO, membership. No surprise that Russia tries to block this and seeks to lure these countries away from the EU: witness the coup attempt in Montenegro in summer 2018, the interference in the referendum on the name change in North Macedonia, the developing cooperation with Serbia (military cooperation, Free Trade Agreement, etc.), among other interventions.

Apart from these focal regions for Russia's grand strategy, Russia actively pursues a policy of "strategic opportunism" in other parts of the world: utilising every opportunity of conflict or tension with the West to propose various types of closer cooperation, and thus tempt countries to abandon their partnerships with the West. New relations with Turkey and Egypt, and the operations in Libya, were launched when relations with the West were at a low eb or perturbed. In the case of Egypt, the West's hesitation to recognize and fully support the 2013 coup by Abdel Fattah el Sisi created an opportunity for Russia to conclude a series of economic as well as security agreements. In the case of Turkey, the West's lukewarm reaction after the failed 2016 coup d'état against Erdogan,

and the US refusal to extradite Fethullah Güllen, allowed Russia to strengthen energy as well as military cooperation with Turkey, thus to some extent luring a NATO member out of the alliance. Russia has also established good relations with all countries in the MENA region, even the enemies of its allies or the allies of its enemies (e.g. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), and countries in conflict (Israel and Palestine, Morocco and Algeria). The relations with Syria are more complex. Support for Assad is not only support for a traditional ally. It also makes Russia an essential player in the region: part of the problem, and therefore necessarily part of the solution. The importance of the Mediterranean naval base in Tartus and the Khmeimim Air Base may be a more important consideration than the defence of the Assad regime as such.

As Moscow strongly believes (or professes to believe) that the aim of the West (the US and NATO in particular) is to weaken Russia, it endeavours to weaken the West, to break alliances, and to weaken countries by interfering in elections, spreading fake news through television stations (Russia Today) or the internet (Sputnik), etc. Not only the US, but various European countries have been at the receiving end of Russian interference as well.

The Primakov Doctrine, the 2007 Munich speech, and other Russian policy statements all point in the same direction: the establishment of Russia as a regional and global power, and Russian primacy in the post-soviet space. To contest the US-dominated international order, an alternative international sphere is to be created. The importance of the CIS was already mentioned, but the Russian initiative to re-create economic and political links with the CIS countries has been only partially successful, and resulted in partial groupings with an economic or

security focus. Russia's "Asia pivot" is part of this strategy; so is Russia's engagement with the BRICS countries, and the various international arrangements it has launched or supported: the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, etc. The key player in the CSTO is, of course, China; the convergence of Russia's geopolitical and China's geo-economic objectives is of crucial importance for the success of this strategy. The Sino-Russian alliance is not without its own problems, however, as the interests of Russia and China do diverge occasionally (e.g. in Central Asia), and because a too dominant China will be as difficult to accept by Moscow as a dominant US.

To be fair: hybrid warfare and zones of influence are not Russian inventions. Western powers have also indulged (and still indulge) in this kind of operations. The classic Russian response to criticism of its various forms of aggressive behaviour is a reference to (allegedly) similar Western actions: "what about-ism". The Russian narrative about its own aggressive initiatives seeks to expose "Western hypocrisy" by referring to Western precedents. Russian action is supposedly only "mirroring" Western disregard for international law:

- The recognition of Kosovo (a "terrifying precedent" in Putin's words) is used as justification for the intervention in (and recognition of) South Ossetia and Abkhazia.
- The same precedent is referred to for the annexation of the Crimea, invoking "protection of human rights" as further justification.
- If NATO can intervene in the Balkans, and the US in Iraq, without a UNSC resolution; if a Western coalition of the willing can transgress the UNSC resolution and force regime change on Libya – why can Russia not intervene in the same manner in Syria, Georgia, Ukraine?

Although “what about-ism” is not a valid reply to Western criticism of Russian aggression and non-respect of international law, there often is an element of truth in it. Perhaps refocussing on respect for international law could put Western foreign policy on a more solid and credible basis, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of Western criticism of Russian aggression.

### **THE ECONOMIC AND DOMESTIC BACKGROUND OF FOREIGN POLICY**

Russia’s foreign policy ambitions are conditioned by its (economic) capacity. Russia’s real importance lies in its military strength and its place as one of the world’s two main nuclear powers. It is questionable how real this strength is. From the point of view of military expenditure, Russia plays only a secondary role: estimated at \$70 billion, Russia’s military budget is just over 10% of the US budget, and 25% of the total military outlays of the EU member states. Is outward aggressiveness perhaps a way to hide underlying weaknesses?

This question becomes even more pertinent if the economic background is considered. A problematic demography, a stagnating economy, a nominal GDP the size of the Benelux, and a notorious overdependence on the export of hydrocarbons are important obstacles, hampering the implementation of an ambitious policy. Instead of diversifying, it turns out that in the years 2010-2018 Russia has become even more dependent on hydrocarbons. The share of oil and gas production in the Russian economy increased from 34.3% to 38.9%. Oil and gas account for  $\frac{3}{4}$  of Russian exports and 50% of the government budget. Russia failed the challenge of modernising and diversifying its economy. With less than brilliant perspectives for hydrocarbons in the world economy, prospects for the Russian economy are rather problematic.

Let us be clear: Russia is far from bankrupt. It has hardly any foreign debt (total foreign debt is 30% of GDP), public debt is low (15% of GDP), the deficit on the budget is below 3%, unemployment is around 6%, and inflation around 4% – all these are pre-COVID figures, of course. But Russia’s growth figures over the last years have been disappointing. All by all, an economy the size of the Benelux (or Italy) is hardly a solid basis for an ambitious foreign policy backed up by an oversized military complex. Naked statistics do not tell the full story, as the nuclear capacity of Russia and the high-tech nature of some of its armaments, as well as Russia’s readiness to use aggressive policies have to be taken into account in assessing Russia’s weight on the international scene. It is nevertheless obvious that Russia overplays its hand in the name of great power status and geopolitics.

Geopolitics is also linked with Russian domestic politics. Not only the leadership, but the Russian people consider that Russia is a great power that must play its role on the world stage. During the chaotic 1990s the loss of great power status was as great a blow for the national pride of the average Russian as the economic catastrophe resulting from the collapse of the plan economy. With the restoration of law and order and the help of high oil prices, the early Putin years saw not only an economic revival but also a return to the world stage – initially along the lines laid out by the West, but rapidly shifting to its own path. For Russians, the return to the world scene, the improvement in living standards, and the establishment of an authoritarian regime were constituent parts of the “social contract” between the President and the Russian population. To the extent that the modernisation and diversification of the economy has not been terribly successful and standards of living are no longer improving, the only justification for maintaining the (increasingly) authoritarian nature of the regime

is Russia's role as a great power. The annexation of the Crimea – and to a lesser extent the intervention in East Ukraine – constituted a great boon for the popularity of the President. Public support for the President and for his party, United Russia, has since been diminishing, however, because of the stagnant economy, corruption, and the incompetence of the leadership. This recalls the situation in the 1980s when Gorbachev stressed the need for perestroika and glasnost.

Putin's strength (in leadership circles and the population at large) is that there is no identifiable alternative. The only credible opposition show in town is Navalny's anticorruption campaign. Despite official boycotts and electoral fraud, in the recent elections Navalny's supporters got elected in several local councils, and United Russia lost the majority in 2 out of 18 councils. Support for the regime by the intelligentsia and part of the middle class has shrunk, and the oligarchs are no longer confident that present policies serve their best interest. Opposition movements are developing in the regions, witness the continuing opposition against the change of governor in Khabarovsk, but also the demonstrations against the refusal of opposition candidates for elections in the Moscow region. The demonstrations against the fraudulent election in 2011-2012 and last year's demonstration of young people all over the country have been skilfully neutralized by the regime, but the spirit is not forgotten. According to the Levada opinion polling organisation, 2/3 of the Russians are aware of these protest movements, and most Russians do not believe that they are organised with Western support.

Putin's power base is gradually eroding and has to be shored up by increasingly authoritarian interventions and foreign policy successes (most recently: the Nagorno Karabakh arrangement).

To be clear, Putin is still solidly in the driving seat. Since the Constitutional amendment he no longer is a lame duck, and he seems to enjoy the full support of the security establishment and the army. Several opposition actions, (in particular led by Navalny) have dented his standing (and that of United Russia), but regime change is likely not for tomorrow.

### **OPTIONS FOR EU FOREIGN POLICY**

Russia pursues an aggressive foreign policy to re-establish its place as a global player on par with the US, it defends its "sphere of influence" in its near abroad, it aims to weaken the West, and to set up an alternative international community, in alliance with China and other emerging countries. However, Russia's weakness lies in its domestic base.

This linkage between foreign and domestic policy makes it improbable that Russian foreign policy will change anytime soon. Moreover, speculations on new opportunities that might potentially arise in a post-Putin era are a rather useless exercise, since it is impossible to foresee when Putin will hand over power and who will be the successor. Even if, by a stroke of political magic, Putin is replaced by the most credible candidate from outside the establishment, Navalny, it is unlikely that he would give up Russia's nationalist foreign policy agenda. Indeed, a quick background check on Navalny reveals that this fighter for democracy and against corruption is also a dyed in the wool nationalist. E.g. it is improbable that Navalny – or any other opposition figure in a hypothetical position of power – would undo the annexation of the Crimea.

Keeping this in mind, what could be the response of the EU, and Western diplomacy in general, to Russia's stance on the international scene? Theoretically, three scenarios are possible.

One option, that could be called “passive containment”, would be to consolidate the status quo, and to turn existing EU policy into a more consciously strong policy. This could be considered an updated version of the Cold War. Relations with Russia would not be allowed to develop further – which would require dampening the enthusiasm of the private sector to seize economic opportunities in Russia. As a consequence, Russia would likely attempt to strengthen its relations with its allies, notably China and the other BRICS countries, and with its near abroad. Like in the Cold War period, in parallel to an international community based on the market economy and liberal democracy under US leadership, a second international community could develop, based on illiberal democracy and state capitalism, especially if relations between the US and China would worsen at the same time. It would be unlikely that the EU would have developed sufficient “strategic autonomy” to distance itself from a US strategy that treats Russia and China as strategic competitors. The longer the stand-off would last, the larger the gap between Russia and the West, and the more complicated it would be to bridge that gap eventually, implying a loss of cooperation opportunities. The success of “passive containment” relies on the assumption that a new “Gorbachev moment” is due to happen in the end: improvement of relations would depend on an eventual change in Russia’s internal and external policies, but it is uncertain how and when this would occur.

A second, more proactive option, could be called “active containment”: Western diplomacy would adopt a more aggressive stance and would more vigorously contest Russian policies. This would mean intensifying relations with countries in Russia’s “sphere of influence”, re-launching the NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine, positioning NATO troops in Russia’s neighbourhood, etc. This would be a more aggressive “Cold War 2.0” and carry the risk of the situation getting out of hand. “Active containment” would also imply a more forceful

response: the West would aim to counterattack in reaction to acts of aggression (e.g. cyber-attacks). It would be essential, therefore, to ensure that the West would be in a position of strength and muster the political will to assume the consequences of its more aggressive policy, in the military and well as in the economic sphere. “Active containment” assumes a “Cuban missile crisis moment”. It counts on Russia recognising and respecting the more forceful Western approach and, eventually, agreeing to sit around the table to negotiate a mutually satisfactory balance of power.

A third, more prudent option, could be called “gradual synchronized relaxation”: Western diplomacy would actively explore how and to what extent the status of Russia as a regional and global power could be recognised. This would imply the recognition of Russia’s “legitimate interests”, particularly in its near abroad. This would be a delicate exercise: looking for openings to improve relations, and exploring overlapping zones of interest in the neighbourhood/near abroad, and how these could be managed. “Gradual synchronized relaxation” assumes that Russia would realise that its Asian pivot is not bringing the necessary modernisation and diversification of its economy, and that only cooperation with the West can bring about the necessary development. This re-conciliation would require imaginative proposals, openness to collaboration, and skilful brinkmanship on both sides. Above all, it would require Russia to give up its zero-sum game approach to foreign policy, and demonstrate a willingness to make significant gestures. A possible approach for the neighbourhood/near abroad could be for Russia and the EU to concentrate on (economic) interests that can be shared, and to refrain from seeking (political) influence that is naturally divisive

## CONCLUSION

All three options require solid unity among the EU Member States and between the EU and the US.

Brussels and Washington have different perspectives on Russia, however. The US is interested in global relations, and focusses on the military threats. Europe is primarily interested in regional relations, and economic and trade relations. There are sufficient overlapping areas of interest, though, to allow for a coherent transatlantic policy to emerge, as the new Biden administration takes office. It would certainly be in everybody's interest (and in the EU's interest in the first place) if the important components of the security infrastructure that have been dismantled (the INF Treaty, New START, etc.) could be re-negotiated and re-established

For the EU, perennating the present immobilism and maintaining a “wait and see” attitude is not an option; it will further erode the credibility of the EU as a player on the regional and international scene. First and foremost, the EU has to tackle the present ambiguity of Member States' positions vis-à-vis Russia, and clearly define what the common interests of the Member States are. The current lack of any proactive policy leaves the initiative to Russia and condemns the EU to stay in a reactive mode. In the meantime, the gap between the EU and Russia becomes ever wider, while Russia aims to get closer to the BRICS countries. The drawn-out dispute and the drifting

apart of the EU and its large neighbour is a costly affair in terms of missed opportunities, political as well as economic. The unintended secondary effect (unintended also for Russia) of this Western policy may well be the reinforcement of China (with Russian support) as the main economic and geopolitical player. This eventuality calls for a thorough analysis of whether it is in the EU's interest to associate itself completely with the US position on Russia and China. Europe's interests are indeed not identical to the US interest.

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