



Is Putin Winning, or Is He Trying not to Lose?

Sven Biscop

Nobody is in doubt, if anybody ever was, that Russia remains a great power. That much the tense stand-off over Ukraine has demonstrated. Whether President Putin's moves have earned Russia the respect that seems to be a strategic objective in its own right, is another thing. To provoke fear is easy enough – respect must be earned. But perhaps, like Machiavelli, Putin judges it is better to be feared than to be loved.

Putin can certainly boast of a gain in stature. He has forced Americans and Europeans on to the reactive, provoked a flurry of high-level meetings, and even obtained a response in writing from the US and NATO to his proposals (proposals which he must have known to be totally unrealistic). But Europeans ought to have learned one thing from a history of internecine war: attaching too much importance to status is not conducive to preventing conflict. Moreover, Putin's gain of face does not change the facts on the ground. There is no need to begrudge him this diplomatic victory, therefore.

More worryingly, Russia's manoeuvres have once again shone a cold light on the absence of centralised decision-making in Europe. Absent EU integration in diplomacy and defence, differences in views between EU Member States produce a void, instead of shaping a nuanced but resolute common position. That void is not filled by Russia though,

but by the US, behind which everybody rallies in the face of Russian sabre-rattling.

Must we fear, then, the end of the European security architecture as we know it? Not quite

EUROPE IS NOT UNDER THREAT

With a hundred thousand troops one may threaten Ukraine, but one does not conquer a united Europe. Nor does one start a great power war against the EU and the US combined on a GDP the size of Belgium and the Netherlands combined (\$1.483 vs \$1.434 trillion in 2020). Putin may well put the future of the European security architecture on the table, but that does not mean that he has the power to undo it. Only European leaders that are silly enough to take their own country out of the EU, or cynical enough to undermine democracy and the rule of law, can do that. By dividing the Union and playing directly into the hands of external powers (sometimes even willingly), they threaten Europe.

Russia does have economic leverage, but the EU's dependence on natural resources cuts both ways. Both Moscow and Brussels may *threaten* economic sanctions to deter each other. But sanctions can be *used* only once – and then nothing will happen, except that both sides will suffer economic pain, as neither is likely to give in to sanctions and change its policies. Economic sanctions can signal discontent, and may serve as punishment, if that is the aim,

but just like a gain of face, they will not change the facts on the ground.

If Russia seeks a revision of the security arrangements on the European continent, it will have to negotiate, therefore. Such negotiations take time – longer than Russian troops can remain concentrated without losing their edge. And to have any chance of success, all parties must come to the table with a willingness to offer concessions. If Putin is in earnest, then Europeans and Americans must negotiate, as they have indicated they are willing to do. Because reviving the arms control and confidence-building regime that has become undone in recent years, would contribute greatly to Europe's security.

Meaningful negotiations on the European architecture must obviously include the Europeans. The political centre of gravity of Europe can only be the supranational EU. It is the EU that took the strategic decision, back in 2014, to offer Ukraine a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), to which Russia overreacted by invading. All the rest – deterrence through NATO, talks in the Normandy format, sanctions by the EU itself – followed from that original choice that the Europeans made through the EU. Instead of adding ever new formats, the EU must insist on a central trilateral format with the US and Russia, therefore, as a precondition for serious negotiations to start. Refusing that would be to go along with Putin, who consistently tries to belittle the EU as a way of weakening European cohesion.

It is doubtful, however, whether sufficient mutual trust can be established to find agreement on the broader issues as long as the stand-off over Ukraine continues and while, let us not forget, Russia engages in near-constant hybrid actions against Europe and the US.

LOSING BY INVADING

Having raised the stakes this high, can Putin back out without any tangible achievement in Ukraine to bolster his authority, other than a diplomatic victory?

In fact, Ukraine represents a failure for Putin. By invading in 2014, he pushed a divided country into the Western orbit. He

annexed the Crimea, but he botched Russia's other strategic objective, besides great power status, of creating a sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union (minus the Baltic states). Short of a full-scale invasion, he cannot win Ukraine back. But that seems the least likely option: the Ukrainian armed forces will stand and fight, and Putin will not want to see some of his best troops ground down in a war of attrition. It is very much in the EU and US interest, therefore, to make sure that Ukraine has the arms, equipment, and munitions to fight. Furthermore, assuming that it does not want to bomb Ukraine into the ground, Russia cannot make unlimited use of its military preponderance. An invasion would anyway not lead to real integration, but to military occupation – like the annexation of the Baltic states in 1940. As the latter's history shows, the moment occupation is lifted, the will to sovereignty reasserts itself.

Russia's demand that Ukraine does not join NATO is damage-control, therefore. It also fits into a centuries-old strategy of conquering territory or creating buffer zones on Russia's western borders, in order to alleviate its vulnerability to invasion in the absence of any natural obstacles. If imposing neutrality on Ukraine is what it takes for Putin to finally accept that it will not be a part of any Russian sphere of influence, that is a concession that the West can afford to make. NATO's 2008 decision that Ukraine (and Georgia) can join but without setting a time was a bad compromise between an insistent Bush administration and reluctant Europeans – and the latter mostly remain opposed. Neutrality could be seen as another gain of face for Putin – but once again, such 19th-century sensitivities should not drive Europeans today. Moreover, NATO enlargement is not a goal in its own right: new members must be invited when our security demands it; countries that would bring more costs than benefits, and for which we are anyhow not willing to go to war, should not be asked.

Neutrality can definitely not be a unilateral concession, however. Russia must also make a real concession other than dispersing its troops, for they can be concentrated again on a whim. Moscow must end all support for armed separatism in the Donbas, and let the government in Kiev resume control over the full continental territory of Ukraine. That,

indeed, says nothing about the Crimea – that is the price Ukraine may have to pay for stability. That would certainly not be fair, but quoting Bismarck: we are not running a courthouse, we are making policy.

However, this may well be a concession Putin is not willing to make. Moreover, if he cannot gain Ukraine back, he may decide that at least he does not want it to work either. Indeed, Putin may see Ukraine's close relationship with the EU as the real threat, for he will not want to see a well-functioning democratic Ukraine begin to exert any power of attraction over his own population. (And neutrality would not affect the DCFTA). Russia may thus judge that it can make more out of its after all limited resources under conditions of permanent instability, by triggering another escalation when it sees fit, than under a stable but (in its eyes) unsatisfactory deal, even if instability comes at the price of additional sanctions.

Sanctions must indeed be imposed if Russia takes renewed military action, in the full knowledge that most probably they will not force Russia to retreat. Putin may indeed still opt for a more limited military campaign, such as conquering the land bridge between the Donbass and the Crimea. Russia would incur casualties but could create a *fait accompli* pretty fast. Or perhaps we will “only” see the overt installation of a permanent Russian military presence in the Donbass. Another option is a repetition of the 14 January cyber-attack, and other “hybrid” actions, to create the perception that if Ukrainian sovereignty survives, it is only at Russia's mercy. The latter two scenarios could also give rise to additional sanctions. In all three scenarios, the stand-off would continue, and permanent instability would reign, leaving but dim prospects for successful negotiations on the broader security architecture.

A SHARED SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

While the West was focusing on Ukraine, in mid-January 2022 Russia intervened, quickly and successfully, in Kazakhstan. Operating under the aegis of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and at the request of President Tokayev, some 2000 Russian troops helped the latter maintain his grip on power. In November 2020, at the

request of another member of the CSTO, Armenia, Russia had also deployed 2000 troops as peacekeepers after it had brokered a cease-fire between its ally and Azerbaijan, ending another war over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russian mediation was needed again in November 2021 to end clashes in violation of this cease-fire.

The situation of Georgia, in contrast, is very similar to that of Ukraine. In the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, Russia secured the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, subsequently even recognizing them as states. Today, some 10,000 Russian troops are stationed there. But as in Ukraine, short of full-scale invasion, the most Russia can achieve is continued stalemate, and the ability to escalate tensions whenever it wants to.

The conclusion is that towards the former Soviet republics where the regime, and the armed forces, with or against the public, support a primarily Russian orientation, Russia continues to act as the security guarantor. That is the case of Belarus, for example. But once a country has switched to a Western orientation, Russia can make things difficult, including by preventing it from integrating the EU or NATO (though in reality membership is not on offer anyway) – but it cannot force it to return to the fold.

Meanwhile, in nearly all former Soviet republics, China is rivalling Russia, and in many has already overtaken it, as a trade and investment partner. The Belt and Road Initiative was indeed unveiled in Kazakhstan, in 2013. A *de facto* division of labour has emerged that suits Beijing fine, but one may doubt whether it really satisfies Moscow: where Russia acts as the security guarantor, it ensures the stability that allows China's economic and political penetration to grow. Russia is no longer able to translate its military power into equivalent political and economic influence. In reality, therefore, an exclusive Russian sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union is a pipedream. Russia has no choice but to share influence with China.

Russia has also built a military presence outside the former Soviet Union, directly or through the mercenaries of the Wagner Group: in the Central African Republic, in Libya,

and now also in Mali. Here too, the main achievement is ongoing instability, to the detriment mainly of the EU's interests. For Russia, the periphery of Europe, east and south, is one theatre in which it can exercise its nuisance power, at a relatively low cost. Brussels ought indeed to worry much more than it does over its inability to prevent it from doing so, even in a country like Mali that is so dependent on European economic and military support. But while Russia can try and entrench itself, it does not have a real alternative project to propose to these countries, other than protecting the security of the regime or the claimant that it opportunistically supports. Such relations are prone to become undone as domestic politics evolve. The exception is Syria, where the Russian intervention ensured that an ally of long standing remained in power, though that alliance too is unlikely to survive regime-change if it ever comes to pass.

CONCLUSION: A, NOT THE, GREAT POWER

Russia will remain one of the world's great powers. But it is also set to continue to slide behind the US, China, and the EU in terms of political influence and economic prosperity. Exercising its nuisance power will remain relatively easy. For now, its military power allows Russia to punch above its political and economic weight. But maintaining its few allies, let alone attracting new ones, will become increasingly difficult as other powers will put more attractive political and economic offers on the table. Will that stimulate Moscow to explore a more cooperative, instead of confrontational grand strategy? Or will it continue to equate great power status with assertiveness and aggression?

The EU, for its part, must keep firmly focused on its vital interests: safeguarding its own way of life, while preventing any spill-over of insecurity from either its eastern or southern flank to threaten it. Stable neighbouring states that make their own sovereign choices are an instrumental interest to that vital end. For the EU, the exercise of nuisance power can never be an end in itself, though it must start to think about how to retaliate against Russian "hybrid" actions. But since one cannot choose one's neighbours, good-neighbourly relations remain the ultimate objective. Whichever path Putin and his eventual successor choose, therefore, the EU must always be open for dialogue, under the motto: Cooperate when you can, but push back when you must. That will require all EU Member States to develop a much stronger European reflex, however. If the strategic centre of Europe is a void, neither cooperation nor pushing back will happen, and the EU will forever be rattled by the next assertive move from any other power.

Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop, the author of [Grand Strategy in 10 Words - A Guide to Great Power Politics in the 21st Century](#), lectures at Ghent University and heads Egmont's Europe in the World programme.

Sven's love for the great 20th-century Russian writers is untouched by Vladimir Putin's strategies. He would rather see the Red Cavalry return to the barracks, though.