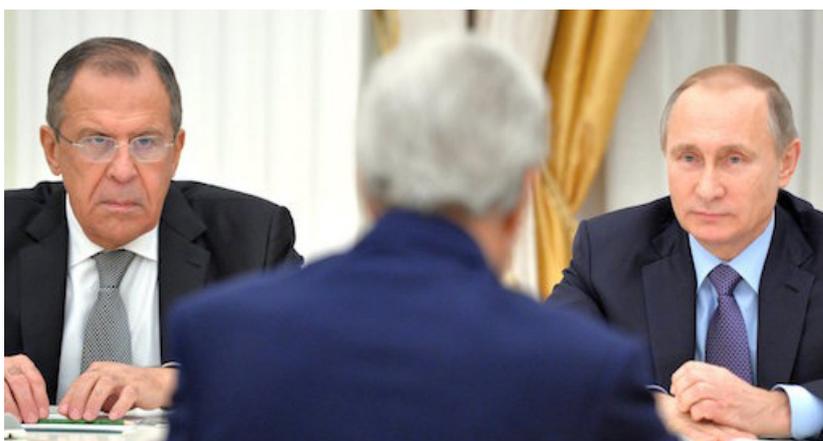


***Chutzpah* and Realism**

Vladimir Putin and the Making of Russian Foreign Policy



Bobo LO

June 2018

The Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri) is a research center and a forum for debate on major international political and economic issues. Headed by Thierry de Montbrial since its founding in 1979, Ifri is a non-governmental, non-profit organization.

As an independent think tank, Ifri sets its own research agenda, publishing its findings regularly for a global audience. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Ifri brings together political and economic decision-makers, researchers and internationally renowned experts to animate its debate and research activities.

The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the author alone.

*This text is published with the support of DGRIS
(Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy)
under “Russia, Caucasus and Eastern Europe Observatory”.*

ISBN: 978-2-36567-847-6

© All rights reserved, Ifri, 2018

How to quote this document:

Bobo Lo, “*Chutzpah* and Realism: Vladimir Putin and the Making of Russian Foreign Policy”, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 108, Ifri, June 2018.

Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15—FRANCE

Tel.: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00—Fax: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website: ifri.org

Russie.Nei.Visions

Russie.Nei.Visions is an online collection dedicated to Russia and the other new independent states (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). Written by leading experts, these policy-oriented papers deal with strategic, political and economic issues.

Author

Bobo Lo is an independent analyst. He was previously Director of the China and Russia Programmes at the Centre for European Reform; Head of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House; and Deputy Head of Mission at the Australian Embassy in Moscow. He is an Associate Research Fellow with the Russia/NIS Center of the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI).

Dr Lo writes extensively on Russian foreign policy. His most recent book, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World*, was published by Penguin Random House for the Lowy Institute in April 2017. Lo's *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Brookings and Chatham House, 2015) was short-listed for the 2016 Pushkin House prize. Previously, Foreign Affairs called Lo's *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics* "the best analysis yet of one of the world's most important bilateral relationships." Shorter writings include:

- "An Accident Waiting to Happen: Trump, Putin, and the US-Russia Relationship", Lowy Institute Analysis, October 2017
- "New Order for Old Triangles? The Russia-China-India Matrix", *Russie.NEI.Visions*, April 2017.

Bobo Lo has an MA from Oxford and a PhD from the University of Melbourne.

Abstract

In the course of his presidency, Vladimir Putin has presided over a remarkable expansion of Russian foreign policy. During the 1990s, Russia was a regional power in all but name. Today, however, we are witnessing the re-emergence of a global Russia, whose ambition and confidence are at a post-Cold War high. The conviction that it is integral to a new world order reflects not only a historical sense of entitlement, but also renewed self-belief.

But this progression masks major flaws. Despite impressive demonstrations of military might in Ukraine and Syria, and Putin's tactical dexterity, Russia remains a weak power in many respects. It has shown little capacity to lead on global issues. Its influence in the post-Soviet space is in long-term decline. Its footprint in the Asia-Pacific remains very modest. And its capacity to influence Western decision-making has rarely been weaker. The realist tradition embodied by Putin envisages a few great powers co-managing a classical, states-based international system. But in a fluid and disorderly world, such notions are delusional.

Putin feels vindicated by events and cheered by the failings of Western leaders. Yet if Russia is to be a global player in coming decades, it will need to reinvent itself. This would entail moving from an over-reliance on military power and political subversion to embracing more sophisticated and inclusive forms of influence. It would also depend on far-reaching domestic modernization as the key to sustaining a truly independent foreign policy.

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION	5
THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT – AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR RUSSIA	7
RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN ACTION.....	10
Global governance.....	10
The post-Soviet space	13
The Middle East.....	16
Russia and the Asia-Pacific.....	19
Russia and the West.....	22
Lessons from Russian foreign policy.....	26
THE SCORE-SHEET	28
LOOKING AHEAD	31

Introduction

During the past 18 years, Vladimir Putin has presided over a remarkable expansion of Russian foreign policy. When he entered the Kremlin in January 2000, he inherited an unenviable legacy. Under his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, Russia had maintained pretensions to be a global player,¹ and still possessed a formidable nuclear arsenal and a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. But in reality it was little more than a regional power. What passed for foreign policy during the 1990s was largely a mixture of empty rhetoric, crude bluff, and severe retrenchment. Today, it is a very different story. While Russia still lacks many of the capabilities that characterize a genuinely world actor, its horizons have become global, and its ambition and self-confidence ascendant.

And yet this progression masks multiple contradictions, major failures as well as eye-catching successes. Putin has reasserted Russia's influence in regions where it had been marginalized, and promoted it as an independent center of global power. But Moscow has also alienated the West, become a junior partner of Beijing, and failed to modernize the country. In many respects, Russia is a 20th century power struggling to adapt to 21st century realities, still clinging to anachronistic notions of geopolitical balancing and Great Power diplomacy.

Writing about contemporary Russian foreign policy presents special challenges. It is not enough to claim, as many have done, that Moscow is guided by a clear sense of "permanent national interests". For not only do these vary according to one's perspective, but the very notion of permanency in a world undergoing massive and unpredictable change is in itself dubious. Similarly, platitudes about a polycentric international system, national sovereignty and an "independent" foreign policy shed little light on where Russia is travelling in its ever more complex relations with the outside world.

1. See, for example, Yeltsin's tirade against US President Bill Clinton. "Zaiavlenie Eltsina" [Yeltsin's Declaration], *Kommersant*, 10 December 1999, www.kommersant.ru.

This essay lays out the landscape of Russian foreign policy at a critical juncture in world history. It is evident that the US-led liberal order is in deep crisis – a crisis accentuated, but not created, by the surprise victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election. It is also apparent that the rise of China, India, and other non-Western powers is bringing about fundamental changes to international society. But it is unclear what sort of order – if there is to be one – will emerge. The world is in transition, but to what? And what are the implications for Russia? Will it be a game-maker and emerge as one of the winners of global transformation, or will it be left adrift by far-reaching changes whose true significance it has failed to grasp?²

The current international context presents Russia with challenges greater than any time since Putin came to power, and for which it is ill-prepared both materially and psychologically. The smoothness of Moscow's annexation of Crimea, its decisive military intervention in Syria, and the impression of certitude conveyed in Putin's public appearances blur a number of uncomfortable realities: a world that increasingly transcends national boundaries and conventional understandings of sovereignty; where power and influence are more diffuse than ever; and where the nature of power itself is undergoing great change. Although military capabilities continue to be important, the real levers of influence in the 21st century world are economic strength, technological advancement, and moral leadership – all areas where Russia has considerable potential, but where it has under-performed until now. If it is to remain a leading player in the long term, it will need to change its mindset about what it means to be a great power. This will mean moving from an over-reliance on primitive forms of power projection – such as military might and political subversion – to embracing more sophisticated and inclusive forms of influence.³

2. B. Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, London/Washington D.C., Chatham House/Brookings Institution Press, 2015, pp. 242-243.

3. Although Moscow frequently speaks of “soft power”, its understanding of this differs markedly from Western conceptions. It is less about the power of persuasion through good example than about “active measures” (*aktivnye meropriiatiia*), a legacy of the Soviet era. These measures range from countering Western media narratives to more aggressive efforts aimed at suborning Western institutions and processes, for example, through cyber-warfare. James Sherr uses the phrase “soft coercion” to describe this phenomenon. See J. Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad*, London, Chatham House, 2013.

The international context – and what it means for Russia

The defining feature of today's international context is its fluidity. The US-led liberal order is falling apart, but no alternative system is in prospect. Western-dominated globalization is under attack from all sides, yet it continues to be the principal economic paradigm. We are seeing the steady de-universalization of Western-led democratic norms and values, but notions of a “China model” or other normative standards for the world remain fanciful. There is much talk of multipolarity (or “polycentrism”), yet there is little consensus on what this entails. Perhaps the only real certainty is that the international “system” – increasingly a misnomer – is more disaggregated and disorderly than at any time since the end of the Second World War.

It is tempting to see Russia as a prime beneficiary of such a context, taking advantage of the vacuum left by the weakening of US leadership, and Europe's continuing difficulties.⁴ In contrast to China, which has thrived within the liberal world order, Russia has generally seen itself as a victim of that order, cruelly exploited by a cynical West. It is therefore unsurprising that over the past decade, the Putin regime has welcomed the troubles of the United States and Europe. This is partly a product of *schadenfreude*, seeing the West punished for its perceived arrogance. But Moscow also identifies practical benefits, such as greater scope to project power in its neighborhood and promote Russia as one of the world's leading powers.

However, there are also significant downsides to the unravelling of the US-led order. In the first place, the demise of any system brings uncertainty and instability. Ideally, Moscow would like to fast forward to a 21st century “Concert” of Great Powers, in which the United States, China, and Russia, along with other leading players, manage the world.⁵ But it is

4. S. Karaganov, “Russia's Victory, New Concert of Nations”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 31 March 2007, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru>; see also S. Karaganov, “Budushchij miroporiadok” [The Future World Order], *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 8 September 2017, [https://rg.ru, http://karaganov.ru](https://rg.ru/http://karaganov.ru) (in English).

5. *Ibid.*

extremely hard to realize such a vision at a time when power has become much more diffuse, and international norms have been hollowed out.

The crisis of liberal internationalism, the rise of global China and a more assertive India, and Russia's own resurgence have resulted in an increasingly fractious geopolitical environment. Just in the past few years there has been a spike in strategic tensions involving major powers—between the United States and China, China and Japan, China and India, India and Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and so on. We have also seen the spread of iconoclastic tendencies, from militant anti-globalization through xenophobic nationalism to Islamist terrorism; the emergence of new forms of confrontation, such as cyber-warfare and so-called “hybrid warfare”; and the erosion of traditional security regimes, such as strategic arms control. The number and gravity of hot-spots has multiplied—on the Korean peninsula, in the Middle East, the South China Sea, Ukraine, to name just a few. And what until a few years ago seemed unimaginable, the threat of military conflict between two (or more) major powers, has become a subject of growing speculation.⁶

The realist tradition to which the Kremlin subscribes is founded in the idea of a few great powers co-managing a classical, states-based international system. But the 21st century world transcends national boundaries – and great power influence – in myriad ways. Global trade flows, the multiplicity and ubiquity of information, the explosive growth of high technology, accelerating climate change, uncontrolled migration, growing pressures on food, water, and other resources, the de-universalization of norms and values – are contributing to a world that is ever more unmanageable. The leading powers retain critical roles, but the notion that they can somehow impose a world order is delusional. For they not only must cooperate with each other, as difficult as that is, but also with regional players and weak states, non-state as well as state actors, grassroots (bottom-up) pressure groups as well as international organizations.

Russia will find it harder than most to adjust to these realities. In past decades, it relied heavily on the enduring presence of the United States as the strategic benchmark, chief “enemy”⁷, and partner in arms control. Such

6. J. Borger, “Nuclear Risk at Its Highest since Cuban Missile Crisis, Says ex-Energy Secretary”, *The Guardian*, 16 February 2018, www.theguardian.com.

7. Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Russian National Security Council (and formerly head of the FSB) has variously accused the United States of seeking Russia's collapse, and of wanting to steal its natural resources. See “U.S. Wants Russia Collapse to Gain Its Resources—Security Council

thinking, however, is ill-suited to responding effectively to an environment where allies, enemies, and even “strategic partners” are moveable entities, and where the nature of power and influence is elusive. In this world, the real challenge for Moscow is not to challenge US “unilateralism”, establish a revamped Concert of great powers, or make good on a cultural-linguistic “Russian world” (*russkij mir*) in the post-Soviet space. Rather, it is to find creative ways to advance Russian interests in an ever more crowded, complex, and disorderly operating environment.

The Kremlin’s emphasis on foreign policy independence and strategic flexibility needs to be supplemented by a process of domestic modernization that provides Russia with the wherewithal to make good on its growing ambitions. With an economy more than eight times smaller than China’s,⁸ it cannot rely in the long term on its strategic and conventional military capabilities, or the effectiveness of “active measures” to subvert its perceived enemies.⁹ Russia instead needs to develop its soft power potential in relatively untapped areas, such as high technology, food and water security, renewable energy, and conflict resolution. For its longevity as a major power depends on reinventing itself as a leading contributor to the global commons, rather than being defined largely by its capacity to foil the aims of others.

Head”, *The Moscow Times*, 26 June 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com>; see also his interview in *The Guardian*, 24 October 2014, www.theguardian.com.

8. Measured by nominal GDP – see IMF World Economic Outlook Database, April 2017, www.imf.org.

9. See note [3] above.

Russian foreign policy in action

The Russian government's foundation policy documents, such as the Foreign Policy and National Security Concepts, have plenty to say about the challenges facing Russia in the modern world.¹⁰ However, the primary purpose of such documents is presentational: to set out the main principles of Russian foreign policy as coherently (and “strategically”) as possible, and to rationalize Moscow's conduct of international relations. Unsurprisingly, they convey little of the “fog of diplomacy” or the *ad hoc* nature of much of the Kremlin's decision-making. To understand the workings of Russian foreign policy, therefore, we need to focus less on what is said than on what is done (or not done).

Global governance

Putin's approach to global governance proceeds from two core premises. The first, alluded to earlier, is that Russia is now a global actor with interests that extend far beyond its immediate neighborhood. This is not to claim that it is a global power (yet) or even that it is globally influential. The point, though, is that Moscow believes that it has a legitimate right of interest in most international issues, and in global governance more generally. The conviction that Russia will be integral to a new world order reflects a historical sense of entitlement – its innate “great power-ness” (*derzhavnost'*)—but also a renewed self-belief.

The second premise is more operational. At a time of considerable uncertainty, Russia must pursue an eclectic approach to global governance that combines bilateral engagement with multilateral diplomacy. The main thrust of its bilateralism is interaction with the other great powers, the United States and China most obviously, but also Germany, France, Japan,

10. See Section II (“Modern world and Foreign policy of the Russian Federation”) of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 1 December 2016, www.mid.ru; and Section II (“Russia in the Modern World”) of the Russian National Security Strategy, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 31 December 2015, www.ieee.es (English translation).

and India. Such engagement may be cooperative or competitive. But regardless of what form it takes, it is seen as the chief determinant of contemporary international politics.¹¹

If great power relations comprise the substance of the Kremlin's approach to global governance, then multilateral diplomacy supplies the institutional and normative framework. For Moscow, multilateralism takes many forms. It entails active involvement in well-established bodies, such as the UN Security Council P-5, along with membership of emergent structures, for example, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). It means engaging with organizations dominated by the West—the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank—while developing mechanisms, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), that effectively exclude the Western powers. It balances participation in global institutions and in regional bodies, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Moscow's wide-ranging approach to global governance is intended above all to maximize its strategic flexibility and independence of action. A Russia able to engage effectively with a host of countries and international organizations is one that need not worry about diplomatic isolation, or of being overly committed to one side or the other. It may aspire to play a balancing role, whether in particular regions, such as the Middle East, or globally between the United States and China. Expanded participation in institutions of regional and global governance also helps to position Russia as a responsible and influential international citizen, key to resolving or managing conflicts wherever they occur. A notable example of this was its close collaboration in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program.

That said, the Kremlin's approach to global governance does not function as a cohesive strategy, but is an amalgam of atavistic instincts, visionary aspirations, and tactical improvisation. It assigns varying levels of importance to different organizations. And it highlights the reality that multilateralism and global governance matter principally to Moscow as vehicles for advancing often narrow national interests.

11. D. Trenin, "New World Order", interview in *Harvard Political Review*, 15 September 2017, <http://harvardpolitics.com>; also A. Sushentsov, "Telamons Holding the Sky": Russian Views on Evolving Global Balance of Power", Valdai Discussion Club, 2 May 2017, <http://valdaiclub.com>.

This latter aspect is reflected in its approach to two organizations in particular, the UN P-5 and the BRICS. The first embodies Russia's formal equality with the United States, and a multipolar world order centered on a Concert of Great Powers. As such, it represents the ultimate legitimating authority. Russia's veto-wielding power plays a critical role here, enabling it to block any Western-led policy it doesn't like – as we have seen over Syria – and to do so in the name of “international law”. This has proved quite successful in confusing the moral issue. It is revealing, for example, that the world's largest democracy, India, has tended to back Moscow's procedural legalism against the humanitarian intervention arguments of the West.¹²

That the UN Security Council has proved ineffective in conflict management is a matter of some indifference to Moscow. This is partly because it believes that actual problem-solving is best done bilaterally or involving as few parties as possible. But it also reflects the fact that the Kremlin's priority is not the UN's operational effectiveness, but Russian status and influence within that organization.

This self-interested attitude is likewise evident in relation to the BRICS. Despite Moscow's attempts to talk up this framework, its achievements have been largely symbolic. The establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA) appears to suggest a new commitment to practical projects, but such ventures remain poorly funded.¹³ Yet that is almost beside the point. The BRICS framework is important to Moscow above all because it embodies an alternative vision of global governance in which Russia is central and the West has been put in its place.

Symbolism also colors Russia's approach toward substantive questions of global governance, from traditional agenda items such as international conflict resolution, strategic and conventional arms control, and energy security, to more “modern” issues – counter-terrorism, climate change, cyber and information warfare. A rough dichotomy has emerged. When Moscow wants to get things done, it engages directly with the relevant

12. See K. Pethiyagoda, “India on Syria – the Rising Power's Position on a Global Conflict”, *The Huffington Post*, 14 January 2016, www.huffingtonpost.com.

13. In theory, the NDB is to have a subscribed capital of USD 50 billion over a period of seven years, comprising equal contributions from the five BRICS members. In fact, the paid-in capital to be allocated is a mere USD 10 billion total. See interview with Leslie Maasdorp, Vice-President and Chief Financial Officer of the NDB in A. Guryanova, “The BRICS New Development Bank Outlines Its Major Priorities”, *Russia Direct*, 1 September 2016, www.russia-direct.org.

parties. That is why strategic arms control remains a bilateral matter with the United States, rather than something to be complicated by multilateral mechanisms. Similarly, the Kremlin believes that gas exports to Europe should be negotiated directly with the customer-countries, instead of being subject to the intrusive rules of supranational institutions, such as the EU and its Third Energy Package.¹⁴

When, however, progress is not a priority or is even undesirable, Moscow prefers the multilateral route. This also applies to issues that it does not regard seriously, but where it is important to demonstrate willing, such as climate change. Far from being concerned by the effects of global warming, Moscow takes a positive view of the melting of the polar ice-cap since this brings closer the day when the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and commercial development of the Arctic become realities. Nevertheless, Russia signed the 2016 Paris Climate Change agreement. Joining the international consensus was useful in showcasing Russia as a good global citizen – a consideration all the more pertinent given Trump’s subsequent announcement that the United States would be withdrawing from the agreement.¹⁵

The post-Soviet space

There are essentially two tracks to Putin’s approach to the post-Soviet space – the bilateral and the integrationist. The first is more concrete, the latter more visionary and abstract.

Recent events have offered some encouragement to Moscow in its bilateral relationships in the post-Soviet space. The death of Islam Karimov, the long-time leader of Uzbekistan, and his succession by the former Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev has opened up the possibility of a more stable and profitable engagement with Tashkent. The ongoing military modernization of Azerbaijan, and its reliance on Russian arms imports, has persuaded President Ilham Aliyev to play nice with the

14. The EU’s Third Energy Package, among other provisions, includes rules for the “unbundling” of gas production and gas distribution. Although it is not specifically targeted at Russian companies, it directly challenges the monopolistic practices of Gazprom in Central and Eastern Europe.

15. On 1 June 2017, Trump announced that the United States would be withdrawing from the Paris Climate Change agreement. Article 28 of the agreement mandates a three-year grace period after its entry into force (4 November 2016), and a one-year notice period after that, although there are potentially other mechanisms for an earlier US withdrawal. See M. Park, “Three Ways Trump Could Dump Paris Climate Change Agreement”, CNN, 1 June 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com>.

Kremlin. Belarus' continuing military and economic dependence on Russia has made it a largely compliant if occasionally defiant partner.¹⁶ And Kazakhstan under President Nursultan Nazarbaev continues to be Russia's most reliable ally among the ex-Soviet republics. In general, the dysfunctionality, security fragility, and economic weakness of these states (with the partial exception of Kazakhstan) obliges them to pursue policies that are broadly acceptable to Moscow.

There are two notable exceptions to the overall trend—Georgia and Ukraine. Even after the political demise of former President Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia has pursued a consistently pro-European line, despite having no realistic hopes of NATO or EU membership. Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign states is a substantial obstacle to strategic rapprochement with Tbilisi. Nevertheless, the Kremlin does not appear overly concerned about this, given Georgia's enduring vulnerability and the unfeasibility of its accession to NATO.

Ukraine is a different story, and arguably the single greatest failure of Putin's foreign policy. The annexation of Crimea and Moscow's subsequent military intervention in southeast Ukraine have resulted in a seemingly irreparable rupture with Kyiv. Far from deterring Ukraine's integration into an EU-centered Europe, Russian actions have accelerated it. They have also injected a new sense of purpose in NATO; severely damaged relations with key European states, in particular Germany and France; discredited integrationist ventures such as the EEU; and aggravated the problems of an already stagnating Russian economy by incurring comprehensive Western sanctions.¹⁷

16. Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko's periodic flirtations with the EU have not prevented Minsk from cooperating closely with Moscow where it really matters, such as the Zapad-2017 military exercises, some of the largest since the end of the Cold War. See E. Schmitt, "Vast exercise demonstrated Russia's growing military prowess", *The New York Times*, 1 October 2017, www.nytimes.com.

17. As James Sherr has noted, "Russia has almost nothing to show for four years of war. It has created new enemies and made no friends" – see "Donbas Peacekeepers Proposal a Classic Putin Gambit", Chatham House, 16 October 2017, www.chathamhouse.org. It has been claimed that Putin was "forced" to annex Crimea and intervene in southeast Ukraine, because tolerating the overthrow of Yanukovich would have inflicted serious, possibly even terminal, damage to his regime. It might also have encouraged NATO to take over the Russian Black Sea fleet base at Sevastopol. These rationalizations are wholly unconvincing. Following the shock of the 2011-12 popular protests against him, Putin steadily consolidated his authority, and by early 2013 was stronger than ever. The notion that NATO might take over the Sevastopol base was self-evidently absurd, not least because of the sheer risk involved in such an undertaking. It is much more probable that the real drivers of Putin's intervention were ego and pride – both his own and

The Kremlin seeks a settlement in Ukraine that would endorse Russia's incorporation of Crimea, and enable it to maintain control of the Donbass. Such a settlement would also guarantee Ukrainian non-accession to NATO (and the EU); grant Moscow lasting political leverage over Kyiv; and secure implicit Western recognition that Ukraine (and Belarus) constitutes a sphere of Russia's "privileged interests". However, few in the Putin elite expect this to happen soon. The consensus instead is that Moscow and Kyiv will become further alienated from each other, and that Ukraine will remain a major source of irritation between Russia and the West.¹⁸ In these circumstances, the Kremlin's goal is essentially preventative – to ensure that Ukraine, if it must remain out of Moscow's orbit, will at least be weak and vulnerable to Russian pressure.

Consistent with this approach, the Kremlin has no plans to reconstitute all or part of the Soviet Union. Its purpose is control, not conquest. In most cases, it is content with the status quo, namely, that the ex-Soviet republics are governed by authoritarian regimes, allergic like Moscow to the "contagion" of Western democratic values. Hence its relatively relaxed attitude toward the expansion of Chinese economic influence in Central Asia and beyond. Although this represents a long-term challenge to Russian interests, Moscow identifies more important priorities: to strengthen the economic dimension of the Sino-Russian partnership, while building on security and political ties; and to benefit from the anticipated windfall effect of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It recognizes, too, that Russia cannot hope to match China's regional appeal when it comes to trade and investment.

Such considerations are reflected in the shift away from the Eurasian Economic Union to the notion of a Greater Eurasia as the Kremlin's flagship integrationist project.¹⁹ The Greater Eurasia venture anticipates a world order in which China, not the United States, is ascendant, and where the most practicable means of preserving Russia's international standing is therefore to work closely with Beijing. Gone are the days when Russia could aspire to be the dominant player in Eurasia. Its project now is more

Russia's. He had previously been humiliated by the outcome of the 2004 Orange Revolution, and so was all the more determined to demonstrate strength on this occasion.

18. See I. Timofeev, "Theses on Russia's Foreign Policy and Global Positioning (2017-2024)", Centre for Strategic Research and Russian International Affairs Council, June 2017, p. 19, <http://russiancouncil.ru>; also D. Trenin, "Russia's Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will It Work?", Carnegie Moscow Center, 20 July 2017, <http://carnegie.ru>.

19. Putin launched the "Greater Eurasia" project during his plenary speech at the St Petersburg Economic Forum, 17 June 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

counter-hegemonic than hegemonic. The most it can hope for is some kind of strategic concordat and equilibrium, in which China's leading influence is mitigated by significant roles for other regional players.²⁰

As in the case of global governance, this requires Moscow to use all the means at its disposal, from expanding bilateral relationships with major Asian players such as Japan and India, to consolidating regional multilateral structures and mechanisms. The counter-hegemonic impulse helps explain why it has striven so hard to open up membership of the SCO to India, Pakistan, and eventually Iran, and why organizations such as the CSTO and EEU remain important to it. Ineffectual though these bodies are, their very existence reinforces Russia's network of regional relationships, in the process contributing to a multipolar strategic environment in Eurasia.

Putin's approach to the post-Soviet space hints at a conceptual unity, one that might conceivably be realized in more propitious circumstances. The problem for Moscow, however, is that current conditions are not conducive to implementing grand schemes. Notwithstanding the hopes invested in the Greater Eurasia vision, post-Soviet Eurasia is set to become more disaggregated and uncontrollable. With tensions rising among the Asian powers, the region is increasingly susceptible to geopolitical conflicts. Meanwhile, the ex-Soviet republics remain ill-equipped to meet a growing array of challenges: issues of political succession and long-term legitimacy, economic sustainability, Islamist extremism and terrorism, and interethnic tensions. In this fluid environment, Moscow's immediate priority is not continental transformation, but rather the day-to-day management of Russia's bilateral relationships in the post-Soviet space, from Belarus in the west to Kyrgyzstan in the east.

The Middle East

The disjunction between foreign policy rhetoric and practice is especially evident in relation to the Middle East, and Syria in particular. A literal reading of official statements would suggest that Putin's abiding concern is to bolster security against the threat of international terrorism.²¹ There is

20. D. Trenin, "Russia's Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will It Work?", *op. cit.* [18]; see also D. Yefremenko, "The Birth of a Greater Eurasia", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 13 February 2017, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru>.

21. See Russian Foreign Policy Concept (2016), *op. cit.* [10].

an element of truth in this, given Russia's sizeable Muslim population,²² and the chronic instability of the North Caucasus region. But in reality, geopolitical priorities far outweigh any existential security concerns. The all-purpose rubric of "international terrorism" has served largely to legitimize Moscow's primary aims: to confirm Russia's return as a leading external power in the Middle East; and, through that, boost its credentials as a global actor.²³

In pursuing Russia's interests in the Middle East, the Kremlin must sustain a delicate balancing act. Over the course of his presidency, Putin has cultivated close cooperation with Israel, a sixth of whose population comes from the former Soviet Union. He has also promoted Russia's partnerships with Iran and Syria, both sworn enemies of Israel. More recently, there has been a modest rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, whose growing rivalry with Iran represents one of the greatest threats to stability in the region.²⁴ And then there is Russia's engagement with Turkey, an important economic partner but also a NATO member-state, and which under President Recep Erdogan has become increasingly nationalistic and temperamental.

Such a context puts a premium on flexibility rather than "big ideas" or political-military alliances. Moscow has responded accordingly by presenting Russia as all things to all people – as an effective and reliable ally (*vis-à-vis* Syria), a key economic partner (Turkey), a counter-balance to the West (Iran), an important supplier of arms (Syria, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Turkey), a leader in the struggle against international terrorism (Israel), and a good international citizen playing a vital role in containing the many tensions across the region.²⁵

Russia undoubtedly has significant geopolitical, security, and economic interests in the Middle East. Yet the region's ultimate importance to Moscow is as a theater of global politics. Putin seeks to position Russia as an indispensable power whose very presence is critical to world order – and where better to do so than on one of the highest profile issues today, the war in Syria? At the same time, Putin has calibrated policies to Russia's

22. This is commonly estimated to be around 20 million people or some 15 percent of the population. See "Closed Streets, Sea of People: 200,000+ Muslims Celebrate Eid Al-Fitr in Moscow", Russia Today, 5 July 2016, www.rt.com.

23. D. Trenin, "Demands on Russian Foreign Policy and Its Drivers: Looking Out Five Years", Carnegie Moscow Center, 10 August 2017, <http://carnegie.ru>.

24. The warming of Saudi-Russian ties was reflected in the visit of King Salman to Moscow in October 2017, the first ever by a Saudi monarch.

25. See paragraphs 92-96 of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, www.mid.ru.

capabilities, and taken care not to assume an excessive burden – such as trying to replace or rival US influence in the region. The Kremlin well understands the historical lessons of imperial overstretch, and of being embroiled in a never-ending military conflict. That is why it attaches primary importance to a political settlement in Syria – not because it desires peace for its own sake or to make common cause with the West in defeating ‘international terrorism’, but because this offers the best hope of cementing its strategic gains at minimum risk and cost.

This, however, is easier said than done. Until now, Putin has exploited the shortcomings – misperceptions, chronic lack of political will, hesitation – of Western decision-makers, as well as the disunity and disorganization of the anti-Assad opposition. Region-wide, he has taken advantage of a fractured security and strategic environment, in which Saudi Arabia and Iran are at loggerheads, the United States has lost moral and political credibility (exemplified by the Trump administration’s repudiation of the JCPOA), and the Europeans have become marginalized. By comparison, Russia comes across as a decisive actor, with clear goals and the means with which to prosecute them. And although its brutal methods have been condemned, this has mattered far less than the “shock and awe” effect of its military power.

The difficulty now, however, is that it is no longer sufficient for Putin to feed off the mistakes and omissions of others. To sustain its new-found position as a leading player in the region, Russia needs to assume a leading role in addressing its longer-term challenges. And with greater responsibility comes increased vulnerability – not so much in terms of physical threat (such as casualties to Russian troops), but of political and economic exposure. Russia, over time, could come to be judged by the same standards as the United States, and previously Britain and France, and found no less lacking.

This conundrum is well illustrated in Syria. Moscow has been relatively successful in organizing de-escalation zones, in which conflict is managed on the basis of a de facto devolution and division of authority. This is a tangible achievement, but it is also one that is largely tactical and fragile without the reinforcement of a broader political settlement. Yet it is precisely in this latter area where Russia has struggled to be effective. It has brokered the so-called Astana process, and also organized a major

gathering in Sochi.²⁶ But the very weaknesses it was able to exploit previously – the divisions of the anti-Assad opposition, and regional rivalries between Riyadh, Tehran, and Ankara – are major obstacles to the lasting settlement it seeks.²⁷

Putin has sought to co-opt others in brokering a new peace, but faces enormous challenges with only a fraction of the resources that were available to the Obama administration. Who will pay for post-conflict reconstruction in Syria, and on what terms? Can there be a political accommodation based on Bashar al-Assad or should he be sacrificed for the sake of the greater good and Russia's long-term geopolitical interests? Can Moscow continue to balance its ties with Riyadh, Jerusalem, and Tehran? On what basis might there be a resolution of the worst refugee crisis since the end of the Second World War? And how to prevent a new wave of Islamist extremism and terrorism? These are huge questions that certainly do not depend on Russia alone. But if it is to realize its ambition of being a leading regional and global actor, it will need to find some answers. Otherwise, its new status as regional power-broker could become increasingly challenged and eroded.

Russia and the Asia-Pacific

The profile of the Asia-Pacific in Russian foreign policy has risen dramatically in recent years. This is not only reflected in the Foreign Policy and National Security Concepts, but also in the impressive number of high-level visits, expanded economic ties, Russia's enhanced participation in Asian multilateral structures, and signs of a genuine commitment to develop the Russian Far East. Once viewed in predominantly instrumental terms, engagement with the Asia-Pacific has become vitally important in its own right. There is now a clear elite consensus that Russia's future as a 21st century power depends on the quality of its interaction with this most dynamic of regions.

However, Moscow has found it very difficult to develop a broad-based policy toward Asia for reasons largely beyond its control. First, the Asia-Pacific environment has become more geopolitically fractured. In addition

26. See H. Meyer, "Putin Stages Syria Peace Talks Boycotted by Assad Opponents", Bloomberg, 30 January 2018, www.bloomberg.com; M. Suchkov, "Hosting Syria Talks in Sochi Presents Challenges for Russia", *Al-Monitor*, 17 January 2018, www.al-monitor.com.

27. D. Trenin, "Putin's Plan for Syria", *Foreign Affairs*, 13 December 2017, www.foreignaffairs.com. See also N. Kozhanov, "Russia in Syria: Life After the Islamic State", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 14, No. 152, <https://jamestown.org>.

to the always difficult relationship between China and the United States, there are rising strategic and security tensions between China and Japan, and China and India. Notwithstanding recent diplomatic moves between Trump, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, the situation on the Korean peninsula remains extremely fluid. And although Moscow is less inclined to play balancing games than it once was, its attempts to engage with Asia are nevertheless often seen in those terms.

The development of the Sino-Russian partnership highlights Moscow's conundrum. In many respects, this has been the signal success of Putin's foreign policy. Although talk of an authoritarian entente is overblown, Moscow and Beijing are closer to each other than any time in the history of their relationship. They have worked effectively in stymieing Western attempts to unseat Assad. Bilateral economic ties have expanded significantly.²⁸ Military cooperation in the form of arms transfers and joint exercises is at an all-time high. And their views coincide on many international issues, from Iran to North Korea. While there remain important differences between them, China has become Russia's most favored partner. Moscow sees its support as crucial in counterbalancing US "unilateralism" and Western normative dominance; in maximizing Russia's strategic flexibility; and in opening up new economic possibilities in the Asia-Pacific region.²⁹

The downside is that other Asian players have a jaundiced view of their burgeoning relationship. They believe that Beijing holds the upper hand, and is therefore able to pressure Moscow into adopting pro-Chinese positions. Take the BRI. Putin hopes to hitch onto Beijing's economic bandwagon via the Greater Eurasia initiative, whereas Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sees the BRI as an instrument for enabling Chinese domination of the Eurasian space, and a serious threat to India's geopolitical interests in South and Central Asia.³⁰ Similarly, Moscow backs Beijing on Pakistan, in effect disregarding New Delhi's view of Islamabad

28. Sino-Russian trade grew from USD 5.7 billion in 1999 to USD 88 billion in 2012 – a more than fifteen-fold increase.

29. For a more comprehensive treatment of the Sino-Russian relationship, see B. Lo, *A Wary Embrace*, Melbourne, Penguin Random House Australia, 2017.

30. See, for example, Indrani Bagchi, "India Slams China's One Belt One Road initiative, Says It Violates Sovereignty", *The Times of India*, 14 May 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.

as the primary sponsor of terrorism in the region, and main threat to Indian security.³¹

The tensions are no less apparent *vis-à-vis* Japan. Tokyo believes that the Sino-Russian partnership has contributed significantly to Beijing's assertive behavior in the western Pacific. China, it is argued, can act with near-impunity, confident that Russia has its back.³² Closer to home, Tokyo deplores the fact that Moscow follows Beijing's line on North Korea, thereby exacerbating the threat posed to Japan by Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program.

The Sino-Russian partnership comes, then, with certain costs. The closer their relationship, the more difficult it is for Russia to develop better ties with other Asian players.³³ This raises a larger point, which is that the key determinants of its Asia policy are external rather than internal. Thus, while political will in the Kremlin is undoubtedly important, how Russia engages with Asia is shaped more by the problematic interaction between the United States and China, its own ongoing crisis with the West, strategic tensions between China and India, and Sino-Japanese animosities.

As a result, what passes for an Asia policy is more often than not a China-plus policy.³⁴ Despite Putin's efforts to develop closer ties with Tokyo, New Delhi, and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) capitals, the Sino-Russian partnership remains the alpha and omega of his approach to Asia. No amount of dressing-up, for example through showcase gatherings such as the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, can hide this reality. Unfortunately for Moscow, the perception of its deepening Sinocentrism has served to constrain Russian influence in the Asia-Pacific. And it has also weakened its ability to shape the Sino-Russian partnership, which is increasingly conducted on Beijing's terms.

31. This was most evident at the 2016 BRICS summit in Goa, when Modi was unable to introduce language in the summit communiqué condemning the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed organization.

32. This has been a frequent theme in my conversations with Japanese policy-makers and thinkers over the years.

33. An example of this is in relation to the South China Sea dispute. The Kremlin has maintained a formally neutral position on territoriality, but inveighed against the "internationalization" of the dispute by Western powers (the United States) and institutions (the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague).

34. B. Lo, *A Wary Embrace*, *op. cit.* [29], pp. 58-61

The subsuming of the EEU within the quasi-mystical vision of a Greater Eurasia represents tacit recognition of this reality.³⁵

Russia and the West

Russia's relations with the United States are now worse than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Although some observers have described the current state of affairs as a "new Cold War",³⁶ if anything this understates the gravity of the situation. The likelihood of military confrontation between Russia and the United States (and its NATO allies), although still low, is greater than it has been in three decades.³⁷

A large part of the problem is lack of clarity about each other's intentions, exacerbated by acute mistrust and a mutual sense of grievance. Events – NATO's Libyan intervention, the Syrian civil war, the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of southeast Ukraine, Moscow's interference in the 2016 US presidential election – have conspired to destroy even the notional foundations for a "normal" relationship between Moscow and Washington. The Trump presidency, which some had hoped might lead to a thaw, has instead seen an escalation of tensions. US policy toward Russia has hardened significantly – on sanctions, Ukraine, NATO, missile defense, and arms control.³⁸ The latest edition of the US National Security Strategy (NSS) explicitly identifies Russia (along with China) as a revisionist power whose purpose is "to weaken US influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners."³⁹ The US National Defense Strategy (NDS) offers an even starker appraisal: "The central challenge to

35. In May 2015, Russia and China signed an agreement to coordinate the work of the EEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), part of the BRI. This political commitment, however, has not yielded any practical results. Beijing has received some 40 project proposals supporting transport connectivity from China to Europe via the EEU space, but has yet to accept even one. See A. Gabuev, "Belt and Road to Where?", Carnegie Moscow Center, 8 December 2017, <http://carnegie.ru>.

36. The term was first used by Edward Lucas in his 2008 book, *The New Cold War*. It has since been picked up by many Western and Russian commentators. See, for example, R. Legvold, "Managing the New Cold War: What Moscow and Washington Can Learn From the Last One", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2014, www.foreignaffairs.com.

37. The risks were highlighted by US air-strikes in the Deir ez-Zor region of eastern Syria which may have killed up to 200 Russian nationals ("mercenaries"). See J. Borger and M. Bennetts, "Scores of Russian Mercenaries Killed by US Airstrikes in Syria", *The Guardian*, 13 February 2018, www.theguardian.com.

38. B. Lo, "An accident waiting to happen – Trump, Putin, and the US-Russia relationship", Lowy Institute Analysis, 25 October 2017, www.lowyinstitute.org.

39. National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017, p. 25, www.whitehouse.gov.

US prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition* [original italics] by [...] revisionist powers.”⁴⁰ In other words, Russia and China are now seen as representing more fundamental threats to American interests than Islamist terrorism and North Korea.

Moscow and Washington have talked at various times of cooperating against “international terrorism”. But the scope for movement here is very limited, given their different understandings of what this entails. Both sides have an obvious interest in preserving the existing framework of arms control treaties – extending the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) to 2026, and preserving the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.⁴¹ However, the outlook here is grim. The US government has accused Russia of being in breach of its INF obligations,⁴² while American missile deployments in Poland and Romania remain a toxic issue in Moscow.

Over the past decade, Moscow has consistently sought to undermine the Transatlantic alliance, playing on differences between Washington and leading European capitals. But the results have been unimpressive. Kremlin hopes that the Transatlantic security consensus might unravel remain unfulfilled. If anything, the direction of travel has been the other way. German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s commitment to a rules-based vision of Europe centered on the EU, and Emmanuel Macron’s convincing victory in the 2017 French presidential election, suggest that the Europeans are more resolute and confident in their dealings with Moscow. The prospect of an early relaxation of EU sanctions has receded.

Faced with these realities, Putin has lately modified his tactics. With Washington, the overtly confrontational line during the late Obama years has given way to a more nuanced approach. Implicit here is the

40. “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge”, p. 2, www.defense.gov.

41. The START (Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty) agreement was signed by Putin and Obama in 2010, and ratified a year later. The agreement limits the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550 for each side. It is valid for ten years after entry into force (i.e., until 2021), after which it can be extended (or not) by an additional five years. The INF (Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces) Treaty was signed by Reagan and Gorbachev in 1987. This prohibits Russia and the United States from possessing short-range (500-1,000 km) and intermediate-range (1,000-5,500 km) nuclear and conventional missiles, and their launchers.

42. M. Gordon, “Russia Deploys Missile, Violating Treaty and Challenging Trump”, *The New York Times*, 14 February 2017, www.nytimes.com. The missile in question is the 9M729 GLCM (ground-launched cruise missile), which Washington claims has a range of well over 500 km. For a more detailed account of the controversy, see S. Pifer, “The Future of the INF Treaty”, testimony to the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Security and Defence, Brookings, 25 January 2018, www.brookings.edu.

understanding that Trump, for all his braggadocio, is a weak president with minimal capacity to grant concessions to Russia. Better, then, for Moscow to await developments, keep expectations low, emphasize the (very few) positives, and cooperate where possible, for example, on de-confliction arrangements in Syria. This approach was exemplified by the Kremlin's careful handling of the Putin-Trump meetings in the margins of the Hamburg G-20 summit in July 2017,⁴³ and again at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, several months later.⁴⁴ More recently, the unprecedented visit of three Russian intelligence agency heads to Washington in January 2018 pointed to a continuing effort to establish some sort of constructive dynamic.⁴⁵

Moscow's behavior toward the Trump White House appears designed to portray Russia as moderate and reasonable. But behind such tactical considerations, there is strategic purpose as well. This derives from the premise that even a dysfunctional United States remains by far the most powerful and influential country in the world, notwithstanding the rise of China. Russia must therefore find a way of co-existing with it, and avoid a catastrophic confrontation.⁴⁶ Such a conclusion recalls the "peaceful co-existence" of the Khrushchev era, except that Putin's approach is more ambitious. It goes beyond what one observer has called "strategic containment"⁴⁷ to envisaging a global equilibrium in which the United States, Russia, China, and other leading players (India, Japan, Germany, France) function as a de facto Concert.

A new, if selective, restraint is apparent also in Moscow's conduct of relations with Europe. Although it previously sought to interfere in various elections, notably in the Netherlands and France, it is now switching tack.

43. The Kremlin praised the atmospherics of the meetings without going overboard. It welcomed the agreement to establish a de-confliction zone in southern Syria, and also the decision to form a joint cyber-security framework. And when the latter initiative quickly unraveled, it reacted calmly.

44. Although there was no formal Trump-Putin bilateral in Da Nang, there were several brief but cordial encounters between the two presidents. See D. Merica, "Trump, Putin Shake Hands, Chat Multiple times at Asia-Pacific Summit", CNN, 11 November 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com>.

45. V. Frolov, "Why the Directors of Russia's Intelligence Agencies Visited Washington", *The Moscow Times*, 8 February 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com>.

46. The Kremlin's caution is exemplified by its restrained response to the American air-strike in the Deir ez-Zor region that killed a significant number of Russian personnel in February 2018. Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov initially denied any knowledge of the incident, warning instead against misleading claims in the media. See "Moscow Won't Acknowledge the Deaths of Russian Mercenaries in US Airstrikes on Syrian Targets, but the Evidence is Mounting", *Meduza*, 14 February 2018, <https://meduza.io>.

47. I. Timofeev, "Russia and NATO: A Paradoxical Crisis", Valdai Discussion Club, 26 June 2017, <http://valdaiclub.com>.

It has moved from openly backing European far-right parties to re-engaging once again with the political mainstream in key countries, such as Germany and France.⁴⁸ The invitation to President Macron as guest of honor at the 2018 St Petersburg International Economic Forum testified to the return of a certain pragmatism. Underpinning this shift is a realization about the limits of Russian influence, and the need to adapt to certain realities, however unpalatable.

But if the Kremlin has modified its *modus operandi*, its broader objectives in Europe remain constant. The most important of these is geopolitical – to reassert a central role for Russia in the continent’s affairs. It would be one of several key players, alongside Germany and France, whose decisions have a major impact on political and security governance. And it would acquire a certain *droit de regard* in its western neighborhood, above all in Ukraine and Belarus.

Overall, the Putin elite is realistic about the current condition and future prospects of Russia’s relations with the West. It recognizes that, despite Trump’s equivocations, the United States will remain the dominant military actor in Europe; that the Transatlantic alliance is not about to implode; and that the EU will remain *in situ* for the foreseeable future. At the same time, though, it sees scope for a reinvigorated bilateralism. In energy, for example, the focus is on projects such as Nord Stream II, sidestepping as far as possible the constraints of the EU’s Third Energy Package with its “unbundling” provisions.⁴⁹ Politically, it means working with Berlin and Paris in seeking a settlement over Ukraine and in mitigating the effects of EU sanctions. Nevertheless, there are limits to Russian pragmatism. Moscow’s involvement in the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal on British soil highlighted that there are occasions when visceral hostility outweighs considered judgement, resulting in unintended consequences – such as enhanced Western unity in response to a concrete Russian threat.

It is important to emphasize what Russian intentions in Europe are not. Contrary to the fears of some Western policy-makers, there is no evidence that Putin wishes to re-impose Moscow’s dominion over the Baltic states. Annexation, even of a discrete, ethnic Russian-dominated territory such as Crimea, has proved a complicated and costly business.

48. In this connection, Putin’s visit to Paris in May 2017 was an early marker of a revised approach in the Kremlin.

49. See note [14] above.

The difficulties would be exponentially greater in relation to the Baltic states, NATO members covered by Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty.⁵⁰ Although future territorial incursions cannot be entirely ruled out, they remain improbable. Thus, the main purpose behind the Zapad-2017 military exercises was to enhance Russia's psychological leverage, not to rehearse a likely military scenario. Keeping Poland and the Baltic states uncomfortable is seen as both desirable in itself, and in testing NATO solidarity in stressful situations.⁵¹

Lessons from Russian foreign policy

We can draw several conclusions from Putin's conduct of foreign policy. First, it is fundamentally reactive. Although the Russian government's foundation policy documents are full of big ideas, such as a "polycentric system of international relations" and the vision of a Greater Eurasia, real decision-making is driven by unforeseen events, for example the Maidan revolution in Ukraine, as well as by larger external trends such as the global rise of China.

Second, Russian foreign policy is susceptible to all manner of political and economic pressures. Thus, Putin's emphasis on "national-patriotic" themes since 2011-12 owes much to a perceived need to reinforce his popular legitimacy at a time when Russia has experienced a serious economic downturn.⁵² In such cases, domestic pressures may skew more "rational" foreign policy choices and prior intentions.

This is not to underestimate the importance of longer-term, structural factors. Historical experience, geographical realities, and strategic and political culture shape the "education" of the ruling elite, and color every aspect of its interaction with the outside world.⁵³ The fiction that Moscow acts in a purely pragmatic, non-ideological fashion should be dismissed as

50. Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty states that "an armed attack against one or more of [NATO member-states] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all".

51. See A. Sushentsov, "Zapad Wargames and Living in Uncertainty", Valdai Discussion Club, 29 September 2017, <http://valdaiclub.com>.

52. The Russian economy suffered a protracted slowdown from 2011, and entered into recession in 2015. There has since been a slight recovery, but the estimated growth rate for 2017 was 1.5 percent, a modest level that is not expected to increase significantly over the next few years. See R. Connolly, "Stagnation and change in the Russian economy", *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 213, Center for Security Studies, 7 February 2018, pp. 5-8, www.css.ethz.ch.

53. For more details on the structural factors shaping Russian foreign policy, see B. Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, *op. cit.* [2], pp. 13-22.

the self-serving artifice that it is. Attitudes and biases matter, even if they do not always translate into specific policies.

Nevertheless, while principles and atavistic instincts remain important, they are subject to constant modification according to circumstance and need. Under Putin, there is a premium on flexibility of aims, means, and messages. Thus, an abiding attachment to Russia's "great power" identity is packaged in terms of good international citizenship – contributing to the global effort to defeat terrorism; emphasizing peaceful methods to resolve crises, such as over Iran and North Korea; and promoting the United Nations as the basis of equitable global governance.⁵⁴ In the post-Soviet space, Kremlin opportunism (and adaptability) is reflected in the shift away from the relatively closed shop of the Eurasian Economic Union to the more inclusive Greater Eurasia concept. In Syria, Moscow aims to preserve Russian gains – a resurgent role in the Middle East and an enhanced global profile – but recognizes this cannot be achieved through military means only, or by tying Russian interests too closely to the fate of the Assad regime. Diplomatic process and a political settlement, however jerry-built, are required.

Moscow's flexible approach is a response not only to the demands of a disorderly world, but also to Russia's limited capabilities. In theory, it disposes of many instruments for projecting power and influence. In reality, these are few and circumscribed. A vast strategic nuclear arsenal, for example, does not carry the geopolitical weight that it did during the Cold War. Russia's military power was unable to prevent the political "loss" of Ukraine – indeed, its operational successes accelerated it. Much has been made of the Kremlin's use of so-called "hybrid warfare", and its role in discrediting Western democracies from the United States to Eastern Europe. Yet this impact, too, has been exaggerated. Trump emerged victorious from the 2016 US presidential election not because of Moscow's interference, but because he was able to tap into a deep sense of disillusionment across much of America (including among Democratic voters), and exploit Hillary Clinton's disastrous campaign. In the Netherlands and France, Russian agencies exerted tremendous efforts to promote far-right parties at the expense of the political mainstream, yet largely failed.

54. The 2016 Russian Foreign Policy Concept highlights the "central and coordinating role played by the United Nations as the key organization in charge of regulating international relations."

The score-sheet

In important respects, Putin's conduct of foreign policy has been highly successful. During his presidency, Russia has metamorphosed from a discredited superpower whose demands for equal status were widely mocked, into a significant player that everyone takes seriously. Some countries, such as China, value it as a "strategic" partner. Others, predominantly in the West, see it as a major threat to international security and stability. What is beyond dispute, though, is that all countries are now adjusting their foreign policies to take into account Russia's changing profile in the world. And for both the Putin elite and the general population that is something of which to be proud.

Putin has also succeeded in conveying a sense of purpose at a time when the foreign policies of many Western powers are in disarray. Even before Trump entered the White House, the Obama administration had become synonymous with American indecision. Obama's prevarications, in particular his refusal to make good on various ultimatums against the Assad regime in Syria,⁵⁵ cleared the way for Russia's military intervention in September 2015. Putin demonstrated that he wasn't afraid to act ruthlessly in support of Russian interests – and so the legend grew of the clever leader running rings around his hapless Western counterparts.

Today, the comparisons are even more stark. The chaos in Washington caused by a delinquent president; the self-harming act of Brexit that has marginalized the United Kingdom as a serious international player; and continuing strains within the EU – have made Russian foreign policy look impressive by comparison. In an environment where few leaders are thinking strategically, and governments appear to be stumbling from one crisis to another, Putin's sharp tactics distinguish him from most of his peers.

55. These included the "red line" announced by Obama in August 2012. When, however, the Assad regime launched a chemical weapons attack against its own people at Ghouta near Damascus a year later, Obama abdicated responsibility to Congress. For various reasons, not least acute partisanship, the latter declined to support military intervention. Most likely, Obama never seriously contemplated military action, but was looking for a way out of his earlier commitment. See G. Kessler, "President Obama and the 'Red Line' on Syria's Chemical Weapons", *The Washington Post*, 6 September 2013, www.washingtonpost.com.

Another success of Putin's foreign policy has been his ability to enlist public support behind the meme of a resurgent Russia. This is a considerable achievement at a time when the former "social contract" – material well-being in exchange for political compliance – has eroded. Putin's personal ratings have boomed since the annexation of Crimea and the imposition of Western sanctions; the more he is attacked in the West, the more popular he is at home.⁵⁶

But many of the strengths of Putin's conduct of foreign policy are also weaknesses in some degree. Thus, his penchant for the tactical "coup" has led to a disproportionate focus on short-term gains and great power vanities at the expense of longer-term goals. The response to the Ukraine crisis in 2013-14 exemplified this contradiction – operationally successful, but strategically self-defeating. It also exposed the limits of Russian power, even in its neighborhood. Moscow can intimidate, but it has yet to come up with an attractive vision to which others would like to subscribe. The contrast here with the recent Chinese experience in Eurasia is instructive. Indeed, Putin's advocacy of a Greater Eurasia amounts to tacit admission that Russia can achieve very little without Beijing's active support as an *economic* great power.

Tactical surprise is also by its nature a fragile and impermanent phenomenon. Until 2017, the Kremlin could count on the hesitation of the Obama administration, and the apprehensions of the Europeans, in framing its actions. The shortcomings of Russian power were outweighed by Putin's ability to project an image as more committed, agile, and ruthless than his Western opponents. This allowed him to extend the boundaries of risk – as exemplified by the military intervention in Syria. Such assumptions, however, have become unsafe. Trump's volatility and the escalation of anti-Russian sentiment in Washington have undermined the Kremlin's previously comfortable calculus.⁵⁷ They increase the likelihood of military actions whose consequences are unclear, such as the US missile strike against the al-Shayrat base in April 2017, and the US-UK-French joint action against Syrian government chemical weapons facilities in April 2018.⁵⁸ Although the consequences of such actions have been

56. Although survey results should always be viewed critically, Putin's approval ratings have stabilized at 80 percent plus, see www.levada.ru.

57. See L. Shevtsova, "Survival in the Trumpian World", *The American Interest*, 22 February 2017, www.the-american-interest.com; also A. Barbashin, "A Sober View of the Putin-Trump 'Bromance'", *Intersection*, 12 July 2017, <http://intersectionproject.eu>.

58. On 7 April 2017, the USS *Ross* and USS *Porter* launched 59 Tomahawk missiles at the Syrian government airbase of Shayrat near Homs. This was in response to a chemical weapons attack on

limited, the situation would be far less manageable in the event of Washington undertaking military action against North Korea or Iran, or pursuing a more aggressive line against Beijing on trade policy or in the South China Sea. In such circumstances, tactical “cleverness” by Moscow is scarcely a viable substitute for a more strategic approach.

That said, Putin faces a problem of *force majeure*. For all Russia’s demonstrations of military might, it remains a weak power in most respects. Its economy is roughly the same size as Australia’s, even though its population is more than six times larger.⁵⁹ It is technologically backward by comparison with most Western countries, and, increasingly, rising powers such as China and India. Despite a high national rate of literacy, its universities rank poorly in world lists,⁶⁰ and many of its best and brightest work abroad. Foreign perceptions of Russia are generally unfavorable, in non-Western countries as well as in the West.⁶¹ It has shown no capacity or will to lead on 21st century global issues, such as combating climate change. Its influence in the post-Soviet space is in long-term decline, while its footprint in Asia remains very modest. Moscow is able to embarrass Western governments, yet its capacity to shape US and European decision-making in its favor has rarely been weaker. This long list of shortcomings is all the more serious in a world where Russia is no longer simply competing against the West, but with an ever expanding cast of players.

the village of Khan Shaykoun a few days earlier. The practical effect of the strikes was limited, not least because Washington took good care to notify the Russians beforehand, and consequently many of the base’s planes (and Russian military personnel) were moved to more secure locations. The US-UK-French strikes a year later inflicted serious damage on the Syrian government’s chemical weapons facilities. But even this more comprehensive action was carefully managed to avoid any unintended escalation arising from possible Russian casualties.

59. Measured by nominal GDP – see IMF World Economic Outlook Database, April 2017, www.imf.org.

60. Moscow State University (MGU-Lomonosov) is the only Russian entry (188=) in the top 300 in the Times Higher Education rankings of top universities in the world – see “World University Rankings 2016-2017”, www.timeshighereducation.com. MGU ranks somewhat higher in other lists – 93= in Shanghai’s Academic Ranking of World Universities – ARWU), and 95= in the QS World University Rankings. But tellingly only in the latter list do other Russian institutions feature in the top 300—St Petersburg State University is 240=, Novosibirsk is 250=, and the Bauman Institute in Moscow is 291=.

61. See M. Vice, “Publics Worldwide Unfavorable toward Putin, Russia”, Pew Global Attitudes Survey, 16 August 2017, www.pewglobal.org. There are some notable exceptions to the rule: China (where curiously opinion was not surveyed); Vietnam (79 percent for Putin; 9 percent against); Philippines (54-24); Greece (50-45); and India (29-13; although the fact that more than half of the respondents expressed no view suggests indifference). Several countries regarded as generally sympathetic to Moscow returned adverse findings: Venezuela (22-65); Brazil (19-60); Turkey (20-74); and Israel (28-69). The global median was 26-60.

Looking ahead

In the short term, the prospects of substantive change in Russian foreign policy are meager. Putin appears convinced that it has been thoroughly successful, measured by the criteria most important to him. Russia has become an increasingly prominent actor in global as well as regional affairs. It has changed the balance of its interaction with the West. There is overwhelming domestic support for Putin's conduct of foreign policy. And a renascent Russian nationalism based on the assertion of "traditional spiritual and moral values" has become one of the pillars of regime legitimacy. In a world where international hierarchies, norms, and institutions are in flux, Russian foreign policy comes across as one of the few relative constants.

The likelihood of change is further reduced by the paucity of options available to Putin. He could look to transform the country through comprehensive modernization. But this is a process that will take decades (if it happens at all), and whose dividends might not be evident for some time. Crucially, large-scale modernization would entail revolutionizing the system of political relations and governance in Russia, a transformation fraught with risk for the longevity of the regime. Confronted with such daunting choices, it is hardly surprising that Putin should prioritize the showy and the immediate, in foreign as in domestic policy. The modernization of Russia's strategic and conventional military capabilities, the revival of militarist traditions in society, and the demonstrations of military power in Ukraine and Syria "make sense" when viewed through this prism.

Looking further ahead, the most probable scenario for Russian foreign policy is one of broad continuity. Putin's re-election in March 2018 for a fourth presidential term suggests that he will remain the dominant political figure in Russia for some years yet, either as President or in some sort of "father of the nation" capacity, similar to that of China's Deng Xiaoping in his later years.⁶² The make-up of Putin's inner circle is likely to undergo

62. Other parallels are Lee Kuan Yew and the Ayatollah Khomeini – or indeed an amalgam of all three leaders.

some modification – indeed, this is already occurring⁶³ – but the collective mindset toward the outside world will remain essentially unaltered. We can expect regular reaffirmations of Russia’s status as an independent center of global power; an emphasis on strategic flexibility; and frequent “surprise” moves, both to realize concrete aims and as a matter of sound operating practice – keeping the enemy off-balance.

Moscow will look to engage with the West, but on a selective and transactional basis, prioritizing trade, inward investment, and technology transfer. It will aim to build on the “strategic partnership” with Beijing, bilaterally and through such ventures as Greater Eurasia, while hoping also to minimize its China-dependence. Policy toward the post-Soviet space will remain largely prophylactic. Eurasian integration will stay on the statute books, so to speak, but the Kremlin will concentrate on reinforcing authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space, countering liberal influences (foreign and domestic), and preserving close ties with ruling elites in key states, such as Kazakhstan, Belarus, and possibly also Uzbekistan. There will be no let-up in efforts to preserve Ukraine as a weak state.

In time, the necessity of some kind of far-reaching modernization may become inescapable to figures within the ruling circle, if not necessarily to Putin himself. This might occur as a result of growing economic pressures, popular discontent, or the realization that things cannot continue as they are.⁶⁴ If the process of change turns out relatively smoothly – a risky assumption – then the effects on Russian foreign policy would be limited. Core principles would remain in place, although the modalities of Russia’s interaction with Western countries and organizations might become smoother as the regime focuses more on domestic reform priorities. Russia’s international commitments would still be significant, particularly in strategic areas such as the post-Soviet neighborhood, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific region. But there would be fewer demonstrations of Russian power for their own sake.

63. In August 2016, Putin changed the head of the Presidential Administration, with his long-time associate Sergei Ivanov giving way to the much younger (aged 44) and obscure Anton Vaino – see “Putin Gets New Right-Hand Man as Chief of Staff Exits”, Reuters, 12 August 2016, www.reuters.com. Putin has also made a number of changes among regional governors – see “String of Changes in Governor Hits Russian Regions as Elections Approach”, RT, 28 September 2017, www.rt.com.

64. This would be roughly analogous with the realization within the Politburo by the late 1980s that the Soviet administrative-command system had atrophied, and was in dire need of reform. But what to do specifically presented an altogether greater degree of difficulty. See R. Service, *The End of the Cold War*, Basingstoke, Pan Macmillan, 2015, pp. 53-64.

Although there is little sign that the Putin regime is in danger of collapse, it would be unwise to exclude this possibility altogether. The rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union from a position of apparent solidity stands as a warning against complacency. A similar combination of economic troubles, loss of regime confidence, popular disillusionment, nationalism, and external pressures could lead to the unravelling of Putinism. The real question is not whether such a scenario is possible, but what might replace the current system.

One potential outcome is the rise of a virulently nationalistic regime that combines xenophobia at home with an aggressive foreign policy, not only toward the West, but also China and anyone else suspected of undermining Russia's position in the world. This would be roughly analogous to the Trump phenomenon in the United States, only worse; there would be few of the institutional (and other) checks and balances that until now have mitigated the worst excesses of the White House.

This scenario is sometimes touted by commentators who argue that Putin represents the best hope for stable, cooperative engagement with the West.⁶⁵ If an ultra-nationalist leadership were to emerge in Russia, it would most likely come at a time of acute political uncertainty, economic crisis, and social ferment. A failing state would behave more reflexively than pragmatically, and the possibilities of confrontation would be considerable.

The best outcome for Russia and the world would be a peaceful transformation of the Putin system. This does not mean that Russia would become "like the West", a liberal democracy similar to France or Germany. Rather, it would find its own path to reinventing itself as a 21st century world power, disposing of multiple forms of influence. The transformation might be gradual and incremental, but it would bring about a fundamental change in the character of the Russian polity. Instead of being dominated by top-down arbitrary power, militarism, resource-dependence, and gigantism, there would emerge a Russia that is an independent but globalized actor, calmly confident about its capabilities and place in the world.⁶⁶

65. See, for example, comments by D. Simes, "Putin: Russia's Last Remaining Pragmatist?", *The National Interest*, 11 March 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org>.

66. B. Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, *op. cit.* [2], p. 243. See also I. Timofeev, "Theses on Russia's Foreign Policy and Global Positioning (2017-2024)", *op. cit.* [18], p. 16.

Today, of course, it is extremely difficult to picture such an outcome. But circumstances change, and even the most unreconstructed of regimes may be susceptible to far-reaching transformation. Indeed, the pressures for systemic change are already increasing. Dmitri Trenin, for example, believes that in the next five years the regime will have to choose between three options: “reform the economy and dismantle the existing politico-economic setup; go for a wholesale economic mobilization dominated by the state; or keep the system intact and face the prospect of continued decline and possibly an upheaval in the end.”⁶⁷

Yet we also need to be realistic about the limits of change, and the nexus between domestic reform and a “liberal” foreign policy. It is often assumed in the West that democracies are intrinsically more peaceful, more enlightened, and more capable in their conduct of foreign policy than authoritarian states. There is precious little evidence to support this proposition. As we survey the chaos of the Trump presidency and the confusion of a post-Brexit Britain, such notions appear more absurd than ever. Domestic factors can exert a powerful influence on foreign policy, but they guarantee nothing. Ultimately, the conduct of Russia’s international affairs is contingent on far larger variables than merely the nature of its political system. It will depend on favorable circumstances at home and abroad; the capacity of its leaders to grasp the enormous challenges facing the country; and their political will and courage to take difficult decisions and stick by them in the face of adversity.

67. D. Trenin, “Looking Out Five Years: Ideological, Geopolitical, and Economic Drivers of Russian Foreign Policy”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 22 August 2017, <http://carnegie.ru>.

The Latest Publications of *Russie.Nei.Visions*

- ▀ [P. Baev, “From Chechnya to Syria: The Evolution of Russia’s Counter-Terrorist Policy”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 107, Ifri, April 2018.
- ▀ [J.-R. Raviot, “Putinism: A Praetorian System?”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 106, Ifri, March 2018.
- ▀ [S. Fainberg, “Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 105, Ifri, December 2017.
- ▀ [C. Pajon, “Japan-Russia: The Limits of a Strategic Rapprochement”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 104, Ifri, October 2017.
- ▀ [M. Suslov, “Russian World’: Russia’s Policy towards its Diaspora”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 103, Ifri, July 2017.
- ▀ [A. Marin, “Minsk-Beijing: What Kind of Strategic Partnership?”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 102, Ifri, June 2017.
- ▀ [I. Facon, “Reforming Ukrainian Defense: No Shortage of Challenges”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 101, Ifri, May 2017.
- ▀ [B. Lo, “New Order for Old Triangles? The Russia-China-India Matrix”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 100, Ifri, April 2017.
- ▀ [M. Laruelle, “Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 99, Ifri, March 2017.
- ▀ [E. Karin, “Central Asia: Facing Radical Islam”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 98, Ifri, February 2017.
- ▀ [P. Baev, “Russia and Central and Eastern Europe: Means of Pressure and Channels of Influence”](#), *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 97, Ifri, November 2016.

If you wish to be notified of upcoming publications (or receive additional information), please e-mail: souin@ifri.org



ifri

institut français
des relations
internationales