

Can Washington move beyond “Ukraine fatigue”?

Mathieu BOULEGUE

For the past two years, the United States has been at grips with an increasingly revisionist Russia in continental Europe. The crisis in Ukraine deteriorated the state of the bilateral relationship with Moscow¹ to what could be an all-time low since the end of the Cold War² (even if the attempt at a “reset” of the relationship in 2009 had already failed). As a result, the U.S. had to reaffirm its involvement in the security of its NATO and bilateral allies. Can the United States find ways forward to improve both the situation in Eastern Europe and its relationship with Russia? Military operations in Syria, now conducted by the two countries with a modicum of coordination, are a complicating factor to say the least.

Even though Washington considered providing lethal military aid to Ukraine, and in spite of very strong rhetoric on both sides, the United States and NATO avoided direct military confrontation with Russia during the most acute phases of the Ukrainian crisis. Indeed, despite the lack of understanding and confidence, channels (and backchannels) of communication between the U.S. and Russia were never broken, and the bilateral dialogue went on unhampered. So far, both countries have managed to tolerate each other and cooperate a minima on common security challenges due to a shared feeling of mutual interests in doing so. As Richard Weitz puts it, they “share the negative goal of keeping their differences [...] from escalating into a direct armed conflict”³.

The present U.S. administration is not trying to improve the bilateral relationship, however: indeed, no “Reset 2.0” seems possible until at least the end of the Putin era. Instead of a grand strategy aimed at addressing Russia⁴,

Mathieu Boulegue is a security and policy analyst in post-Soviet affairs. Partner at the risk management and business consulting firm AESMA.

Les opinions exprimées dans ce texte n'engagent que leur auteur.

ISBN : 978-2-36567-478-2

© Tous droits réservés, Paris, Ifri

9 novembre 2015

1. “Final Report of the International Security Advisory Board (ISAB) on U.S.-Russia Relations”, United States Department of State, December 9, 2014.
2. Jeffrey Mankoff and Andrew Kuchins, “Russia, Ukraine, and U.S. Policy Options: A Briefing Memo”, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), January 2015.
3. Richard Weitz, “U.S.-Russian Relations Beyond Ukraine: Realities and Recommendations Moving Forward”, Center on Global Interests, May 2015.
4. “White House to unveil call for strategic patience”, *Foreign Affairs*, February 2015, available on: <<http://foreignpolicy.com>>.

Washington therefore develops what seems to be a pattern of pragmatic waiting out based on short-term priorities towards Moscow.

This policy has led Washington to slowly tilt towards Russian interests by forcing Kyiv to make further concessions with Moscow. Over the course of the summer of 2015, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and her Russian counterpart Grigory Karasin developed a powerful relationship with regard to the application of the Minsk Two agreements⁵. This backchannel bypassed Kyiv altogether and ended up forcing Ukraine to speed up the implementation of the “special status” in Donbas (which will give full-fledged legitimacy and legality to the separatist entities in Donetsk and Luhansk) and the organization of local elections in the Donetsk and Lugansk “People’s Republics” (DPR/LPR) under a new electoral law.

Other factors of great import also impact the U.S.’s stance on the Ukraine issue, compounding the sense that Washington is suffering from a “Ukraine fatigue”. As a matter of fact, it is also because the United States and Russia need greater interaction in the fight against Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq that compromises were forced upon Ukraine.

Even though U.S. financial support to Ukraine remains unconditional⁶, U.S. policy makers may still find it difficult to justify this course of action without (completely) legitimizing Russian actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

In this context, reassurance towards bilateral and NATO allies has become a complicated matter. Instead of seeking to extend its borders, NATO’s actions will be circumscribed to ensuring its core mission of providing security to its European Allies, especially Georgia and Ukraine, in a logic of “resilience and engagement”⁷. The creation of the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) by the White House in June 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, falls in this category⁸. Its aim is not so much to deter Russia but rather to offer some reassurance to European NATO members regarding the continued relevance of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty on collective defense⁹. With a budget of one billion dollars earmarked for 2015, this new policy is specifically geared towards Poland and the Baltic States and mostly encompasses additional military training, increased U.S. rotational presence, and improvements of combat readiness infrastructure. Pledges to increase interactions with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have also been made.

Meanwhile, Russia could very well seek to disrupt NATO Allies by “testing” their collective response. Conventional means of destabilization could range from the remilitarization of the Kaliningrad enclave, the strengthening of Russian military presence in Transnistria and Belarus, the posting of nuclear weapons in Crimea, or the multiplication of high-profile military exercises on NATO’s borders. Even worse, Moscow could experiment non-conventional, asymmetric

5. Vladimir Socor, “Obama Administration Undercutting Ukraine’s Position in the Minsk Armistice Negotiations”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 12, Issue 139, July 24, 2015.

6. “White House fact sheet on U.S. assistance in Ukraine”, available on: <www.whitehouse.gov>.

7. Olga Oliker, Michael J. McNerney and Lynn E. Davis, “NATO Needs a Comprehensive Strategy for Russia”, *RAND Corporation*, 2015.

8. White House fact sheet on the European Reassurance Initiative, available on: <www.whitehouse.gov>.

9. “An attack against one Ally is considered as an attack against all Allies”, in “The North Atlantic Treaty on collective defense”, Article 5, available on: <www.nato.int>.

methods against NATO members, such as cyberattacks on critical assets, increased information warfare, or large-scale subversion and propaganda operations targeting Russian-speaking populations and minorities¹⁰. These hybrid threats fall beneath the threshold of what is usually defined as requiring a legitimate military response under NATO's collective defense. The credibility of the Alliance as a whole and its ability to defend its Allies against non-traditional threats could therefore be at stake.

Such proceedings on the Russian side could lead to miscalculations in Washington and take both states down a spiral of unwanted confrontation¹¹. The recent rhetorical use of the nuclear threshold by President Putin speaks volumes about the possibility of self-fulfilling threats and potentially hostile acts. This is especially true since "red lines" have never been clearly defined between the two States. For instance, would a mid-air collision between U.S. and Russian jet fighters in Syria be considered a deliberate accident or a downright act of war? The same goes for the repeated violations of Turkish airspace, a NATO member, by Russian planes since the beginning of the bombing campaign in Syria at the end of September 2015.

The perceptions both countries have of each other, their vision of the world and of international relations are now poles apart. Their security and strategic interests seem to be irreconcilable. President Vladimir Putin drove the point home during his address at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, when he lashed out at the "single center of domination" represented by the United States and openly accused Washington of being responsible for a new Cold War¹². This statement underlined his vision of the disintegration of the Soviet Union as a moment of humiliation for Russia, thereby justifying his refusal of the legitimacy of State borders drafted in the 1990's.

Since little is likely to change until the end Obama administration, Vladimir Putin may think he has a whole year to speed up his European agenda and finish what he has in store for Ukraine. Implied is the thought that the course of American diplomacy will change after the 2016 presidential elections. Most Democratic and Republican candidates have already voiced tougher stances on Russia than the current President. Whereas Donald Trump (GOP) and Bernie Sanders (Dem) might be more lenient towards the Kremlin, GOP frontrunners Jeb Bush, Ben Carson, and Carly Fiorina all denounced Russia's military actions and pledged a strengthened NATO presence in Europe. Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton (Dem) and Marc Rubio (GOP) advocate an even more hardline approach towards President Putin.

Whatever the outcome of the elections, the next U.S. administration will have to rethink the balance between keeping some level of cooperation and engagement on common security challenges with Russia while containing Moscow's revisionist policy in Europe and providing reassurance to its NATO

10. "Third Report Towards the Next Defence and Security Review: Part Two-NATO", House of Commons Defence Committee, 22 July 2014.

11. "Military if not nuclear escalation, although unlikely, cannot be completely ruled out", intervention of Fiona Hill, available on: <<http://globalinterests.org>>.

12. "Read Putin's U.N. General Assembly speech", *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2015, available on: <www.washingtonpost.com>.

Allies¹³. The latest developments in Syria, with Moscow increasing its military involvement and becoming a major strategic actor in the region, will be an important element in this balance.

13. Jeffrey Mankoff, "U.S.-Russian relations: the path ahead after the crisis", *Potomac Paper* 22, Ifri, December 2014.