

## Russia, the West and Ukraine: A View from Moscow

By Sergey Markedonov, Moscow

### Abstract:

Today Russia and the West face the most severe crisis in their relations since the end of the Cold War. The West accuses Russia of violating international law in Ukraine, while Russia claims that the West violated similar laws earlier in the Balkans and Middle East. Today's confrontation is not a new Cold War, but grows out of different accounts of what violates the world order and international law. Ultimately weakening Russia will not serve the interests of the US and the EU as they seek to address challenges from a rising China and growing Islamist terrorist threats. To exit the current stalemate, Russia and the West must no longer be held hostage by the Ukrainian situation, so that they can restore full diplomatic discussions.

### Russia and the West: New Challenges

The Ukrainian political crisis—defined by the change in status for Crimea and the armed confrontation in the Donbass—is the most serious and dangerous challenge for European security since the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the subsequent ethno-political conflicts in the Balkans. It has sparked the deepest confrontation between Russian and the West (USA and the European Union) since the end of the “Cold War,” marked by the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact and the disintegration of the Soviet Union and, thus, also of one of the poles in the bipolar world of the Cold War era.

Differences between Moscow, on one side, and Washington and Brussels, on the other, existed prior to the current crisis over Ukraine. The sharpest example being the “five-day war” in the Trans-Caucasus in 2008, when the attempts by the Georgian authorities to smash the infrastructure of the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia and minimize the role of Russia within the region led to the open intervention of Russia's armed forces. However, the current confrontation is different in that it is taking place against the background of the recognition of the failure of efforts by post-Soviet Russia to integrate into the Western world, while preserving its “special position” on a series of questions, especially the security of its “nearby neighborhood.” The sanctions adopted by the USA and EU, although not the only reason for the slowing rate of economic growth and financial crisis in Russia, have helped push the development of events in a negative direction.

Against this background, a “defensive mood” has developed inside Russia. Politicians and pundits, who only yesterday were considered marginal, have been transformed into essentially the chief articulators of public opinion and the spokesmen for the position of the authorities. Representatives of the authorities have begun to appeal much more frequently to both foreign policy realism with its pathos of national interests, which earlier profitably characterized the Russian diplomatic line, and an arsenal of romantic approaches,

such as appeals to the “Russian World,” the sacredness of Crimea, among others. The confrontation with the West has activated a search for foreign policy alternatives, which explains Moscow's new activeness toward China, India, Turkey and Iran across a wide range of issues, starting with military-technical cooperation and energy and finishing with humanitarian concerns.

Thanks to this deep confrontation, several topics on which Russia and the West had earlier found a *modus operandi* are no longer being given the necessary attention: Afghanistan, regulating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and countering Islamist terrorism are chief among them. The appearance in the Middle East of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has seriously destabilized the situation in this region, which was already filled with conflicts. It is a challenge both for Russia and the West. Today, ISIL is battling against the U.S. coalition and its allies. But, at the same time, the leader of this terrorist organization Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi speaks of the need to destabilize the North Caucasus as an answer to Moscow's support for Syrian President Bashar Assad. But, even the appearance of this new common threat has not made Washington and Moscow more willing to talk.

From the point of view of the USA and its European allies, Moscow's actions have gone beyond the boundaries of international law. Announcing that Russia had violated the Budapest Memorandum (which was signed on December 5, 1994, and guaranteed Ukraine's security in connection with its joining of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) has become a common refrain in speeches by representatives of the American and European diplomatic and expert community. The Russian leadership claims that the results of the referenda in Crimea and Sevastopol make it possible to speak about the legitimacy of the “return” of the peninsula to Russia. Russia's violation of legal agreements is explained inside the country as simply doing what others (the West) have done and continue to do. The prime examples cited are the cases of the former Yugoslavia and the Middle East,

when external forces intervened in the civil war and ethno-political conflicts without the consent and participation of the United Nations.

### Confrontation without “Cold War”

Political scientists, politicians, and journalists are using the phrase “cold war” with increasingly frequency to characterize the current state of relations between the West and Russia. Can we speak of a return to a time of global confrontation or view Crimea and the Donbass as a turning point in the history of international relations? And, if so, what is the essence of today’s standoff, which, unfortunately, is getting worse with each passing day?

Today several attributes are missing from the situation for it to be legitimately characterized as a “cold war.” These include the absence of a second superpower or military bloc that can gather around itself an ideology to distinguish itself from the values of the Western world. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) cannot play the role of a Warsaw Pact for the twenty-first century, in terms of either its membership or financial-economic indicators. And, despite the authorities’ harsh rhetoric, Russia does not plan to build a “new type of society” or spread a revolutionary ideology around the world.

In comparison with the Soviet period, the geopolitical interests of Moscow are much more locally-orientated. The priority for post-Soviet Russia is the former Soviet space. And ensuring security in this part of the world is not a matter of restoring “empire,” evening the historical score, or addressing a trauma that originated from the Soviet collapse, but is rather a requirement to meet current needs. The land border between Russia and Kazakhstan is the second longest in the world (exceeding even the U.S.–Mexican border). If the security situation collapses in Afghanistan (which is more than likely with the exit of NATO from there), it will be a dangerous challenge for the Russian Federation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Crimea hosted approximately 80% of the infrastructure for the Russian Black Sea fleet, one of the key elements in protecting the southern part of the country. Many ethno-political conflicts in the South Caucasus are directly connected to security problems in the North Caucasus (the Georgian–Ossetian conflict with the Ossetian–Ingush conflict, Abkhazia with situation in regions hosting a significant Adyghean population; the situation in Chechnya and Dagestan with the situation in Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge). And even where Russia is involved in resolving problems going beyond the borders of the former USSR, such as in the Middle East, Moscow is mainly focused on the security problems of the post-Soviet space (threats from radical Islamists to the Russian North Caucasus

and Volga regions, as well as neighboring Georgia and Azerbaijan). These connections will exist no matter who is the Russian president.

Accordingly, the reason for today’s flare up in confrontation between Moscow and Washington / Brussels is not a “second cold war” or an ideological disagreement, but an asymmetrical perception of national priorities. Russia and the West have different accounts of what violates the world order and international law. The Americans and their allies see Russia’s actions in Crimea exclusively as a violation of post-WWII European borders. But for Moscow the violation of international law began much earlier and the Ukrainian–Crimean crisis is only part of a much larger process, beginning with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the USSR, Yugoslavia, and the expansion of NATO to the east.

The situation with Ukraine is not an argument about “who started it first.” It is a story about the absence of a real working international law and effective international arbitration for disagreements concerning the relations between the center and regions in crisis conditions. Again, as happened earlier in the Balkans or in the South Caucasus, in the current crisis there has been no consensus among leading world powers about the specific criteria for secession or preserving territorial integrity.

This duality has its roots in the years when the Cold War was ceremoniously announced over, and a single linear *de facto* project was announced for Europe and the post-Soviet space that was focused on NATO (in which, as is well known, the US is considered an important element of European security) and the European Union (a strategic partner of Washington). Interestingly, one of the main NATO “commandments”—keeping Russia out—was migrated from the Cold War era to the world that followed it. The linear project for expanding to, and incorporating, Eurasia has been implemented without including Russia as an equal partner. The West is *de facto* proposing to Moscow that Russia become one of the post-Soviet countries, with no special interests on the space of the former USSR.

But if the new Russia is not ready to bear the burden of global leadership (which it cannot do for many reasons, above all, economic and technological), the question of its “neighborhood policy” is to a significant degree a continuation of its domestic political agenda. This continuation is visible in the connections between the conflicts in the North and South Caucasus, the focus on guaranteeing security in Central Asia, and Eurasian integration as an opportunity to develop the Russian poly-ethnic project and advance its own industrial base. Of course, as the legal successor to the USSR in the UN, the Russian Federation seeks to continue to reap the benefits of its privileged position within this structure (such

as permanent membership in the Security Council) to prevent a single great power from dominating the world. And the issue here is not just anti-Americanism, but an understanding that a single power cannot achieve a real harmonization of the world.

However, Russia has not managed to achieve equal status with regard to NATO on the basis of any “special reasons” or “golden share.” Instead, the expansion in membership eastwards and all border changes made in line with the West’s linear, progressive project were welcomed; any expansion of NATO was seen as a success for democracy and a loss for the “totalitarian past,” as was the case with recognizing the independence of Kosovo, despite the conflicts, unregulated border disagreements and problems with the ethnic minorities that appeared as result. While, cases in which other players (particularly Russia) sought to impinge on existing borders were blocked. But, if in August 2008 the West was passive because Georgia did not represent a first-priority strategic interest, Ukraine became a quantitative and qualitative turning point given its wider dissatisfaction with Russian policy in the post-Soviet space. A country with the seventh largest population (even without Crimea) and second largest amount of territory in Europe is certainly a prize for Russia. Such a break in the trend of the West’s linear project for Europe was a challenge to the order which was created in Europe “after Yalta.” It is an irony that Crimea is again the focus of attention for problems of European security and international regime building.

As correctly pointed out the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev: “The Russian elites are seeking to create a state on a durable basis which can integrate into the global economy, but at the same time defend its domestic policy from external interference. Russia will never accept the idea of NATO-centrism and a European order focused on the EU.” In this area, there is no distinction between the positions of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, in spite of what observers in Russia and the West are inclined to write to the contrary. To understand this point, it is sufficient to conduct a comparative analysis of two speeches: Yeltsin’s 1999 Istanbul speech and Putin’s 2007 Munich speech. These speeches suggest that the disagreements noted above will determine relations between Russia and the West for the short and medium term future.

### Searching for an Exit to the Dead End

Today it is not possible to speak about significant preconditions for a breakthrough in relations between Russia and the West. The USA and its allies see that the sanctions policy has played a role in weakening the social and economic position of Russia. As a result, there is a

great temptation, if not to continue the pressure, then not to actively seek out an exit from the current dead-end. In this light, at the rhetorical level “restoring Ukrainian territorial integrity” and “de-occupation” (not only of south-eastern Ukraine, but also Crimea) are priority goals. This approach minimizes Russia’s interest in the negotiation process, which look less like a diplomatic format and more an arena for making ultimatums. Through its actions during the second half of 2014, the Kremlin demonstrated that it will not allow a repeat in the Donbass of the Balkan scenarios analogous to the Croatian operations “Storm” and “Lightning” against the unrecognized Serbian Republic of Krajina, with a parallel official blocking of Belgrade from intervening to defend its co-ethnics. A repeat of this path in the current context for Russia is fraught with not only the prospect of a loss of its image on the international stage, but domestic political complications. However, the temptation to further weaken Russia could push the West toward harsher actions. Particularly when the Donbass home guard (which the US and EU see exclusively as Kremlin marionettes), in accomplishing military tasks (such as guarantees against shelling large cities) will create new political conflicts and challenges. Growing pressure from the West in both military and economic dimensions, along with Russia’s financial problems, could force Moscow to effectively admit defeat.

In this case, the US and its allies would need to practically deal with an activist East by themselves, as the focus of global politics today shifts from Europe to the Islamic world and China. But, in following such a course, the US and EU will not come up against the former members of the Warsaw Pact, which thanks to the shedding of the Soviet past, are prepared for significant costs in the expectation of future profits. In the East, the “linear project” will not work as the efforts to democratize Afghanistan and the Middle East have already demonstrated. It is possible to reduce Russia’s influence in Eurasia and soften Moscow’s voice. But how productive Russian weakness will be for the West in a changing world is a big question. Even more so, a weak Russia will not bring stability to either Europe or Asia; instead it will multiply the risks and threats for the countries of the EU and ultimately for the US, which is actively involved in guaranteeing European security.

Thus, it is possible that these background factors will force the US and its allies to correct their position in relation to Moscow. Such a trend could be strengthened by domestic Ukrainian problems, such as stagnating reforms and the growth of populist and nationalist moods and, as a result, the *de facto* and *de jure* fragmentation of the country. In any case, medium-term developments will depend on Russian reserves of strength.

To what extent is Moscow in a position to minimize the costs of the crisis and to solve the question of higher quality management both inside the country and in its foreign policy? The answers to this question depend significantly on the choice that the US and its allies make in terms of their Russia policy.

Today many experts and politicians speak about the need to reform the basis of European security in the realization of a future Helsinki-2 that would take into account the new realities after the collapse of the USSR,

the end of the Cold War, the expansion of NATO and the EU, and the appearance along the way of alternative forms of the future (including Russian approaches). However, without the end of the confrontation between Russia and the West, an exit toward some kind of compromise agreement in relation to the post-Soviet space does not seem possible. In order to overcome the existing obstacles, it is extremely important to exit the situation in which the two sides have become “hostages” of the Ukrainian crisis and restore full diplomatic discussions.

#### *About the Author*

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### ANALYSIS

## Understanding Russia

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### Abstract

This article argues that Putin’s Russia has not become a revisionist, or anti-status quo, power with its actions in Ukraine, but is rather continuing to pursue the same status-quo-orientated approach that Russia has followed since the end of the Cold War: resisting changes to the relative distribution of power by a variety of means. It is suggested that a rethink in US policy towards Russia is needed, including by focusing more efforts on understanding the Russian position, while by no means having to share the Kremlin’s world view.

The latest “[Report on U.S.–Russia Relations](#)” by the International Security Advisory Board—, a Federal Advisory Committee established to provide the US Department of State with policy analysis and recommendations—comes to the conclusion that Russia’s actions in Ukraine “were, in part, a reaction to the fear that growing Ukrainian engagement with Western Europe could ultimately culminate in Ukraine joining NATO.” In order to address Russia’s concern, the Board suggests, amongst other minor measures, “increases to the evaluation visit quota under the Vienna Document”—a politically binding document which seeks to establish transparency for conventional forces. It is also an agreement which—when it was updated back in 2011—NATO allies described as “clearly less ambitious than we expected”.

The fact that this report can make such a recommendation points to two mutually dependent trends: (1) important segments of the U.S. foreign and security elite no longer understand contemporary Russia; (2) the United States has no sound strategy for dealing with Moscow.

### Russia Has a Status Quo Orientation

Contemporary Russia is a status quo-oriented power. That might sound farfetched given Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and its continued incursions into South-Eastern Ukraine. But these actions are basically consistent with Moscow’s continuous orientation since the break-up of the Soviet Union. The Russian national interest, which drives that orientation, is to preserve Russian influence in the post-Soviet states and to prevent NATO from enlarging eastwards. While Moscow’s interest has remained the same over time, the strategy for achieving that end has changed. However, U.S. policy analysts have not followed the twists and turns in Russian strategy carefully enough.

Throughout much of the 1990s, the Russian strategy for dealing with enlargement was public disagreement, hopeless diplomatic initiatives to prevent the inevitable—such as references to Gorbachev’s vision of a *common European home*—, and tacit acquiescence in turn for accommodating side-payments offered by Washington. “The eastward expansion of NATO is a mistake and a