

## Analysis

# Moscow Seeks to Renegotiate Relations with the West

By Andrei Zagorski, Moscow

### Abstract

Russian foreign policy appears to be going in circles. Each new president begins by emphasizing – or repairing – the relationship with the West, only to end his time in office by questioning and jeopardizing it. It remains an open question if Putin's successor will seek a new accommodation with the West.

### Under Yeltsin and Putin: Warm Beginnings, Difficult Endings

Boris Yeltsin declared in December 1991 that the new democratic Russia might consider joining NATO. Although the text of his address to the North Atlantic Cooperation Council was retroactively revised because the request met with a lack of understanding, Yeltsin's first term in office was characterized by his determination to see Russia accepted as a full-fledged member of the community of democratic industrialized nations; not least because the West largely had to underwrite his policies, as well as his re-election in 1996 in both political and financial terms. Yeltsin's second term in office was, however, overshadowed by a number of controversies, including the two Chechen campaigns, the eastward expansion of NATO, the dispute over the status of Kosovo and the war in former Yugoslavia, the future nuclear balance between Russia and the US, and, particularly, US plans to build a missile defense system. The legacy of Yeltsin's policy towards the West just before his resignation at the end of 1999 was a grim one. "Russia fatigue" was spreading in the West, and the US opposition complained that Russia had been "lost," while even Yeltsin himself talked about the advent of a "cold peace" at his last appearance before a Western audience at the OSCE summit in Istanbul in November 1999.

Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, began his tenure in 2000 by repairing the heavily-damaged relationship. Russia's economic stabilization, energetic communication with Europe, and especially the immediate announcement of almost unlimited support for the US in fighting terrorism after the September 11, 2001 attacks marked the beginning of a new course. For a while, former disagreements seemed to have moved far into the distance. But this was only a brief interlude before the disputes returned to center stage at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007.

It is remarkable that the issues currently at the center of controversy are the same as in the latter years of

the Yeltsin presidency. The main stumbling blocks are still Kosovo, NATO's eastward expansion, conventional forces in Europe, US plans for missile defense, and policies towards Russia's neighbors. Similarly to Yeltsin's statements in 1999, Putin is threatening a confrontation with the West in his final year in office. While he has not used the term "cold peace," he has conjured up the prospect of a new arms race in Europe.

Admittedly, political parallels can often be misleading. The mere fact that two successive presidents have evolved in the same direction does not mean that this pattern is set in stone. It does not fully apply to Yeltsin's predecessor, Mikhail Gorbachev, the first and last president of the Soviet Union, though Gorbachev did ultimately make the same evolution. In his case, though, skepticism and criticism of the policies of the West, particularly of the US, only came to the fore after his tenure was disrupted by the 1991 coup and the breakup of the Soviet Union. Had Gorbachev remained in office for a longer period, it is conceivable that his views might have changed during his time in the Kremlin as well.

The question now is how Putin's successor will act. Will he, like Putin in the early days of his first term in office, conclude that no sensible modernization policy for Russia is possible in confrontation with the West? Will he therefore have to, and wish to, begin his tenure by repairing relations with the West? Or will he rather continue the policies pursued recently by Putin, which have been more critical toward the West? This question is all the more important because most, if not all, of the decisions pertaining to the current disputes will be made during the incumbency of Putin's successor (assuming that Putin will indeed cede power at the end of his second term, an outcome that still appears to be uncertain).

### Return to the late 1990s

It is notable that the current difficulties between Moscow and the West are driven by almost exactly

the same topics that shaped the disputes of the late 1990s. One prime example is the status of Kosovo. In 1998, during the debate in the run-up to the war in the following year, Moscow argued vehemently that any solution apart from independence for Kosovo was possible on the condition that Belgrade agreed. Otherwise, Moscow threatened, it would veto any decision of the UN Security Council. The introduction of UN administration for Kosovo in 1999 only postponed the resolution of this question, which has now returned to the focus of the world's attention.

Arms control has also provoked contention. From 1999 to 2002, the dispute between Moscow and Washington over nuclear arms control escalated. The debate focused on US plans to establish a rudimentary missile defense shield and to abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty concluded by the Soviet Union and the US in 1972 – an agreement that the Russian side had promoted as the cornerstone of the overall system of treaties governing the limitation and dismantling of strategic nuclear weapons. In 2002, Russia accepted the US abrogation of the ABM Treaty, calculating that it had sufficient means to overcome any potential US defense system. Now, however, Russia has reacted to US plans to deploy parts of the global missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic within six or seven years by revisiting the controversy.

Already in the early 1990s, after the Warsaw Pact had been dissolved and particularly after the eastern expansion of NATO, Moscow felt that the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty put it at a disadvantage. Furthermore, since the beginning of the first Chechen campaign in 1994, the Russian military had felt constrained by the limitations imposed on its southern flank by the CFE Treaty. Over the course of two years in the 1990s, the necessary adaptations were negotiated. First, the “flank” provisions were loosened for southern Russia. In 1999, the adapted CFE Treaty was signed. While the adapted treaty did not take into account the Russian desire for rigid collective restrictions on the categories of heavy weapons that could be deployed by NATO members as the alliance expanded eastward, lower ceilings were agreed upon for individual states. Furthermore, Moscow received assurances of a special arrangement for Central Europe under which foreign (NATO) troops could only be stationed there if the national troop levels had been reduced accordingly.

The adapted CFE Treaty is not yet in force because the NATO states have linked its ratification to the implementation of Russia's long-overdue “Istanbul Commitments” – the withdrawal of its troops from

Georgia and Moldova. Nevertheless, Moscow has little reason for complaints: The current 26 NATO members have 20 percent less manpower and equipment today than the treaty signed by the 16 NATO states in 1990 allowed them to maintain. The ratification of the adapted treaty by the NATO states has long been among Moscow's major stated policy goals; not least because the treaty is to be opened to admit other states such as the Baltic countries, which are now NATO members, but not signatories to the CFE Treaty. However, it is not only NATO's linkage with the “Istanbul Commitments” that has now convinced Moscow to suspend the application of the CFE Treaty as of December 12, 2007. The demands laid out by Moscow at the Special Conference on the CFE, held June 12–15, 2007, go far beyond these issues and are evidence that the Kremlin is aiming at a fundamental renegotiation of the treaty.

In doing so, Moscow is returning to proposals for which it failed to win support in the 1990s. The Russian government is seeking again to establish collective ceilings for the heavy weapons of an expanding NATO that would not exceed those of the “old alliance” as of 1990. Furthermore, it is aiming at having the flank restrictions for Russia lifted altogether.

Both topics – the US missile defense shield and the CFE Treaty – are seen in Moscow as being linked to the issue of NATO's eastwards expansion for two reasons. First, the Kremlin rejects NATO's open-door policy, which would allow former Soviet republics, including Ukraine and Georgia, to become NATO members as another challenge to the status quo. Second, NATO's eastward expansion is linked to the construction of US bases in Bulgaria and Romania and to the planned missile shield projects in the Czech Republic and Poland. These policies are seen as violations of the promise made by NATO states in the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, according to which no substantial combat forces would be stationed in new member states. Now Russia is also aiming at a binding definition of the term “substantial combat forces” within the framework of the CFE Treaty.

Unlike in the 1990s, the relationship between Russia and the EU is also subject to controversy today. In addition to the highly politicized debate on energy security, pipeline routes, and Gazprom's success in buying into the networks supplying European gas customers, the focus here is also on Russia's desire to renegotiate the basis for its relations with the EU. By concluding a new partnership agreement, Moscow is obviously aiming to shake off the conditionality of the agreement that has been in force since 1997, which stipulated that progress in mutual cooperation

is dependent on the implementation of political and economic reforms in Russia. The new agreement, the Kremlin hopes, would instead seal an unconditional global political partnership of equals between the two sides.

Not only are there noticeable parallels between the current controversies in relations between Russia and the West and the disputes of the late 1990s; there are also clear indications that Russia intends to reopen talks on the agreements that it accepted then but now seem disadvantageous, since Moscow agreed to them in the past decade from “a position of weakness.” At the same time, however, it is obvious that Moscow continues to act defensively as a status-quo power that cannot maintain the status quo. This is clear, for example, in the case of NATO’s eastward expansion, where Moscow is trying to hold the “red line” it drew in the 1990s. It also applies in the case of the vehement rejection of the US missile defense shield, which has nothing to do with the Russian missile arsenal as far as technology or defense policy is concerned, but certainly has the potential to make obsolete plans for cooperation on missile defense between Russia and NATO that have been discussed for years. In both cases, what is noticeable is Moscow’s intention to renegotiate the fundamentals of relations with the US, NATO, and the EU. Putin’s Russia clearly feels much more confident than Yeltsin’s did.

### Confidence Based on Oil at \$70 a Barrel

There is a difference between ruling a country that is the world’s number one exporter of energy at a market price of \$70 per barrel of oil, and doing so at a price of \$14. This difference also shapes the self-awareness of the political class in Russia, which is now largely recruited from former members of the intelligence services and the military. The difference is to be found not least in the external perception of the country. An example is a recent CNN series on “Rising Russia” that aimed to present the changes the country has undergone in the past seven years.

There is only little now to remind one of the country that just ten years ago was “a consumer of security from the West’s point of view,” that was in transformation “from an authoritarian system with a planned economy to a democratic and free-market system and [from] the Soviet Union to a Russia that was trying to compensate for the loss of its status as a global power by foreign-policy escapades” and that was primarily characterized by political instability and a potential for chaos, according to Russia analyst Hans-Joachim Spanger. In Europe particularly, Russia is increasingly seen not just as an irreplaceable supplier of energy, but

also as an indispensable, though not exactly uncomplicated partner in regional and global policy matters. No reasonable solution to any of the world’s major problems seems feasible without Moscow’s support, whether the issue be the final status of Kosovo, a settlement for the Middle East conflict, or negotiations concerning the nuclear programs of Iran or North Korea.

Thanks to Russia’s current economic growth, flood of revenues from energy exports, and ability to pay off its debts, there is a new sense of confidence in the political class that is increasingly becoming aware of Russia’s need to prevail and sustain itself in competition with the West.

All the talk about a “democracy deficit” in contemporary Russia, according to the Russian political elites, is only an exercise in political deception by the West. Such debates only aimed to “gain control over Russia’s natural resources” by “weakening the state’s institutions, its ability to defend itself, and its autonomy,” according to remarks made by the chief ideologist of the Putin regime, Vladislav Surkov, in a speech before the Russian Academy of Sciences in June 2007. The newfound confidence of the political class (and the changed external perception of Russia) has caused Moscow to increasingly distance itself from the “other” Russia of Yeltsin. The country is no longer the weak and apathetic “sick man of Europe” forced to accept certain developments due to circumstances. Russia aims to return to the global stage and is trying to find its former strength, whether through the power gained by energy exports or in investment in a new generation of military technology.

The theory of a resurgent Russia nurtures the illusion that Moscow might be able to stop further changes in the European status quo and particularly in its immediate vicinity, and possibly reverse some of the concessions it was forced to make under Yeltsin. The aim of redefining relations with the West and Europe and to renegotiate the basis of this relationship is not at all incompatible with this theory. However, only little time remains for Putin himself to translate this wish into reality. Should his successor come from the immediate circle surrounding Putin (and where else would he come from?), will he wish and be able to continue this course, or will he attribute greater importance to repairing the relationship with the US and Europe? This question cannot be answered for another year. Nevertheless, it is clear that the answer depends not only on the personality of the successor; it also depends on the West’s response to Russia’s new self-perception.

### **Must Relations Between Russia and the West be Renegotiated?**

There is every reason to rejoice in the fact that Russia is doing better than a decade ago. Global politics is well off without another “sick man,” especially a big one with nuclear weapons. There is no reason to believe that Russia, after a brief or longer interlude, will return to the political trajectory of the early Yeltsin years. At the same time, there is no reason to believe that the only “other” path will lead Russia to confrontation with the West and a new arms race. Its new self-perception and increased international standing will not suffice to catapult Russia back into the center of global politics. Conversely, a new deterioration towards an arms race or a Cold Peace is improbable not only because of Russia’s structural deficits. The reality of Russian politics is very different from the picture painted by official rhetoric. The ineffective pressure on Ukraine and Georgia as well as the failure of Moscow’s attempts to push Iran towards cooperation with the international community or to use its contacts with Hamas to win back a significant role in the Middle East peace process instead indicate the narrow limitations of Russia’s return to global politics.

While Russia’s resurgence is evident, it is far less powerful than is generally assumed, as Rajan Menon

and Alexander Motyl correctly point out. What has changed is the fact that Putin is playing the strongman and that the increase of energy prices has supplied the political class with funds allowing them to act more confidently. But the new rhetoric is not enough to make Russia strong. Therefore, for the foreseeable future, the West will continue to have to deal “with a Russian petro-state that is weak, boisterous, and potentially unstable.” The challenge of a new self-perception among the Russian political class is not that “Russia is too strong to handle, but that it is too weak to make a reliable partner.” In this difficult phase of self-assertion, Moscow should not be unnecessarily alienated by “red lines” drawn by the West; at the same time, the latter need not concede to all of Russia’s demands, which are often perceived as *diktats*. If Moscow should decide in the coming year to withdraw from the CFE Treaty, that would certainly be regrettable. Moscow should not, however, be prevented from doing so at all cost. The only conclusion would be that despite its rhetoric, Moscow (rightly) has no problems with the US and NATO if it is prepared to give up the only instrument that restricts US deployments in Europe and of NATO forces in the new member states.

*Translated from German by Christopher Findlay*

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