

Analysis

Putin's Foreign Policy Legacy

By Edward Lucas, London

Abstract

Russian foreign policy is now focused on business rather than ideology, military power, or territorial expansion. However, Russia feels that the West has betrayed promises made by expanding NATO and Vladimir Putin decided to stop seeking friendly relations in 2006. Instead Moscow has tried to build up its relationship in the Muslim world, though these countries mainly see Russia as a counter to the USA and a possible source of weapons. Russia has also sought to work with China in building a "World Without the West." However, Russia and China are rivals in the battle for influence in Central Asia. In these conditions, the West would do best to confront Russia sooner rather than later.

Russians See NATO Betrayal

Russia has dropped three Soviet attributes from its foreign policy: a messianic ideology, raw military power and the imperative of territorial expansion. Instead comes the idea that, as Dmitri Trenin, a well-connected foreign-policy expert, puts it: "Russia's business is business." That has special weight, he argues, because the people who rule Russia also own it. Stitching up world energy markets with other big producers, or finding customers for Russian weapons and raw materials, are much more interesting than the nuances of the Middle East peace process or the endless woes of the Balkans. In short, bad politics is bad for business. Capitalism is integrating Russia ever more deeply into the outside world, and surely making political conflicts less likely, not more. So what is going on? The Kremlin's explanation goes like this. The West takes Russia for granted, swallows concessions and offers only snubs in return. Russia abandoned the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, on the strict understanding that NATO would not expand to the former Warsaw Pact countries.

Yet that is exactly what happened. Far from winding up, or staying as a backstop security organization, NATO started offensive operations for the first time in its history, intervening in ex-Yugoslavia to bomb Serbia, a traditional Russian ally. That cold shoulder during the 1990s demoralized the pro-Westerners in the Yeltsin Kremlin. Now, at least in some Russian eyes, the West has treated Mr. Putin equally shabbily. In 2006, a former top Kremlin aide, Aleksandr Voloshin, went on a semi-official mission to explain Russia's frustration to American decision-makers, outlining what Mr. Putin had done since September 11, 2001. This included offering unprecedented intelligence and security cooperation against militant Islamism, closing the two main overseas bases inherited from the Soviet Union and allowing America to use air bases in Central Asia to support

the attack on the Taliban in Afghanistan. All that, Mr. Voloshin argued, had exposed Mr. Putin to sharp criticism from hawks in the Kremlin. He had assured them that a bold gesture to America would pay dividends. But instead, America continued to interfere in Russia's backyard, stoking popular revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, bringing the Baltic states into NATO and talking about new bases in Eastern Europe.

The arguments got nowhere. Though the Kremlin insists that NATO expansion is encirclement, a better way of looking at it is that Russia has willfully cut itself off from the European mainstream. Switzerland and Austria are entirely surrounded by NATO members, but do not worry that they are encircled. NATO has in fact done rather little – too little in the view of some of its new members – to counter Russian muscle-flexing. Most of the new members are militarily weak, and struggle to meet their NATO commitments. The alliance's work in Eastern Europe is mainly based on strengthening its members' ability to work with each other in joint training and peacekeeping. The truth is that so long as the Kremlin insists on seeing NATO as an enemy, it strengthens the case for bringing vulnerable ex-communist countries into the alliance. In the early 1990s, that was off the agenda. Joining NATO was seen as too expensive by the potential applicants, and too destabilizing by the alliance's policymakers. But Russia never seemed to understand why its former satellite countries might be worried about their security. By protesting loudly that NATO enlargement was provocative and "impermissible" (a favorite word in the Russian diplomatic lexicon), the Kremlin ensured that the applicants' desire grew stronger and more urgent; it also became morally all but impossible for existing NATO members to turn them away. The Kremlin may dislike this development. But it has only itself to blame for it.

Russia Turns from West

Some Westerners may find it mildly offensive that their support for security, freedom and justice in ex-communist countries, and attempts to prevent genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo, are dismissed as nothing more than self-interested geopolitics. Such arguments seem to make no impact, however: in 2006 Mr. Putin apparently decided that it was pointless trying to maintain a warm friendship with the West. Instead, Russia would have to gain respect by talking, and acting, toughly. That has some risks. Russia is now increasingly seen in the rich industrialized world as an authoritarian state that hangs out with international pariahs. Secondly, fear of Russia may make the Euroatlantic glue stickier. For the first time since the end of the old Cold War, it is now possible to argue that America and Europe need each other in the face of a Russian threat. But Kremlin cheerleaders do not see it that way. They argue that the world is changing: America and Europe may have put Russia in the deep freeze, but much larger countries such as India, Brazil, Mexico and Indonesia, all respectably free and law-governed, have not. America may be rich now, but developing countries, where Russia is much more popular, have brighter prospects. American hegemony, in short, is history.

The tactics are increasingly clear and effective. But the goal is still puzzling. The short-term wish list is clear: recognition of Russia's primacy in the former Soviet empire; the energy "Finlandisation" of Europe; and international parity of esteem, a seat, *de facto* or *de jure*, at the Western top tables. But these wishes are incompatible: bullying the Balts pretty much precludes a friendly reception in Brussels or Washington, DC. If anything, it guarantees a series of embarrassing public snubs. The Kremlin may be assuming that the West will eventually abandon its new allies, or that they will become indefensible by their own efforts. But pending a split in the West, or its surrender, Russia's choice is a stark one. It can drop its pretensions to empire and its peculiar version of history, in which case it can move sharply closer to the EU and NATO. Or it can go down the route of independent foreign policy, either in alliance with the Muslim world or with China.

Seeking Ties in the Muslim World

The Kremlin is certainly making an effort to restore at least some of its Soviet-era clout in the Muslim world, to some extent on the basis of "my enemy's enemy is my friend." If America identifies Iran as part of the "axis of evil" then that kick-starts Russian goodwill. Russia joined the Islamic Conference Organization as an observer in 2005 and Mr. Putin attended its 2003 conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where, amid anti-Semitic tirades from some of the other participants,

he described Russia as Islam's "historical defender." Unlike almost all Western countries, Russia is prepared to talk to radical Islamist movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah. As Aleksei Malashenko of the Moscow Carnegie Center argues, the Kremlin approach seems to be to draw a rather arbitrary (indeed, probably fictional) line between "good" and "bad" Islamic militants: the "bad" are the Chechen separatists and their allies in the North Caucasus and Tatarstan. The "good" are the ones who tweak America's nose. That echoes faintly the Soviet Union's attitude from twenty-five years earlier: "good" Muslims attacked Israel and America. "Bad" ones attacked the Soviet boys in Afghanistan.

Perhaps aware of the contradiction, the Kremlin tries to keep a little distance from Hamas and the like: they are welcomed warmly in Moscow by pro-Kremlin ideologues and propagandists, but not by senior Kremlin figures themselves. Aleksandr Prokhanov, editor of the "red-brown" *Zavtra* (Tomorrow), congratulated the Hamas leader Khaled Mashal "with all his heart" on the movement's victory in the Palestinian territory elections. Yet the same newspaper is an ardent supporter of the most ruthless tactics against Chechen rebels. Russia's engagement, such as it is, does not seem to have nudged either Hamas or Iran into a more moderate position.

From a Muslim viewpoint, Russia's flirtation with the Islamic world is seen, rightly, as opportunist. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (plus support for the American attack on the Taliban in 2001), two wars in Chechnya and strong support for the Milosevic regime's harsh stance towards Muslim populations in Kosovo and Bosnia make it hard to regard Russia as a serious ally for the Islamic world. Muslims appreciate Russia as a counterweight to American influence, and as a possible source of useful weapons (officially or unofficially). But it goes no further.

Building a Partnership with China

The Chinese option, at least in comparison, looks more attractive. The "strategic partnership" between Russia and China is one of the big achievements of the Putin years in foreign policy. A long-standing squabble over the border has been settled. Worries about illegal migration (overblown in the Yeltsin years, but widely believed) have calmed down. Trade with China has more than tripled since Mr. Putin came into the Kremlin. China has invested \$500 million in Rosneft, the Kremlin's oil subsidiary, and Russia has agreed to build an ambitious gas pipeline to China. Both countries share a strong dislike of Western universalist values and a belief that economic growth and stability are preferable to imported notions of freedom. The Kremlin's home-grown ideology of "sovereign democracy" and China's nominal

“communism” have a lot in common: horror of instability, nationalism, and a belief that the proof of the authoritarian pudding is in the eating. The message, crudely, is “who needs your kind of democracy when we have our kind of growth.”

Based on such similarities in worldview, it is possible to see Russia and China as two pillars of what some have called the “World without the West,” or WWW. The WWW is strictly pragmatic, shuns idealistic political approaches (which it sees as hypocritical) and detests outside interference in other countries’ affairs. It is the antithesis of the American idea of liberal internationalism: that intervening to prevent genocide, say, is not just the right but the duty of a civilized country. The WWW favors state-dominated market economies, where the heights of political and economic power converge. Yet it is not the embodiment of a comprehensive rejection of the West, so to speak an “anti-West”: it wants economic cooperation with the advanced industrialized world, particularly in order to catch up in technology and education.

The most practical expression of the WWW is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an outfit that creates a potentially formidable new security axis between Russia, China and Central Asia. In 2007 this started to develop a strong military component in the organization: its summit in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek in August 2007 was marked by ten days of joint military exercises in Chelyabinsk in the Urals and Urumqi in Chinese Turkestan. These were the SCO’s biggest military exercises; the first time that Chinese airborne forces have taken part in such military drills abroad; and the first time that Russian forces have exercised in China. The end was observed by the six defense ministers of the SCO core members: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The SCO is linked to Russia’s answer to NATO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This has the same five ex-Soviet members, plus Armenia and Belarus, creating an embryonic security sphere that stretches from the Arctic to the South China Sea, and from the Bering Strait to the Polish border. Mr. Putin says any comparison between the SCO and the old Warsaw Pact is “idle talk” and “improper either in content or form.” But the fact remains that a big anti-Western alliance, however loose, is taking shape.

It is one thing to agree on anti-American positions, another to agree who is the top dog in a shared backyard. Russia may have invented the SCO, but China clearly thinks of itself as the natural leader, by virtue

of its size and economic weight. Russia and China may be partners in keeping America out of Central Asia, but they are also rivals there. Within the region, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan each want to be the leader. China has been strenuously trying to do its own bilateral gas deals with Turkmenistan (not an SCO member) and with Kazakhstan (which is). That threatens Russian interests. The biggest problem is that Russians’ old-fashioned zero-sum geopolitical thinking makes it hard to conceive of a deep strategic alliance with anyone. China’s huge population and shortage of natural resources (coal aside) are a painful contrast to Russia’s demographic collapse and mineral-rich eastern regions. As a result, the two countries may make common cause, but they are not natural allies. The sharp-witted Andrei Piontkovsky calls the notion “an alliance between a rabbit and a boa constrictor.”

Confrontation Inevitable

That leaves Russia stuck. It is too weak to have a truly effective independent foreign policy, but it is too disgruntled and neurotic to have a sensible and constructive one. It wants to be respected, trusted and liked, but will not act in a way that gains respect, nurtures trust or wins affection. It settles for being noticed – even when that comes as a result of behavior that alienates and intimidates other countries. It compensates for real weakness by showing pretend strength. Little of that – advanced weapons sales to rogue regimes aside – immediately threatens global peace and security. In that sense, the New Cold War is less scary than the old one. But Russia’s behavior is alarming, uncomfortable and damaging, both to its own interests and to those of other countries. And the trajectory is worrying.

If Russia becomes still richer and still more authoritarian, all the problems described above will be harder to deal with, not easier. Russia’s influence in the West will be stronger; the willingness to confront it less. The former satellite countries will be even more vulnerable; the economic levers even better positioned. In other words, if the West does not start winning the New Cold War while it can, it will find it much harder in the future. The price of a confrontation now may be economic pain and political uncertainty. But it still offers the chance of a new relationship with Russia based on realism rather than sentiment, and tough-mindedness rather than wishful thinking. The price later will be higher – perhaps so high that the West will no longer be able to pay it.

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