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Bracing for Cold Peace. US-Russia Relations after Ukraine

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Bracing for Cold Peace. US-Russia Relations after Ukraine

Ondrej Ditrych

The crisis in Ukraine has turned the tables of the post-Cold War relationship between the United States and Russia. The ongoing transformation can result in a number of outcomes, which can be conceived in terms of scenarios of normalisation, escalation and 'cold peace' – the latter two scenarios being much more probable than the first. NATO ought to shore up its defences in Central and Eastern Europe while Washington and its allies engage in a comprehensive political strategy of 'new containment'. This means combining political and economic stabilisation of the transatlantic area with credible offers of benefits to partners in the East and pragmatic relations with Russia which are neither instrumentalised (as was the case with the 'reset') nor naïvely conceived as a 'partnership'.

Keywords: US, Russia, Ukraine, cold peace

Reflecting on the future of relations between two great powers in the midst of their most serious crisis since the end of the Cold War inevitably carries tremendous prediction risks. Just as the outcome of the struggle between the USSR and the US was widely *underpredicted* while it created an atmosphere of *overprediction*[1] – most notoriously, the "end of history" or an upcoming "clash of civilisations" were trumpeted[2] – the annexation of Crimea came as a surprise to many who believed that rational considerations would prevent Vladimir Putin from challenging that fundamental norm of the contemporary European order according to which borders of independent states ought not to be redrawn by force. The developing situation in Ukraine is taken to herald a broader redefinition of world politics. A redefinition that is driven, as some argue, by the revenge of revisionist powers that never accepted the geopolitical settlement that followed the end of the Cold War.[3] Forecasting what the relations between Washington and Moscow may be like needs to consider overprediction risks, and has to take into account their interests and

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[1]Schneider *et al.*, "Exploring the Past", 3.
[2]Fukuyama, *The End of History*; Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations?".
[3]Cf. Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics".

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strategies to pursue them. It also has to draw on certain assumptions about their relative standing.

The first of those assumptions concerns the US' decline, which is taken to be at best *relative* rather than absolute. The unipolar moment may be over for Washington, but its power is still unrivalled. This is not the same as saying, on the other hand, that "in the age of liberal order, revisionist struggles are a fool's errand".[4] Second, Russia may be using efficient strategies to convert means to ends, having a resolved leadership and cleverly exploiting the weaknesses of those it sees as adversaries, but it finds itself in a position vastly inferior to the US in every measurement of international influence, while its macroeconomic and social indicators do not suggest that it could significantly improve its position in the future. It is suffering from growing deficits, lack of competitiveness, capital flight and demographic stagnation, all of which will drive a decline rather than a rise. Moreover, it is excessively dependent on energy export revenues (amounting to two-thirds of all exports, and some one-half of federal budget revenues[5]) to fuel domestic growth, which makes it vulnerable to the cyclical effects of the global economy.

The argument here proceeds as follows. First, a short survey of the relations between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War situates the most recent events in a broader context. Second, these most recent events are then recounted. Third, the view from Moscow is outlined. It is of crucial importance to understand the sources of Moscow's behaviour. Needless to say, understanding does not amount to condoning. Therefore, when it is argued that Russian government actions are *both* offensive and defensive, this is not to say that by having a defensive component they are legitimate. Such legitimisation would need to rest on the premise that it is fine to exercise political influence beyond one's border without even a semblance of true *hegemony* (rather than mere relative preponderance in resources) and that people inhabiting the 'near abroad', which the Kremlin's apologists in the West consider sacred and for the 'trespassing' on which they blame the EU, have no choice of their own. Fourth, the view from Washington follows. Rather than acting according to a master plan to expand America's geostrategic influence in Eurasia, Washington has been seized in the crisis *by default* as it represents something of a nuisance for the administration further complicating the realisation of its grand vision of a global liberal order and America's place in it. Fifth, basic scenarios of possible developments in Ukraine and their effects on US-Russia relations are put forward.

[4]Ikenberry, "The Illusion of Geopolitics".
[5]US Energy Information Administration, "Russia: Country Profile", 2014, http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=rs.

A look back

One may not appreciate the nostalgia in Putin's statement that the disintegration of the USSR was a 'geopolitical catastrophe'. But analytically speaking, there can be no doubt that it was indeed a geopolitical event of the first order. Some Russian academics would not be afraid to make an even stronger case, arguing that the fall of the 'Russian empire' can be compared only to the fracture of the ancient continents of Gondwana and Pangea.[6] The centre that could no longer hold lost one-quarter of the territory under its direct control in addition to the satellites in Central Europe, as well as more than one-half of its economy and two-thirds of its military personnel. Suddenly, Moscow was not the capital of an empire, but of a failing state with a fraction of the United States' GDP, rampant corruption and no soft power.

It was in the context of this historical transformation that the future of the European security architecture was being decided. Triumphalism and a certain *hubris* prevailed in the West as NATO not only continued to exist, but assumed, as Behnke has argued, a "global gaze" and the strategy of value projection to mitigate the (externalised) uncertainty that now, instead of any defined enemy agency, threatened to destabilise the West.[7] Proposals for alternative architectures, notably a comprehensive Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) system – sometimes referred to as 'Helsinki 2' – were dismissed, and Russia, instead of a partner, was first designated as a source of instability (due to uncertainties related to the disintegration process and fundamental state weakness) and then as a 'learner' (consumer of NATO values) akin to all others, who would be subjected to an exercise in Western narcissism manifested in assimilative attitudes.[8]

This assimilation was taken to perfection in the process of NATO enlargement. NATO's 'open door' policy, driven less by a rational calculation of benefits – there were few tangible benefits to the old members, who were now to suffer instead from risks of entrapment and a thinning of the buffer zone with the 'source of instability' in the east, while new members contributed little material power to the Alliance – and more by the reinforced understanding of NATO as a liberal community,[9] would prove the most difficult to swallow for Moscow. Not only did it witness its western borders return to where they had been in the 18th century, but it also saw NATO – an organisation with whose discursive redefinition from a traditional military alliance and means of US onshore balancing in western Eurasia it remained unimpressed – expand to eventually cover all former Warsaw Pact countries as well as the three former Soviet republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

[6]Cf. Zamyatin and Zamyatin, *Imperiya prostranstva* [*Imperial Space*], 17.
[7]Behnke, *NATO's Security Discourse.*
[8]Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honour*, 52.
[9]Cf. Schimmelfennig, *EU, NATO and Integration of Europe*.

It was for that reason that George Kennan, who admittedly never cared for NATO too much, called the enlargement "the most fatal error".[10]

Moscow has been reacting to the lack of recognition of its status, the enlargement that constituted a complete failure of its long-term grand strategy to ensure its security from challenges coming from the West, and the new US strategy of "global dominance",[11] with resistance strategies of its own. This guaranteed that relations between Russia and the West would be, as a senior EU official once characterised it to the author, one of "mutually assured disappointment". A short *rapprochement* took place following the 9/11 attacks, which facilitated US and its allies' deployment in Afghanistan, not least because the Kremlin could suddenly depict the brutal counter-insurgency operation its forces were conducting in the North Caucasus as a contribution to the great cause of defeating global *jihad*.[12] But relations between Washington and Moscow soon cooled down when the Bush administration announced that it was withdrawing from the ABM treaty, a move that Russia (reasonably) saw as having the potential to undermine the existing strategic nuclear balance. In 2002, Washington then supported further NATO enlargement (now to the Baltics), which Moscow perceived as a 'roll-back' aimed at it. Soon, the perception of being under a political offensive was reinforced as 'colour revolutions' swept Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004).

Relations then deteriorated further in 2007, when Russia vehemently objected to US plans to place a 'third site' of its GMD (ground-based missile defence) in Poland (interceptors) and the Czech Republic (X-band radar). Moscow additionally 'suspended' its implementation of the Conventional Forces Europe (CFE) treaty, and in a newly assertive voice President Putin warned at the Munich Conference that Russia objected to militarisation of its neighbourhood through NATO and would resist further interference in what it saw as its sphere of influence. Merely two months after the speech, Estonia fell victim to an extended cyber attack following a decision by its government to remove a WWII Soviet memorial from its capital's city centre. With attributions in the cyber domain notoriously difficult (but not impossible) to establish, Russia's state services are widely believed to have been involved in the series of incidents carried out by 'hactivist' groups who, in any case, were acting in the Kremlin's interest. In this period, and following Putin's Munich speech, Moscow also strove to forestall Ukraine and Georgia's further integration in NATO, and eventually managed to prevent the granting of membership action plans (MAPs) to those countries at the NATO Bucharest Summit (2008). With further enlargement of NATO not on the table in the near future, a combination of personal animosity, intent to punish the West by proxy – Kosovo had just declared

[10]G. Kennan, "A Fatal Error", *New York Times*, 5 February 1997.
[11]Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design".
[12]Cf. Souleimanov and Ditrych, "Internationalisation of Russian-Chechen Conflict".

independence with backing from most Western states – and simple capability drove the Kremlin to prepare an escalation trap in Georgia's separatist entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia for Mikhail Saakashvili, the country's charismatic, liberal but also autocratic and erratic president. The result was a Russian invasion of Georgia, turning the two territories into formally independent Russian protectorates.

When Barack Obama came to office the next year, the aim of his administration's 'reset policy' was to mend relations between Washington and Moscow, mainly to facilitate achievement of its priorities in areas of arms control and proliferation. Indeed, a new START treaty was negotiated limiting US and Russian strategic arsenals, and Moscow supported more crippling UN economic sanctions against Iran while calling off the sale of S-300 missile defence systems to Tehran. The reset created fears in Central and Eastern Europe of a great power 'condominium' – reminiscent of West Europeans fears during the *détente* period of the Cold War that Washington would agree to recreating the region as a no man's land. But as a matter of fact, the administration did not have to compromise on much. Indeed, GMD plans were reviewed and a new phased adaptive approach (EPAA) adopted in 2009.[13] The announcement was poorly timed – it coincided with the anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland seventy years earlier – but the administration was not simply appeasing Russia, the new approach also appealed to the domestic public because of the reduced cost and to some NATO allies in the expectation of having EPAA included in NATO BMD (ballistic missile defence). Moreover, the approach was 'rationalised' insofar as it was linked closely with the development of Iran's capabilities (chiefly securitised in the US missile defence discourse) and deployment of the system's elements foreseen in Romania (2015) and Poland (2018).

While limited gains were achieved as a result of the reset policy, it failed to effect a more fundamental transformation of mutual relations through engagement. The missile defence review took place in the immediate aftermath of an energy crisis in Europe that was spurred by Gazprom's refusal to continue deliveries to Ukraine (2009). The NATO Lisbon Summit (2010) showed that on fundamental issues such as missile defence no practical progress could be achieved despite agreement on Russia's participation. NATO rejected Moscow's idea of a 'joint system' with sectoral commands (a solution that would presumably entail transfer of sensitive technologies and also the ceding of responsibility for defence of parts of NATO territory to Russia) and the US was not inclined to take on a binding commitment, also requested by Moscow, that BMD – which the latter continues to see as potentially upsetting the global strategic balance – would never be used against Russia. In 2011, the US scaled up criticism of the democratic deficit in Russia, while

[13]A leaked private letter from Obama to Dmitri Medvedev from Feb. 2009 appears to provide evidence that the administration saw this as a proposed direct *quid pro quo* for progress on START and Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes issue.

Moscow felt betrayed when the UNSC Resolution 1973/2011 it had allowed to pass was used, contrary to what it believed had been agreed, to legitimise the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime in Libya through NATO's extensive direct military support for rebel militias. That no *rapprochement* was in place then became plain when the brutal civil conflict in Syria was effectively turned into a 'proxy war' between Washington and its allies on one hand, and Moscow, pursuing its geopolitical interest in the Levant, but also deliberately increasing the costs of US hegemony globally, on the other.

It was in this atmosphere that Moscow decided in June 2013 to grant asylum to Edward Snowden. Snowden's agenda, as well as the objectives and political effects of his revelations remain a subject of intense public debate. While it is now clear that, rather than a common whistle-blower, Snowden was more of a cyber *partisan* – in his own words, he entered his last job at Booz Allen Hamilton (an NSA contractor) with a clear intent to appropriate classified information – there is insufficient evidence to determine whether he is a freelance partisan, a freelance partisan who at some point became exploited by Russian intelligence (which, given his current residence and recent actions, seems rather plausible), or a partisan run by Russian and/or Chinese intelligence while still on the job.[14] In any case, granting political asylum to a suspect in crimes of such magnitude was understandably interpreted as a serious offence by Washington, which responded by cancelling a meeting between Obama and Putin scheduled for the fall.

This survey of relations since the 1990s points to a slow but steady deterioration. This deterioration was the result of 1) continuity in the US global strategy in which Russia was not recognised as a great power and was either cavalierly ignored or, as Rohde and Mohammed argue,[15] assigned a secondary role of helping to achieve the administration's objectives related to the global war on terror or arms control and proliferation; and 2) the increased assertiveness of Moscow's resistance to this state of affairs under Putin's resolved leadership at a time of steadily rising oil and gas prices over the last decade that filled the state coffers due to booming demand from China and other emerging markets. The resistance has not simply consisted in balancing against the US together with China as structural realists predicted,[16] likely due to a combination of regional rivalries (Central Asia), Russia's long-term perceived threat from the East (in addition to the West), and the different ideational foundations of their foreign policies. Instead, Moscow has sought to use diplomatic, military and economic means to increase the cost of US hegemony globally, and to strike back in what was once its empire. Russia's actions in Ukraine are a logical extension of this strategy.

[14]The position of the US government is that the vast amount of classified material Snowden appropriated was unrelated to NSA's surveillance programmes, such as PRISM or eavesdropping on allies (cf. E. Epstein, "Was Snowden's Heist a Foreign Espionage Operation?", *Wall Street Journal*, 9 May 2014).
[15]Rohde and Mohammed, "How America Lost Vladimir Putin".
[16]Cf. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War", 37.

Winter's coming

Last November, Putin seemed to have it all. After the turnaround in what for months had appeared like an almost closed deal and Viktor Yanukovich's decision not to sign a new association agreement and a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, Kyiv now appeared to be gravitating towards Moscow's trade and political orbit. The only thing that Putin apparently had to do was to put an offer on the table that Yanukovich – a man of neither principle nor vision, but one interested above all in his own political survival – could not refuse. That offer consisted in Russia's buying Ukrainian state bonds worth USD15 billion (increasing Ukraine's rapidly diminishing reserves as the government was unwilling to carry out the structural reforms on which a new IMF loan was conditioned and its low rating precluded borrowing on the market) and cutting the price of imported gas by one-third.

What Putin did not foresee was the Maidan movement, triggered by Yanukovich's decision and carried by widespread discontent with a model of government that was neo-patrimonial, corrupt and reliant on personal loyalty rather than formal institutions – a model of government that, incidentally, could be termed 'Putinism-lite' – as well as Yanukovich's amateurism in dealing with this popular movement. After the security apparatus increased its brutality against the protesters (but not to the point where it could deal them a decisive blow), the situation in Kyiv escalated in late February. A deal between three representatives of the opposition (Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Oleh Tyahnybok and Wladimir Klitchko) and Yanukovich effectively postulating a negotiated transition was agreed on 21 February under the mediation of three EU foreign ministers (Poland's Radoslaw Sikorski, France's Laurent Fabius and Germany's Frank-Walter Steinmeier). But it was refused by the Maidan. Simultaneously, Yanukovich appears to have lost the support of his security apparatus, which likely saw him as demonstrating critical weakness by striking a deal with the opposition, and left Kyiv in panic. That marked the end of his political career ... and the beginning of Russia's direct involvement.

The first act of this involvement was set in Crimea. While the operation to take the peninsula followed immediately upon the closing ceremony of the Sochi Olympics (whose intended strategic effect was to present Russia as a 'normal' country for investment and business), its execution, skilfully combining military action with information warfare based on deception campaigns targeting diverse audiences from Ukrainian troops deployed in Crimea to the world public,[17] suggests that it had been planned for some time. Moscow clearly gave preference to a strong response to the revolution in Kyiv over its international reputation.

[17]Cf. Berzins, *Russia's New Generation Warfare*; Darczewska, *Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare.*

Having annexed Crimea following the instalment of a puppet government and a staged referendum, Moscow decided to further increase pressure on Kyiv by amassing some 40,000 troops at the border with Ukraine and infiltrating the southeast, while continuing to conduct an information campaign that consistently depicts the new authorities in Kyiv as illegitimate 'fascists' and challenges the very idea of Ukrainian statehood. This campaign has been ongoing, with reasonable evidence that Moscow has been supplying arms[18] and training military and security personnel for the separatists in the east, as well as targeting Ukrainian armed forces' positions from its own territory. When Ukraine scaled up its operations to regain rebel positions in Donetsk and Lugansk in the summer, the fighting intensified and expanded to densely populated urban areas, in a short time doubling the death toll and worsening the already dire humanitarian conditions in the region. With the separatists on the defensive, Moscow appears to have brought more 'regularity' to the conflict by expanding its direct engagement (though statements by the separatist leaders about Russia's material support ought not be taken at face value since they are probably intended in part to bolster troops' morale). Nevertheless, in the environment of informational ambiguity Russia managed to create (and maintain through, for example, the staging of yet another exercise in the border area), its denial of involvement could still be accepted by segments of international public opinion. Russia also continued its information warfare campaign, most visibly by sending an 'aid convoy' to the theatre (that is, territories under the formal sovereignty of Kyiv authorities).

The US response to Moscow's interference was initially a measured one. Washington expressed "deep concern" on several occasions over reports of Russia's actions inside Ukraine. It attempted to engage Moscow diplomatically, without much result. Phone conversations between Obama and Putin were ceased in April, while ongoing phone exchanges between Foreign Ministers John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov were openly described by the former as 'bizarre' and 'Kafkaesque', even though in the beginning of May they appeared to lead at least to an understanding on an increased role for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in the conflict. No more significant results were reached during the Geneva talks (17 April), where the US seemed implicitly to consider the annexation of Crimea – not mentioned at all in the final declaration – as a *fait accompli*.

Washington also imposed three rounds of targeted sanctions (16 March, 20 March and 28 April) on approximately 30 persons, either senior officials or other members of Putin's inner circle providing material support to the regime, Bank Rossiya (used to manage assets of this circle) and 17 business entities linked to the Kremlin. The objective of the sanctions, coordinated with the EU, was *signalling*

[18]The deliveries may have included the Buk air defence systems apparently used in the downing of the Malaysian Airlines passenger plane on 17 July 2014. Those could also have been captured by the separatists who may however have benefited from Russia's expertise in repairing and manning them.

that these relatively minor restrictive measures could be compounded by more serious sectoral sanctions adversely impacting Russia's economy.[19] Despite the Obama administration's claims, the sanctions had a very limited impact and therefore potential to change the Russian leadership's calculus.[20] In addition to the sanctions, the US administration also announced that it would cease to issue export licences for technologies with potential military use, and that it was cancelling preferential tariffs on Russian imports under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP).

Moscow retaliated by announcing that it would not agree to an extension beyond 2020 of joint use of the International Space Station (ISS) which had symbolised the end of the space race during the Cold War era and, more immediately, that it would suspend supply of the NK-33 and RD-180 rocket engines the US uses to launch military satellites, as well as operation of GPS sites on its territory (unless similar sites are open for Russia's Glonass system). However, despite the restrictive measures by the US and the responses to them by Russia, in many areas business continued as usual. This included the transit *via* Russia of redeployment from Afghanistan, inspections under START, negotiations on the Iran nuclear programme, projects on the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons and the decommissioning of Russia's obsolete weapons systems. Obama's administration successfully pressured executives of US businesses not to attend the annual St. Petersburg forum taking place in May. But partnerships between major companies like Exxon Mobil and Rosneft continued unabated.

The tide may have begun to change in the summer, however. First, Washington accused Russia of being in violation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty since it had allegedly tested a ground-launched cruise missile banned by the treaty.[21] More seriously in immediate terms, in response to indications of Russia's more direct engagement, the US, together with the hitherto – due to deeper economic interdependence[22] – more reluctant EU, decided to impose for the first time sectoral sanctions on Russia (in addition to targeting more individuals close to

[19]It should be noted that this was not the first time the US, unlike the EU, imposed sanctions on Russia. The Magnitsky Act (2012) introduced asset freezes and visa bans on officials assumed to be involved in the murder of Sergey Magnitsky and other persons involved in investigating human rights abuses in Russia. The act, which was initially opposed by the Obama administration but passed through Congress due to extensive non-governmental lobbying, is under review at the time of writing and could be extended as a different avenue of imposing additional restrictive measures.

[20]Moscow's actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine were immediately punished by the markets in terms of falling value of the ruble and Russian stocks and further withdrawal of investment capital (approx. USD 70 bn., more than the amount that left Russia over all of last year). But this happened before the sanctions were imposed, by which time both the ruble and the markets had stabilised.

[21]Moscow was swift to frame Washington as the real transgressor and itself as a 'victim', including through a reminder of the 'offensive' nature of the US and NATO missile defence plans.

[22]Russia is the US' twentieth largest trading partner, but the EU's third. Trade between the EU and Russia is currently valued at more than USD 400 billion *per annum*, which is some ten times more than the trade between the US and Russia.

Putin and separatist leaders). While the broad US sanctions were announced on 16 July, the EU sanctions (as well as expansion of the initial US package) followed the shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines plane *en route* from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur on 17 July.[23] These sanctions target the finance (banning Western entities from buying bonds issued by Russia's major state-owned banks to raise capital), natural resources excavation and defence sectors. While the imposed sectoral sanctions are still relatively modest – the EU's banking bans exclude banks' subsidiaries or do not target infrastructure (for example, SWIFT transactions), the gas industry is untouched, and the prohibition on defence equipment sales does not apply to current contracts (leaving, for example, the one for the delivery of Mistral assault ships intact) – the financial restrictions in particular do appear to have the potential to hurt Russia's economy, which is currently showing no growth and suffering from structural deficiencies (such as a lack of competition in many sectors and strong dependence on the export of raw materials) as well as capital flight, which has significantly accelerated since the Crimea invasion.

The effects on the population will very likely be compounded by the outcome of the countermeasures taken by Moscow on 8 August, which entail an embargo on the import of meat, fish, fruit, vegetables, cheese and dairy products from the EU, the US, Canada, Australia and Norway. On the one hand, such a response suggests that in order to punish the West economically, Russia has to, figuratively, 'shoot itself in the leg', increasing the perception of its economic weakness. On the other hand, with popular support at 87 percent[24] around the time the measures were passed, and a strong hold on the most influential media, Putin could calculate that his government would be able to absorb and redirect the public *malaise* against the West (already by and large blamed for the Ukraine crisis) and alienate the populace from it by taking another step in installing a new 'iron curtain'.

Sources of the Kremlin's behaviour

Russia's foreign policy is not driven by ideology. Indeed, considerable attention has recently been paid to the revival of the doctrine of 'Eurasianism', which defines a national project for Russia that is conservative and authoritarian, while juxtaposing the aspiration of moral purity and the importance of individual submission to the collective moral purpose coded into Christian Orthodoxy with the permissiveness, 'rightism' and moral decline of Western liberalism.[25] Conceived in the 1920s

[23]At the time of writing, responsibility for the accident has not been independently determined. However, the US government indicated it had evidence the separatists launched the surface-to-air missile that downed the plane, while metaphors of 'Lockerbie' – with the clear intent to portray Moscow as a terrorism sponsor – proliferated in the Western press.

[24]Levada center, "March approval ratings", 8 August 2014, http://www.levada.ru/13-03-2014/martovskie-reitingi-odobreniya.

[25]Cf. Barbashin and Thoburn, "Putin's Brain"; Fleischhauer, "Putin's Not Post-Communist".

among Russian *emigrés* like Peter Savicky or Nikolai Trubeckoy, Eurasianism was later developed in the works of Lev Gumilev, who coined the concept of (*super)ethnos* and used it to describe what he proposed was a fertile fusion of Slavic and Mongol cultural elements in the Russian "ancestral land".[26] More recently it has been taken up again by Alexander Dugin, the Kremlin's chief ideologue and a man of mystique, largely attributed to him by Western commentators and himself. Dugin has not only championed a conservative revolution in the 'eternal Rome' (Moscow) to prevail over the 'eternal Carthage' (Washington), but has also turned Eurasianism into a geopolitical doctrine. His vision of a Eurasian empire entails Moscow maintaining, from a hegemonic position, relations with 'minor' centres of the continent and its rims – Berlin, Tehran and Tokyo – united against America, with Central and Eastern Europe divided between Russia and Germany.[27] Needless to say, in this vision there is no place for an independent Ukraine.

Dugin and Gumilev have been popular reading among Russia's political class, and their ideas have been favourably commented on by Putin. In broader terms, a (neo)conservative patrimonial and corporativist state as a model of organisation of domestic politics that relates to 'Eurasian' ideas has indeed been emerging in Russia. That said, it is implausible that these ideas serve as a blueprint for the Kremlin's foreign policy, given their Utopian character, but also because of Moscow's consistent historical record of using theory instrumentally and pragmatically to justify this or that course of action. Ideology, the late Vaclav Havel noted, is the bridge through which power comes to the individual, and the individual comes to power.[28] In that vein, Eurasianism can be seen as serving rather than driving the state policy by giving the government's authoritarian and expansionist tendencies a sense of coherence through their strategic orientation towards a 'national idea' drawing on the ethno-symbolic pool of Russia's collective imaginary, increasing their acceptability as not simply an exercise of power but as a means of achieving the goal of restoring the Russian empire and defeating the morally inferior and ever conspiring enemies outside.

What then are the sources (and objectives) of the Kremlin's exercise of power internationally? In the White House's view, "Russia is a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbours – not out of strength but out of weakness."[29] Weakness, however, is a relative property. Indeed, today's Russia is inferior to the United States according to any criterion of international influence.

[26]Cf. Gumilev, *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere*.
[27]Predictably, Russia would restore its hold over Poland, but also embrace Finland in its sphere of influence while, curiously, Estonia – unlike the other two Baltic republics – would find itself controlled by Germany. Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki* [*The Foundations of Geopolitics*].
[28]Havel, *The Power of the Powerless.*
[29]White House, "Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Rutte of the Netherlands", 25 March 2014, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/25/press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-rutte-netherlands.

Yet the Kremlin made an impressive show of strength in executing the Crimea operation, which together with its skilful exploitation of ambiguity regarding its tactical intentions has prompted NATO to launch a revision of its defence and deterrence posture in the exposed areas of its eastern approaches. It would be more precise to suggest, therefore, that in plotting its recent policies toward Ukraine, Moscow has been acting not out of weakness, but in response to an increased perceived threat of a Western 'roll-back'. The intensity of its response has been proportional to the threat, which can be identified along two lines: political and geopolitical.

In political terms, the Maidan represents a revolt against a mentality of government that is distinctly Putinist in character and that, through state sponsoring of dissemination of a new imperial chauvinism (which helps to explain the popular support for the annexation of Crimea, for example), has managed to build a base for the legitimation of an assertive foreign policy. And while it can be suggested in general that Russia's foreign policy is not driven by demands (as systemic inputs) from below, in particular instances including support for East Ukraine's separatists, the chauvinism cultivated by the government can be seen as constraining its policy options. In geopolitical terms, this revolt, should it succeed, would not only mean a significant setback in terms of increasing Moscow's sense of encirclement, grounded in a deeply rooted mistrust of the West and the perceived permeability and hence vulnerability of its European borders. It would also take place in a space from which not only the government, but also the majority of society in Russia seems unable to separate, and which it considers an integral – if perpetually inferior – part of the *Rosskiy mir* ('Russian world'). In this respect, it is noteworthy that while the Kremlin's policy is not driven by Eurasianism (or any other ideology, for that matter), the Russian tradition in geopolitics is not merely *Realpolitik* spatially conceived, but has an important ideational, almost emotional component.

Russia may be a revolutionary power, but there are clear limits to its challenge to what it sees as American hegemony. It acts assertively on the genuine conviction that its leadership is being threatened. Whether this conviction is correct or incorrect is less important than the fact that it is based on a deeply rooted 'diagram' of world politics – and the deeply rooted belief that offence is the best defence. It does so in a rational way,[30] calculating the costs and benefits – mostly domestic and defined in terms of regime security – of its assertive policies while, admittedly, as any rational actor is expected to do in theory, discounting future costs. The annexation of Crimea and the domestic support for the government in Russia it generated serves as a case in point. The capital flight that accelerated after the invasion compounded with international sanctions and Moscow's own countermeasures is very likely to cause substantial damage to Russia's frail economy in the longer

[30]Motyl, "Is Putin Rational?", http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141039/alexander-j-motyl/is-putin-rational.

term. On the other hand, there are tangible benefits for Russia in terms of removing the concern about the future of the Sevastopol naval base, actually increasing control over the Black Sea by missile systems deployment on the peninsula, expanding the Russian Federation's exclusive economic zone in view of prospective exploitation for oil and gas, and possibly saving money by re-routing the South Stream pipeline. In other words, by reviving the 'Brezhnev doctrine' of limited sovereignty of the countries which it considers in its sphere of influence, the Kremlin remains far from assuming the position of leader of a global rebellion against the liberal order since, due to its capacities, it can hardly aspire to doing so.[31]

The notion of Russia as a revolutionary power is useful insofar as it suggests that while in Ukraine it can be seen as largely responding to what it perceived as a threat of further and more serious Western incursion into its sphere of influence, its strategy in general has not been purely reactive. With the limitations mentioned above in mind, it is revanchist and harbours a (limited) Utopia of restoration of empire – now not under direct administration, but rather through a 'Eurasian Union'. This project amounts to a new 'collection of Russian lands' and appears to resolve the historical tension between modern nation-builders and empire-builders in Russia[32] decisively in favour of the latter. This has been taking place against the background of apologetism of the empire as a source of peace and civilisation and a political form necessary to carry out "great historical tasks",[33] while simultaneously undermining, through a devaluation of the concept of nationalism, any sense of independent identity in the imperial *okrainas* ('margins'), notably Ukraine and Belarus. The intended effect of this restoration project may be seen as both domestic (disciplining the population by playing on the sentiment of retribution for the geopolitical catastrophe Russia suffered allegedly through a conspiracy of its enemies and the betrayal of the *okrainas*)[34] and international, since in the scheme of international politics that seems to prevail among the Russian leadership, international relations are inevitably defined by a great power struggle, that is with a prevalence of patterns of conflict rather than cooperation. Hence the US, but also China (in the longer term, and despite a measure of cooperation such as the recent major gas deal allegedly worth up to USD 400 billion) are conceived as adversaries

[31]It is implausible to see Russia as a leader of the BRICs, for example, not only due to the largely artificial character of the bloc with its numerous internal tensions, but also to the role of China which, unlike Russia, enjoys the status of what Martin Wolf has called a 'premature superpower' (quoted in Nye, *Future of Power*, 173).

[32]Cf. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire*; Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine and the Breakup.*

[33]Cf. Nowak, *Ab imperio.*

[34]Cf. Nowak, *Historia politycznych tradycji* [*The History of Political Traditions*]. The government's disciplining effort appears to have borne some success. According to a recent Pew Research Center poll, only 23% of Russians have a favourable opinion of the United States (down from 51% a year ago), and 39% (as opposed to last year's 63%) have a favourable opinion of the EU. Pew Research Center, "Despite Concerns about Governance, Ukrainians Want to Remain One Country", 8 May 2014, http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/05/08/despite-concerns-about-governance-ukrainians-want-to-remain-one-country/.

against which Russia has to create as favourable a position for itself as possible, even at the price of the sovereignty of those lesser states that cannot enforce it.

Exploiting unpredictability has arguably been the Kremlin's strategy for decades to manage the populace and the political class alike domestically (to wit, random purges) and to increase its power in the adversary's calculations and seize initiative. However, it is not unknown to US Realpolitik either, as practiced for example by Nixon and Kissinger when they attempted to limit America's strategic footprint and revive the strategy of containment.[35]

The view from Washington

Conspiracy theories regarding alleged US orchestration of the regime change in Ukraine have proliferated, partly fomented by the Kremlin's propaganda. There is indeed evidence, most likely thanks to Russia's SIGINT, that the US was actively involved in internal developments in Ukraine in critical moments and sought to work with the opposition,[36] though the extent to which it succeeded in influencing the dynamic within the protest movement is much less obvious. In the broader context of the Obama administration's grander vision, however, it is more plausible to see the role of the US not as driving the process to score a geostrategic victory in terms of extending its influence in the post-Soviet space, but simply as that of a superpower that is involved by default and without any master plan – and with the perpetual risk of over-extension – in almost any crisis around the globe.

The Obama administration's grander vision is one of retrenchment and putting an end to a decade of "permanent war-footing"[37] that will have cost the US up to USD 1 trillion while producing no strategic advantage. The crisis in Ukraine underlines, however, a tension in this vision in terms of an imperfect match between means and ends. Despite proclamations in the spirit of retrenchment, the administration actually harbours an ambitious foreign policy agenda of not merely repairing America's image, but struggling for a vision of global security and justice, and advancing its agenda in areas of arms control and proliferation as well as climate change.[38] In pursuing its priorities, it has continued to relegate Russia to a secondary role – the reset policy being no exception – thus leaving unaddressed its growing revanchism and the potential for crises such as in Ukraine. For the administration sees multilateralism (or governance, rather than government) as a strategy for achieving its objective with the limited means at its disposal, on the assumption that the others – including Russia and China – will share the US'

[35]Cf. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*.
[36]A recording of a phone call between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and US ambassador to Kyiv Geoffrey Pyatt that testifies to that was leaked in the beginning of February 2014, with the Russian government first bringing public attention to it.
[37]Obama during the State of the Union Address, 28 January 2014.
[38]Cf. Indyk *et al.*, *Bending History*.

burden in realising *its* global vision. It is a utopian view of a global liberal order, but without the US bearing the costs of hegemony, and so it appears to be a perfect case of exercise of what David Chandler has called "empire in denial".[39]

The way out of this conundrum would seem to involve nothing less than rethinking not the administration's global ambitions – also possible in principle, but unlikely given a rooted strategic culture of internationalism – but the means, or conversion strategies of how to bring them about. In other words, designing a real grand strategy that would include not only reversing two decades of US policy toward Russia, but also a change in the mental framework determining how US influence is exercised more generally. Therefore, it would be no mean task and one that the Obama administration may prefer to avoid.

So, for the foreseeable future, the US, engaging by default rather than deliberately playing a more significant role in the crisis (even though its former choices contributed to its outbreak), will conduct a policy conditioned on the tension between means and ends, and seek to avoid further deterioration of relations with Russia, also by working out a minimalist option to respond to the need to 'reassure' allies in Central and Eastern Europe (as evidenced by the NATO Wales Summit conclusions that do not foresee permanent troop deployment in the region but only the creation of a rapid reaction force to be declared operational next year). Neither domestic public opinion (since the conflict in Ukraine has not spurred the public imagination in a way even remotely similar to the emergence of a 'terrorist' ISIS in Syria and Iraq for example) nor the Beltway (with the exception of a few remaining seasoned 'cold warriors') would challenge the continuity of the 'empire in denial' for the time being, short of a major escalation. And as long as the situation does not deteriorate significantly, Washington may seek to leave the diplomatic crisis management in the hands of the more moderate European allies (which do not share threat perceptions with CEE, and are under significant pressure from business not to take too harsh measures against Russia), and probably would not oppose some sort of appeasement deal. Such a course, however, could easily prove to be short-sighted.

Scenarios

Drawing on the above and contemplating different, more or less alternative futures for developments in Ukraine, the following three basic scenarios can be identified, and their effects on US-Russia relations outlined: normalisation, escalation (with four sub-scenarios of limited intervention by Russia in Ukraine, extensive intervention, collective intervention, and '*Drang nach Westen*'), and cold peace. The key factors used to model the scenarios are the degree of Russia's involvement (driven

[39]Chandler, *Empire in Denial*.

by presumably rational considerations of domestic and international costs and benefits), Western responses (also balancing costs and benefits of the change in relations *vis-à-vis* Russia based on key actors' interests), and the political, economic and military outlook for the Kyiv government and the separatists it is confronting. The likelihood of each scenario is determined by qualitatively assessing the probability that crucial conditions for each outcome (such as significant domestic stabilisation as a sine qua non of the normalisation scenario, or the Kremlin's resolve to play a very risky gambit in '*Drang nach Westen*') are met.

Normalisation

In this scenario, Ukraine is stabilised. Regionalisation, which seems to be favoured by or at least acceptable to all parties, takes place, likely under the auspices of the OSCE, and a broadly inclusive and acceptable central government is established in Kyiv. Ukraine's territorial integrity is preserved – short of Crimea, whose annexation becomes a *fait accompli* – and direct interference by Russia is discontinued. In short, Ukraine is *finlandised*. Even in the short term, this scenario is very unlikely due to internal dynamic in Ukraine that makes such a development, premised on the emergence of a national consensus, nearly impossible. This even if – and that is the critical uncertainty – the Kremlin were willing and able to accept this outcome of effective *status quo ante* (quelling demands for its involvement from the more radical elements at home and abroad) while maintaining significant influence in Ukraine, guaranteeing that it does not leave Moscow's orbit. For Washington, it is the best possible outcome since it would make possible 'normalisation' of relations with Moscow, their gradual improvement as sanctions would probably be suspended upon 'positive steps' by Moscow, and a potential for cooperation on issues dear to the Obama administration. Even such an outcome would however not preclude the emergence of other, immediately unrelated crises, since Russia's basic 'revolutionary' profile is very unlikely to be modified in the near future.

Escalation

In this scenario, the instability in Ukraine increases to a point where it is possible to speak of a civil war. Several sub-scenarios of such a development can be envisioned. In the limited intervention sub-scenario, Russia conducts a successful offensive in the east and southeast, removing Donbas and possibly other areas that it sees as conforming to the historical geographical notion of '*Novorossiya*' [new Russia] from the central authorities' control but without annexing the region. Even so, the occupation and creation of dependent protectorates would mean enormous economic strain for Russia, compounded by the need to accommodate displaced populations from the West Ukraine where 'ethnic' tensions would intensify. In addition, the US (and the EU) would likely impose much more severe sectoral

sanctions on Russia, causing further economic loss not only to Russia, but also for example to Kazakhstan, thus possibly reducing the chances for the Eurasian Union to emerge. Reaching its limited objectives and keen on not raising the cost of the chosen course of action beyond the necessary, Moscow would discontinue its advance. But relations with Washington would further deteriorate, the so far preserved venues of cooperation would be closed and a potential for further crises would remain considerable. In Ukraine, after some time, Russia would probably seek to initiate a national dialogue between the government and the separatists it sponsors. However, this would be unlikely to yield any results and the situation would resemble that of Georgia *vis-à-vis* its separatist entities, only that, in the Ukraine 'proper', there would be a period of protracted instability despite the West's efforts to mitigate it, and the political environment here would be close to the 'neo-medieval model' characteristic of the cold peace scenario (see below). This is one of the more likely futures.

In an alternative to Russia's limited engagement, military advance toward Kyiv and beyond the Dniepr can be envisioned, possibly as a result of a failure of the initial *Blitzkrieg* and extended campaign and the resistance of the Ukrainian armed forces and national guard, or as a second stage of the limited engagement scenario on the pretext of state failure, growing instability and its 'spillover' to the new protectorates or Transnistria. This would likely result in Russia's eventual success in establishing control over most of the country save for the westernmost areas, where an insurgency would emerge and – particularly if sponsored from abroad – could be sustained for an extended period of time. This would increase the cost of Russia's occupation, which would entail not only enormous financial transfers but also bearing the material as well as human costs of an 'anti-terrorist operation'. The effects on US-Russia relations of such a development would not be significantly different from the limited engagement scenario. However, in addition to creating more favourable conditions for the emergence of the EU's energy union (a collective action to seek ways to eliminate dependence on Russia's imports), Finland and Sweden would be more tempted to join the North Atlantic Alliance, ironically bringing about an outcome that the Kremlin wished to avoid (however unrealistic it was) in the first place: NATO's further enlargement. Given Russia's military preponderance in conventional capabilities and the costs of the extended intervention, "Dugin might not be fazed by these prospects, but a rational Putin should be", as Motyl notes.[40] This scenario, which could alternatively be called a 'new Cold War', is one of the less likely ones.

Even less likely is an international peacekeeping operation to respond to Ukraine's slide into civil war. It could only operate under the auspices of the UN or OSCE. But deep mistrust among key stakeholders, Moscow's likely resistance to deploying any (truly) international military force in its 'near neighbourhood' and,

[40]Motyl, "Is Putin Rational?"

in the case of the OSCE, also a lack of capabilities appear to be nearly decisive factors preventing such collective action.

The most dangerous escalation sub-scenario of '*Drang nach Westen*' involves a continuous, step-by-step Russian advance from (either limited or extended) intervention in Ukraine to directly threatening NATO member states in the Baltics on the pretext of protecting 'Russian' populations abroad. The risk of this scenario is primarily that NATO and Russia could climb the escalation ladder far beyond the levels seen during the Cold War and up to the point of the 'unthinkable'. To avoid this, Moscow would attempt to put to best use its information warfare instruments to create an environment of ambiguity and uncertainty in pursuing its (neo-)imperial project. The secondary risk is that the US would choose not to act to prevent escalation, the result of which would be the effective end of NATO not only as a defence alliance, but gradually also as a security community defined by dependable expectations of peaceful change.[41] This is currently a less likely scenario. At the same time, Putin's resolve to pull such stunt and try to exploit what he may perceive as NATO's critical vulnerability – its cohesion – cannot be ruled out, particularly if the regime feels a need to sustain its position *vis-à-vis* domestic pressures.

Cold peace

In the scenario of cold peace, civil war in Ukraine is immediately averted, but prolonged instability obtains while the political environment is characterised by a frail centre (where the weak government is under a permanent challenge from the nationalist radicals threatening 'counter-revolution') and further solidification of a 'neo-medieval' political structure featuring informal, personalised patrimonial networks of power, regional (oligarchic) fiefdoms, and possibly also a welter of political and security entrepreneurs combining force and patronage and extracting revenues from protection[42] and providing other public goods such as social services. A campaign of insurgency supported by the Kremlin continues. Russia chooses not to scale up the interference to avoid further international costs, but at the same time does not lose face at home among the supporters of the neo-imperial project (many of whom it created). Ukraine does not pursue effective economic integration with either the EU (or the larger economic zone that may come into being with the conclusion of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP) or the Customs (Eurasian) Union. In terms of constitutional design, extensive devolution takes place[43] and consensus patterns of government[44]

[41]Cf. Deutsch *et al.*, *Political Community*.
[42]Cf. Marten, *Warlords*.
[43]In theory, this could result in different regions pursuing their own integration strategies with the EU and the Eurasian Union. Even if in practice Ukraine's sovereign statehood would be turned into a simulation, existence of such incompatible regulatory frameworks under one jurisdiction might be impossible if such a simulation were to be sustained.
[44]Cf. Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*.

promoted by Russia are introduced, increasing the central government's paralysis (akin, for example, to the federal government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where such a consensual model was introduced as a conflict resolution measure in the 1990s). Moscow is temporarily satisfied with the reversal of Ukraine's geopolitical drift away from its orbit. Occasional calibrated interferences would continue using the comprehensive arsenal of means it has on the severely weakened government in Kyiv, while posing as a peacemaker and the 'protector' of Ukraine as a constitutive peace of the *Rosskiy mir*.

This scenario is premised on a fundamental rationality of the Putin regime and awareness of its weakness. It can also be envisioned, however, as an outcome of a limited engagement sub-scenario outlined above, should the West fail to deter it but still respond in a way that would immediately prevent Moscow's more extensive engagement. In the cold peace, relations between Moscow and Washington would remain strained beyond the point of the normalisation scenario and the potential for other, immediately unrelated crises, possibly involving NATO territory, would be higher, but lower than in the case of the 'new Cold War'. To Washington, such a new equilibrium is suboptimal to normalisation, which may however be beyond reach; to Moscow, it may be preferable to other, more costly options. Therefore, it is the most likely scenario of those described.

Conclusion: new containment and shoring up defences

The task at hand for the US and NATO is twofold: to steer the situation in Ukraine in order to avoid the more perilous scenarios, and brace for what likely will be a period of a cold peace succeeding two decades of 'mutual assured disappointment'. The strategy for the cold peace proposed here is one of *new containment*. But while it is new, it also draws closely on the original formulation of US policy developed in the late 1940s and does not necessarily involve, as it may in the common understanding of the term, isolating Russia politically and economically.

George Kennan's original formulation of containment policy[45] was articulated at a time that – however strange it may seem – was not entirely dissimilar, structurally, from our own time. The Soviet Union was much weaker than the US following World War II. Moscow then did not, as it likely does not now, seek an open conflict with the West.[46] Putin may not be hoping for a capitalist war that Moscow can wait out as Stalin appeared to believe would happen (under the influence of Lenin's theory of imperialism), but he cherishes and probably incites the fragmentation of the transatlantic and European security community since a united Europe and a strong transatlantic link threaten the Kremlin's interests.

[45]Cf. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*.
[46]Cf. Mastny, "NATO at Fifty".

The aim of the original containment policy was to check Moscow's expansionist tendencies. It consisted of three pillars: first, reconstruction of Europe and Japan so they do not suffer from societal *malaise* and become vulnerable to the charms of communism; second, exploitation of tension in the international communist movement; and third, modification, over time, of Soviet conduct so as to facilitate negotiated settlement of crucial differences. This all in the belief that the Soviet regime "bears within it seeds of its own decay and that the sprouting of these seeds is well advanced".[47]

The aim of the new containment should be the same. Instead of postwar reconstruction, upholding a prosperous Europe and a flourishing transatlantic economy by means of a swiftly negotiated TTIP, for example, together with a reform restoring trust in European politics in the wake of the sovereign debt crisis should be a centrepiece of this strategy. Instead of playing out tensions in the international communist movement, it should consist of making credible and compelling offers to Russia's neighbours to discourage them from bandwagoning with Moscow. Finally, negotiations with the potential to modify Moscow's behaviour should be preserved, but crucially as an integral part of a comprehensive containment strategy as opposed to the instrumentally narrow 'reset' policy.

NATO should also shore up its defences at least in terms of the Wales summit conclusions (i.e. without permanent stationing of troops in the Baltic or Poland) – which will be useful in terms of reducing the Alliance's response time in case of crisis – but possibly beyond that threshold if necessary. In general terms, NATO should find a political consensus on a more equal permanent distribution of deterrence capabilities across the member states, dispelling any notion that Central Europe is some sort of a *cordon* or 'special regime' region within the Alliance that might tempt Moscow to interfere there on the assumption that it would be less costly. Increasing the foreseen costs of Moscow's assertive actions is the best guarantee that the most dangerous scenario sketched out for Ukraine or similar scenarios in likely future crises will never come true.

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[47]Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct". Since Kennan did not believe that the Soviet Union represented a real military threat to the US, the strategy was political rather than military. A consequence was his support for aggressive 'political warfare' which, conducted by the CIA, resulted in a long series of more or less catastrophic failures (cf. Wiener, *Legacy of Ashes*) – certainly not something suggested for emulation.

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