

Putin's Foreign Policy

The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place

Fyodor Lukyanov

In February, Moscow and Washington issued a joint statement announcing the terms of a “cessation of hostilities” in Syria—a truce agreed to by major world powers, regional players, and most of the participants in the Syrian civil war. Given the fierce mutual recriminations that have become typical of U.S.-Russian relations in recent years, the tone of the statement suggested a surprising degree of common cause. “The United States of America and the Russian Federation . . . [are] seeking to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Syrian crisis with full respect for the fundamental role of the United Nations,” the statement began. It went on to declare that the two countries are “fully determined to provide their strongest support to end the Syrian conflict.”

What is even more surprising is that the truce has mostly held, according to the UN, even though many experts predicted its rapid failure. Indeed, when Russia declared in March that it would begin to pull out most of the forces it had deployed to Syria since last fall, the

Kremlin intended to signal its belief that the truce will hold even without a significant Russian military presence.

The cease-fire represents the second time that the Russians and the Americans have unexpectedly and successfully cooperated in Syria, where the civil war has pitted Moscow (which acts as the primary protector and patron of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad) against Washington (which has called for an end to Assad's rule). In 2013, Russia and the United States agreed on a plan to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons, with the Assad regime's assent. Few believed that arrangement would work either, but it did.

These moments of cooperation highlight the fact that, although the world order has changed beyond recognition during the past 25 years and is no longer defined by a rivalry between two competing superpowers, it remains the case that when an acute international crisis breaks out, Russia and the United States are often the only actors able to resolve it. Rising powers, international institutions, and regional organizations frequently cannot do anything—or don't want to. What is more, despite Moscow's and Washington's expressions of hostility and contempt for each other, when it comes to shared interests and common threats, the two powers are still able to work reasonably well together.

And yet, it's important to note that these types of constructive interactions on discrete issues have not changed the overall relationship, which remains troubled. Even as it worked with Russia on the truce, the United States continued to enforce the sanctions it had placed on Russia in response to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and a high-level U.S.

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Treasury official recently accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of personal corruption.

The era of bipolar confrontation ended a long time ago. But the unipolar moment of U.S. dominance that began in 1991 is gone, too. A new, multipolar world has brought more uncertainty into international affairs. Both Russia and the United States are struggling to define their proper roles in the world. But one thing that each side feels certain about is that the other side has overstepped. The tension between them stems not merely from events in Syria and Ukraine but also from a continuing disagreement about what the collapse of the Soviet Union meant for the world order. For Americans and other Westerners, the legacy of the Soviet downfall is simple: the United States won the Cold War and has taken its rightful place as the world's sole superpower, whereas post-Soviet Russia has failed to integrate itself as a regional power in the Washington-led postwar liberal international order. Russians, of course, see things differently. In their view, Russia's subordinate position is the illegitimate result of a never-ending U.S. campaign to keep Russia down and prevent it from regaining its proper status.

In his annual address to the Russian legislature in 2005, Putin famously described the disappearance of the Soviet Union as a "major geopolitical disaster." That phrase accurately captures the sense of loss that many Russians associate with the post-Soviet era. But a less often noted line in that speech conveys the equally crucial belief that the West misinterpreted the end of the Cold War. "Many thought or seemed to think at the time that our young

democracy was not a continuation of Russian statehood, but its ultimate collapse," Putin said. "They were mistaken." In other words: the West thought that Russia would forever going forward play a fundamentally diminished role in the world. Putin and many other Russians begged to differ.

In the wake of the 2014 Russian reclamation of Crimea and the launch of Russia's direct military intervention in Syria last year, Western analysts have frequently derided Russia as a "revisionist" power that seeks to alter the agreed-on post-Cold War consensus. But in Moscow's view, Russia has merely been responding to temporary revisions that the West itself has tried to make permanent. No genuine world order existed at the end of the twentieth century, and attempts to impose U.S. hegemony have slowly eroded the principles of the previous world order, which was based on the balance of power, respect for sovereignty, non-interference in other states' internal affairs, and the need to obtain the UN Security Council's approval before using military force.

By taking action in Ukraine and Syria, Russia has made clear its intention to restore its status as a major international player. What remains unclear is how long it will be able to maintain its recent gains.

NO WORLD ORDER

In January 1992, a month after the official dissolution of the Soviet Union, U.S. President George H. W. Bush announced in his State of the Union address: "By the grace of God, America won the Cold War." Bush put as fine a point as possible on it: "The Cold War didn't 'end'—it was won."

Russian officials have never made so clear a statement about what, exactly, happened from their point of view. Their assessments have ranged from “we won” (the Russian people overcame a repressive communist system) to “we lost” (the Russians allowed a great country to collapse). But Russian leaders have all agreed on one thing: the “new world order” that emerged after 1991 was nothing like the one envisioned by Mikhail Gorbachev and other reform-minded Soviet leaders as a way to prevent the worst possible outcomes of the Cold War. Throughout the late 1980s, Gorbachev and his cohort believed that the best way out of the Cold War would be to agree on new rules for global governance. The end of the arms race, the reunification of Germany, and the adoption of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe aimed to reduce confrontation and forge a partnership between the rival blocs in the East and the West.

But the disintegration of the Soviet Union rendered that paradigm obsolete. A “new world order” no longer meant an arrangement between equals; it meant the triumph of Western principles and influence. And so in the 1990s, the Western powers started an ambitious experiment to bring a considerable part of the world over to what they considered “the right side of history.” The project began in Europe, where the transformations were mainly peaceful and led to the emergence and rapid expansion of the EU. But the U.S.-led 1990–91 Gulf War introduced a new dynamic: without the constraints of superpower rivalry, the Western powers seemed to feel emboldened to use direct military

intervention to put pressure on states that resisted the new order, such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

Soon thereafter, NATO expanded eastward, mainly by absorbing countries that had previously formed a buffer zone around Russia. For centuries, Russian security strategy has been built on defense: expanding the space around the core to avoid being caught off-guard. As a country of plains, Russia has experienced devastating invasions more than once; the Kremlin has long seen reinforcing “strategic depth” as the only way to guarantee its survival. But in the midst of economic collapse and political disorder in the immediate post-Soviet era, Russia could do little in response to EU consolidation and NATO expansion.

The West misinterpreted Russia’s inaction. As Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard observed last year in these pages, Western powers “mistook Moscow’s failure to block the post-Cold War order as support for it.” Beginning in 1994, long before Putin appeared on the national political stage, Russian President Boris Yeltsin repeatedly expressed deep dissatisfaction with what he and many Russians saw as Western arrogance. Washington, however, viewed such criticism from Russia as little more than a reflexive expression of an outmoded imperial mentality, mostly intended for domestic consumption.

From the Russian point of view, a critical turning point came when NATO intervened in the Kosovo war in 1999. Many Russians—even strong advocates of liberal reform—were appalled by NATO’s bombing raids against Serbia, a European country with close ties to Moscow, which were intended to force



Bad old days: during an attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev, August 1991

the Serbs to capitulate in their fight against Kosovar separatists. The success of that effort—which also led directly to the downfall of the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic the following year—seemed to set a new precedent and provide a new template. Since 2001, NATO or its leading member states have initiated military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. All three campaigns led to various forms of regime change and, in the case of Iraq and Libya, the deterioration of the state.

In this sense, it is not only NATO's expansion that has alarmed Russia but also NATO's transformation. Western arguments that NATO is a purely defensive alliance ring hollow: it is now a fighting group, which it was not during the Cold War.

VICTORS AND SPOILS

As the United States flexed its muscles and NATO became a more formidable organization, Russia found itself in a strange position. It was the successor to a superpower, with almost all of the Soviet Union's formal attributes, but at the same time, it had to overcome a systemic decline while depending on the mercy (and financial support) of its former foes. For the first dozen or so years of the post-Soviet era, Western leaders assumed that Russia would respond to its predicament by becoming part of what can be referred to as “wider Europe”: a theoretical space that featured the EU and NATO at its core but that also incorporated countries that were not members of those organizations by encouraging them to voluntarily adopt the norms and regulations associated

with membership. In other words, Russia was offered a limited niche inside Europe's expanding architecture. Unlike Gorbachev's concept of a common European home where the Soviet Union would be a co-designer of a new world order, Moscow instead had to give up its global aspirations and agree to obey rules it had played no part in devising. European Commission President Romano Prodi expressed this formula best in 2002: Russia would share with the EU "everything but institutions." In plain terms, this meant that Russia would adopt EU rules and regulations but would not be able to influence their development.

For quite a while, Moscow essentially accepted this proposition, making only minimal efforts to expand its global role. But neither Russian elites nor ordinary Russians ever accepted the image of their country as a mere regional power. And the early years of the Putin era saw the recovery of the Russian economy—driven to a great extent by rising energy prices but also by Putin's success in reestablishing a functioning state—with a consequent increase in Russia's international influence. Suddenly, Russia was no longer a supplicant; it was a critical emerging market and an engine of global growth.

Meanwhile, it became difficult to accept the Western project of building a liberal order as a benign phenomenon when a series of so-called color revolutions in the former Soviet space, cheered on (at the very least) by Washington, undermined governments that had roots in the Soviet era and reasonably good relations with Moscow. In Russia's opinion, the United States and its allies had convinced themselves that they had the right, as moral and political victors, to

change not only the world order but also the internal orders of individual countries however they saw fit. The concepts of "democracy promotion" and "transformational diplomacy" pursued by the George W. Bush administration conditioned interstate relations on altering any system of government that did not match Washington's understanding of democracy.

THE IRON FIST

In the immediate post-9/11 era, the United States was riding high. But in more recent years, the order designed by Washington and its allies in the 1990s has come under severe strain. The many U.S. failures in the Middle East, the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent recession, mounting economic and political crises in the EU, and the growing power of China made Russia even more reluctant to fit itself into the Western-led international system. What is more, although the West was experiencing growing difficulties steering its own course, it never lost its desire to expand—pressuring Ukraine, for example, to align itself more closely with the EU even as the union appeared to be on the brink of profound decay. The Russian leadership came to the conclusion that Western expansionism could be reversed only with an "iron fist," as the Russian political scientist Sergey Karaganov put it in 2011.

The February 2014 ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich by pro-Western forces was, in a sense, the final straw for Russia. Moscow's operation in Crimea was a response to the EU's and NATO's persistent eastward expansion during the post-Cold War period.

Moscow rejected the further extension of Western influence into the former Soviet space in the most decisive way possible—with the use of military force. Russians had always viewed Crimea as the most humiliating loss of all the territories left outside of Russia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Crimea has long been a symbol of a post-Soviet unwillingness to fight for Russia's proper status. The return of the peninsula righted that perceived historical wrong, and Moscow's ongoing involvement in the crisis in Ukraine has made the already remote prospect of Ukrainian membership in NATO even more unlikely and has made it impossible to imagine Ukraine joining the EU anytime soon.

The Kremlin has clearly concluded that in order to defend its interests close to Russia's borders, it must play globally. So having drawn a line in Ukraine, Russia decided that the next place to put down the iron fist would be Syria. The Syrian intervention was aimed not only at strengthening Assad's position but also at forcing the United States to deal with Moscow on a more equal footing. Putin's decision to begin pulling Russian forces out of Syria in March did not represent a reversal; rather, it was a sign of the strategy's success. Moscow had demonstrated its military prowess and changed the dynamics of the conflict but had avoided being tied down in a Syrian quagmire.

IDENTITY CRISIS

There is no doubt that during the past few years, Moscow has achieved some successes in its quest to regain international stature. But it's difficult to say whether these gains will prove lasting.

The Kremlin may have outmaneuvered its Western rivals in some ways during the crises in Ukraine and Syria, but it still faces the more difficult long-term challenge of finding a credible role in the new, multipolar environment. In recent years, Russia has shown considerable skill in exploiting the West's missteps, but Moscow's failure to develop a coherent economic strategy threatens the long-term sustainability of its newly restored status.

As Moscow has struggled to remedy what it considers to be the unfair outcome of the Cold War, the world has changed dramatically. Relations between Russia and the United States no longer top the international agenda, as they did 30 years ago. Russia's attitude toward the European project is not as important as it was in the past. The EU will likely go through painful transformations in the years to come, but mostly not on account of any actions Moscow does or does not take.

Russia has also seen its influence wane on its southern frontier. Historically, Moscow has viewed Central Asia as a chessboard and has seen itself as one of the players in the Great Game for influence. But in recent years, the game has changed. China has poured massive amounts of money into its Silk Road Economic Belt infrastructure project and is emerging as the biggest player in the region. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Moscow, but more than anything, it serves as a reminder that Russia has yet to find its place in what the Kremlin refers to as "wider Eurasia."

Simply put, when it comes to its role in the world, Russia is in the throes of an identity crisis. It has neither fully

integrated into the liberal order nor built its own viable alternative. That explains why the Kremlin has in some ways adopted the Soviet model—eschewing the communist ideology, of course, but embracing a direct challenge to the West, not only in Russia’s core security areas but far afield, as well. To accompany this shift, the Russian leadership has encouraged the idea that the Soviet disintegration was merely the first step in a long Western campaign to achieve total dominance, which went on to encompass the military interventions in Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya and the color revolutions in post-Soviet countries—and which will perhaps culminate in a future attempt to pursue regime change in Russia itself. This deep-rooted view is based on the conviction that the West not only seeks to continue geopolitical expansion in its classical form but also wants to make everyone do things its way, by persuasion and example when possible, but by force when necessary.

Even if one accepts that view of Western intentions, however, there is not much Moscow can do to counter the trend by military means only. Influence in the globalized world is increasingly determined by economic strength, of which Russia has little, especially now that energy prices are falling. Economic weakness can be cloaked by military power or skillful diplomacy, but only for a short time.

ANGRY, OR FOCUSING?

Putin and most of those who are running the country today believe that the Soviet collapse was hastened by perestroika, the political reform initiated by Gorbachev in the late 1980s. They

dread a recurrence of the instability that accompanied that reform and perceive as a threat anything and anyone that might make it harder to govern. But the Kremlin would do well to recall one of the most important lessons of perestroika. Gorbachev had ambitious plans to create a profoundly different relationship with the West and the rest of the world. This agenda, which the Kremlin dubbed “new political thinking,” was initially quite popular domestically and was well received abroad as well. But as Gorbachev struggled and ultimately failed to restart the Soviet economy, “new political thinking” came to be seen as an effort to compensate for—or distract attention from—rapid socioeconomic decline by concentrating on foreign policy. That strategy didn’t work then, and it’s not likely to work now.

It’s doubtful that the Kremlin will make any significant moves on the Russian economy before 2018, when the next presidential election will take place, in order to avoid any problems that could complicate Putin’s expected reelection. Russia’s economy is struggling but hardly in free fall; the country should be able to muddle through for another two years. But the economic agenda will inevitably rise to the fore after the election, because at that point, the existing model will be close to exhausted.

Turbulence will almost certainly continue to roil the international system after the 2018 election, of course, so the Kremlin might still find opportunities to intensify Russia’s activity on the world stage. But without a much stronger economic base, the gap between Russian ambitions

and Russian capacities will grow. That could inspire a sharper focus on domestic needs—but it could also provoke even more risky gambling abroad.

“Russia is not angry; it is focusing.” So goes a frequently repeated Russian aphorism, coined in 1856 by the foreign minister of the Russian empire, Alexander Gorchakov, after Russia had lowered its international profile in the wake of its defeat in the Crimean War. The situation today is in some ways the opposite: Russia has regained Crimea, has enhanced its international status, and feels confident when it comes to foreign affairs. But the need to focus is no less urgent—this time on economic development. Merely getting angry will accomplish little. 🌐