

**RUSSIA'S EVOLVING GRAND STRATEGY:
THE IMPLICATIONS OF U.S.-RUSSIAN CONFRONTATION FOR SECURITY IN EUROPE
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The U.S.-Russian confrontation which started in 2014 as a result of the Ukraine crisis, continues to have a major impact on global security, not least in Europe. Sometimes this confrontation is likened to the Cold War of the 1940s-1980s. This approach is misleading. The Cold War was fought by two roughly equal politico-military blocs, each headed by a superpower; it was at its core an ideological battle, with both camps securely “sealed” from the influence of the other on their domestic situations; there was also a measure of crude reciprocal respect between the leading powers and their polities; and there were rules of behavior reducing the probability of what was known as the “central conflict”, i.e. a war between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The current confrontation, by contrast, is hugely asymmetrical, with Russia much inferior in power, influence, global stature than the United States, not to speak of the West in general. There is a conflict of worldviews and values to be sure, but no “iron curtain” to act as a barrier for people or ideas. Instead of mutual respect, there is a high degree of contempt for the other party. There are, finally, no rules of the road anymore in Russian-American relations, which makes them accident-prone.

The implications from this new state of conflict are both wide-ranging and far-reaching. In order to compensate for its weakness, Moscow has to upend its opponent by deciding quickly, acting swiftly, and taking Washington by surprise. Since the locus of the conflict is so much closer to Russia's borders than to America's, Russia needs to demonstrate that it has much higher interests at stake. Thus, it is prepared to take a higher degree of risk. Essentially, as U.S. warplanes fly ever closer to Russia's territory, Russian interceptors are flying closer to U.S. planes. On several occasions over the past three years, the distance was measured in meters, placing the whole thing in God's hands.

The new confrontation is not only fluid, it also lacks clear a frontline. Common information space has turned into one gigantic battlefield for an information warfare that knows no borders. As a result, news flows have turned into weapons operating “fake news”; fact and fiction have become virtually impossible to distinguish; and the credibility of even “the most trusted names in news” has been damaged beyond repair. The borderless nature of the information space has blurred the distinction between foreign and domestic, internal and international. Domestic battles are fought on the foreign policy front, and vice versa.

Basic respect for opponents has turned into basic disdain. It is hard to say which is worse: when the Western mainstream media routinely demonize the Russian leader and his regime, or when Russian state-run TV regularly lampoons U.S. or European leaders. Studying the opponent and seeking to understand him has been replaced by publicly ridiculing and humiliating him.

Attempts to take a more nuanced stance, and look for ways of cooperation is often dismissed as a sign of weakness, lack of patriotism – or worse. On the U.S. side, there is a presumption of moral superiority when dealing with Russia, which makes serious dialogue impossible.

Since any compromise with the inferior, much-despised and morally corrupt opponent, under these circumstances, looks like appeasement, there is no agreement on the rules and norms. Rather, Russia is expected to act under the rules laid down by the United States and accept even those U.S. actions which infringe upon those rules. This leads not so much to the lack of trust, which cannot exist in the situation I am describing, but to the absence of confidence in the opponent, whose behavior becomes unpredictable.

Finally, one cardinal and highly dangerous distinction is the absence of the fear of nuclear war which had stayed at the back of people's minds throughout most of the second half of the 20th century. Paradoxically, even as the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia still number thousands of weapons guaranteeing mutual assured destruction, the nuclear factor is often taken out of the equation, lest Moscow tries to use its only remaining element of former superpowerdom to blackmail the West. Incredibly, Russia is treated as if it did not possess a vast nuclear arsenal.

The main thesis of this lecture is that, from the mid-2010s, the Russian Federation has made a sharp turnaround in its strategic orientation. Its two main foreign policy strategies having failed, simultaneously and abruptly, Moscow has embarked on a fundamentally different path in seeking a place and a role in the world system. It also is pursuing objectives which are markedly different from anything seen before. To give a label to this new approach, let us call it “Grand Eurasia”.

Before we turn to this new and still evolving geopolitical concept, we need to briefly examine the double failure which has led to it. In early 2014, a popular uprising in Kiev – *Euromaidan* - backed by some members of the Ukrainian elite presented the Kremlin with no less than a nightmare: the emergence of a Ukraine led by a coalition of pro-Western elements and anti-Russian nationalists. President Putin, heretofore content with managing the relationship with the formerly second-biggest Soviet republic through his private links with the Ukrainian leader and his household, was jolted out of his apparent complacency. He responded to the “coup” in Kiev with sending military forces into Crimea, whose mainly ethnic Russian population was then invited to vote in a referendum to join Russia, and then supporting an anti-*Maidan* separatist movement in Ukraine's south-eastern region of Donbass.

These moves by the Kremlin led to a rupture with the West, which strongly condemned Russian actions as “aggression” and “illegal annexation”, and imposed sanctions on Moscow. To Putin and his associates, European and U.S. handling of the developments in Ukraine leading to the Maidan and the ouster of the previous regime were no less than “political aggression” by the West which had thus trespassed onto the historical territory of the “Russian world” – a close

union of Russian, Ukrainian and Belarussian peoples, ethnically, linguistically and culturally tied to one another. As a result, Russia and the West, which had struggled to build a partnership following the end of the Cold War, were again adversaries.

This change, which took just a few weeks to complete, demolished Moscow's principal foreign policy strategy which it embraced even in the final years of the Soviet Union: integrate into the Western community of nations, "return to Europe", work together with the United States to maintain global peace and security. To be sure, this strategy had not achieved all, or even most of its goals. Russian-Western relations were strained from the Balkans wars of the 1990s to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the interference in Libya in 2011; NATO's eastern enlargement destroyed the Russian leaders' trust in America's good intentions; Russia's own political and socio-economic record, particularly the consolidation of authoritarianism, was loudly criticized in the West. Yet, till 2014 Russia looked to the West as its principal partner and a model to follow. After 2014, this was no longer possible.

If Russia's Western integration was "Plan A" for the Kremlin, its attempts to integrate former Soviet lands into a geopolitical unit centered on Moscow, was its "Plan B". This "post-imperial option" was both a complement to Western integration and an alternative to it. Some Russians hoped they could have both; others were prepared to jettison the Western strategy in favor of the more familiar and seemingly easier "Eurasian" one. In reality, both became unworkable at the same time.

Above all, Ukraine was suddenly lost to the project, denying it the critical mass of 200 million people and the economic potential of the 45-million-strong nation. Russia's conflict with Ukraine had wider implications. Even as Western countries branded Russia an aggressor and a threat to European security, countries in the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States recoiled from Russia as it annexed territory of one of them, championed the rights of ethnic Russians, many of whom continue to live in a number of former imperial borderlands, and used force to assert its interests. Nothing like condemnation followed, but "Plan B" was rendered inoperable: the most CIS members agreed to was a customs union and security cooperation. A Moscow-led "power center" in Eurasia was not to be.

Three years on, Russia's break with the West and the distancing of CIS countries from it have only become more pronounced. Following NATO summits' decisions in 2014 and 2016, Europe has entered a new period of military stand-off, this time along Russia's western frontier. U.S., British, French, German and other NATO troops are now permanently deployed in Poland and the Baltic States. Still formally neutral, Sweden and Finland are overtly tilting toward the United States and NATO. The conflict in Ukraine's south-east is smoldering despite a series of cease-fires, and Ukraine has become Russia's implacable foe, probably for generations to come. The U.S. and Russian forces, in Europe and the Middle East, have been on the brink of a kinetic collision.

The Customs Union, despite its promotion to a Eurasian Economic Union, has not fared too well. Russia's economy has been in recession; Russo-Belarusian relations have been replete with mutual recriminations; Kazakhstan has been jealous of its sovereignty; Kyrgyzstan, which joined the union in 2015, is still weighing the pros and cons of its membership; Armenia, another new member, has been unhappy about Russia's defense transfers to Azerbaijan, a bitter enemy and not a member of either the economic union or the security alliance. Tajikistan has not joined, and Uzbekistan, even after the change of leadership, is keeping its distance.

This placed the Russian foreign policy strategy in a void. "Option C" (for China), welcomed by some Russians and feared by others, did not work. Faced with a Russia alienated from Europe and in a confrontation with the United States, Beijing got an opportunity to step forward, give Russia a helping hand, and tie it even closer to China. In the second half of 2014, Russia's realignment toward China could be had for the asking. Still, the Chinese leadership refused the temptation, considering the risks too high, and the payoff too low. Indeed, what China really wanted from Russia could be had without an overt alliance with Moscow. Beijing probably feared the inevitable and highly unwelcome worsening of China's relations with the United States and the difficulty, if not impossibility of managing Russia as a junior partner.

This is just as well. Instead of integrating into a foreign-led system or integrating recalcitrant ex-provinces itself, Russia has a chance to develop a truly national strategy geared to its own values, interests, and goals. This does not spell isolationism. Russia vitally needs to integrate, but into the global system as a whole, not its regional or trans-regional alignments.

The building blocs of such a strategy are not so difficult to see. Russia occupies a central position in the north and center of the Eurasian landmass. It borders on Norway and North Korea, and a dozen countries in between, including China, the United States and Japan; it has access to both the Atlantic and the Pacific, and has the largest coastline – and the exclusive economic zone - in the Arctic. A continent-size country endowed with rich natural resources and strategic depth, but with a modest-size population, it faces the challenge – and opportunity – of domestic development. This, rather than foreign mergers or acquisitions, should be Russia's main business.

A multi-ethnic, multi-confessional country, with the Russian and Orthodox elements comfortably prevailing, but not oppressing others, Russia is both the east of the West and the west of the East. Its official emblem, the double-headed Byzantine eagle, illustrates that. It may be the essential geopolitical swing state, but it should strive for something else: being a stabilizer in the global system. Claiming this position would come naturally to the Russians, who have never accepted others' domination or leadership and who have become disillusioned as a result of their own ill-fated attempt at global primacy. One takeaway from the Soviet-era internationalism and superpowerdom has survived and can still be useful: a global worldview.

Victories often lead to relaxation and decay, as the Russian post-1812, post-1945 experience shows, while defeats can be instructive. Russia has learned a lot from its most recent history, from Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking" onward. It has become convinced that ideologies, in foreign policy, are expensive and misleading. After having initiated the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has been going through the painful process of leaving the empire behind – and the Ukraine case is exceedingly important here. It has essentially replaced the concept of an empire with that of a great power, which is self-centered rather than expansionist – and Crimea does not change anything there. It has learned, the hard way, that one needs to be strong to stay independent. It knows about the indispensable nature of military force, but is also aware of the fundamental importance of domestic factors, economic, political and ethical: the Soviet Union died at the peak of the Soviet Army's power. Political will at the top and popular support for leadership are the sine qua non of a country's stability. It knows that the announcements of the death of geopolitics, so common in Europe until recently, are at least premature.

Intellectual sources of Russia's emerging foreign policy strategy include a wide range of ideas, from a "civilized" version of Realpolitik to ethical concepts rooted in Orthodox Christianity. States, in that collection of views, are central to international relations. They are not the only actors, but Westphalian norms still rule, by and large. International institutions are creations of states and their servants, not masters. States however are not equal. Some are leaders, some are followers. Equality is displayed in the form of state-to-state relations, inequality determines their substance. Spheres of influence have not vanished, they just changed their metropolitan centers. The world order is best upheld by a reasonably small group of leading states – including Russia: this is the point - acting consensually and drawing their legitimacy from the public goods, such as peace, justice, and prosperity, that they share with all other countries.

For this "global Russia", divorced from Europe, half-estranged from its immediate "imperial family", whose members have come of age, and not accepted as Asian anywhere in Asia, it is the entire continent of Eurasia that makes sense as a geopolitical locus and intellectual framework. Hence, the strategy of a "Grand Eurasia".

This strategy seeks to win Russia a position of a major independent player alongside and on a par with China to the east, the European Union to the west, and in future India to the south. It is the relationship with China that is of the greatest importance and considerable concern to Russia, given China's obvious strength and steadily expanding geopolitical horizon. The watchword is "harmonization". Moscow's best bet is to persuade Beijing that its interests would be served most effectively if its strength becomes embedded – and tamed – within collective institutions, where others, including Russia, would wield some influence. One such institution is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, another, a much more amorphous, is RIC – institutionalized summitry involving Russia, India, and China.

Russia itself seems to have found an acceptable formula for Sino-Russian relations: never against each other, but not necessarily always with each other. This formula successfully marries reassurance with flexibility and can be a model of sorts for major power relations. Even

though, adopting that same formula for China-India relations would be difficult. Russia needs to work real hard to “harmonize” relations with its many partners in Asia and the Middle East, from Japan and South Korea to Vietnam and Indonesia to Iran, Pakistan and Turkey. The “new frontier” for Moscow’s foreign policy is long and varied.

Within this broad continental vision, Russia’s relations with Europe remain hugely important, despite the recently grown gap between Russia and the EU. Western European countries remain the prime source of technology and investment, a major market and a cultural magnet. Though not part of “Europe” – if that definition means today the EU - Russia remains European. Like the United States it is, in some sense, a Europe outside of Europe. Russia’s wish that Europe grows out of the U.S. tutelage will not be realized in the foreseeable future, but Russia’s “Grand Eurasian strategy” will still be aimed at looking for points of conversion, primarily between Moscow and the key European players: Berlin, Paris, Rome, Madrid, and intermediaries, such as Vienna and possibly Helsinki. London is probably written off as a suburb of Washington, DC. Alongside Stockholm, Warsaw and the Baltic capitals, it will need to be “isolated”. This is not an attempt to impose Russia’s own dominance on its European neighbors, but rather a search for a “true Europe”, in the image of Charles de Gaulle or Willi Brandt, distinct from its Atlantic partners. Alas, in the absence of the grand old men of the past, Russia has to deal with mainstream Atlanticists or present-day narrow-minded nationalists. The Eastern Europeans are customarily neglected in this scheme.

Russians probably understand that no rapprochement with Europe can happen without some sort of a settlement of the Ukraine crisis. The solution, however, is a very long way off. The 2015 Minsk agreement, negotiated with Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel and France’s President Francois Hollande, was dead on arrival. It worked for the Kremlin, which had been looking for a way to erect an insurmountable constitutional obstacle within Ukraine barring it from even making a bid to join NATO. Vladimir Putin had every reason to be satisfied with the outcome of the Minsk talks.

However, implementing Minsk would have led the Ukrainian leaders to political suicide. Abandoning the idea of acceding to the U.S.-led Atlantic Alliance; transforming a unitary Ukraine into a federation some of whose members might look to Russia; exonerating those whom Kiev called “terrorists”, and welcoming them all the way to the Verhovna Rada, or parliament; allowing Donbass to become a focal point of opposition to the post-Maidan authorities; and finally paying for Donbass with its largely disloyal population was simply impossible for the Ukrainian leadership, simultaneously egged-on and challenged by nationalists.

Absent the political settlement, Donbass is likely to become a protracted conflict, which needs to remain frozen until the situation in Ukraine, Russia or Europe materially changes. There is also no way for Russia to “return” Crimea to Ukraine: Moscow considers its status as part of the Russian Federation as final, and based on the will of the overwhelming majority of the local population. In the foreseeable future, the Russo-Ukrainian relations will be as hostile as any in

Europe, and a source of tension for the continent as a whole. Pragmatic management of the relationship can only be hoped for.

Other irritants in the “lands between” Russia and the EU include the situations in Moldova and Georgia. Moldova’s 27-year-old conflict with the self-proclaimed Dniester republic is stalemated, but remains a potential hotbed of tensions, which can involve Russia that supports Dniester and keeps a small military contingent in the area. Georgia’s breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, were recognized by Russia as independent states as far back as 2008, with Russian forces stationed in both republics. Since that time, there have been no major incidents in the region, but Georgia’s steps toward NATO membership can reignite tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Belarus is a formal military ally of Russia and a close economic partner. However, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is determined to assert his country’s freedom of diplomatic maneuver, even as he continues to rely on Russian subsidies to keep the Belarusian economy afloat. Lukashenko, in power since 1994, is challenged by domestic opposition which is relatively small but persistent. There is no certainty about the future of the one-man rule in Belarus. Should Lukashenko be challenged in a more serious way, and should his control of the country be in danger, Russia would probably need to react. As with Ukraine in 2014, the prospect of a Western-leaning and nationalist-led country on the main highway between Moscow and Berlin and so close to the Russian capital cannot be tolerated by the Kremlin.

In the post-2014 environment, the Baltic States have not been an intended target of Russian invasion, despite all the historically-rooted fears in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. However, these fears have led to NATO’s decision to deploy token forces to the region as reassurance for the jittery allies. These moves have created small Western military bases as close to Russia’s borders and the former imperial capital St. Petersburg as never before in modern history. In its present configuration, the NATO forces in the Baltics cannot pose a real threat to Russia, but they help build an image of an “enemy on the doorstep”. Absent a common security framework, addressing the insecurities of some countries leads to growing insecurity of others.

There is little prospect, however, that in the current environment Russia would go for a separatist scenario in the regions of Latvia and Estonia heavily populated by ethnic Russians. Unlike in Crimea, there is no sense of belonging to the Russian state either in Latvia’s Daugavpils or in Estonia’s Narva. Even though local Russians resent being placed in the category of “non-citizens” or being assimilated by the ethnic Estonians or Latvians, they set their gaze on the European Union rather than on the Russian Federation. The Kremlin has no strategic reason and no political resources to try to detach small Russian-population regions of the Baltic States. At this point, it does not even know what to do with Donbass when Minsk is formally pronounced dead.

Continued U.S. ballistic missile deployments in Romania and Poland do not seriously affect Russia’s deterrent posture, but they are seen as part of a global U.S. effort to build strategic defenses which at some point, in combination with non-nuclear strategic forces and space-based assets might lead to U.S. gaining strategic superiority over Russia. While serious experts

dismiss this scenario as unlikely, given the defense penetration capability of Russian missiles, the Kremlin is more concerned. In the present environment, U.S.-Russian arms control is on hold, and may be collapsing over time, as existing treaties are not renewed when they expire, and new agreements are not signed.

Europe should be particularly concerned about the fate of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which banned all ballistic and ground-/air-based cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km. The ongoing dispute between Moscow and Washington about the alleged violations of the treaty by the other side pose a threat of the treaty's abrogation. If this happens, Russian and U.S. "Euromissiles" can return to become part of Europe's increasingly militarized strategic landscape.

Thus, realistic scenarios for Europe's future foresee a continued confrontation between Russia and the United States in Europe, linked to estrangement between Russia and Europe. This puts a premium on both sides focusing on incident-prevention, confidence-building measures, and war avoidance.

The analytical part of this lecture is the author's view of the dramatically changed environment of the last three years. As for the conceptual part, it is not, of course, a summary of some paper being prepared in the safe rooms of the Kremlin. Rather, this is a reconstruction of the emerging pattern of Russia's post-2014 foreign policy, amplified by the author's own reflections on where Russia might/should turn next after the dual collapse of its post-Soviet strategic framework. Russia's foreign policy is still a work in progress, but the direction of change is most telling.