



BRIEFING PAPER

Number CBP 7646, 5 July 2016

Russian foreign and security policy

By Ben Smith

Inside:

1. How is Russian foreign policy made?
2. A realist foreign policy
3. Russian foreign policy tools
4. Weapons of mass destruction
5. Alternatives to Western alignment
6. Policy theatres
7. Conclusion



Contents

Summary	4
1. How is Russian foreign policy made?	6
1.1 Centralisation	6
1.2 Role of Lavrov and the Foreign Ministry	6
2. A realist foreign policy	8
2.1 Geopolitics	10
2.2 Russian difference	11
2.3 Foreign policy as domestic politics	11
Pride, humiliation, conservatism	11
Growing domestic threats?	13
2.4 Economic interests	14
2.5 Corruption as a policy driver	14
2.6 Efforts at partnership frustrated	15
Reset and divergence	16
The return of Vladimir Putin	16
2.7 Russian Foreign Policy Concept 2013	18
2.8 The Russian National Security Strategy 2015	18
Objectives	18
Threats	19
3. Russian foreign policy tools	20
3.1 Alternatives to boots on the ground	20
3.2 Soft power	21
Russkiy Mir	22
Overseas aid	22
Support for NGOs	23
Is it working?	24
3.3 Economic levers	24
Nordstream 2	25
Weakening levers?	26
3.4 Russian money	27
Tool against the West?	27
Tool against Russia's neighbours?	27
3.5 Cyber attacks	28
3.6 Special forces and intelligence	28
3.7 Conventional military modernisation	29
4. Weapons of mass destruction	31
4.1 Nuclear weapons	31
Nuclear doctrine	32
Missile defence	33
Intermediate forces	33
Tactical nuclear weapons and Kaliningrad	34
Increasing dangers?	35
4.2 Chemical weapons	35

3 Russian foreign and security policy

4.3	Biological weapons	36
5.	Alternatives to Western alignment	37
	Eurasian Economic Union	38
	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	39
	Collective Security Treaty Organisation	41
	China	42
5.1	Problems	45
	Trust	45
	Russian economic weakness	45
	BRICS slow-down	46
	West remains the most significant 'other'	46
6.	Policy theatres	47
6.1	Russia and the EU	47
	Russia opposed to EU integration?	48
6.2	Ukraine crisis	49
	Recent developments	51
6.3	Stand-off over Syria	54
	Problems for the Kremlin	58
6.4	Baltic States and other eastern/central Europe	60
	NATO response	61
	2016 NATO Summit	63
	Push-back against Russia?	64
6.5	South Caucasus	65
6.6	Libya	66
7.	Conclusion	68
7.1	Soft power cut?	68
7.2	Prospects for cooperation	69
7.3	Russia isolated?	72
7.4	Long-term pain?	72

Summary

Russian foreign policy-making has become increasingly the preserve of President Putin, as the foreign and defence ministries have been marginalised, but the President is still subject to constraints. Some of those constraints may lead to decisions that may not be in the long-term national interest. That would not be unique to Russia, but there the tendency seems marked.

Russian foreign policy is based on realist assumptions: a vision of a zero-sum competition between nations using largely hard power to establish spheres of interest based on geography. Policy is aimed at restoring national pride and regaining Russia's place at the top table in world affairs. Defence spending has been going up and Putin's popularity is reported to be at near-record highs.

Corruption is a significant driver of foreign policy; Russia is perceived as easily the most corrupt of the world's major nations – BRICS members and permanent members of the UN Security Council.

The return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency was followed by a turning-point year in 2014, which saw the stand-off with the West over Russian intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the dramatic fall in the oil price. Since then, hard-line nationalist assumptions have increasingly entered official Russian foreign policy, although they have by no means taken it over completely. As economic difficulties have increased, conservative nationalism and an assertive foreign policy have increasingly been used to bolster the legitimacy of the government at home.

An increasingly nationalistic assessment of interests has meant that relations with the West have continued on a rocky course. The sharp deterioration caused by the annexation of Crimea and the military involvement in Ukraine was crystallised in the cancellation of the G8 meeting in Sochi and the suspension of Russia from that group.

As relations with the West have worsened, increasing attention has been focussed on Russia's 'hybrid warfare' strategies, including covert use of the armed forces, propaganda warfare, energy politics, cyber attacks and indeed, according to some analysts, the deliberate spread of corruption as a foreign policy tool, aiming to co-opt elites in vulnerable countries, making resistance to Russian interests less likely. Many of these techniques are far from new, however – the Soviet Union was adept at many of them – and far from exclusively Russian. Western countries too are seeking alternatives to 'boots on the ground'; resistance to troop casualties is high among Russian as well as Western publics.

Russia skilfully uses non-conventional tools and, significantly, practices 'escalation control' of more conventional armed conflicts, making sure that conflicts stay just under the radar, or are unpredictable enough to keep adversaries destabilised, or hit the right note to support political positions.

In spite of the concentration on hybrid warfare and 'escalation control' of conflict, Russia is still placing significant emphasis on its armed forces, undergoing a military modernisation programme to professionalise its armed forces, on which it is spending a higher proportion of GDP than most Western countries.

Russia is also modernising its nuclear arsenal with more reliable weapons. This is not an escalation, as suggested in some quarters, but any reduction in the size of the arsenal is likely to level off in the next few years. There are some sharp disagreements with the West and the US, particularly, over compliance with the arms control treaties to which both are party. And there is the question of missile defence. The stationing of missile defence systems in Eastern Europe is seen in Russia as a threat to Russian nuclear deterrence, something which the US denies.

With the stationing of nuclear-capable missile systems in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and increasing exercises by both Russian and Western nuclear-capable forces, together with questions about

tactical nuclear weapons, there is increasing concern that the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons may be lowering, making their use more likely.

With complicated relations with the West, Russia has been cultivating other potential partners and groupings. Moscow is pursuing its Eurasian Union plan, to include several former Soviet states. There is also the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, which brings together Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. Some former members have left this group. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is a forum including China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan have agreed to become full members and there are a number of observer states. Other, more unexpected countries such as Egypt are also moving closer to Moscow.

China is Russia's most important alternative to Western partnership, especially as regards the economy, but the relationship is unbalanced, because China is so much more powerful economically than Russia, especially since the energy price falls. Some Russians even see Russia's eastern territories as increasingly vulnerable to informal Chinese colonisation. Nevertheless, Sino-Russian cooperation should not be dismissed. Russia and China share many strategic goals, have voted together many times on the UN Security Council and, tellingly, have sharply increased their military collaboration in recent years.

Russia is not as isolated as some Western commentators suggest; Moscow has considerable support for many of its positions and the Russia's proposal that the West is in long-term decline has plenty of support, especially in those countries who feature in this scenario as the rising powers. There are nevertheless plenty of difficulties for Russia – levels of trust between Russia and former Soviet states are not always very high, particularly after Russian intervention in Ukraine. Russia's economic weakness makes Western countries and China more attractive economic partners.

Russia is often perceived to be interested in breaking up the EU so that it can come to more advantageous arrangements with individual states, using its energy as a lever. Some nationalists in Russia celebrated the British vote to leave the EU as heralding the end of the Atlantic domination of Europe and the beginning of a new Eurasian togetherness. The Kremlin's official line was rather more sober, pointing out Russia's interest in a stable, prosperous and predictable Europe.

Concerns have been raised about the security of the Baltic States, with increasing Russian 'provocations' in or near European waters and airspace, particularly in the Baltics and Scandinavia. Some have argued that NATO could do little to stop an invasion of countries such as Estonia and Latvia.

NATO has taken significant steps to strengthen its ability to respond in the event of Russian aggression in Eastern Europe and the UK is participating in the NATO Readiness Action Plan, which involves pre-positioning equipment and rotating more forces in Central and Eastern Europe. More is likely to be agreed at the forthcoming NATO Summit in Warsaw.

The situation in Syria remains intractable. Russia's military campaign there has succeeded in pushing Russian interests onto the international agenda, but there is sharp disagreement between Russia and the West about Syria which it is difficult to imagine being resolved easily, and the Russian intervention has many potential dangers for Russia (as well as other participants) in the longer term, particularly in relation to its relations with other states in the Middle east.

Many opportunities for cooperation between Russia and the West remain, if enough mutual trust can be found. Space, terrorism and the disposal of nuclear materials remain two of the areas of fruitful collaboration, although none is without its difficulties.

Sanctions and, probably more importantly, the fall in the price of oil have shown up the weaknesses in the Russian economy. Analysts talk of the old Putin deal – authoritarian government in exchange for rising living standards – being replaced by a new one: authoritarian government and squeezed living standards in return for a restoration of national pride and Western countries taking notice of Russia. The Syrian military intervention and the creation of a 'frozen conflict' in Ukraine may have achieved this aim. In the longer term, that may prove to be a poor deal for Russians.

1. How is Russian foreign policy made?

Summary

The Russian state has been strengthened, at least nominally, and power has been centralised in the presidency and, particularly in the person of Vladimir Putin and his close associates.

The role of Sergei Lavrov, the Foreign Minister, who is widely regarded as very able, has been reduced, as has that of the Foreign and Defence Ministries. Lavrov has had a higher profile in the Syria crisis than in Ukraine.

1.1 Centralisation

Vladimir Putin has achieved dominance over the Russian political scene, surviving protest movements and election setbacks and overcoming the term limit set out in the Russian constitution by the simple expedient of swapping places with his Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev for one term, before returning to the Presidency for another two. At the same time, the Russian state itself was strengthened and centralised, as centres of political power outside the inner circle in the Russian political system were weakened.¹

This dominance means that the President in the person of Putin also has a strong grip on the direction of Russian foreign policy.

Nevertheless, there remain other influences on foreign policy apart from what the President thinks is best for Russia.

1.2 Role of Lavrov and the Foreign Ministry

Sergei Lavrov was Russia's ambassador to the UN from 1994 to 2004 and has been the Russian Foreign Minister since 2004. He is widely regarded as highly able. Someone familiar with his work in the United Nations described him as:

...the most powerful personality on the Security Council ..., with a rapid mind, with comprehensive and accurate knowledge and awareness of what was going on, and with a capacity for articulate intervention which could easily change the tenor of the debate.²

Another ex-diplomat said that he was not particularly good at creating solutions at the UN:

He was more powerful as a critic of other people's positions rather than as a constructor of solutions - that was really his power.

The Security Council tends to respect people who look for collective answers to collective problems.

¹ Andrew Monaghan, *The Russian Vertikal: the Tandem, Power and the Elections*, Chatham House, June 2011

² '[Profile: Putin's foreign minister Lavrov](#)', *BBC News Online*, 29 June 2007

7 Russian foreign and security policy

Lavrov didn't feature as a problem-solver as often as its members might have wished.³

Particularly since the return of Vladimir Putin in 2012, Lavrov seems to have been marginalised, part of the general concentration of power in the hands of a tight circle of Putin associates during the period. The Defence Ministry, too, seems to have been excluded: from decisions involving the deployment of troops to Crimea, for example.⁴ There are some portfolios where the downgrade of ministries is more visible than others. For example, Lavrov has taken a higher profile with the Syrian diplomatic process than with the conflict in eastern Ukraine.⁵

President Putin's comprehensive grip on policy is partly a show to boost his popularity domestically. Russians' confidence in Putin's ability to handle world affairs jumped from 69% to 88% from 2012 to 2015, according to one poll.⁶

But some suggest that reducing Sergei Lavrov to a 'salesman' for Putin foreign policy is damaging Russia.⁷ One insider from the Russian ministry of foreign affairs is quoted as saying that Lavrov could improve policy:

...if Lavrov had been brought into the room earlier on Crimea, we'd have managed it better, and probably stayed out of the rest of Ukraine. He knows the Ukrainians were going to mess things up for themselves, and why make ourselves their alibi?⁸

³ *Ibid*

⁴ ['Russian TV doc on Crimea send a clear message: Putin is in charge'](#), *Associated Press*, 16 March 2016

⁵ For more detail on the Syrian diplomatic process, see the Commons Briefing Paper [Seeking a negotiated solution in Syria](#), February 2016

⁶ ['Russian Public Opinion: Putin Praised, West Panned'](#), Pew Research Center, 10 June 2015

⁷ Mark Galeotti, ['Free Sergei Lavrov!'](#), *Foreign Policy*, 17 February 2016

⁸ Mark Galeotti, ['Free Sergei Lavrov!'](#), *Foreign Policy*, 17 February 2016

2. A realist foreign policy

Summary

Russian foreign policy is based on traditional, realist assumptions, sometimes called Realpolitik. This means:

- an emphasis on zero-sum competition for influence between states rather than cooperation (although cooperation is not ruled out altogether)
- a stress on the importance of geographical situation of a country. Russia's particular geographical location means that geopolitics have always been a very strong determinant of foreign policy
- an awareness of Russian cultural difference and a self-definition as a global power in opposition to the West.

Particularly since domestic threats to the government have increased with the decline of the economy, foreign policy has become a tool of domestic politics. Economic interests are also an important driver, as is the corruption of many officials.

The failure of the 'reset' with the West and the return of Vladimir Putin saw relations with the West decline further.

The Russian National Security Strategy and Foreign Policy Concept have increased the importance of the BRICS countries, the Eurasian Economic Union and a 'polycentric' international system. They also stress global competition, possibly on a 'civilisational' level and mention the development of Russia's 'soft power', something which was absent in earlier editions.

The present Russian elite has a relatively traditional view of international relations, increasingly building foreign policy on 'realist' assumptions – the power struggle between states – rather than on either liberal notions of cooperation and soft power, or any great attachment to ideology.

With the end of Communism, Russia was perhaps bound to downgrade the importance of ideology in international relations, although fear and resentment of, and rivalry with, the US remained the prominent feature.

Now Russian policy is firmly grounded in realism. As argued by Bobo Lo in 2002,⁹ Russian realism results in three tendencies:

- a zero-sum view of foreign relations – if one side wins then the other must lose. This does not leave much room for constructive cooperation in which both sides can win
- a search for the balance of power; a conviction that imbalance leads to instability because the weaker states will try to end their relative weakness by acting against the stronger, or because the stronger state will take advantage of its position to increase its strength further. Russia roundly rejected the 'unipolar' hyper-

⁹ Bobo Lo, [Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era](#), 2002, pp. 103-18

9 Russian foreign and security policy

power of the United States in the years immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union

- a belief in (geographical) spheres of influence. This is particularly important for some Russian politicians because of the lost former Soviet states such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan. A 'privileged sphere of influence' became a central tenet of Russian foreign policy under Vladimir Putin

These concepts would not have been out of place in Russian policy in the 18th and 19th centuries, which saw pushes to secure warm-water ports in the Baltic and the Black Sea and to control territory to the west, on the North European Plain, and south as far as the Caucasus Mountains.

Historically, Russia has long aimed to secure a sphere of interest and to compensate for its lack of natural defences, such as mountain ranges. The 19th century 'Great Game' played out between the Russian and British empires was a good example of a realist, zero-sum contest. Persistent geopolitical assumptions have led to historically familiar alignments: the 19th century and the First World War saw Russia clash with the Turks; in November 2015 the Turks shot down a Russian fighter plane.

Alexandr Dugin, a traditionalist Russian intellectual, has provided a lot of the support for the philosophy of the present Kremlin. In the 1980s he was an anti-communist, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union he worked with the remnants of the Communist Party and developed a movement called National Bolshevism, a group of parties that mixed some elements of communist economics with a radical conservative Russian nationalism. Dugin sees an inevitable clash between conservative Eurasian societies rooted in the land and maritime-based civilisations of the Atlantic, which are viewed as inevitably liberal, capitalist and inimical to tradition.¹⁰ Dugin is reported to have been involved with plans to annex Crimea and has set up the Eurasian Movement, with a youth branch, and string of contacts throughout former Soviet countries and in other European countries including in Romania, Poland, Hungary, France, Croatia, Serbia, Greece and Italy.¹¹

In the early years after the fall of the Soviet Union, there were competing strands of thought in Russian foreign policy. Some of the elite were fully pro-Western, but the economic chaos of the Yeltsin years and, arguably, NATO enlargement were among the factors that undermined their cause. Andrei Tsygankov categorises the other strands as 'statist' and 'hard-line nationalist'.¹² He argues that through the crises of Kosovo, 9/11 and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the hard-line nationalists failed to influence Russian foreign policy; the

Hard-line nationalism in the ascendant

¹⁰ Andrey Tolstoy and Edmund McCaffray, '[Mind Games: Alexander Dugin and Russia's War of Ideas](#)', *World Affairs*, March/April 2015

¹¹ Orysia Lutsevych, '[Agents of the Russian World. Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood](#)', Chatham House, April 2016

¹² Andrei P Tsygankov, 'From Belgrade to Kiev: hard-line nationalism and Russian foreign policy', in Marlene Laruel (ed.), *Russian Nationalism and the national reassertion of Russia*, 2009

statists, who favoured limited engagement with the West, particularly where it was necessary to secure Russian economic development, prevailed. These included Vladimir Putin. Since 2014, which saw dramatic falls in the oil price and the Ukraine/Crimea crisis, it seems that the centre of gravity of Russia foreign policy has shifted towards the hard-line nationalists. That does not mean, however, that Russian foreign policy has been taken over by the most extreme nationalist forces, rather that a 'statist' approach has taken more nationalist tones since 2014. The pro-Western strand, which was less convinced by foreign policy 'realism', has been almost entirely marginalised.

2.1 Geopolitics

Russian rulers have often tended to alternate between autocrats and Western-orientated liberalisers, but their actions have always been determined by Russian geopolitical realities. Indeed, the Russian elite's view of international relations is dominated by geopolitical ideas – these after all underline that Russia is geographically the world's biggest state and that its interests touch on almost all areas of the globe: the Arctic, the Pacific, the Middle East, the Far East and so on.¹³

Russians also tend to believe that their country is or should be a superpower. Russia rivalled the other great powers such as Great Britain and France in the 19th century and, during the 20th century's bipolar era rivalled the US for the top spot, despite persistent economic weakness.

The basis for that superpower status was geopolitical (as well as the possession of nuclear weapons): Russia early on became geographically the largest state, only exceeded in land mass by the British Empire in the 19th century. Not only did that extend Russian interests around the globe, it led to a historical and cultural self-image of Russian superpower status:

This concept [...] has been gradually codified through works of fiction, academic works in the field of geopolitical science, geopolitics and history, and based on Russian territorial expansion as a "natural trait" of Russia. This concept is [...] a permanent characteristic of Russian identity...¹⁴

Territorial expansion
a "natural trait"?

Russia's roots in territorial expansion to the east have often been compared with the 19th century history of the USA and its expansion to the west.

As well as being the basis for Russia's superpower self-image, geographical size has on famous occasions proved to be Russia's salvation. Russia's traditional heartlands in the eastern side of the European Plain have few natural defences except distance (and weather). Russia's vast size was invaluable in defending it against both Napoleon and Hitler.

¹³ Magda Leichtova, *Misunderstanding Russia: Russian foreign policy and the West*, 2014, p18

¹⁴ Magda Leichtova, *Misunderstanding Russia, Russian foreign policy and the West*, 2014, p12

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, maintaining that strategic depth has largely translated into keeping states along Russia's borders out of NATO and, indirectly, out of the EU.

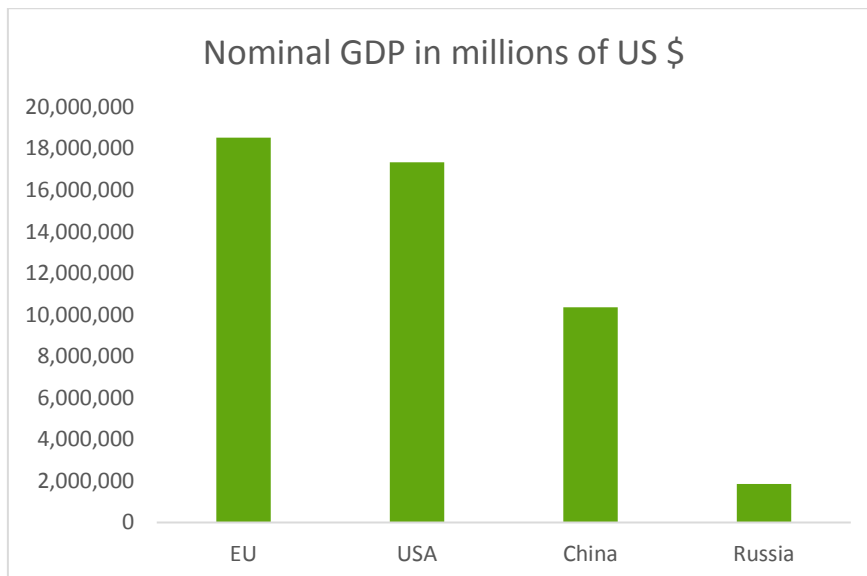
2.2 Russian difference

Many in the Russian elite want Russia to be treated as more than an ordinary state. In 2008, Dmitry Medvedev said:

The end of the Cold War allowed for the establishment of equal cooperation between Russia, the European Union and North America as three branches of European civilisation.

Russia is indeed a difficult fit among the world's nations. It is extremely big in area but very sparsely populated. It has huge natural resources but an underdeveloped economy. It has the forms of North American or Western European democracy, but without much of the content.

Above all, despite the country's physical size its gross domestic product is small in comparison to its perceived rivals:



Source: [International Monetary Fund 2014](#)

2.3 Foreign policy as domestic politics

One constraint on foreign policy is that it has increasingly been used for domestic policy purposes. This tendency is not exclusive to Russia – populist nationalism is on the rise in many countries.

Pride, humiliation, conservatism

Russian history is full of examples of attempts to cooperate with the West interspersed with prickly reassertions of national honour and pride, and Russia is without doubt going through one of the latter phases.

Russia's unique character and history influence Russia foreign policy in another way: many Russians see their country as an important counterbalance to Western supremacy and, increasingly, to Western

supposed degeneracy.¹⁵ 'Unipolarity', supposed to have occurred for a while after the fall of the Soviet Union, was anathema to many Russians and the present government has sought to portray Russia as a bastion of morality against the all-powerful West.

After the failure of Communism, Russians experienced one of the greatest crashes in living standards ever recorded and a sense of loss of national prestige. As the Warsaw Pact countries and the states formerly part of the Soviet Union sought to break away, and to blame Russia for their problems, the sense of humiliation for Russian citizens was acute. There was a surge in religious adherence to replace the lost sense of order, something that other ex-communist countries experienced.

The Kremlin has sought to capitalise on the growth of Russian religious and conservative feelings to build national identity and its own legitimacy. (Russian leadership also presents itself as a bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism; cooperation with the West on terrorism and in Afghanistan, for example, continued as it dried up in other areas.)

It was at the Valdai Club meeting in 2013 that Vladimir Putin first articulated this vision of a Russia defending Orthodox and other traditional religious values, in contrast to the West:

Another serious challenge to Russia's identity is linked to events taking place in the world. Here there are both foreign policy and moral aspects. We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan. Another serious challenge to Russia's identity is linked to events taking place in the world. Here there are both foreign policy and moral aspects. We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.¹⁶

This sense of moral mission, unconvincing as it may be in Western eyes, is at the heart of some of the conflicts today, as argued in an article for the Carnegie Foundation:

It may seem strange to many in the West, but Russia's attitude on the Ukrainian crisis is inflexible precisely because it sees itself as occupying the moral high ground in this dispute.

A key reason why Western moral criticisms of Russian actions have so little traction among Russians is that the Russian Orthodox Church has regained its traditional pre-eminence as the institution that defines the nation's moral vision and sense of honor. Looking

¹⁵ Maxim Trudolyubov, '[Russia's Culture Wars](#)', *New York Times*, 7 February 2014

¹⁶ [Speech of Vladimir Putin](#), Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, 19 September 2013

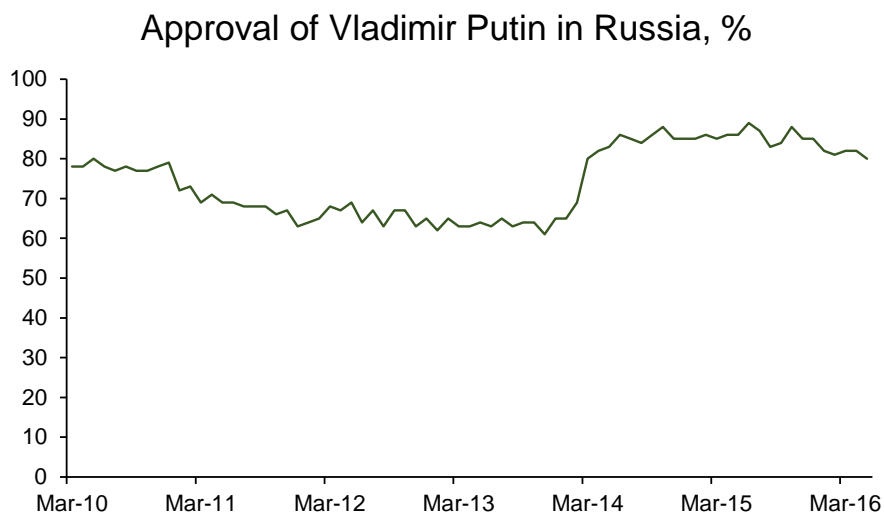
beyond Russia's borders, that vision has come to be known as the Russky mir or Russian World.¹⁷

Growing domestic threats?

The protest movement which emerged in the wake of the 2011 elections to the Duma were treated a serious threat to the rule of then Prime Minister Putin and his associates.¹⁸ When Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency in March 2012, policy became more hostile to the West, with increased tensions in areas such as missile defence, arms control and trade relations. Edward Snowden, wanted in the US for the leak of National Security Agency information, was granted asylum in Russia in 2013.

Putin's popularity, which had been modestly declining since the beginning of 2011, stabilised with his return to the presidency, perhaps because of his more defiant stance towards the West.

The intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 appear to have a strong correlation with sharply increasing popularity for the President, as shown in the chart below:



Source: [Levada Center Moscow](#)

Throughout the period, President Putin has enjoyed popularity levels that would be the envy of most of his peers. In the last few months, the shine may be coming off Putin's approval ratings, however. Fewer Russians think that the country is going in the right direction, too. When asked this question, Russians are generally less enthusiastic than when asked about Vladimir Putin, but in spring 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, the number answering positively jumped from 40% to 60%. By May 2016 it was below 50% again.¹⁹

Shine coming off?

¹⁷ Nicolai N Petro, 'Russia's Orthodox Soft Power', Carnegie Council for Ethics in World Affairs, 23 March 2015

¹⁸ For more detail on this period see the Commons Briefing Papers [Russian revolt?](#) January 2012; [The Russian crisis and Putin's third term](#), April 2012

¹⁹ Levada Center Moscow - [Assessment of situation in the country](#)

2.4 Economic interests

Despite the formal strengthening of the Russian state, the economic interests of elite figures close to the Kremlin observers have become increasingly important. The close intermeshing of powerful figures in the elite with state-controlled enterprises and the private sector, as well as straightforward corruption, have undermined the state, this has become an important factor in foreign policy formulation, according to some observers.²⁰

The decision to conduct air strikes in Syria in support of the Assad government was, in part, attributed to an interest in advertising the effectiveness of Russian military hardware. Since Russia started the Syria air campaign, reports quote Russian government sources saying that orders for Russian Sukhoi aircraft are up, with Algeria buying 12 and Pakistan, Vietnam, Indonesia and several Latin American countries also looking at aircraft orders.²¹ This business would provide a multi-billion dollar boost to the ailing Russian economy.

Power plays within Putin's inner circle are responsible for affecting foreign policy, according to some analyses. Igor Sechin, head of the state oil company Rosneft and one of Putin's closest associates, is credited with Russia's close energy relationship with China, despite the fact that it contradicted an earlier policy which aimed to diversify Russia's energy customers, reducing the dependence on any particular one.²² The policy suits Rosneft and its head Sechin, but left Gazprom with an exclusive contract to supply China with gas at rates which some consider will turn out to be unprofitable.

2.5 Corruption as a policy driver

Transparency International ranks Russia at 119 out of 167 countries for perceived corruption in 2015;²³ while the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicator on the control of corruption for Russia puts the country in the bottom 20% of countries, the most corrupt of all the most influential countries, if those are taken as the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus the BRICS grouping.²⁴

The main victims of corruption may be the Russian economy and ordinary Russians, but corruption is also very significant in foreign relations, and not only because it is a huge disincentive to foreign inward investment and therefore to economic integration with other countries.

Corruption is a motivating force and at the same time provides tools for Russian foreign policy. Many commentators have argued that Russia cannot afford to have a functioning and relatively corruption-free

The 'why' and 'how' of foreign policies

²⁰ Marcin Kaczmarski, '[Domestic Power Relations and Russia's Foreign Policy](#)', *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 383–410, September 2014

²¹ '[Syria's war: A showroom for Russian arms sales](#)', *Al-Jazeera*, 6 April 2016

²² Marcin Kaczmarski, '[Domestic Power Relations and Russia's Foreign Policy](#)', *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 383–410, September 2014

²³ Transparency International [Corruption Perceptions Index 2015](#)

²⁴ World Bank Governance Indicators, Russian Federation, 1996-2014 – Aggregate Indicator: Control of Corruption

democracy in Ukraine, for example, because that would show up the levels of corruption in the Russian Federation, encouraging popular resistance to the system which provides such riches for those in power. Russia is also alleged to use friendly countries and those with weak financial oversight as routes for laundering the proceeds of corruption. Countries such as Cyprus and Moldova are often cited as important to organised crime and corrupt officials from Russia, so an objective of foreign policy is to keep those countries either dependent or friendly and poorly-regulated.

Corruption in the energy sector is one of the most important factors; while energy is used as a tool for enhancing Russian influence with neighbouring countries, it is also a source of illicit income for officials, many of whom sit on the boards of energy companies. Energy deals in foreign countries often allegedly serve to enrich these officials.

Many other Russian decisions are motivated by private gain, according Karen Darwisha:

...the behaviour of Russia's foreign policy establishment abroad – whether in competing to get the Olympics of the World Cup, in contracting BP in a deal that undermined BP's other contractual obligations in Russia, or in placing Russian representatives in international organisations like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development who engage in fraudulent activity – often shows that the Russian elite is in the business of maximising short-term private gain, even if it corrupts not only Russian institutions but also international institutions of long standing.²⁵

2.6 Efforts at partnership frustrated

Many hoped that the end of the Soviet Union and the arrival of democratically-elected politicians in the Kremlin would usher in a new era of convergence with the West – a 'common European space.' Shared political values and economic interdependence would sweep away the divisions, bringing in great advantages for Russians and other Europeans. Russian politicians' own preference was to integrate the country in Western structures such as the G8 and the World Trade Organisation.²⁶

Was this an idea whose time has not yet come? Or was it mishandled by politicians on both sides?

In the early years after the collapse of the Soviet Union both sides, Russia and the West, made efforts to set up a new relationship based on partnership. Vladimir Putin began his first term as Russian president focused on establishing strong and cooperative relations with the US and on closer integration with the European Union, carrying out what was known as Russia's 'European choice.'

²⁵ Karen Darwisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy*, 2014, p340-1

²⁶ Dmitri Trenin, '[Russia Far From Isolated in Non-West Community](#)', *China Daily*, 8 July 2015

Ideas of a Greater Europe, or a common European space, were put forward, suggesting that Russia and Western Europe would jointly be responsible for security in the continent. The NATO-Russia Council, set up in 2002, was their most important embodiment.

Common European space

However, Russia appears already to have had doubts about its 'European choice.' Arriving in the presidency in 2000, Vladimir Putin adopted a more flexible foreign policy framework that envisioned forming coalitions with whichever countries suited the situation.²⁷

Reset and divergence

Russian/US relations were difficult during the George W Bush presidency.²⁸ Relations were particularly damaged by the enlargement of NATO into Central Europe in 2004, Western support for the independence of Kosovo from Serbia in 2008 and Russian support for separatists in South Ossetia, a region of Georgia bordering on Russia, involving full military action by Russian forces on Georgian territory, also in 2008.²⁹

In 2009, Hillary Clinton presented her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov with a symbolic reset button – for a fresh start in US-Russia relations, marking the arrival of Dimitry Medvedev in the Russian presidency in 2008 and Obama in the White House in 2009.

For a while it seemed as if relations had indeed improved. A new nuclear arms reduction treaty (New START) was signed by the two Presidents in April 2010. It provided for the reduction in long-range nuclear arsenals and replaced the 1991 START treaty. Also in 2010 a joint anti-terrorist exercise, Operation Vigilant Eagle, was carried out between Russian, US and Canadian warplanes.

Nuclear weapons reduction

The return of Vladimir Putin

With the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency, Russia and the West seem already to be diverging, and not only politically; the cultural worlds they live in seemed to be drifting apart. This had less to do with the return of Putin himself than with the impact of Russian domestic events on foreign policy (as discussed in the section on Libya, below, many analysts think that Putin remained in overall control during the Medvedev presidency).

The political crisis of 2011 and 2012

Attempts at partnership were undermined by arguments over missile defence, the eastward expansion of NATO (and the EU) and Russian resistance to former Soviet states such as Georgia and Ukraine moving out of its orbit.³⁰

²⁷ [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation](#), Approved by the President of the Russian Federation V.Putin, 28 June 2000

²⁸ For more on this period see the Library briefing paper [Russia and the West](#), April 2009

²⁹ The Georgia crisis is explained in the Library briefing paper [Georgia: the conflict with Russia and the crisis in South Ossetia](#), August 2008

³⁰ For detail on the trajectory of Russia's relations with the West during this period, see the Commons briefing paper [Russia and the West](#), April 2009

As far back as 2007, the US Administration announced its intention to build ballistic missile defence installations in Poland and the Czech Republic. This touched the Russian sensitivities that have driven much of the present stand-off. While the US said that the missile defence capability was not aimed at defending against Russian missiles, Russians tended not to believe this. Suspicions on both sides had never gone away.

Missile defence

Ukraine and Crimea

It was the Ukraine crisis that was the immediate cause of the rupture with the West. The difficulties had been there long before, however – President Obama's 'reset' of relations would not have been necessary if tensions had not already been serious.

In February 2014 pro-Russian gunmen took control of government buildings in Crimea and in March a referendum was held on integration with Russia. In May the breakaway regions of eastern Ukraine declared themselves independent republics.

In 2014, NATO announced the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council.³¹ The EU announced broad economic sanctions against Russia on 29 July 2014 including restrictions on some Russian banks' ability to borrow money in EU financial markets, and an arms embargo.³²

Sanctions over Ukraine

Russia's economic slowdown

The Western and Russian economies were increasingly de-coupled by sanctions and growing nervousness among Western investors.³³ And this coincided with a sharp fall in the global oil price and in other commodities. This reduced government revenues and caused the rouble to fall steeply against other currencies.

The International Monetary Fund estimates that real Russian GDP grew by 0.6% in 2014, shrank by 3.7% in 2015, while further contraction of 1.8% in 2016 is forecast, before a return to weak growth of 0.8% in 2017.³⁴

Real wages fell by some 4% in 2014 and by 9% in 2015.³⁵ This was the first time that real wages had decreased since Vladimir Putin took over the presidency in 2000.

Real wages fall for the first time under Putin

Analysts predict that the government could face a budgetary crisis if the situation continues as predicted: reserves are being used up quickly.

It is against this background that Russia has intensified its turn away from integration with the West.

³¹ NATO-Russia Council, [Statement by NATO Foreign Ministers](#), April, 01 2014

³² For more on the Ukraine crisis, see the Commons Briefing Papers [Ukraine, Crimea and Russia](#), March 2014; [Sanctions over the Ukraine conflict](#), March 2015

³³ 'FDI to Russia slumps but Chinese investors step in as others pull back', *Financial Times*, 6 May 2015

³⁴ International Monetary Fund, [World Economic Outlook Update](#), April 2016

³⁵ 'Russia's economy: Phase two', *Economist*, 23 January 2016

2.7 Russian Foreign Policy Concept 2013

In February 2013, Vladimir Putin approved a new concept document on Russia's foreign policy: "a systemic description of basic principles, priorities, goals and objectives of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation."³⁶

Such concept documents are often filled with high-sounding aspirations and bureaucratic language. Looking at how that language changes in successive editions perhaps gives a better clue to thinking.

The 2013 version was very much an evolution of the 2008 strategy,³⁷ containing many of the same principles.

Both the BRICS and the Eurasian Economic Union were more strongly stressed in the 2013 document than in its predecessor. Meanwhile, the 2013 concept highlighted what it described as the development of a "polycentric" system of international relations and the decline or Western domination of the world economy and political system.

It also stressed the view that "global competition" is tending to take place "on a civilisational level," and urged action to prevent civilisational fault lines appearing. The description of the era as the "end of the Cold War" disappeared between the 2008 and the new edition.

"Civilisational competition"

The document promises a foreign policy intent on integrating with the global economy and forging links with as many countries as possible.

This latest version, like its predecessor, prioritises a central role for the United Nations in international affairs, an "unconditional" regard for international law, and top priority for the post-Soviet space in its regional view.

'Soft power' is stressed for the first time in the 2013 concept.

2.8 The Russian National Security Strategy 2015

In December 2015, the Russian government published a new National Security Strategy, replacing the previous 2009 edition.³⁸

Objectives

The strategy focuses on prestige, saying that ensuring Russia's status as one of the world's great powers is a fundamental long-term interest for Russia,³⁹ while it says that Russia has already managed to strengthen its role in solving the world's most important problems, earning it a hostile reaction from the West. The strategy notes approvingly:

³⁶ [Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation](#), Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013

³⁷ [The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation](#), Approved by Dmitry A. Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, on 12 July 2008

³⁸ [Russia's National Security Strategy approved](#), President of Russia press release, 31 December 2015

³⁹ Olga Oliker, [Unpacking Russia's New National Security Strategy](#), Center for International and Strategic Studies, 7 January 2016

An entire spectrum of political, financial, economic and information instruments has been brought into struggle for influence in the international arena.⁴⁰

“The struggle for influence”

The strategy says that Russia needs to improve its competitiveness in order to achieve this goal, and says that Russia’s GDP should be raised to one of the biggest in the world. This will be achieved through Russia’s membership of international organizations and support for international law, according to the strategy. It also mentions regional organisations.

Relations with China and India are highlighted in the strategy as important to Russia’s longer-term goals and cooperation with the US and the EU are not ruled out, although these should recognise Russia’s legitimate interests.

Much of the strategy focuses on internal Russian issues, stressing ‘traditional Russian spiritual-moral values’ several times – strengthening the reference to traditional Russian values in comparison with the earlier version, published in 2009, and showing that ‘soft power’ questions were being given stronger consideration.

Threats

Russia sees the West as deliberately creating tension in Russia’s near abroad in Eurasia, overthrowing legitimate governments and provoking civil unrest. The US is portrayed as trying to undermine stability and the world order, while Russia’s opposition to this means that the country is threatened.⁴¹ ‘Foreign and domestic non-governmental organisations’ are some of the agents of these threats to stability listed in the strategy.

⁴⁰ [‘Russia’s national security strategy for 2016 in 9 key points’](#), *Russia Today*, 31 December 2015

⁴¹ Olga Oliker, [‘Unpacking Russia’s New National Security Strategy’](#), Center for International and Strategic Studies, 7 January 2016

3. Russian foreign policy tools

Summary

Russia wants to avoid direct military intervention where possible, as do other powerful states. The costs are high. So it employs a variety of different tools to achieve its objectives in foreign policy. This strategy has received a lot of attention in the West, with its 'hybrid' tactics in Ukraine and the Baltic states particularly controversial. To suggest that this is new would be wrong – the Soviet Union used propaganda, special forces, spies, sabotage and the full range of tools at its disposal. The West does too.

Russia has recognised that its soft power is limited in comparison to the West's (although the the Russian and Western conceptions of it are somewhat different). The Kremlin has decided to fight Western soft power advantages by spending more on getting its message across. It has also forged links with far-right parties in the EU and undertaken propaganda campaigns in Scandinavia.

Russian-speakers in former Soviet countries are a particular target for Russian attention, and there is a programme dedicated to drawing them closer to the Russian Federation.

Russia has famously used natural gas as a lever to try to get other countries to bend to its will. But gas is not the only economic factor that has been used in foreign policy. Trade sanctions have been used to try to dissuade Moldova, for example, from getting closer to the EU. Since the decline in the oil price, Russian economic levers may be getting weaker.

Russian money abroad is also a foreign policy tool. In the West and in the countries in the Russian neighbourhood, profiting from Russian money flows, sometimes corrupt, makes it more difficult for the elites of those countries to act against Russian interests. Using other countries to launder corrupt money undermines the rule of law and financial regulation in those countries, weakening them politically and making them more amenable to Russian pressure.

One foreign policy 'hybrid' tool that is new is cyber-attacks.

Russia is also dedicating increased resources to the conventional armed forces – more as a proportion of gross domestic product than Western countries – with programme of modernisation to move from conscription to an all-professional service.

3.1 Alternatives to boots on the ground

Powerful states may be strong enough to knock out the government of a small, poor country and install another one. Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq have shown that keeping the favoured government in power and helping it to maintain order in a country where there is significant resistance is another matter.

The wide availability of powerful weapons and explosives makes tackling 'insurgency' an increasingly dangerous business for rich countries' regular troops. Modern communications, meanwhile have transmitted news about the deaths of those troops straight into the homes of richer countries' citizens.

These factors have made the search for an alternative to ‘boots on the ground’ a priority in Russia as well as in the West.

While there has been much focus in the West on the use of sanctions as an alternative to military action, Russia has relied on varied tactics that have become known as ‘hybrid warfare’. Although the label is new, the idea of fighting a war with all disposable means, overtly and covertly, is not.

‘Hybrid warfare’ not new

As well as the difficulty in controlling ‘asymmetric’ threats such as terrorism, Russia faces the challenge of a potential or perceived conventional threat (in NATO and the US) that is in many ways more powerful. This too has led Russian strategists to rely on asymmetric and covert foreign policy tools.

The battle for Ukraine, particularly, showed these tactics in action, even if they are not new. Perhaps because of Soviet experience in their use, the combination of information campaigns with military action, the smoothly-handled transition from peace to conflict, and the “discipline of escalation control” were displayed to considerable effect by Russia in the takeover of Crimea.⁴²

3.2 Soft power

Westerners’ basic understanding of soft power rests on a view that their societies and the principles they are based on are naturally attractive and universally applicable. Andrew Monaghan for Chatham House points out that the Russian understanding of the concept of ‘soft power’ is quite different from the West’s:

The Russian understanding of the term is more in the context of an information campaign: the Foreign Policy Concept notes the ‘illegal’ use of soft power and human rights concepts to put pressure on sovereign states, intervene in their internal affairs and destabilize them by manipulating public opinion.⁴³

This applies to Russia’s view both of Western ‘deployment’ of soft power and of how Russia should respond: the concept says that the Russian government should support media and civil society to promote Russian views.

Perhaps worried about the effectiveness of Western ‘soft power’, big efforts have been made to get Russian points of view over to international observers. Russian strategists do not necessarily see their use of propaganda as either new or as particularly Russian. Indeed, a common Russian view is that the West has ruthlessly used its propaganda strength to bring about, among other things, the ‘Colour Revolutions’ in the post-Soviet space, removing pro-Russian governments.

At the apex of Russian efforts is RT, formerly Russia Today, a satellite broadcasting and online network controlled by the government. RT has

⁴² Keir Giles, *Russia’s ‘New’ Tools for Confronting the West Continuity and Innovation in Moscow’s Exercise of Power*, Chatham House, March 2016

⁴³ Andrew Monaghan, *The New Russian Foreign Policy Concept: Evolving Continuity*, Chatham House, April 2013

received increased funding in some recent years and is creating French- and German-language services. The group's finances have been affected by the fall in the rouble, but despite pressure on the Kremlin budget,⁴⁴ grants to RT and other state support for media outlets, particularly those aimed at foreign audiences, have been boosted.

Russian television in general, not just overtly state-controlled services, has been subjected to ever closer government control, a tendency noticeable at least from the second Chechen war in 1999, when coverage of the conflict was tightly controlled.

The tussle for Ukraine has been the scene of a concerted information war undertaken by the Kremlin to discredit the Ukrainian government as tainted by fascism, hide its own military interventions, and present rebel forces in eastern Ukraine as representatives of the people there. A Guardian editorial drew attention to the importance of propaganda:

The plain truth is that Russia will not let Ukraine go. It is waging a hybrid war, part conventional but deniable (at least by Russian standards), and one camouflaged by a huge campaign of disinformation, in Russia itself, in Ukraine, and in the rest of the world.⁴⁵

While much is made in official Russian pronouncements of the involvement of the far right in the Ukrainian government, the Kremlin has become surprisingly friendly to far-right parties in Europe.

Ruskiy Mir

The Russian World Foundation (Ruskiy Mir) was set up in 2007 by Vladimir Putin to enhance Russia's soft power. It aims to promote Russian language and culture and to work with ethnic Russians living in the near abroad, building on a compatriots policy in place since 1999. (Russian television stations are also popular with ethnic Russians living in several post-Soviet countries.)

Russian World works with the Russian Orthodox Church to promote traditional Russian culture and values and to counter Western liberal influence. While such soft power initiatives have limited reach in Western countries, their effectiveness with Russian speakers is much more significant. Ruskiy Mir has a branch in Pushkin House, the Russian cultural institute in London, and at Durham University.⁴⁶

Overseas aid

Russian aid policy was set out in the Concept of Russia's Participation in International Development Assistance, published in 2014.⁴⁷ The concept set out the following purposes for Russian aid:

⁴⁴ ['Looking West, Russia Beefs Up Spending on Global Media Giants'](#), *Moscow Times*, 23 September 2014

⁴⁵ ['The Guardian view on subversion in Ukraine and its impact on the international system'](#), Editorial, *Guardian*, 15 November 2014

⁴⁶ [The Ruskiy Mir Centre](#), Durham University

⁴⁷ [Concept of the Russian Federation's State Policy in the Area of International Development Assistance](#), 20 April 2014

- improving the performance of governance systems and improving conditions for trade and investment in recipient countries,
- building industrial and innovation capacities in recipient countries,
- boosting economic activity in recipient countries,
- establishing and strengthening national systems for combating organized crime and terrorism,
- supporting efforts on post-conflict peacebuilding,
- implementation of social and economic projects in recipient countries.⁴⁸

Humanitarian aid

With the economic crisis that followed the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia received aid. After the turn of the century, Russia started to give significant amounts in humanitarian aid, although these remained modest in comparison with the amounts given by donors such as the EU and the US. There were also criticisms that some of the humanitarian aid had a political purpose.⁴⁹ Syria, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Russian allies, were the biggest recipients of Russian humanitarian aid over the last five years.

In 2015, humanitarian aid fell to its lowest level for eight years.

Overseas Development Aid

In 2014, the Russian Federation gave net ODA of \$876 million, an increase of 39% in real terms over the previous year. Russian Federation ODA was projected to be USD 1.1 billion in 2015. Like humanitarian aid, most of the ODA went to allied countries, in the Commonwealth of Independent States.⁵⁰

About a quarter of Russian ODA is multilateral, going mainly through the World Bank and the United Nations with some other international organisations receiving a small amount.

Rosstrudnichestvo

The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rosstrudnichestvo) is the Russian overseas aid agency. It is also a significant tool in the strategy of drawing Russian-speaking communities towards the Kremlin.

Support for NGOs

Some have expressed particular concerns about Russian-supported human rights NGOs in Latvia and Estonia issuing reports that exaggerate the plight of Russian speakers in those countries. The Legal Information Centre for Human Rights, based in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, has received funds from the Russian government and authored a report highlighting the alleged plight of Russian speakers in Estonia.

⁴⁸ [Russia and the World Bank: International Development Assistance](#)

⁴⁹ [Russia's humanitarian aid policy](#), European Parliament, May 2016

⁵⁰ [The Russian Federation's Official Development Assistance \(ODA\)](#), OECD,

The Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, with offices in New York and Paris, is also supported by the Russian government and aims to boost Russia's soft power, particularly by emphasising the Russian government's historical narrative, which focuses on the greatness of Russia and, especially, on Russia saving Europe from Fascism during the Second World War.

Russians might say that to have friendly relations with foreign parties or organisations with whose views you sympathise is perfectly legitimate. On the other hand, the Russian government is not so enthusiastic about foreign interventions within Russia. The legal requirement on NGOs that receive foreign funding to label themselves 'foreign agents' was a response to the perception that Western support for human rights NGOs, for example, had a subversive intent.

Foreign agents

Is it working?

While the Russian elite reacted to the 'Colour Revolutions' by seeking to counter Western soft power, by promoting Russian culture and dedicating more resources to putting Russian viewpoints across, the effectiveness of the soft power drive has been limited. The Russian elite, anyway, has a different view of soft power from that current in the West – the attraction element of soft power is far less important, while the propaganda element is correspondingly emphasised:

Like the West, Russia has adopted the vocabulary of soft power. However, the Western concept of soft power is a poor guide by which to analyse Russian actions. Russia instead projects its influence by what has been termed 'soft coercion', using methods that include both hard and soft tools, rather than through attraction.⁵¹

Another important difference in the Russian concept of soft power is that, rather than coming from society as a whole, in Russia the soft power belongs to the state and the Kremlin directs it.

Russia's willingness to deploy hard power may also undermine its attempts to enhance its soft power. Even ideas of Russian, Orthodox or Slav unity are undermined by conflicts such as that in Ukraine, and a legacy of mistrust which dates from long before the Soviet era is still significant in Russia's neighbourhood.

3.3 Economic levers

Natural gas has been Russia's most useful foreign policy tool in recent years. Not only is gas one of the biggest suppliers of government revenues and foreign exchange, it has tied former Soviet states to Russia in many ways. Gas pipeline networks often run from production sites through Russia and towards markets through former Soviet states such as Ukraine. Former Soviet states have enjoyed preferential deals on their own purchase of Russian gas or have bought on credit, accumulating large debts. Gas remains very much a live issue between the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

⁵¹ Orysia Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood*, Chatham House, April 2016

Russian companies have also been buying strategic industries, particularly in Eastern Europe. A string of European oil refineries have been bought by Lukoil and Gazpromneft, the oil arm of the state-controlled gas giant, Gazprom. Since even privately-owned Russian companies have decidedly limited independence, this has political implications. In 2014 the EU registered its concern about Russian purchases of energy infrastructure. "...increased concentration in the Russian oil industry, and the increased ownership of EU refinery capacity by Russian oil companies" need to be carefully monitored in the interests of European energy security, according to the document.⁵²

Russia has also imposed economic sanctions on neighbouring countries whose policies did not meet with approval. An example is banning Moldovan wine. In 2006-7, and then in 2013, imports of Moldovan wine were banned on a health pretext widely seen as spurious. The ban had more to do with Moldova's intention to sign an Association Agreement with the EU. When the first ban was imposed, Russia was taking 60% of Moldovan wine exports. By the time the second ban came along, that figure had fallen to 29%.⁵³ Producers subjected to import bans learn to diversify their customers, so sanctions can produce diminishing returns.

Moldovan wine

Nordstream 2

The Nordstream 2 pipeline, connecting Germany directly to Gazprom gas supplies, is described by opponents as a politically-motivated attempt by Russia to undermine European energy unity and, specifically, undermine the Ukrainian economy, which benefits to the tune of \$2 billion a year from being the transit country for Russian gas going to Western Europe. Resistance to the project in Central and Eastern Europe and in Italy has been particularly fierce. On 17 March 2016, the Prime Ministers and Presidents of nine EU member states (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovak Republic, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Croatia) sent a letter to Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, arguing against Nord Stream 2. Eastern and Central Europeans worry that they will become more vulnerable to Russian supply restrictions if gas does not have to pass through their territory to reach bigger Western European markets.

The European Commission is also opposed to the project, which, it says, does not comply with the legal requirements set out in the third energy package.⁵⁴ EU single market competition rules require energy transmission to be 'unbundled' from supply – the same companies that produce energy are not allowed to control transmission infrastructure – and new suppliers must be able to use that transmission infrastructure. Supporters say that Nord Stream 2 is largely offshore and therefore counts as import infrastructure rather than transmission infrastructure, and is therefore not subject to the EU law provisions. Opponents say that EU law applies to the sections on EU land and also to those in the

⁵² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, [European Energy Security Strategy](#), COM 2014/000330

⁵³ ['Why has Russia banned Moldovan wine?'](#), *Economist*, 25 November 2013

⁵⁴ European Commission, Energy, [Market legislation](#)

territorial waters and exclusive economic zones of member states, meaning that most of the pipeline should indeed comply.⁵⁵

A Lithuanian MEP described it as a “killer project”:

Independent energy experts agree that there is no market logic for investing €20 billion in new Baltic pipelines. Nord Stream I, which is already in operation, uses less than half of its capacity. NS2 was never about the energy business, it was always energy politics. It aims to split and destabilise the EU, to harm individual member states and to degrade Ukraine, which would be eliminated as the main Russia-EU gas transit route.⁵⁶

“Split and destabilise the EU”

He announced his intention to seek a legal review.

There was opposition from the German head of the European Peoples’ Party in the European Parliament, Manfred Weber:

The EU risks creating detrimental consequences for the gas supply in central and eastern Europe, including Ukraine, in particular against the background of Gazprom’s announcement to stop gas delivery through Ukraine once Nord Stream 2 is finalised.⁵⁷

Weakening levers?

Disquiet about the potential for disruption to Western European gas supply also seems to have abated since the crisis between Russia and Ukraine in 2009 left some EU member states very short. Some progress has been made in investments in the European distribution pipeline network to make it more flexible, and in such facilities as liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, allowing imports from further afield.⁵⁸ Progress has also been made with the decarbonisation of the EU’s electricity supply, which has the advantage of reducing dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

There are other reasons why Russia’s economic levers may be losing their force. Firstly, the fall in oil prices and the glut of gas on international markets have taken the pressure off energy consumers (this was also a factor Russia’s difficulties with selling its gas to China).⁵⁹

Gas glut

The argument that Russia needs its EU customers at least as much as they need Russia has some force, but since the Ukraine/Crimea crisis and the imposition of sanctions, political relations between Europe and Russia have got sharply worse; while the energy dependence levers have got weaker, the desire to use them might have increased.

In order to continue to weaken Russian use of economic levers, Chris Miller for the Transatlantic Academy argues that Western governments would be well advised to support Eastern European countries’ (particularly Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova’s) efforts to diversify their

⁵⁵ [‘Can Nord Stream 2 be stopped?’](#), *Energy Post*, 14 April 2016

⁵⁶ Petras Auštrevičius, [‘Nord Stream 2: A killer project’](#), *EUObserver*, 11 May 2016

⁵⁷ [‘Top German MEP joins foes of controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline’](#), *Financial Times*, 1 May 2016

⁵⁸ [‘Liquefied Natural Gas and gas storage will boost EU’s energy security’](#), European Commission press release, 16 February 2016

⁵⁹ [‘Exclusive: Russia likely to scale down China gas supply plans’](#), *Reuters*, 15 January 2016

export markets. He also advises keeping up the programme to make Europe's gas market more liquid and transparent.⁶⁰

3.4 Russian money

Maintaining corrupt income is not just a motive force for Russian foreign policy makers (see above under 'How is Russian foreign policy made?'), money is also an important tool for the Kremlin.

Using lucrative positions as a way to buy political loyalty is nothing new and far from being an exclusively Russian practice, but with the blurring of the lines between the state and the private sector in Russia, the opportunities for doing this to control domestic politics and enhance global influence are immense.

Tool against the West?

Some \$50 billion per year were leaving Russia and heading for Western financial centres, at least until the oil price falls of 2014.⁶¹ A significant proportion of that money is the fruit of corrupt practices, and Western financial institutions are accused of profiting from those illicit gains. The laundering of corrupt money in Western finance systems implicates Western institutions in malpractice and makes it more difficult for the West to do anything about it. It also strengthens the Kremlin's grip on its domestic elite. Together these constitute a powerful tool against the domestic opposition, according to Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss:

Western acquiescence in profiting from the corrupt gains of Russian elites then acts as a psychological weapon to demoralise the Russian domestic opposition, which feels abandoned and finds the Kremlin's arguments regarding the hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of the West reinforced.⁶²

Corrupt practices

Tool against Russia's neighbours?

While the important banking centres in Western Europe, and particularly London, are the target of accusations that they re-inforce a corrupt Russian elite, Western European is much less vulnerable to Russian corruption than Central and Eastern Europe. Here, some commentators argue that Russian corruption and organised crime have combined with the Russian intelligence services to tap into the heart of former Soviet and Warsaw pact countries:

It has used murky energy schemes with opaque ownership structures like RosUkrEnergo, EuralTransGas, and Moldovagaz as carrots to capture and control elites in former Soviet states like Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova.⁶³

The capture of elites in Russia's privileged sphere of interest is a high priority for the Kremlin and energy is often the market where Russia has

⁶⁰ Chris Miller, [Why Russia's Economic leverage is Declining](#), Transatlantic Academy, April 2016

⁶¹ Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, [The menace of unreality: How the Kremlin weaponises information, culture and money](#), Institute of Modern Russia, 2014, p22

⁶² Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, [The menace of unreality: How the Kremlin weaponises information, culture and money](#), Institute of Modern Russia, 2014, p22

⁶³ Brian Whitmore, [Corruption Is The New Communism](#), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 12 April 2016

the most leverage; there was concern, for example, at the possible sale to a Russian company of a stake in a Lithuanian oil refinery would bring back non-transparent Russian business practices to Lithuania and encourage corruption.⁶⁴ As well as the influence implied by control of energy infrastructure, the Kremlin would acquire a direct lever over Lithuanian elites implicated in corrupt practices.⁶⁵

Laundering the proceeds of corruption and organised crime through former Soviet states undermines their political and judicial systems as well as their financial institutions, making it more difficult for those countries to move closer to the European Union or to resist Russian pressure on other issues. Moldova is one of the biggest centres for laundering Russian cash, according to the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. In 2014 \$1 billion was stolen from three Moldovan banks, a theft, according to the OCCRP, connected to Russian corruption and organised crime:

The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) analyzed tens of thousands of records, and found that the same people who stole the bank money operated a seemingly unrelated, large-scale, money laundering operation that laundered more than US\$ 20 billion, much of it from Russian and Russian state companies, over the past seven years.⁶⁶

\$1 billion stolen

3.5 Cyber attacks

A cyber-attack from Russia is thought to have caused a power cut in Ukraine in December 2015. In April 2016, the Lithuanian Parliament's website was temporarily out of action as a result of a distributed denial of access attack, whereby many computers intentionally overload a website with requests. The attack coincided with a meeting of Tatars at the parliament that discussed alleged human rights abuses in Crimea, a traditional home for the group.⁶⁷

Russia is widely reported to promote the activities of 'trolls' who post pro-Russian arguments in response to material about Russia and the west on the internet. A former employee in an 'troll factory' in St Petersburg called Internet Research, said that she and scores of colleagues spent 12 hours a day at the work: "We had to say Putin was a fine fellow and a great figure, that Russia's opponents were bad and Obama was an idiot."⁶⁸

3.6 Special forces and intelligence

Russian special forces' support for paramilitary groups has been particularly strong in eastern Ukraine, according to many analysts. Although the Russian government denies any direct intervention, the Ukrainian government quickly supplied evidence that it said supported

⁶⁴ John Lough, *Russia's Energy diplomacy*, Chatham House, 2010, p

⁶⁵ John Lough, *Russia's Energy Diplomacy*, Chatham House, May 2011

⁶⁶ 'Grand Theft Moldova', OCCRP, 24 July 2015

⁶⁷ 'Lithuanian parliament under cyber attack', *EurActiv*, 12 April 2016

⁶⁸ 'My life as a pro-Putin propagandist in Russia's secret 'troll factory'', *Daily Telegraph*, 24 June 2015

the allegation that Russian special forces had been integral to the operations of the rebels in eastern Ukraine.⁶⁹

Intelligence officers are reported to have directed the activities of separatist groups in other parts of Ukraine, fomenting unrest in cities such as Odessa, between the Donbas and Crimea, and Ruthenia in western Ukraine.⁷⁰

3.7 Conventional military modernisation

Despite the publicity generated by unconventional tactics, Russia gives a very high priority to its conventional military strength. Expressed in defence expenditure as a proportion of GDP, that priority is higher in Russia than in the US, the UK or France, and rising.⁷¹ In 2013, Russia spent a higher proportion of its GDP on defence than did the US for the first time in 10 years.⁷²

The Russian military action in Georgia in 2008 revealed significant weaknesses and a concerted programme, coinciding with high oil prices and high government revenues, was set in motion.

The 2015-2016 intervention in Syria demonstrated that the modernisation programme had made much progress. While the Kremlin's strategy in Syria was highly controversial in Western countries, there was little comment to the effect that the Russian air force had fallen short.

There is also concern that the modernisation of the Russian army has coincided with defence spending cuts and a post-Cold War mind set in NATO countries. The UK, for example, is sticking to a plan to withdraw all its troops stationed in Germany by 2020,⁷³ despite pressure from eastern NATO member states to retain some of them, in the context of increasing tensions with Russia.

Concerns have been raised that Russia's modernised ground forces, backed by very effective artillery, tanks and armoured vehicles, could mount a surprise attack on the Baltic States. With the short distances from the Russian border to the Baltics' capital cities, Russian forces could be in Tallinn or Riga in a couple of days, before NATO allies had a chance to move troops and equipment necessary to resist them.⁷⁴

Nevertheless there are important longer-term obstacles to Russia's military modernisation, mainly due to economic difficulties. There are also difficulties in recruiting soldiers – a result of the demographic crisis of previous decades.

Riga in 36 hours?

⁶⁹ 'Ukraine submits proof of Russian covert action', *EurActiv*, 16 April 2014

⁷⁰ Orysia Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood*, Chatham House, April 2016, p15-6

⁷¹ World Bank, *Military expenditure (% of GDP) 2014*

⁷² World Bank, *Military expenditure (% of GDP)* (data from Stockholm International Peace research Institute)

⁷³ HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, Cm 9161, p53

⁷⁴ David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Outnumbered, Outraged, and Outgunned: How Russia Defeats NATO*, War on the Rocks, 21 April 2016

It seems likely that even if the Russian economy cannot really sustain such high levels of military expenditure, they will continue for the foreseeable future. Even though living standards for ordinary Russians have already started to decline as a result of the fall in the oil price and Western sanctions, Vladimir Putin's high satisfaction scores in public opinion surveys will be ample justification for continuing on the present course.

4. Weapons of mass destruction

Summary

Russia is modernising its nuclear arsenal with more reliable weapons. This is not an escalation, as suggested in some quarters, but any reduction in the size of the arsenal is likely to level off in the next few years. There are some sharp disagreements with the West and the US, particularly, over compliance with the arms control treaties to which both are party. And there is the question of missile defence. The stationing of missile defence systems in Eastern Europe is seen in Russia as a threat to Russian nuclear deterrence, something which the US denies.

With the stationing of nuclear-capable missile systems in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and increasing exercises by both Russian and Western nuclear-capable forces, together with questions about tactical nuclear weapons, there is increasing concern that the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons may be lowering, making their use more likely.

4.1 Nuclear weapons

Both the US and Russia made considerable progress on reducing their respective stockpiles of nuclear warheads after the end of the Cold War. This reduction is now levelling off on the Russian side, at least, and much of the renewal work is replacement of Soviet-era weapons by more modern and reliable systems. Some in the West have described a Russian 'build-up' but this is not an accurate picture overall, according to the Federation of American Scientists – the Russian nuclear arsenal will continue to decline in numbers of warheads and launchers over the next decade, although the rate of decline is slowing.⁷⁵

Russia-US nuclear weapons relationship is presently based on certain treaties –

- The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Russia, along with other states parties to this treaty, has a legal obligation to pursue disarmament under Article VI.
- Russia signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996 and ratified it in 2000. All states parties agreed to end all nuclear explosions in all environments, whether for civil or military purposes.
- The Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty (INF). The treaty came into force in 1987 and required the destruction of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,500 kilometres.
- The New START Treaty was signed by Obama and Medvedev in 2010 and entered into force in 2011. The treaty has an initial duration of 10 years and the option to extend for another five years. The treaty limits each side to a maximum of 800 deployed and non-deployed ballistic missiles and nuclear-capable bomber

⁷⁵ ['FAS Nuclear Notebook Published: Russian Nuclear Forces, 2016'](#), Federation of American Scientists, 18 April 2016

aircraft. Within that total, only 700 may be deployed. The treaty also limits each side to 1,550 deployed warheads.⁷⁶

Nuclear doctrine

Russia is more secretive than the US about its nuclear policies. Much of the detail is contained in a confidential report, *Foundations of State Policy in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence to 2020*, although nuclear policy is referred to in Russia's Military Doctrine and National Security Strategy, which are updated periodically.

On 25 December 2014 President Putin approved a new Military Doctrine for the Russian Federation, replacing the 2010 edition. In line with previous iterations of the doctrine, on the issue of nuclear weapons it confirms that Russia would use nuclear weapons in response to the use of weapons of mass destruction or any other existential threat to the state:

The Russian Federation shall reserve the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.

Existential jeopardy

The decision to use nuclear weapons shall be taken by the President of the Russian Federation.⁷⁷

In December 2015 President Putin also approved a new National Security Strategy for Russia. Echoing the 2014 military doctrine, the strategy set out Russia's position on strategic deterrence:

Strategic deterrence and the prevention of armed conflicts are achieved by maintaining the capacity for nuclear deterrence at a sufficient level, and the Russian Federation Armed Forces, other troops, and military formations and bodies at the requisite level of combat readiness.⁷⁸

It also went on to state that Russia is open to talks on arms reductions:

The Russian Federation [...] is prepared for further discussion of a reduction of nuclear potentials based on bilateral accords and in multilateral formats and also contributes to the creation of fitting conditions permitting a reduction in nuclear arms without detriment to international security and strategic stability.

Russia formally dropped its overt 'no first use' undertaking in 1993 and said that nuclear weapons were at the heart of its national defence strategy. As Russia has periodically updated its defence strategy, nuclear weapons have been given an ever-stronger role.⁷⁹

No first use?

Nevertheless, the 2014 doctrine does not provide specifically for pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons. But there is concern that both Russian and Western forces have been increasing training exercises with nuclear-capable forces.

⁷⁶ US State Department, [New START](#)

⁷⁷ [The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation](#), December 2014

⁷⁸ [Russian National Security Strategy](#) (English translation), December 2015

⁷⁹ Amy F Woolf, [Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons](#), Congressional Research Service, 23 March 2016

Missile defence

The US government maintains that New START contains no limits on missile defence. Russia argues that a build-up in the United States' missile defence capabilities would amount to an extraordinary event, as referred to in Article XIV of the Treaty, if such a build-up "would give rise to a threat to the strategic nuclear force potential of the Russian Federation."⁸⁰ The US State Department countered that the US missile defence programme was not aimed at Russia or at undermining the Russian deterrent, rather, at limited regional threats to US forces and its allies'.⁸¹

The Iranian nuclear deal undermined part of the US rationale for installing the system, since it had been justified on the grounds of a threat from Iran. The other perceived potential nuclear threat, from North Korea, remains very much a live issue.

Threat from Iran?

In May 2016, the Romania deployment of the missile defence system became operational. A Kremlin spokesman said that it was a threat to Russia:

Without doubt, the deployment of the PRO system really is a threat to the security of the Russian Federation. Measures are being taken to ensure the necessary level of security for Russia. The president himself, let me remind you, has repeatedly asked who the system will work against.⁸²

A US State Department spokesman denied that:

Both the US and NATO have made it clear the system is not designed for or capable of undermining Russia's strategic deterrence capability," Rose told reporters.

Russia has repeatedly raised concerns that the US and NATO defense are directed against Russia and represents a threat to its strategic nuclear deterrent. Nothing could be further from the truth.⁸³

Intermediate forces

The INF prohibits the parties from possessing, producing or testing missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km.

In 2014 the US accused Russia of being in violation of the INF, following a reported test of a new ground-launched cruise missile.⁸⁴ This has, however, been disputed by the Russian government. In its national report to the NPT review conference in April 2015 the Russian government stated:

The Treaty is still in force. It remains an important factor of maintaining international security and strategic stability. The

⁸⁰ [Statement of the Russian Federation Concerning Missile Defense](#), 2010 (official translation hosted on the NTI website)

⁸¹ [Statement by the United States of America concerning missile defence](#), 7 April 2010 (hosted on the NTI website)

⁸² ['Kremlin: U.S. missile shield in Romania threat to Russia'](#), *Reuters*, 12 May 2016

⁸³ ['US defence shield goes live in Europe, Russia condemns the move'](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 12 May 2015

⁸⁴ See "Russia breaches INF treaty, US says", *Arms Control Today*, 2014

Russian Federation remains committed to the Treaty and fully complies with its obligations.⁸⁵

The US State Department declared Russia to be in breach again in 2015 and in 2016, in its annual reports on compliance with arms control agreements.⁸⁶ Since Russia continues to protest its compliance with the treaty, options for a response are at present limited. But analysts worry that the treaty may collapse if the sides cannot reach some agreement on it.

Russia has also indicated that it will not negotiate further non-strategic arms reductions unless the US withdraws its non-strategic nuclear forces that are currently based in Europe.⁸⁷

Tactical nuclear weapons and Kaliningrad

Kaliningrad is a Russian enclave between Poland and Lithuania, the westernmost piece of Russian territory.

Russia's military modernisation has given it some significant new capabilities, particularly in surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles. These have been stationed in forward Russian positions such as the Kola Peninsula in the Arctic near Finland, and in Kaliningrad.

The stationing of these missiles has given Russia the ability to threaten the Baltic Sea, which would make the use of NATO naval and air forces to defend the Baltic States, for example, much more difficult.

The rate at which Russian weapons have been moved into Kaliningrad have made it one of the most militarised places in Europe, and it is not only missiles. Military aircraft, and ground forces, including hundreds of armoured vehicles and mechanised infantry brigades, have arrived in the enclave in recent years. Kaliningrad is the home of the Russian Baltic Fleet. The enclave is, however, vulnerable to NATO, since it is an 'island' surrounded by NATO territory and could be besieged by NATO forces.

According to reports, Russia stationed the Iskander missiles, otherwise known as the SS-26 Stone, a few years ago, although it has never been officially confirmed. Iskanders have a range of 400 kilometres and are nuclear-capable. The missiles do not breach the limitations of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty and were designed to evade missile defence systems, as it has evasive and decoy capabilities. It is a tactical weapon with nuclear potential that would be used during a conflict to destroy stationary and moving targets; it could be aimed at missile defence facilities in Poland.⁸⁸ Iskanders have also been deployed to Syria.

Iskander missiles

There has been concern that Russia might use tactical nuclear weapons delivered by strategic systems, such as long-range bombers. These

⁸⁵ [National Report submitted by the Russian Federation](#), April 2015

⁸⁶ [Russian Compliance with the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty: Background and Issues for Congress](#), US Congressional Research Service, 13 April 2016

⁸⁷ For more on Russian nuclear capabilities and modernisation, see the Commons Briefing Paper [Nuclear Weapons - Country Comparisons](#), April 2016

⁸⁸ ['Introducing the Iskander: The Russian Missile NATO Fears'](#), *The National Interest*, 1 April 2016

might be used to intimidate enemies both near and far with the threat of a limited nuclear strike at an early stage of, or even before, a conflict, forcing the adversary to back down.⁸⁹

Increasing dangers?

Overall, despite the persistence of the various arms control agreements, analysts are worried that the likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons is increasing. In the context of the stand-off between NATO and Russia in Eastern Europe, there are signs that the threshold for nuclear weapons use may be lowering.

After New START there was talk of negotiations between the US and Russia on possible further disarmament measures, including reductions of both countries' non-strategic/tactical nuclear weapons. In 2013 President Obama called for negotiations with Russia on a further one-third cut in strategic forces, an offer which the US State Department has continued to make. Russia has yet to engage in discussions on this issue and has made clear that it will not negotiate further non-strategic arms reductions unless the US withdraws its non-strategic nuclear forces that are currently based in Europe.

With increasing political tensions, however, the chance of progress on further cuts is low.⁹⁰

4.2 Chemical weapons

Russia signed the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1993 and ratified it in 1997. As well as banning their production and use, the convention provides for the destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles, and Russia is in the process of destroying its own. More than 90% of the chemicals have been destroyed, and a completion date of 2020 is envisaged.⁹¹

Russian and US pressure led to the destruction of some or most of the Syrian government's stockpile after the 2013 attack in a suburb of Damascus, although there are fears that some may have found their way into the hands of radical Islamist groups; in 2015 ISIS/Daesh is reported to have used sulfur mustard gas in Syria.

In 2016, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, called for a new international treaty on chemical terrorism, saying that the existing Chemical Weapons Convention did not cover it adequately and that a separate treaty should be negotiated. The call was made at the most recent Conference on Disarmament talks in Geneva. The Conference on Disarmament is a 65-member international forum in which Russia still participates.⁹²

⁸⁹ [Russian Compliance with the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty: Background and Issues for Congress](#), US Congressional Research Service, 13 April 2016

⁹⁰ For more information on nuclear arms control see the Commons Briefing Paper [Nuclear Weapons: Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Regimes](#), June 2016

⁹¹ ['OPCW Executive Council Observes Chemical Weapons Destruction Progress at Kizner Facility in Russia'](#), Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons press release, 29 April 2016

⁹² ['Russian Foreign Minister Calls for New Chemical Weapons Accord'](#), *New York Times*, 1 March 2016

4.3 Biological weapons

On the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited in 1992 its status as a party to the Geneva Protocol and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). The Biological Weapons Convention bans the development, acquisition and stockpiling of chemical weapons and their delivery systems. It also requires states parties to destroy their stocks of these things or divert them to peaceful use.

Although Russia claims that the biological weapons programme, that used to be enormous under the Soviet Union, has been terminated, the Arms Control Association says “questions remain about what happened to elements of the Soviet program”.⁹³ The ACA also says that Russia opposed discussion of bio-terrorism at the 2011 biological weapons review conference, the most recent.

⁹³ Arms Control Association, [The Biological Weapons Convention \(BWC\) At A Glance](#)

5. Alternatives to Western alignment

Russia's political differences with the West and the West's economic difficulties have led to a predictable reaction in Russia: a desire to form new alliances with other emerging countries, particularly China. Those alliances would be built on a resistance to intervention on 'humanitarian' grounds in the internal affairs of sovereign nations, cooperation against terrorism, extremism and separatism, and the economic dynamism of East and Southeast Asian economies.

The main alliances are the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union.

There are difficulties in this approach, however, perhaps the most important being Russia's economic weakness, especially in comparison with China.

The idea that Russia is different from the West is far from new. Even in the 1990s, Russian politicians were interested in the idea of Russia as a counter-balance to Western hegemony led by the United States. As attempts to form alliances with the West came unstuck and the West seemed to be increasingly having its own economic and security difficulties, these ideas have gained in strength in Russian elite circles. Even Russians perceived a return to bipolarity to be unrealistic, however, given Russian economic weakness and its large deficit in soft power in comparison with the West.

That made alliances with other rising powers such as China and India attractive. The emergence of the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and later South Africa and alignment with it on many issues became a crucial plank in Russia's foreign policy.

BRICS

On the United Nations Security Council, Russia and China have often voted together and sometimes against the US line, notably in reference to Syria in 2011 and 2012, but also on resolutions relating to Zimbabwe and Myanmar (in 2008 and 2007, respectively) and North Korea.⁹⁴ Also noticeable were the countries that abstained on Security Council resolution 1973 on Libya (see below): Brazil, China, Germany, India and the Russian Federation.

Russia may have been suspended from the G8 in March 2014, but when Julie Bishop, the then Australian Foreign Minister and host of the forthcoming G20 summit in Brisbane, Australia, suggested that Russia should be barred from attending that as well, she was rebuked in a communiqué from the BRICS foreign ministers, who told her that it was not for one member of the G20 to determine its character.⁹⁵

Rebuke

The G8 was anyway regarded by some as out of date, focussed as it was on the 'old' powers. The G20, on the other hand, included the

⁹⁴ [Security Council - Veto List](#), UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library Research Guide

⁹⁵ [Chairperson's Statement on the BRICS Foreign Ministers Meeting held on 24 March 2014 in The Hague, Netherlands](#)

BRICS and other important emerging nations such as Mexico and Indonesia, and it announced at its 2008 summit its intention to replace the G8 as the main forum for the world's most powerful economies. (Since the commodities downturn, however, G20 is perhaps not looking so powerful.)

Russia, then, had significant support among other emerging nations and, if Russia was not to align with the West, then these could be its new allies. President Vladimir Putin hosted two international summits in July 2015: the BRICS group and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (see below).

Eurasian Economic Union

The Russian establishment, having taken note that attempts to cooperate with the West were failing,⁹⁶ decided to look to their own region for an alternative.

Russia's most concrete alternative to Western alliances is the Eurasian Economic Union, building on the Eurasian Customs Union. The EEU would create a larger market, increase trade between its members, insulate Russia from economic relations with the West that are vulnerable to political instability and, importantly, offer states that Russia considers to be in its 'privileged sphere of interest' an alternative to signing economic agreements with the EU.

A treaty establishing the EEU was signed in 2014 by the leaders of Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russia.

Armenia was an important example of a state that was considering moving closer to the EU but decided in the end to move towards Russia and the EEU at the last minute instead, signing the papers on 10 October 2014.⁹⁷

In May 2015, Kyrgyzstan finally committed to joining the EEU, after significant delays and 'waning enthusiasm'.⁹⁸ Tajikistan is moving towards membership, partly because of worries that Tajik migrants to the Russian Federation would be replaced by Kyrgyz workers – many Central Asian states depend on remittances from migrant workers in Russia for a significant proportion of their GDP.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Russian Foreign Policy Under Putin: The Making of an Independent Centre of Power
Alexey Pushkov Chairman, International Affairs Committee of the State Duma,
Russia, Chatham House, 13 June 2012

⁹⁷ ['Armenia Signs Up To Russian-Led Economic Union'](#), *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 10 October 2014

⁹⁸ ['Kyrgyzstan \(Finally\) Joins the Eurasian Economic Union'](#), *The Diplomat*, 22 May 2015

⁹⁹ ['Tajikistan Paves the Way to Eurasian Union'](#), *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 7 January 2015



Source: [Eurasian Economic Union](#)

The EEU is beset by difficulties, however, deepened by Russia's economic slowdown and by falling oil prices. Intra-EEU trade fell by 26% in 2015, while member states spent 10 to 15% of sovereign reserves fighting declines in the value of their currencies.¹⁰⁰ In January the Kyrgyz parliament voted to cancel Russian collaboration with two big hydroelectric projects, because of lack of progress.

The smaller EEU member states want to boost trade with economies outside the bloc and attract investment. Russia is reluctant to increase outside influence in what it sees as its traditional sphere of influence.

Perhaps worried by the prospect of being tied to Russia's weak economic prospects, the Kazakh President argued recently for more integration with both China's One Belt One Road project and with the European Union. The article was not highlighted in Russian media outlets close to the government.

Russia has indicated its desire to introduce a common currency for the EEU: in March 2015 President Putin said that it was time to start talks on a currency union. On 22 April, a Kazakh minister publicly rejected the proposal.¹⁰¹

In December 2016, Kazakhstan signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU,¹⁰² making the EU's trade relations with Kazakhstan closer than with Russia's relations with Kazakhstan.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

When the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was founded in 1996, as the Shanghai Five, it was a loose organisation comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Its concern in the post-Soviet, post-Cold War years was to develop good relations among the

¹⁰⁰ 'Is Kazakhstan Getting Eurasian Union Blues?', *Eurasianet*, 9 March 2016

¹⁰¹ 'Astana To Sign Expanded Cooperation Deal With EU', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 April 2016

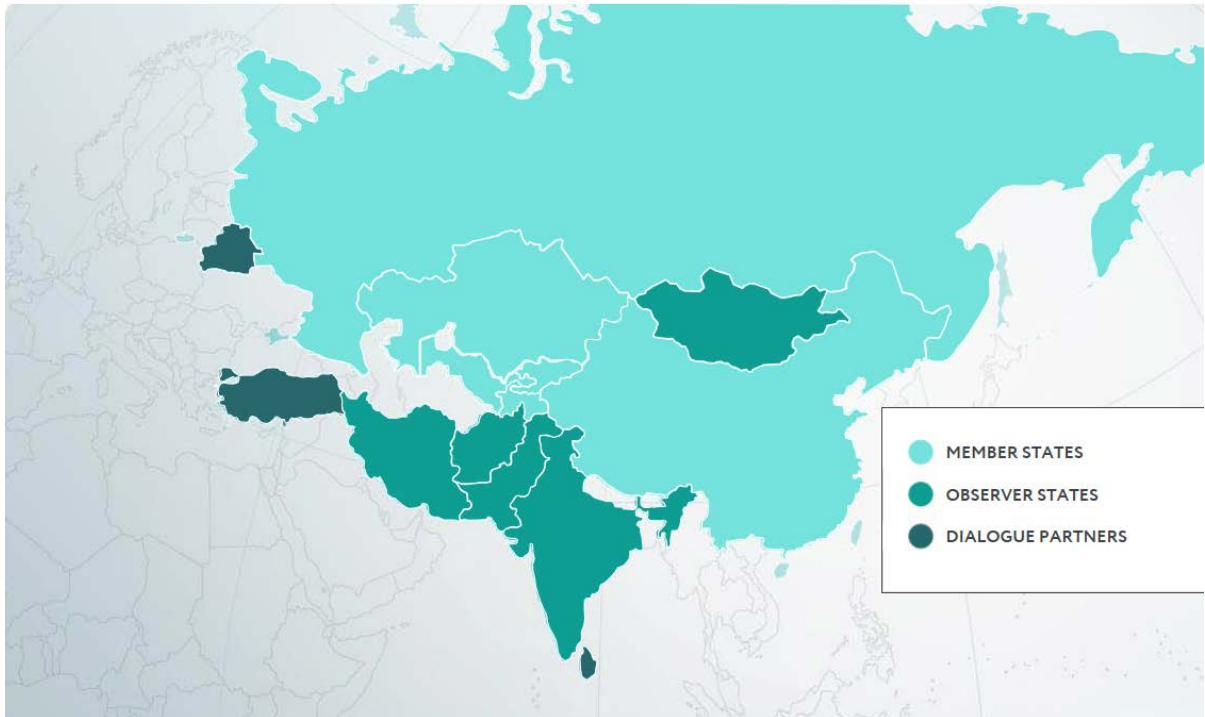
¹⁰² 'EU and Kazakhstan sign Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement', European External Action Service press release, 21 December 2015

countries, and the five soon signed agreements on reducing tensions and military forces in their border regions.

In 2001 Uzbekistan joined the group and in 2015 it announced its intention to include India and Pakistan, expected to be members in 2016.

The renamed Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has become a politically significant institution comprising approximately a quarter of the world's population. It is increasingly seen as a counterbalance to United States activity in the region and its agenda concentrates on perceived regional and domestic threats – “terrorism, extremism or separatism” – on combating drug-trafficking and on securing and developing gas and oil resources.

The economic aspects of SCO cooperation have increasingly come to the fore, as Chinese economic success has given that country the strength to offer massive Chinese investment.



Source: [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#)

There are plans to discuss an SCO free trade zone and to link the Eurasian Economic Union economies and the New Silk Road economies and even to build a “mega economic partnership” between the SCO, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Association of South East Asian nations (ASEAN).¹⁰³ The last of these is seen as a response to the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The inclusion of India and Pakistan will increase greatly the weight of the SCO, but it might also paralyse its decision-making process. India and Pakistan find it famously difficult to agree, and the themes of separatism and terrorism are particularly sensitive, in the light of the

India and Pakistan

¹⁰³ Alexander Gabuev, “[2016: Where China Will Clash With Russia](#)”, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 30 December 2016

Kashmir conflict, for example. India has already denounced parts of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a transport network that will connect Pakistan’s Baluchistan to China’s westernmost province of Xinjiang – because it runs through disputed Kashmiri territory administered by Pakistan.¹⁰⁴

Separately from the SCO, Pakistan and Russia have been moving closer in recent years, partly as a move to offset India’s moves towards alignment with the US.

Collective Security Treaty Organisation

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is a Moscow-led security alliance that currently includes the Russian Federation, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan rejoined the CSTO in 2006 but withdrew in 2012. Azerbaijan and Georgia have also quit the group.

China has not joined the CSTO and does not try to compete with the Russian security presence in the Central Asia region.

In January 2016 the Russian government announced its intention to restructure the CSTO to become an international security organisation. Referring to the National Security Strategy 2015, the spokesman said that Russia would strengthen relations between BRICS, SCO, APEC and other regional organisations,¹⁰⁵ within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States.¹⁰⁶

Any attempt to draw former Soviet states into a mutually-reinforcing alliance, particularly in opposition to pro-Western alliances, is dogged by mistrust of Russian intentions. As well as viewing Russian actions in Ukraine with alarm, CSTO member governments are reported not to back the Russian military action in Syria. The organisation’s Secretary General said that CSTO troops could not be deployed in non-member states’ territory.

THE CSTO head did not, however, rule out the possibility that Syria could at some point join the organisation.¹⁰⁷ In recent years India, Iran and Egypt have all held talks with the CSTO on the possibilities of observer status and membership.

Central Asia

Through the CSTO Russia plays a significant military role in Central Asia: it maintains two military bases – one in Tajikistan and one in Kyrgyzstan – and also has a space launch base in Kazakhstan.

¹⁰⁴ Farzana Shaikh, ‘[India and Pakistan Bring Risks for Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#)’, Chatham House, 10 July 2015

¹⁰⁵ APEC, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation organisation, is a wide forum containing 21 economies and specifically devoted to economic cooperation. Its members include China and the US, as well as countries such as Australia and Vietnam.

¹⁰⁶ ‘[Russia wants to restructure Collective Security Treaty Organization into a universal international organization](#)’, *Eurasia Daily*, 18 January 2016

¹⁰⁷ ‘[Members of Russia-led security alliance do not back Moscow’s action in Syria](#)’, *Asia Times*, 16 February 2016

There could be severe security problems coming from Russia's historically troublesome southern flank. There are worries about jihadi terrorism in Central Asia, and the Taliban are far from eliminated from Afghanistan. ISIS/Daesh are now reported to have a significant presence in Afghanistan.

The treaty contains a provision for a 15,000-strong force to be deployed in times of crisis. Moscow's willingness and capacity, however, to police Central Asia is likely to be limited. The Syrian conflict, combined with commitments in Ukraine and decisions to increase military commitments in response to NATO moves have drained Russia's limited resources. Russian officials have also not forgotten Afghanistan, where a difficult and ultimately unsuccessful Russian military campaign made an big contribution to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

When violence broke out between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the Kyrgyz government appealed to Moscow for help but the call went unheeded, suggesting that the members of the CSTO have different expectations of its role.

In 2015, Russia said that it was going to increase its troop presence in Tajikistan, which, like Uzbekistan, has a border with Afghanistan. In February 2016 the Russian government announced that it was now planning to reduce slightly the number of its troops there, from 7,000 to 9,000 troops by 2020.¹⁰⁸ It was not clear if the reduction was due to cost-saving by the Russian government or tensions between the Moscow and the Tajik government.

There is also the possibility of disputes between the Central Asian states. Armed units have been deployed along the Uzbek/Kyrgyz border, where disputes over the un-demarcated frontier have led to deaths.¹⁰⁹

Eastern Europe

As well as Belarus and Armenia being members of the organisation, Serbia cooperates with the CSTO. Serbian President Nikolic said that his country would remain neutral and maintain good relations with NATO as well, however.¹¹⁰

Further casting doubt on the organisation's unity and effectiveness, Armenia recently criticised some other CSTO members for backing its rival Azerbaijan in the Nagorno Karabakh dispute. Belarus also failed to back Russia in the recent dispute with Turkey, reportedly because Belarus, like many other members of the CSTO, is worried by Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy.¹¹¹

China

During the years following the US Nixon Administration's rapprochement, there was a *de facto* alliance between China and the US. When the Soviet Union ceased to exist, the hostility between Russia

¹⁰⁸ ['Why Is Russia Cutting Troops in Tajikistan?'](#), *The Diplomat*, 5 February 2016

¹⁰⁹ ['Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan Deploy Troops In Dispute Over Border Mountain'](#), *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 April 2006

¹¹⁰ ['President Nikolic with the Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation'](#), President of Serbia press release, 5 April 2016

¹¹¹ ['Regional Tensions Fracturing Russia's Alliances'](#), *Eurasianet*, 28 January 2016

and China declined, particularly as a result of deteriorating Russian relations with the West.

In 2001 the two signed a treaty of good-neighbourliness and friendly co-operation.¹¹² A state visit to Moscow by Chinese President Xi Jinping underlined the improvement.

Russia concluded an important gas export deal with China in May 2014, helping to insulate it against the EU's efforts to diversify supplies and from the effect of EU sanctions. One pipeline is already under construction and another, further east, is in the planning stage. Russia also plans cooperation with China on nuclear energy.

A Russian 'pivot to Asia' is therefore well under way. China plans a 'new silk road', increasing the transport, energy and communications infrastructure between China, the Middle East and Europe, passing through Central Asia and Russia, enhancing trade in the presently isolated and fractured Central Asian region.

Russia is participating in the Chinese initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), an alternative to the Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Bank that will seek to finance much-needed Asian infrastructure projects. Even though the bank was opposed by the United States, which fears that US influence through institutions such as the World Bank will be diluted, US allies including the UK, Germany and Australia decided to participate in the AIIB. Russia is particularly keen to participate in the enterprise, and hopes for significant voting rights in the bank.¹¹³

While some in the West see Russia's 'pivot' as fuelled by political frustration with the West, President Putin has compared it to the US change in policy, saying it is more about economics:

I often hear comments about Russia's turn towards the East. Now, if you read American analysts, they also write about the United States' turn towards the East. Is this true? Partly, yes. Why? Is this political? No. This stems from the global economic processes, because the East – that is, the Asia-Pacific Region – shows faster growth than the rest of the world. New opportunities open up. As for energy, the demand for resources is racing in leaps and bounds in China, India, as well as in Japan and South Korea. Everything is developing faster there than in other places. So should we turn down our chance? The projects we are working on were planned long ago, even before the most recent problems occurred in the global or Russian economy. We are simply implementing our long-time plans.¹¹⁴

There is undoubtedly a strong economic element in the Russia/China relationship. Whether that will turn out to be more in Russia's interest than China's, or both, is another matter.

Some in Russia are worried about the increasing Chinese population in eastern Russia. Its sparse population and commodity riches make it

¹¹² [Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation](#), 24 July 2001

¹¹³ ['Russia Will Hold Key Positions In China-Led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank'](#), *International Business Times*, 27 June 2015

¹¹⁴ President of Russia, ['News Conference of Vladimir Putin'](#), 18 December 2014,.

vulnerable to Chinese encroachment, according to these ideas, from a resource-hungry China whose population is almost 10 times bigger than Russia's.¹¹⁵ Many Chinese people and businesses have already moved into neighbouring Russian areas in Siberia and the Far East.

One belt, one road

The New Silk Road, now re-named 'One Belt, One Road', will provide a framework for increased economic cooperation with China.



Source: CCTV

One Belt One Road is backed by the \$40 billion New Silk Road Fund and by the \$100 billion Asian Development Bank. China also hopes to channel further funding from World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; big investments in transport connections and other connectivity projects are planned.

Military cooperation with China

Some Western commentators comfort themselves with the idea that China has no great need for Russia – pointing for example to the gas deal where Russia agreed to sell gas to China reportedly more or less at cost price.

Nevertheless, the Chinese leadership does appear to have concluded that cooperation with Russia can offer China advantages. Not only does China often vote with Russia on the UN Security Council, it is deepening its military engagement with Russia – probably the most important area of cooperation between the two.

Recent joint military exercises between China and Russia in Moscow showed that the two countries are enhancing their military cooperation. Not only are they practising joint responses, they are sharing sensitive

Deepening trust

¹¹⁵ See for example '[Why China Will Reclaim Siberia](#)', *New York Times blog*, 14 January 2015

information about their defence systems, and this suggests a deepening level of trust. A Moscow-based expert in China said:

The ability to share information in such a sensitive area as missile launch warning systems and ballistic missile defence indicates something beyond simple co-operation.¹¹⁶

China is said to be particularly interested in Russia's experience of facing a militarily superior adversary and in Russia's military modernisation programme. Russia embarked on military modernisation after the Georgia war in 2008. China is pursuing a similar reform programme, ending conscription and developing a professional and better-equipped army. There has also been a series of Sino-Russian arms deals, partly fuelled by the fact that Western sanctions exclude both countries from Western markets, meaning that they have to rely more on each other. In June 2016 an agreement was signed to share the development of a heavy-lift helicopter.¹¹⁷

5.1 Problems

Russia's plans to develop economic and political relations with other partners, many of which have better growth prospects than Western economies, make sense from a Russian point of view. There are plenty of difficulties ahead, too, however.

Trust

Trust levels among Russia's new putative allies are one problem. Although the relationship with China is the most important, the two are unlikely to become close allies, according to analysts.

Former Soviet states, such as those in Central Asia, are keen to maintain their independence and are alarmed by Russia's treatment of Ukraine; Central Asia also has Russian-speaking minorities that Russia might decide need protection in the event of instability.

While the Central Asians are interested in the proposed investment, they are also wary of exchanging one 'big brother', Russia, for another, China.¹¹⁸ Like many smaller countries, they seek to keep their options open.

The Central Asian states also have significant hostilities between them, with shots even being fired in a border dispute between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2014.

Russian economic weakness

The relationship between Russia and China is also more difficult than either side likes to present it, partly because of the great disparities in population size and in economic growth.

¹¹⁶ ['Russia and China learn from each other as military ties deepen'](#), *Financial Times*, 24 June 2016

¹¹⁷ ['China and Russia finalise heavy-lift helicopter collaboration project'](#), *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 27 June 2016

¹¹⁸ Kemal Kirişci and Philippe Le Corre, ['The great game that never ends: China and Russia fight over Kazakhstan'](#), Brookings Institution, 18 December 2015

China and Russia have very different objectives in moves towards economic integration. The Russian government does not want to open the enfeebled Russian economy to the fierce trade competition that freer trade with China would provide.

Russia is also worried that Chinese economic projects such as the One Belt One Road project will weaken Russia's traditional influence over the Central Asian economies. Transport routes from Central Asia traditionally run through Russia.

As they stand, One Belt proposals would largely bypass Russia to the south and Russian economic weakness, sharply exposed by the fall in commodity prices and the EU's sanctions, has already reduced Russia's power of attraction in Central Asia.

Commodity prices

China is not likely to want to hurt its lucrative economic relationship with the West in order to cement closer ties with Russia, while Russia does not want to be one of China's junior partners.

BRICS slow-down

Also significant is the recent weakness in emerging economies in general. China, the powerhouse of the emerging economies and the force behind the commodities boom that has fuelled them, is facing a significant economic slowdown,¹¹⁹ and if the US raises interest rates it may worsen the financial situation of emerging nations.¹²⁰

China's slowdown has reduced its demand for energy, and this has taken the pressure off Chinese negotiators in bargaining for Russian hydrocarbon supplies.

West remains the most significant 'other'

There are also some who argue that even though Russia has opted for closer relations with the emerging economies, this is not reflected in the mind-set of the Russian elite, who do not take a very serious interest in Russia's southern and eastern neighbours or in countries such as India.

There is Magda Leichtova argues that the West remains Russia's most significant 'other' in foreign policy. Analysing President Putin's discussions with other leaders and speeches, she finds that the West and particularly the USA is the dominant theme and that attitudes towards the West are very strong in determining Russian foreign policy.¹²¹

There is a long tradition in Russian culture of defining Russian identity in opposition to Western identity. This tendency may have strengthened in recent years, but the focus remains on Russia's relationship with the West, rather than with its new allies.

¹¹⁹ 'China: Weakened foundations', *Financial Times*, 19 August 2015

¹²⁰ Nouriel Roubini, 'How a Fed rates rise creates problems for emerging markets', *Guardian*, 30 June 2015

¹²¹ Magda Leichtova, *Misunderstanding Russia*, 2014, pp67-94

6. Policy theatres

The Ukraine conflict eased somewhat in the last few months of 2015. Many analysts think this is the result of a decision made in Moscow. The struggle for influence over Ukraine continues but it is now more economic and political rather than military – the Ukrainian government's financial troubles are acute and its politics in disarray.

Russia's relations with the EU remain tense, particularly over the question of sanctions because of the Ukraine conflict. There are those in Russia who welcome the UK's vote to leave the EU, saying that it will split the EU and the US, allowing Russia to move closer to the EU.

Russian special forces are reported to have moved from Ukraine to Syria, where the Russian military intervention has been highly controversial. It is a high-risk strategy that appears to be aimed at preventing the collapse of the Syrian government and securing Russian influence in any future settlement. Russia says that the action aims to fight terrorism and restore peace; Moscow does have a genuine interest in fighting ISIS and other *jihadi* terrorist groups – they have many fighters from the former Soviet space and these may return to cause trouble in Russia. But evidence that the Russian action is targeted more at groups supported by the West and its allies than at ISIS/Daesh undermines this.

6.1 Russia and the EU

In 2011, the EU signed the Strategic Partnership with Russia. Relations were to be built on four 'common spaces' for greater integration:

- Economic issues, including the environment.
- Freedom, Security & Justice.
- External Security.
- Research & Education, including cultural aspects.

As relations worsened, however, that looked increasingly unrealistic. In 2015 the European Parliament passed a sharply-worded resolution underlining the gulf that had opened up between the two sides, particularly over Ukraine. The European Parliament rapporteur who had piloted the motion through the parliament said:

With its aggression against Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, the Russian leadership has put our relations at a crossroads. It is up to the Kremlin to decide now which way it will go – cooperation or deepening alienation. I am convinced that the Russian people, as all of us, want peace, not war. A change in Russia can, and will, come from within. Meanwhile we must send a strong message to the Russian leadership that we stand united with the victims of its aggression and those who stand for the values the EU is founded on.¹²²

The EU's imposition of sanctions over the Ukraine crisis was a significant blow to Vladimir Putin, and one that has gained in significance as the Russian economy has suffered from the fall in the oil price.

¹²² ['Russia is no longer a strategic partner of the EU, say MEPs'](#), European Parliament press release, 11 June 2015

Russia opposed to EU integration?

Some suggest that Russia would like to undermine EU integration, which would allow Moscow to strike more favourable deals on a range of subjects with individual countries.

The idea first gained currency around 2009, as supply disruptions caused by a dispute with Ukraine led to interruptions in EU countries. The European Commission argued for the completion of the EU's internal energy market partly to reduce vulnerability of certain consumers to such supply disruptions. Critics see bilateral arrangements such as the Nord Stream pipeline from Russia to Germany as undermining EU solidarity and increasing Germany's dependence on Russia, and its vulnerability to Russia's potential use of gas supplies as a political lever.¹²³

The energy crisis has died down, but many still consider Russia to be acting against EU solidarity in other ways. The Kremlin is reported to have funded indirectly the National Front in France, with a £7 million loan from a small Russian bank. Marine le Pen, leader of the party, has made statements supportive of Vladimir Putin in the past. There have also been questions about the Eurosceptic Alternativ für Deutschland party in Germany, whose youth wing formed a formal link with the Hungarian Jobbik and the Greek extreme right Golden Dawn and the Bulgarian Attack party have significant Russian connections. Analysts say that the aim of these contacts is to foster anti-EU parties in Europe.

Jobbik

One leading member of Jobbik wants Hungary to leave the EU and join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. Viktor Orban, Hungarian president, has called into question the continuation of sanctions and is described by one analyst as "taking a leaf out of Putin's United Russia playbook" in manipulating political coverage in the media.¹²⁴

In May 2016 a delegation of Italian MPs from the anti-EU Five Star movement announced a trip to Crimea. The leader of the delegation told the Russian press that the EU sanctions against Russia were illogical and that the Crimea referendum was legitimate.¹²⁵

The Czech President, Milos Zeman, is also reported to be close to the Russian government, and has minimised Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine, saying "I take seriously the statement of foreign minister Sergei Lavrov that there are no Russian troops,"¹²⁶ and criticised EU sanctions.

Michael Orenstein argued in *Foreign Policy* in 2014 that Europe should launch official investigations into foreign funding for far-right parties and publicise the results.¹²⁷ In 2015 it was reported that the CIA had ordered an investigation into such funding.¹²⁸

¹²³ ['Duda says Nord Stream 2 pipeline undermines EU solidarity'](#), *Reuters*, 18 January 2016

¹²⁴ 'Is Hungary's Viktor Orban a miniature Vladimir Putin?', *Policy Review*, July 2014

¹²⁵ ['Delegation of Italian MPs: Crimea's referendum was legitimate'](#), *TASS*, 13 May 2016

¹²⁶ ['Czech president is Russia's Trojan Horse'](#), *Euobserver*, 10 June 2016

¹²⁷ Michael Orenstein, 'Putin's Western Allies', *Foreign Affairs*, 25 March 2015

¹²⁸ ['Russia accused of clandestine funding of European parties as US conducts major review of Vladimir Putin's strategy'](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 16 January 2016

A British government official said that the Russian initiative was broad:

Right across the EU we are seeing alarming evidence of Russian efforts to unpick the fabric of European unity on a whole range of vital strategic issues.¹²⁹

Brexit

Russian relations with the UK have been perhaps the most difficult of relations with European countries in recent years, damaged by the Litvinenko and Magnitsky cases.¹³⁰

The UK vote to leave the EU received a strong reaction in Russia. Nationalist politicians and journalists welcomed the result, with some saying that the UK's exit would be likely to hasten the lifting of EU sanctions. Moscow's mayor said: "Without the U.K. in the EU there will no longer be anyone so zealously standing up for sanctions against us."¹³¹

Russian ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy predicted that Brexit would be about the collapse of NATO, the euro and the Schengen agreement. Some Russian commentators also argued that the departure of the UK meant more: the uncoupling of the US and the EU. The Anglo-Saxons would go their own way, and the continental Europeans – Russia and Germany, particularly – would unite. The Russian government's small business ombudsman wrote:

In my opinion, the most important long-term consequence of all this is that the exit will take Europe away from the Anglo-Saxons, meaning from the USA. It's not the independence of Britain from Europe, but the independence of Europe from the USA. [...] And it's not long until a united Eurasia — about 10 years.¹³²

The Kremlin's official reaction was more sober, however, with President Putin's spokesman calling for EU stability: "Moscow is certainly interested in the E.U. remaining a major economic force — prosperous, stable and predictable."¹³³

Former Russian finance minister Alexei Kudrin, a liberal voice in Russia, warned that both the EU and the UK could be weaker economically.¹³⁴

Anglo-Saxons

6.2 Ukraine crisis

The present Russian government blames the US and its 'satellites' for the crisis in Ukraine because, it says, the West blatantly ignored Russia's legitimate interests and tried to export its own ideology to countries in Russia's periphery and to Russia itself, supporting opposition movements and anti-government NGOs and fomenting 'colour revolutions'. President Putin recently called the fall of the Yanukovich

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ For more on Russia/UK relations, see the Commons Briefing Paper [UK relations with Russia 2016](#), 21 March 2016

¹³¹ 'Russia Revels In Brexit Vote', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 24 June 2016

¹³² "'10 years until a united Eurasia': How Moscow reacted to Brexit", *Washington Post*, 24 June 2016

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ 'Russia Reacts to Brexit Referendum', *Moscow Times*, 24 June 2016

government in Ukraine a 'coup d'état' supported by Western countries.¹³⁵

Although for Westerners their approach to Eastern Europe was that these peoples should get the future they wanted, to many Russian observers it looked like a different strategy. As two Russian analysts argued recently, it could be interpreted as a strategic move against Russia:

[The West] saw the separation of Russia from its CIS partners as a guarantee that the USSR would never be brought back to life.¹³⁶

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014 came a decisive moment in the estrangement between Russia and the West: the planned meeting of the G8 richest countries in Sochi, Russia, was cancelled. On 24 March 2014 the seven members, meeting in The Hague, voted for Russia's membership to be suspended.

Vladimir Putin made a speech to Duma deputies and Federation Council members in 2014 outlining the reasons behind Russia's annexation of Crimea.¹³⁷ He said that Crimea had been transferred to Ukraine unconstitutionally by the then Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev for political reasons and that no-one then foresaw the independence of Ukraine.

He said that "Russian citizens and Russian speakers" were subjected to forced assimilation by politicians who "milked the country, fought among themselves for power assets and cash flows and did not care much about the ordinary people." He said that the Ukrainian change of government was a coup d'état backed by fascists and anti-Semites and that the Crimean people were entitled to the same rights of self-determination as those which had allowed Ukraine to declare independence from the USSR.

On the legality of the Crimean independence referendum, he compared the situation with that in Kosovo, where the US and the West backed Kosovar secession from Serbia.

Some of his statements would be particularly unacceptable in Western capitals. He said, for example: "We have always respected the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state, unlike those who sacrificed Ukrainian unity for their political ambitions," referring, presumably, to the alleged manipulation of 'colour revolutions' by the US or the attempt by the EU to sign an Association Agreement with Ukraine.¹³⁸ Also controversial was: "we want peace and harmony to reign in Ukraine..."

Ukraine 'coup d'état'

¹³⁵ [Speech by Vladimir Putin at the Valdai International Discussion Club](#), 22 October 2015

¹³⁶ Nadezhda K. Arbatova and Alexander A. Dynkin, '[World Order after Ukraine](#)', *Survival*, February-March 2016

¹³⁷ [Address by President of the Russian Federation](#) [Address by the President of the Russian Federation](#), 18 March 2014

¹³⁸ For more detail on this period see the Commons Briefing Papers: [Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius: carrots v sticks](#), November 2013; [Ukraine crisis](#), February 2014; and [Ukraine, Crimea and Russia](#), March 2014

These themes are common to many Russian positions on the protection of Russian-speaking minorities, one of the reasons why the Baltic governments are so concerned about Russia's assertive foreign policies.

In imposing meaningful economic sanctions, the West may have been more united than the Russian government expected. The Russian economy has certainly been suffering, particularly since the price of oil and other commodities has fallen so dramatically and the rouble's consequent slide. Ukraine's armed forces have also performed relatively well, meaning that Russian action in Ukraine are far from cost-free.

Recent developments

Donbass

Although the conflict in eastern Ukraine cooled down in late 2015 that tendency has been reversed more recently; analysts are concerned that it has not gone away and is likely to rumble on.

In any case, attention has been distracted from Ukraine by the Russian military action in Syria.

According to the OSCE, which is monitoring the ceasefire in eastern Ukraine, the situation in late October 2015 was relatively calm,¹³⁹ which Western leaders welcomed. However, reports indicate an increase in violence in 2016.¹⁴⁰

In his annual speech at Sochi, president Putin voiced support for the Minsk Agreements:

I believe (and I have already said this) that there is no other way if we want to achieve lasting peace in the southeast of Ukraine and restore the country's territorial integrity, there is no other way but to comply with the Minsk Agreements.¹⁴¹

There are reports that Russian special forces have been redeployed from Ukraine to Syria. Some commentators write that Russia has now abandoned the alleged 'Novorossiia' project,¹⁴² that would have seen Russia or pro-Russian forces taking Ukrainian territory to link rebel-held territory in the east around Donetsk to Crimea, via Mariupol, and perhaps even as far as the secessionist territory of Transnistria in the east of Moldova.

On December 23, thousands of Ukrainians in the west of the country were left without electricity. It emerged that the power cut had been caused by the insertion of malware in the computer networks governing power systems. The Ukrainian government blamed the incident on Russia. This was reportedly the first time that electricity supplies had been targeted in cyber-attacks.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, [Status report 21 October 2015](#)

¹⁴⁰ '[Chief of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine concerned by increased violence, calls for a sustained ceasefire](#)' OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine press notice, 7 April 2016

¹⁴¹ [Speech by Vladimir Putin at the Valdai International Discussion Club](#), 22 October 2015

¹⁴² '[The myth of Putin's strategic genius](#)', *New York Times*, 24 October 2015

¹⁴³ '[Ukrainian blackout blamed on cyber-attack](#)', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 January 2015

Although the situation is relatively calm, it could flare up again at any time. Many of the provisions of the Minsk II peace agreement have not been implemented. The International Crisis Group argues that Russia is in no hurry to see the eastern regions return:

Moscow's policy in Ukraine's east looks more likely to strengthen those entities than prepare for the dismantlement the Minsk agreement envisages.¹⁴⁴

Russia has started to pay pensions and benefits in the Donbass, an expensive investment for Moscow that may suggest a commitment to supporting the eastern entities for some time.

The timetable for implementing the provisions of the agreement has been stretched into 2016. "This gives Moscow further opportunities to concentrate the parties more on process than a settlement," according to Crisis Group; the authors argue that Ukraine has not fulfilled all of its commitments either.

In 2014 a Ukrainian air force pilot, Nadyia Savchenko was abducted, according to Ukraine and the EU, or strayed into Russian territory, according to the Russian government.

In March 2016 she was sentenced to 22 years in prison for the deaths of two Russian reporters, drawing condemnation though not surprise from the EU and the US. In April 2016 she started refusing food and water.¹⁴⁵

In May 2016 Savchenko was released, as part of a prisoner swap with Russia.

Crimea

Russia has been acting to consolidate its hold over the Crimean peninsula, investing money in the territory and encouraging Russians to holiday there. There are considerable economic difficulties for Crimean residents however, as the area is being hit by the EU's sanctions against Russia,¹⁴⁶ as well as restrictions from the Ukrainian side.

In November 2015 power lines running from Ukrainian power stations (on which Crimea depends for most of its electricity) were destroyed, possibly by Ukrainian nationalists or by militant Tatars. This plunged much of Crimea into darkness. Crimean Tatar activists said that Russia would have to release 'political prisoners' before they would allow repair work to the pylons to take place.

Then in early 2016, a dispute over a power supply contract broke out. Ukraine refused to renew the electricity supply contract for Crimea that had expired on 1 January. Crimean leaders had also declined to renew the contract, according to the Ukrainian government. Ukrainian

¹⁴⁴ [Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine](#) Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°79, Kyiv/Brussels, 5 February 2016

¹⁴⁵ ['Jailed Ukrainian pilot Nadiya Savchenko begins new hunger strike'](#), *Guardian*, 6 April 2016

¹⁴⁶ ['Ukraine crisis: Putin shows who is boss in Crimea'](#), *BBC News Online*, 19 August 2015

President Poroshenko said that power would be supplied if Crimea re-joined Ukraine.¹⁴⁷

The Ukrainian government and activists on the ground near the border have been hampering trade with Crimea. This was formalised as a full trade embargo in January 2016. The *Financial Times* criticised the embargo in an editorial, saying that Ukraine should keep the 'high ground'.¹⁴⁸

MH17

In October 2015 the Dutch air crash investigators concluded that Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 was brought down by a surface-to-air missile launched by the Russian-made Buk system. No attempt was made in the report to apportion blame. The Netherlands, Belgium, Ukraine, Australia, and Malaysia have formed a Joint Investigation Team to pursue criminal enquiries, whose results are due in autumn 2016.¹⁴⁹ A draft UN Security Council resolution was presented by Malaysia in July 2015 to establish a UN special tribunal to try those accused of bringing down the airliner. Russia vetoed the draft resolution.¹⁵⁰ Without Russia cooperation, the criminal investigation will find it difficult to name those responsible for the disaster.

Buk missile

Economic levers

Reining back the military side of operations does not mean that Russia has given up on its plans for Ukraine. If the Ukraine conflict is cooling off,¹⁵¹ it may be because the Kremlin has decided that the Ukrainians will do the work themselves. According to one EU foreign minister quoted in the press, Vladimir Putin backed away from conflict in Ukraine "because he is now betting on an internal Ukrainian implosion, which is not impossible".¹⁵² If control of corruption is a good indicator of effective governance, Ukraine has very little of it: Ukraine does even worse than Russia in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.

There are other levers apart from military destabilisation that Russia can pull to maintain its influence. The first of these levers is financial. In late 2015 Russia demanded the full repayment of a \$3 billion loan advanced to the government of Viktor Yanukovich at the time of his refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. Russia argued that the loan should be repaid in full; non-repayment of it would mean that Ukraine could not receive a further loan of \$17.5 billion from the International Monetary Fund, whose rules prohibit loans to countries in

¹⁴⁷ ['Poroshenko Says No More Power For Crimea Until Re-joins Ukraine'](#), RFE/RL, 15 January 2016

¹⁴⁸ ['Kiev should act to end the blockade of Crimea'](#), *Financial Times*, 25 November 2015

¹⁴⁹ ['"OPINION: Will MH17 investigation report mean justice for all?'](#), *Flight International*, 16 October 2015

¹⁵⁰ ['Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution on Tribunal for Malaysia Airlines Crash in Ukraine, Amid Calls for Accountability, Justice for Victims'](#), UN Security Council press release, 29 July 2015

¹⁵¹ For background on Ukraine and Crimea, see the Library Briefing Paper [Ukraine: towards a frozen conflict?](#), September 2014, and [Ukraine: summary of developments in 2015 and 2016](#), January 2016

¹⁵² ['Kiev fears default as MPs prepare to vote on debt restructuring'](#), *Financial Times*, 16 September 2015

default on official loans.¹⁵³ The loan was due to be repaid by December 2015. Ukraine declined to repay the loan, arguing that Russia had refused to accept terms it had offered to other creditors, and Russia responded in February 2016 by taking legal action against the Ukrainian government in the High Court in London.

Trade with Russia is still important for Ukraine. When Ukraine imposed a ban on Russian airlines landing in Ukraine's airports in September 2015, as a response to Russian flights landing in annexed Crimea, Russia responded by banning Ukrainian flights to Russia. The damage to Ukrainian trade will be proportionally larger than to Russia's. With Ukraine already in economic difficulties, such damage will make life more difficult for the Poroshenko government, and the flight bans seem likely to remain in place for some time.

6.3 Stand-off over Syria

If the Ukraine crisis was the most important event on the timeline of the declining relations between Russia and the West, that decline had already been signalled in the stand-off over Syria. In October 2011 Russia and China vetoed a Security Council resolution that would have imposed sanctions on the Syrian government for using violence against its own people. The vetoes were very sharply condemned by the then US ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice:

The courageous people of Syria can now clearly see who on this council supports their yearning for liberty and human rights, and who does not.¹⁵⁴

In February 2012, Western countries reacted 'furiously' when Russia and China vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution based on an Arab plan which aimed to end the violence in Syria.¹⁵⁵ The plan called for President Assad to stand down and this stirred up Russian (and Chinese) opposition to what they saw as another attempt at Western-sponsored regime-change, likely to bring more chaos to Syria.

Western leaders seemed genuinely shocked at the vetoes. William Hague said in 2012:

More than 2,000 people have died since Russia and China vetoed the last draft resolution in October 2011. How many more need to die before Russia and China allow the UN security council to act?¹⁵⁶

Strategy

At his recent speech in Sochi, President Putin said that Russia's only aim in Syria was restore peace:

After Syria's official authorities reached out to us for support, we made the decision to launch a Russian military operation in that

¹⁵³ Martin Wolf, '[Resist Russia's blackmail over Ukraine's debt](#)', *Financial Times*, 20 October 2015

¹⁵⁴ '[UN resolutions are mainly about regime change, says Russia's UN ambassador](#)', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 December 2011

¹⁵⁵ '[Syria resolution vetoed by Russia and China at United Nations](#)', *Guardian*, 4 February 2012

¹⁵⁶ '[Syria resolution vetoed by Russia and China at United Nations](#)', *Guardian*, 4 February 2012

nation. I will stress again: it is fully legitimate and its only goal is to help restore peace.¹⁵⁷

Russia presents the action as a counter-terrorist action to protect religious minorities and to protect the secular government. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov says that it is targeting ISIS "and other terrorist groups" in Syria at the invitation of the legitimate Syrian government.¹⁵⁸

Asked whether Russia had targeted groups supported by the US and its allies, Sergei Lavrov repeated that Russia had targeted ISIS. The increasing ambivalence in the West and elsewhere, given the rise of ISIS, about pushing for Assad's fall has made Russian intervention in favour of the Syrian government far more palatable to international opinion.

Russia's longer-term strategy is to lend effective support to the Assad regime, which has been coming under increasing pressure in recent months.¹⁵⁹ Russia denies, however, that Bashar al-Assad himself must remain in power (and it is reported that Russia offered in 2012 at the UN to provide for Bashar to step down in 2012 – an offer which Western powers 'ignored').¹⁶⁰

But Moscow wants to maintain its relationship with whatever Syrian government eventually emerges from the conflict there – Syria is one of the few states in the region that is clearly aligned with Russia. Syria's pro-Russian alignment is one of the reasons, along with protecting a secular government in Syria, why it is so important for Russia to avoid the arrival in power of a Sunni regime in Damascus. Russia also wants to keep its military bases on Syria's Mediterranean coast, and may be eyeing increased trade and economic opportunities with Syria after the conflict, particularly in energy.¹⁶¹

It could be useful, especially with the Assad government increasingly under threat, for Russia to build up a significant military presence as soon as possible so that a more decisive intervention is possible in the event of imminent government collapse. The Kremlin does not want to have combat troops on the ground, however. President Putin said there would be "no ground operation involving Russian units or Russian troops. This is out of the question."¹⁶²

Indeed, one commentator points out that this is Russia's first 'US-style war', based almost exclusively on airstrikes and warship-launched missiles.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁷ [Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, 22 October 2015, Sochi](#), President of Russia website

¹⁵⁸ ['Russian Foreign Minister Defends Airstrikes in Syria'](#), *New York Times*, 1 October 2015

¹⁵⁹ For more information see the Commons Briefing Paper [ISIS/DAESH one year on](#), 16 July 2015

¹⁶⁰ ['West 'ignored Russian offer in 2012 to have Syria's Assad step aside''](#), *Guardian*, 15 September 2015

¹⁶¹ Salam al-Saadi, ['Russia's Long-Term Aims in Syria'](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6 October 2015

¹⁶² ['Obama, Putin talk of easing tensions in Syria, but at odds on how'](#), *McClatchy DC*, 28 September 2015

¹⁶³ Dmitri Trenin, ['Putin's Syria Gambit Aims at Something Bigger Than Syria'](#), Carnegie Moscow Center 13 October 2015

Many commentators see more negative reasons for the dramatic intervention, however. Russia is widely reported to have attacked the 'moderate' rebel groups that are the basis for Western hopes for a political solution. One source says that only 20% of Russian attacks have been against ISIS.¹⁶⁴ Russia may also be interested in:

- Supporting the Syrian government's strategy of making the rebellion more terrorist in nature, bolstering its claim to be fighting terrorism rather than resisting democracy.
- Spoiling any potential Western-backed solution, underlining the weakness of the US and the West in the region.
- Demonstrating the effectiveness of its military hardware.
- The Kremlin may even be happy to see the conflict worsen so that the West remains distracted from other rivalries with Moscow.

Perhaps in answer to criticisms that Russia was targeting 'moderate' rebel groups supported by the US and its allies more than ISIS, Sergei Lavrov offered in October 2015 to support the Free Syrian Army in cooperation with the US.

The fact that the Russian air campaign is coordinated with the Syrian army may make it more effective than US-led air strikes in Syria. Initially, the US and its allies prioritised the fall of the Syrian government, avoiding actions which would help it, and building up 'moderate' Syrian forces. This strategy looks increasingly unconvincing: the US lacks allies on the ground, air strikes alone are widely regarded as being limited in their effectiveness and, in any case, the arrival of ISIS/Daesh on the scene may have changed the balance. Some in Washington are reported to see the advantage of Russia 'doing what the US can't do itself'.¹⁶⁵

Russian intentions will be revealed by the degree to which it targets ISIS rather than such secularist forces as remain on the ground and groups supported by US aligned states such as Qatar and Turkey. Given its problems with *jihadi* violence at home, Russia does have a genuine interest in preventing the establishment of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Many ISIS fighters come from the former Soviet Union. And with the aftermath of Western countries' interventions in Iraq and Libya appearing chaotic, the Kremlin's arguments against regime change have gained some force.¹⁶⁶

In January 2016, the *Financial Times* published a sharply critical editorial denouncing the Kremlin's tactics for 'spoiling' efforts at a negotiated solution:

There are huge obstacles to overcome: from the future of the Assad clan; to which groups should be excluded apart, obviously, from Isis and the al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. But Moscow

¹⁶⁴ Igor Sutyagin, '[Russia's War Plan in Syria](#)', Royal United Services Institute, 2 October 2015

¹⁶⁵ Patrick Cockburn '[Too Weak Too Strong – the state of the Syrian war](#)', *London Review of Books*, 5 November 2015

¹⁶⁶ '[President Obama: Libya aftermath 'worst mistake' of presidency](#)', *BBC News Online*, 11 April 2016

has lined up behind the Assad regime and is busily eliminating all alternatives to it except Isis. That was also clearly President Assad's calculation in 2011 when, months into what began as a civic uprising against the 40-year tyranny of his family's rule, he emptied his jails of jihadis. Mr Putin's insistence the Assad regime is a secular bulwark against Islamist extremism is hypocritical posturing.¹⁶⁷

'Withdrawal'

On 14 March 2016, to the surprise of most observers, Russia announced the withdrawal of the majority of Russian forces from Syria. Vladimir Putin said that their mission was 'largely' accomplished and that he had asked his diplomats to step up their efforts to achieve a political settlement. The talks coincided with the restart of the negotiations in Geneva.¹⁶⁸

The Russian military intervention had certainly made a difference in Syria: the early targeting of the western-aligned rebel groups had dealt a severe blow to them. Later, there were signs that more Russian firepower was being directed at acknowledged terrorist groups ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra,¹⁶⁹ particularly in areas covered by February 2016's ceasefire (which, notably, did not include Aleppo) which set out that only UN-designated terrorist groups should remain targets.

ISIS

The March 2016 announcement allowed the Kremlin to underline that it had no intention of repeating the mistakes made by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. It may also have been a tacit admission that Western assessments of the unsustainability of the Assad government are correct, which would make supporting it ultimately an unwinnable war.

The partial withdrawal sent a signal to the Assad government that Russian support was not unconditional or limitless, and allowed Russia to tack towards the search for a negotiated solution to the conflict. The future of Bashar al-Assad remains the most difficult problem but Russia's attachment to the Assads is not unshakeable, and the US signalled in autumn 2015 that Assad might be allowed some part in a political transition. Added to this convergence is the strong interest shared by Russia and Western governments in fighting ISIS.

Selling any Russian/US compromise on a Syrian political solution to parties in the region, and particularly anti-government Syrians, would remain a huge obstacle.

Enjoying the disruption?

There have been some suggestions that the Russian government could be interested in the disruptive effects of the Syrian refugee crisis on the EU. The flow of refugees from Syria has certainly strained EU cooperation on migration and has brought the future of the Schengen Agreement on control-free borders. Some argue that the demise of the Schengen Agreement would be a success for a Kremlin that does not like EU collaboration (see section above on Russia and the EU).

¹⁶⁷ ['Putin wants to bomb in Syria and talk in Geneva'](#), *Financial Times*, 31 January 2016

¹⁶⁸ See the Library briefing paper [Seeking a negotiated solution in Syria](#), February 2016

¹⁶⁹ 'Russia and the US can deliver peace in Syria', *Financial Times*, 3 May 2016

Such concerns were underlined by the Syrian government's near-encirclement of Aleppo in February 2016, backed by Russian airstrikes. Observers worried that familiar siege tactics would be used to subdue the parts of Aleppo still in rebel hands. Thousands were reported to be fleeing the city.

Norbert Roettgen, chair of the Bundestag's foreign affairs committee, described the EU's refugee crisis as a "welcome side-effect for Russia."¹⁷⁰ Attention was also drawn to the fact that pro-Kremlin media sources had spread an untrue story about the supposed rape of a German/Russian girl in Germany by migrants and the alleged cover-up of the story by the German police. The story increased the pressure on the German government over refugees.¹⁷¹

Problems for the Kremlin

Russian influence in Damascus is not as strong as the Kremlin would like; various Russian attempts to broker some sort of deal involving 'constructive' elements of the opposition have been obstructed by the Syrian government.

The Russian military action in 2015 and 2016 was in part designed to ensure that the Assad government survives and is dependent on Russian protection (perhaps relative to the growing Iranian help that Damascus has been getting, especially in view of potential rapprochement between Iran and the West).

On the other hand, close involvement in Syria risks diluting Russian influence closer to home. Syria is outside Russia's self-declared 'privileged sphere of interest'. Soviet and Russian leaders have tended to avoid taking such 'out of area' action in recent history, preferring to concentrate resources on countries bordering Russia or the Soviet Union.

A long-term military presence on the ground is inherently risky. Firstly, it may be difficult to secure the goals that Russia has set itself – to prevent the Assad government from falling. Once committed, Russian forces may be drawn deeper into the conflict and it would be difficult to hide the costs in human lives and money from the Russian people. As an article in *Jane's Defence Weekly* has noted:

In the apparent absence of a political endgame, Russia has made an open-ended commitment to a complicated conflict that could ultimately undermine rather than enhance its standing on the international stage.¹⁷²

There is also the question of cost: according to calculations by IHS Jane's, a security consultancy, Russia was spending as much as \$4 million per day on its military action in Syria at a time when resources are stretched.

Boots on the ground

¹⁷⁰ ['Is Putin trying to topple Merkel?'](#), *EUObserver*, 9 February 2016

¹⁷¹ ['Police say 13-year-old girl 'kidnapped and raped by asylum seekers in Berlin' was actually staying at friend's house'](#), *Independent*, 30 January 2016

¹⁷² "Analysis: Russia's unguided intervention", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 7 October 2015

Regional impact

Russian support for the Assad government may undermine Russian influence with Sunni governments, most notably Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This problem would only be enhanced by Sunni perceptions of the accord, reached in September 2015, between Iraq, Syria and Iran to share intelligence on ISIS. That accord suggest that Russia is joining a Shia bloc, hostile to the Sunnis who are in a majority in most Muslim countries in the region. Reports suggest that Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar are likely to increase their support for rebel groups in the face of the Russian intervention.

One Saudi analyst said:

Since the beginning of the uprising in Syria, the view in Riyadh has been that Bashar al-Assad must go. There is no indication whatsoever that Riyadh will change this position. What is clear to Riyadh and its regional allies is that the recent Russian and Iranian escalation will only create a more unstable region and spill more blood.¹⁷³

In a sign of the strength of reaction in Saudi Arabia, 55 Wahhabi Saudi clerics signed a document calling for *jihad* against Russia for its military intervention in Syria.¹⁷⁴ The document also attacked the West for failing to support the anti-Assad rebels.

Incursions by Russian warplanes into Turkish airspace were widely seen as intentional.¹⁷⁵

Alliances in the region are shifting, however, and the situation is complicated. Russia has made some efforts to minimise hostilities with the Sunni-led governments, with some success. Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi welcomed Vladimir Putin to Cairo in 2015 and has taken a different line from the Gulf States and Turkey to a Syrian solution. Russia has also maintained a dialogue with Israel. When Binyamin Netanyahu visited Moscow in September there may have been significant common ground on the Middle East: "The Kremlin finds its Israeli counterparts to be brutally realistic about the region—in contrast to the White House and State Department."¹⁷⁶

Putin in Cairo

In another sign of fluid relations in the region, Turkey decided to mend fences with Russia in June 2016, sending a letter regretting the downing of the Russian fighter jet in 2015.

Potential for direct conflict

The presence of Russian war planes in Syria has greatly increased the danger of confrontation between Russia and US or NATO forces. The downing of a Russian jet by the Turkish air force, in particular, caused some alarm in Western capitals and elsewhere. A scenario where Russia

¹⁷³ ['Gulf states plan military response as Putin raises the stakes in Syria'](#), *Observer*, 4 October 2015

¹⁷⁴ ['Saudi opposition clerics make sectarian call to jihad in Syria'](#), *Reuters*, 5 October 2015

¹⁷⁵ ['Syria conflict: Russia violation of Turkish airspace 'no accident''](#), *BBC News Online*, 6 October 2015

¹⁷⁶ Dmitri Trenin, ['Putin's Syria Gambit Aims at Something Bigger Than Syria'](#), *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 13 October 2015

responds with force to such an event, if it was repeated, and Turkey then calls on Chapter IV cooperation from its NATO allies is not impossible to imagine.

There have been suggestions from both Ankara and Riyadh recently that they may enter the Syrian conflict directly, setting up safe zones inside Syrian territory to protect the 'moderate' rebel forces that they are backing.

In June 2016 it was alleged that Russian forces had used cluster bombs in an attack on a US-backed Syrian opposition group near the border with Iraq. US jets had gone to the area when notified of the attack, tried and failed to contact the Russian warplanes, and then another formation of Russian planes carried out another attack.¹⁷⁷

Cluster bombs?

Cluster munitions are highly controversial because of the damage they can cause to civilians. Russia, along with the US, China and several other countries, did not sign the 2008 Cluster Munitions Convention. US military leaders were reported to be incensed by the attack on a group that they back, as well as the danger of accident or direct conflict with Russian warplanes.

6.4 Baltic States and other eastern/central Europe

Along with direct interventions such as those in Syria and Ukraine, Russia has increased the psychological pressure on other states near its borders, particularly the Baltic States, which used to be part of the Soviet Union.

All of the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have significant ethnic Russian populations, particularly Estonia and Latvia, with about a quarter Russian-speakers; Estonia and Latvia share long and difficult-to-defend borders with Russia.

The Baltic States have seen their air space probed and violated. US, Swedish and other Western planes and warships have been buzzed by Russian planes in the Baltic and the Black Sea, and the frequency of these incidents is reportedly increasing.¹⁷⁸ While intercepting and escorting foreign warplanes and navy ships through sensitive areas is common practice, incidents involving Russian fighter jets have been distinctly aggressive and risky.

In 2014, Estonia accused Russia of abducting an Estonian intelligence officer from Estonian territory near the Russian border and taking him to Russia. The Russian security agency the FSB said the agent had been arrested on Russian territory and accused of spying. Estonia claims to have evidence that the abduction did indeed take place on Estonian territory. In August 2015 the agent was convicted of spying and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment.

Estonian abduction?

¹⁷⁷ 'Russian cluster munitions: Now you see them, now you don't?

¹⁷⁸ '[Why Russia Harasses US Aircraft](#)', *Stratfor* April 2016

The EU's High Representative described the incident as a breach of international law:

Mr Kohver's abduction and subsequent illegal detention in Russia constitute a clear violation of international law. Moreover, from the very beginning, Mr Kohver has been deprived of the right to a fair trial: there was no public hearing of the case, the Estonian consul was not allowed to be present at the hearings and Mr Kohver was deprived of adequate legal aid.¹⁷⁹

The psychological impact of the incident was increased by the fact that it took place just days after a visit by President Obama to the country to reassure the Baltic States about US and NATO protection. The Estonians decided that it would not serve their interests to escalate it into an international incident

It is exactly that effect that analysts say Moscow is seeking: to remind countries such as Estonia of their vulnerability to Russia and to spread doubt about NATO's commitment to defend them, while increasing the costs and risks of accidents or unintended clashes associated with patrols. With that achieved, countries such as Estonia would take Russian concerns much more seriously, restoring Russian influence in countries around its borders, even in another EU member state: Poland.

NATO response

To counter increased assertiveness by Russia along NATO's eastern flank, the alliance adopted its Readiness Action Plan in 2015. Measures include bolstering air policing and air surveillance in the Baltics and along NATO's eastern flank and a more visible military presence in these states by means of additional exercises and training.

The measures seek to adapt NATO's force structure to improve its ability to respond to any crisis. These include significantly enlarging the existing Response Force, creating a new 'spearhead' force of around 5,000 troops, and pre-positioning equipment in member states along the eastern flank.

Some of these measures were adopted in April 2014 as part of NATO's immediate response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. They crystallised into the Readiness Action Plan adopted at the September 2014 NATO Summit. The Plan reflects what NATO says is the "most significant strengthening" of its collective defence in decades.

Main elements of the Readiness Action Plan

- enlarging the existing Response Force from 13,000 to 40,000 troops
- creating a new very high readiness force (VJTF) of around 5,000 troops
- appointing a country, drawn from a pool of seven nations, to lead this force

¹⁷⁹ ['Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Mogherini on the verdict against Estonian police officer Kohver'](#), EU External Action Service statement, 19 August 2015

- Pre-positioning equipment in Baltics and Eastern Europe
- Establishing six small headquarters in Baltic and eastern European states
- Speeding up the decision-making for the Response force

UK military contribution

- Three deployments of Typhoon aircraft to the Baltic Air Policing mission in 2014, 2015 and 2016
- Contribute a battle group of 1,000 personnel to the VJTF each year from 2016 into next decade
- Lead the VJTF in 2017 with up to 3,000 personnel and on rotation thereafter
- 4,000 troops committed to NATO exercises in 2015
- Sentry aircraft conducted air surveillance flights over Poland and Romania in 2014
- Warships patrolling Baltic Sea

In February 2016 it was announced that the UK would be sending five extra warships to the Baltic to contribute to the NATO operation. The contingent comprises three Mine Countermeasures Vessels, on four month deployments in rotation; one Frigate for six months, the first to be deployed to this task since 2010; and a Destroyer, from October 2016.¹⁸⁰

A sizeable contingent of British troops is possible for the planned new NATO force. Reinforcements for the Baltic and East European operations are likely to be discussed at the forthcoming Warsaw NATO Summit, in July 2016.¹⁸¹

European Reassurance Initiative

The US Department of Defense announced in 2014 the European Assurance Initiative, which was intended to reassure European allies of the US commitment to NATO and to eastern European states' territorial integrity. The initiative supported increased investment in five areas: presence, training and exercises, infrastructure, prepositioned equipment and building partner capacity.

The department has requested a sharply higher allocation for financial year 2017, as shown in the table:

¹⁸⁰ [Written question – 28576, 3 March 2016](#)

¹⁸¹ The House of Commons Defence Select Committee is holding an inquiry in 2016 on [Russia: the implications for UK defence and security](#)

European Reassurance Initiative (ERI)*(Dollars in Millions)*

Category	FY 2015 Enacted	FY 2016 Enacted	FY 2017 Request
Increased Presence	423.1	471.4	1,049.80
Additional Bilateral and Multilateral Exercises	40.6	108.4	163.1
Enhanced Prepositioning	136.1	57.8	1,903.90
Improved Infrastructure	196.5	89.1	217.4
Building Partnership Capacity	13.7	62.6	85.5
ERI Transfer Fund	175	--	--
Total:	985	789.3	3,419.70

Source: [Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year \(FY\) 2017](#)

The 2017 proposal envisages supporting 5,100 active and reserve personnel in U.S. European Command, including 4,955 Army personnel and 127 Air Force personnel. These will support NATO interoperability exercises and other training events. The increased US troop commitment remains based on rotation, rather than any commitment to permanent presence of US forces.

Still vulnerable?

A war games study in 2016 concluded that the Baltic States remained vulnerable to a conventional Russian attack – and that NATO would find it difficult to stop it. In fact, the longest simulated time it would take Russian forces to reach the outskirts of Tallinn or Riga was 60 hours.¹⁸² They argued that once Russia had taken over these small allies, NATO would be left with unpalatable choices: accept the defeat and risk the survival of NATO or start a bloody conventional fightback and risk escalation and the possible use of nuclear weapons.

The authors advised a stronger deterrent posture from NATO:

Aggressive acts, angry – even paranoid – [Russian] rhetoric, and a moderate but real military buildup combine to signal a situation where it may be less than prudent to allow hope to substitute for strategy.

In 2016 the retired British General Sir Richard Shirreff, NATO's former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, wrote a popular semi-fictionalised book, reportedly based on his experience of war planning at NATO, in which he envisaged a scenario where Russia invades the Baltics in 2017 and threatens a nuclear reaction to conventional defensive moves by NATO.¹⁸³

2016 NATO Summit

Poland hosts the next summit meeting of NATO heads of state and government in Warsaw on 8-9th July 2016.

¹⁸² David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank*, RAND Corporation, 2016

¹⁸³ Richard Shirreff, *2017 war with Russia – an urgent warning from senior military command*, 2016

Specific decisions are expected to include: boosting the defence of the Baltic States and Poland with four battalions provided on a multinational, rotational basis (the UK is believed to be providing one of these); expand its presence in the Black Sea; provide greater support to the EU's maritime mission in the Mediterranean, Operation Sophia; greater focus on cyber-defence.

Discussion is also expected on an enhanced forward presence of four battalions which will be based in the three Baltic States and Poland on a multinational, rotational basis. Defence Ministers agreed this at their February 2016 meeting and the detail will be revealed in Warsaw. The UK is believed to be contributing one battalion, to be based in Estonia, but this has yet to be confirmed by the Government.

Discussions are likely about an increased NATO presence in the Black Sea region, probably a land element built around a multinational framework brigade in Romania.¹⁸⁴

NATO also wants further improvements to logistics and communications, enabling quick reinforcements across Allied territory. This includes reducing the bureaucratic restrictions on the movement of munitions and personnel.

Continuing dialogue with Russia will also be an objective of the summit. The NATO Russia Council met for the first time in two years in April 2016, but Jens Stoltenberg,¹⁸⁵ NATO Secretary General, said afterwards

We had a frank and serious discussion. NATO Allies and Russia hold very different views. But we have listened to what each of us have to say.

He said that while keeping channels of communication is important there would be no return to business as usual until Russia "until Russia returns to the respect of international law."¹⁸⁶

Push-back against Russia?

Particularly in Europe, there are signs of other reactions to the perceived Russian intimidation. Several Western European countries are at present not NATO members: Austria, Sweden, Finland, Ireland and Switzerland. These countries have partnership arrangements with NATO but remained technically 'neutral'. While Russian policy has aimed to discourage NATO enlargement in Russia's near abroad, a more assertive foreign policy threatens to encourage these Western European neutrals to seek full NATO membership.

Support in Sweden and Finland for membership has been growing, although it remains in a minority in both countries.¹⁸⁷ Swedish intelligence has, however warned that Russian agents were in Sweden trying to rally opposition to closer Swedish relations with NATO.

Russian agents in Sweden...

¹⁸⁴ ['NATO Defence Ministers agree to enhance collective defence and deterrence'](#), NATO press release, 14 June 2016

¹⁸⁵ ['Doorstep statement by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the NATO-Russia Council meeting'](#), NATO press release, 20 April 2016

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ ['Russia wary as Nordic states mull closer Nato ties'](#), *EUObserver*, 2 May 2016

On 25 May 2016, the Swedish Parliament voted to ratify an agreement on closer ties with NATO, making it easier to base NATO troops on Swedish soil, following a similar move in Finland.¹⁸⁸

The Scandinavian countries also signed a joint declaration in 2015 promising to increase their regional military collaboration, saying that “the Russian military is acting provocatively along our borders and there have been several border violations of countries around the Baltic Sea.”

The statement went on:

Closer cooperation in northern Europe and solidarity with the Baltic states will contribute to stronger security in our region and raise the threshold for possible military incidents.¹⁸⁹

The memoranda of understanding between NATO and Sweden and Finland respectively, originally signed in September 2014, established procedures for operational and logistical support sites:

This Memorandum of Understanding is intended to serve as a basis for planning by appropriate Host Nation authorities and by NATO Commanders anticipating support arrangements for a variety of operations. This Memorandum of Understanding applies equally to all operations in which deploying forces have been identified and those for which forces are yet to be identified.¹⁹⁰

The Central and Eastern European countries have also reacted unilaterally to increased tension, with Lithuania, for example, re-introducing conscription. The Polish defence budget for 2016 was 9.4% bigger than the 2015’s after the Polish Government committed to hit the 2% of GDP NATO spending target.¹⁹¹

6.5 South Caucasus

The South Caucasus region has been one of the most important areas where Russia has attempted to restore its influence in former Soviet states and protect the interests of ethnic Russians.

Georgia was the scene of a brief war with Russia in 2008 over the breakaway region of South Ossetia. That region, and Abkhazia, remain under Russian domination and there are occasional skirmishes along the border. Russia signed an alliance and integration agreement in 2015, abolishing border posts between Russia and South Ossetia. The Georgian authorities regarded this as a step towards Russian annexation of the region.¹⁹² Abkhazia signed a similar agreement in 2009 and in 2014 they agreed a ‘strategic partnership’ document, drawing protests from Georgia about creeping annexation.

¹⁸⁸ ‘Sweden tightens Nato ties’, *EUObserver*, 26 May 2016

¹⁸⁹ [‘Nordic countries extend military alliance in face of Russian aggression’](#), *Guardian*, 10 April 2015

¹⁹⁰ [‘Finland and Sweden sign Memorandum of Understanding with NATO’](#), NATO press release, 5 September 2014

¹⁹¹ [‘Poland to raise defence budget’](#), *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 7 January 2016

¹⁹² [‘South Ossetia profile’](#), *BBC News Online*, 21 April 2016

Conflict is also hotting up between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Azerbaijan's Nagorno Karabakh, occupied by Armenia after a war in 1994. In April 2016, the fragile ceasefire looked as if it had broken down as the two sides used armoured vehicles and artillery fire against each other, causing over 30 deaths. The Karabakh conflict is highly significant at a time of increased tensions between historic rivals Russia and Turkey over the Syrian war. Armenia is ethnically close to Russian and joined the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. Azerbaijan is ethnically close to Turkey. Armenia is highly dependent on Russian support in the contest – it is far poorer than energy-rich Azerbaijan. Russia's role is ambivalent, though, as it has sold armaments to both Armenia and Azerbaijan in recent years. Russian companies have energy interests in Azerbaijan.

Energy interests

The OSCE Minsk Group,¹⁹³ co-chaired by France, the Russian Federation, and the United States, is the official forum for negotiations between the two sides and it issued a statement mentioning the increased violence along the Line of Contact and offering to facilitate a meeting in Vienna in May:

There can be no success in negotiations if violence continues, and there can be no peace without a negotiation process. We reiterate that there is no military solution to the conflict.¹⁹⁴

Russia offered to mediate between the two in May 2016, and analysts say that Russia would genuinely like to see that conflict resolved rather than 'frozen'. Although Russia's position is that it supports the OSCE Minsk process, some analysts argue that the Kremlin would like to reduce the influence of Western powers in the Armenia/Azerbaijan dispute and establish its dominance.¹⁹⁵

In April 2016, Russia signed an electricity market cooperation agreement with Georgia, Armenia and Iran, to connect the four countries' grids. The agreement was viewed by some observers as political as well as economic. It also showed that, despite difficult relations with Russia, countries such as Georgia have to maintain a certain balance between the West and Russia.

6.6 Libya

The military intervention in Libya was another step down in Russia's relations with the West. In 2011, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1973, authorising military intervention in Libya, including the imposition of a no-fly zone, to protect civilians.

Russia abstained, along with Brazil, India, China and Germany. All other Security Council members voted in favour.

Russia, China, India, Brazil and Germany

There were signs of a split in the Russian government over the intervention. On 20 March Vladimir Putin, who was then Russian Prime Minister, was sharply critical of the coalition action, comparing the

¹⁹³ [OSCE Minsk Group](#)

¹⁹⁴ ['Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group'](#), OSCE press release, 12 May 2016

¹⁹⁵

strikes against Libya to the invasion of Iraq and likening it to a “medieval call for a crusade.”¹⁹⁶ The following day, the Russian defence minister Anatoly Serdyukov called for a ceasefire during a meeting with US defence secretary Robert Gates. China also criticised the civilian casualties caused by the Western intervention.

Putin’s remarks were later contradicted by then President Dmitri Medvedev, who described them as “unacceptable”,¹⁹⁷ a rare show of division between the two leaders, although it may have been more show than reality.

According to Russia expert Dmitry Trenin, Putin remained in ultimate charge throughout the Medvedev presidency and when it came to the vote on resolution 1973, “it was definitely Putin who ordered the Russian delegation to abstain from voting in the UN Security Council.”¹⁹⁸

During the military intervention there was international disagreement over its interpretation, with many arguing that the Western allies carrying out the action had exceeded the authority given to them by the United Nations, which was simply to prevent civilian casualties.

David Cameron assured the House of Commons in March 2011 that the operation was not about regime change:

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether the emphasis is still on protecting people, not regime change. That is right – the UN Security Council resolution is all about putting in place the no-fly zone; protecting civilians, using all necessary measures; and, of course, humanitarian aid.¹⁹⁹

Russia took a different lesson from the conduct of the Libya campaign – Russian leaders believed that Western governments had used the Security Council resolution as a cover for military action to topple the regime in Libya and to remove its leader, Muammar Qaddafi.

The experience of Libya would contribute to an uncompromising Russian position on the Security Council when it came to Syria.

.

¹⁹⁶ [“China Urges Quick End To Airstrikes In Libya”](#), *New York Times*, 23 March 2011

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ [‘Vladimir Putin’s Fourth Vector’](#), *Russia in Global Affairs*, 30 June 2013

¹⁹⁹ [HC Deb 28 Mar 2011, c38](#)

7. Conclusion

Summary

In the long term, Russia's soft power deficit in comparison with the West may be a serious weakness – Russian economic prospects do not look rosy under the present set-up.

Russia is not, however, as isolated as some in the West portray it.

Vladimir Putin may be skilful at tactics, and his rule may have brought short term gains – certainly in getting Russia's concerns noticed. The strategy looks problematic, though. Trading economic wellbeing for national pride will not help Russians in the future.

The increasingly cool relationship between Russia and the West does not change the fact that there are areas where Western countries such as the UK benefit from cooperation with Russia, if confrontations can be managed so that they do not get out of control.

7.1 Soft power cut?

It was no coincidence that it was in 1990 that Joseph Nye published his book developing the concept of 'soft power'.²⁰⁰ The idea was that the influence of the US (and other countries) would increasingly be determined not by military power but by the force of attraction. Cultural influence and overseas aid would play an important part as would respect for such things as a country's legal and political systems. This idea took hold partly because the collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in an era of optimism in the West, one where it was thought that armed conflict would play a decreasing role in the world and the Western model, replete with soft power, would dominate.

Those opposed to US dominance might say that the idea was dependent on overwhelming US military power, making war less likely, and that the ascendancy and universal attraction of the Western cultural and political model should never have been taken for granted.

One aspect of Russia's traditionalist view of international relations appears to be that hard power is more important than soft power and, while soft power (particularly in the area of news management) does feature in Russian thinking, Russians have a different and perhaps less powerful conception of soft power. In any case, Russian hard power policies may be drowning out its attempts to deploy soft power.

This is to an extent logical, since Russia has far greater reserves of hard power (including a nuclear arsenal to rival the US force). While the Russian economy is weak and the West is culturally dominant, Russia's power of attraction is likely to remain limited.

Russian favourability ratings in international polling have declined in most countries, particularly since the Ukraine crisis began.²⁰¹ Vladimir Putin comes out even worse in international opinion surveys.

²⁰⁰ Joseph Nye, *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power*, 1990

²⁰¹ ['Russia, Putin Held in Low Regard around the World'](#), Pew Research Center, 5 August 2015

So although Russia may be losing the international public relations battle, there is no sign that the Kremlin intends to back down in its confrontation with the West and indeed it might be politically dangerous for the Russian leadership to do so, given that difference from and resistance to the West is ingrained in Russia's image of itself, and the present government has moved to strengthen that image, helping to increase its legitimacy at home, at least for now.

There may be good reasons for the West not to reward the Russian leadership for its uncooperative relations with many other countries, importantly because Russia's security demands often come at the expense of countries in its neighbourhood that want to move closer to the West.

But a new framework for relations is sorely needed. Maria Lipman argued in 2014 that neither Russia nor the West has a vision of 'another Russia':

The current confrontation between Russia and the West is a move back to a cold war design: Russia as "another world" isolated by the US-led West. Russia's world today is limited to just itself with no socialist camp around it, and the West has the potential of pushing Russia deeper into a crisis, both economic and political. Unlike the Soviet meltdown that had numerous internal causes, but is blamed on the West by Russian conspiracy theorists, this crisis will truly be precipitated by the West. In the cold war the West sought to prevail against Communism and hailed the post-Communist Russia. This time round, there is no idea just what "another Russia" should look like – either in the West or in Russia itself.²⁰²

At present, the Kremlin seems happy with the way Russia is, but the opposition is marginalised.

7.2 Prospects for cooperation

Dmitry Medvedev argued at the Munich Security Conference 2015 that an ideological divide no longer prevents collaboration:

I believe that we have become wiser and more experienced and more responsible. And we are not divided by ideological phantoms and stereotypes. I believe that the challenges we are facing today will not lead to conflict but rather will encourage us to come together in a fair and equal union that will allow us to maintain peace for another 70 years, at least.²⁰³

Some collaboration between Russia and the West is still possible.

Space

European space programmes have a history of collaborating with Russia that goes back to Soviet times and present-day collaboration between the European Space Agency and the Russian space programme is substantial, dating from an agreement signed in 1991.²⁰⁴ The ESA is an

²⁰² Maria Lipman, '[The origins of Russia's new conflict with the West](#)', European Council on Foreign Relations, 14 October 2014

²⁰³ [Speech by Dmitry Medvedev at the 2015 Munich Security Conference](#)

²⁰⁴ European Space Agency, [Cooperation with Russia](#)

intergovernmental body which operates outside the framework of the EU, although much of its funding comes from the EU.

Representing the ESA, UK astronaut Tim Peake arrived at the International Space Station with Tim Kopra of NASA and Russian cosmonaut Yuri Malenchenko on 15 December 2015. He returned to Earth in June 2016

The ESA is also collaborating with Russia on a plan to send an uncrewed lander to the Moon in 2020, whose aim is to conduct experiments to determine whether the moon may be able to support a human settlement.²⁰⁵

Settlement on the Moon?

In March 2016 the ExoMars collaborative Mars exploration programme was in the news. ExoMars is a joint venture between the ESA and Russia to send space craft to Mars primarily to find out whether life has ever existed on that planet; the programme plans to put a British-assembled rover onto the surface of Mars in 2018.

George Freeman, UK minister for life sciences, underlined the political importance of the space collaboration, specifically the International Space Station, in a debate on space policy in January 2016:

The debate on space is also about geopolitics. Who, in the appallingly dark days of the cold war and intercontinental ballistic missile threats in which many of us grew up, could have imagined that we would now have an international space station in which Americans, Russians and people from across the world work together for the good of all? It is about defining a new common space for all and a new approach to our defence and security through common leadership.²⁰⁶

Nuclear collaboration

The UK signed a memorandum of understanding on commercial civil nuclear collaboration between the Department for Energy and Climate Change and Rosatom in 2013.²⁰⁷ French energy utility EDF also has a commercial arrangement with Rosatom, something which dates back to 1994. The Franco-Russian programme has been expanding.²⁰⁸

Weapons of Mass Destruction

The Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction is a formal multilateral non-proliferation initiative created by the G8 countries in 2002. Collaborating countries fund and implement projects to prevent terrorists and other proliferators from acquiring WMDs.

Nuclear materials and terrorist groups

Russia's suspension from the G8 in 2014 and the sanctions imposed by both the EU and the US, called this cooperation into question although Western governments are keen to see it continue. In 2014, Russia pulled

²⁰⁵ 'Russia starts moon base collaboration with European Space Agency', New Scientist,

²⁰⁶ [HC Deb 14 January 2016, c1058](#)

²⁰⁷ [Memorandum of Understanding between the State Atomic Energy Corporation "Rosatom" and the Department of Energy and Climate Change of the United Kingdom establishing a programme of commercial cooperation in nuclear civil energy, 2013](#)

²⁰⁸ ['French and Russian nuclear utilities extend collaboration'](#), *World Nuclear News*, 26 April 2016

out of the nuclear security process, a series of summits involving the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty states to try to prevent the spread of fissile materials to terrorist groups. The absence of Russia at these summits dramatically undermined their effectiveness, given that Russia has the biggest stockpile of fissile material in the world.²⁰⁹

Terrorism

Cooperation on space exploration is by definition distanced from earthly disputes. Collaboration on terrorism, while desirable, is fully entangled with them.

There is a widespread feeling in Russia that Western countries have at best been naïve in supporting pro-democracy demonstrations in countries such as Egypt. At worst Russian commentators portray this as illegitimate intervention against legitimate governments in sovereign states – dangerous destabilisation moves designed, in the case of countries such as Ukraine, to encircle Russia and “chain” the “Russian bear”,²¹⁰ as Vladimir Putin put it in 2014. Russians see this as undermining stable governments and making terrorism more likely.

In this context, disagreement on who deserves the label of ‘terrorist’, always a subjective term, was inevitable. In the context of Syria and ISIS/Daesh such disagreement, the complexity of the conflict and the pursuit of differing national interests by Russia and the other participants, makes cooperation on terrorism very difficult.

In October 2015 Vladimir Putin invited the US and other Western states to join Russia in a campaign against ISIS in Syria, saying that it could be a model for a global campaign against terrorism. He said that the West had played a double game:

Why is it that the efforts of, say, our American partners and their allies in their struggle against the Islamic State has not produced any tangible results? Obviously, this is not about any lack of military equipment or potential. Clearly, the United States has a huge potential, the biggest military potential in the world, only double crossing is never easy. You declare war on terrorists and simultaneously try to use some of them to arrange the figures on the Middle East board in your own interests, as you may think.

It is impossible to combat terrorism in general if some terrorists are used as a battering ram to overthrow the regimes that are not to one’s liking. You cannot get rid of those terrorists, it is only an illusion to think you can get rid of them later, take power away from them or reach some agreement with them. The situation in Libya is the best example here.²¹¹

Critics might say that using some terrorists to arrange things according to your interests is not so far from what Russia is doing in Eastern Ukraine. At least all the states involved in the Syria conflict, and the United Nations, have agreed that ISIS/Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra are

²⁰⁹ For more information on efforts to control fissile materials, see the Commons Briefing Paper *Russian foreign policy*, June 2016

²¹⁰ [News conference of Vladimir Putin](#), Kremlin press release, 18 December 2014

²¹¹ [Vladimir Putin meets with members of the Valdai Discussion Club](#), Transcript, 23 October 2015

terrorist organisations: they are proscribed as such by the United Nations.

Even cooperating on that common ground is not straightforward. It is widely reported that Russia concentrated its air strikes against the 'moderate' rebel groups backed by the West and its allies rather than against ISIS and Nusra in Syria

7.3 Russia isolated?

Western policies tend to be based, at least overtly, on the idea that the world has moved on from such naked competition; that the international community should now cooperate to solve problems together. Like much else, however, the concept of the international community is viewed by Russia as highly conditioned by the Western point of view. For a country not basking in the approval of the international community, cooperation with it may seem like obligatory acceptance of Western norms.

Many in the West see Russia as increasingly isolated from the international community, and even as pursuing an isolationist policy.

It is true that relations with many countries are cool, particularly those aligned to the West, and that the international image of Russia is not particularly favourable.²¹² It is wrong to suggest that the Russian leadership is isolationist, though. It is pursuing international engagement quite strongly, seeking a place at the highest tables, with the West and with the emerging powers.

It would be easy to exaggerate Russia's present state of isolation, too. There are plenty of important countries that do not write Russia off. On the contrary, they are increasingly making common cause, creating an alternative to perceived Western and US domination, particularly in the context of the long-term relative decline of the West.

China is by far the most important of these nations, and military cooperation between Russia and China is growing. Russia is in any case guaranteed a significant role in international politics, as a nuclear-armed member of the Security Council, like China. Russia also has deeper diplomatic experience and contacts than many other emerging countries, and its enormous territory and reserves of natural resources also ensure relevance.

7.4 Long-term pain?

While a popular image of Russian foreign policy is that it is driven by the strategic 'genius' of Vladimir Putin, many observers counter that it is highly reactive and more tactically-driven. Michael McFaul, a former official in the Obama Administration, says "Mr. Putin is adept at short-term tactical responses to setbacks, but less talented at long-term strategy."²¹³ McFaul argues that Putin's tactics might look effective, but

²¹² ['Russia, Putin Held in Low Regard around the World'](#), Pew Global Attitudes Survey, 5 August 2015

²¹³ 'The Myth of Putin's Strategic Genius', *New York Times*, 23 October 2015

that Russian strategy will leave the country weaker. In the context of the destruction of the Russian airliner over the Sinai Desert, Edward Lucas, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, came to similar conclusions:

...short-term success and long-term failure are the hallmark of Mr Putin's rule. He scores stunning coups – against the oligarchs, against the opposition, against neighbours such as Georgia and Ukraine, in energy deals with China and Germany – yet at the end Russia languishes.

Short-term success?

Nevertheless, it is to disagree that the Kremlin's muscular tactics abroad have forced Western governments to take Russia into consideration, particularly over Syria. This seems to have restored Russian pride, something viewed by the Kremlin as a very important goal in itself.

So the Kremlin appears to be having some success. But there remain questions as to whether those policies are in the long-term interest of Russian people.

The new Putin deal – the restoration of national pride, at the expense of economic difficulties – might bring a feel-good factor to the people and, in doing so, shore up Putin's rule, but it will do little to improve Russians' wellbeing in the longer term.

About the Library

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publically available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email hcinfo@parliament.uk.

Disclaimer

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).