

A future-oriented and values-led approach to dealing with Russia

Reconciliation with Russia?

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Reconciliation among conflicting states seems evident in a globalised world in which geographical distance and national borders no longer form a barrier to vital threats and challenges. Alas, reconciliation with Russia currently seems futile, as at the latest in 2014, Moscow fundamentally altered its position in and perception of the international order. Three elements of Russia's new course are striking.

First, Russia defines itself as an anti-Western power, regarding Western values and concepts of democracy as degenerate. Instead, Moscow forms its policies on the basis of nationalism, orthodoxy and the notion of Slavic superiority. It therefore rejects a European security order based on institutions like NATO, the EU or the OSCE, which it perceives to have been corrupted by the United States.

Second, Russia's strategic thinking has visibly reverted to the logic of the Yalta Conference of 1945, with major powers claiming spheres of interest that they mark by political and military signals such as force deployments or overflights by military aircraft or even nuclear bombers. Countries within these spheres have to accept limitations on their sovereignty, since they belong to the "Near Abroad" of the major power.

Thirdly, these two viewpoints have led Russia to breach international law, to violate agreements that it previously had negotiated and supported and to annex the territory of a neighbouring state.

The end of the European Peace Order

This open aggression against Crimea and the Eastern part of Ukraine in 2014 is key, as it ends a decades-long consensus that borders in Europe will never again be altered by military force. The "European Peace Order" established after the end of the Cold War has come to an end. The purpose of this fundamental shift is to re-establish Russia as a leading world power – a position President Putin believes that Russia lost during the humiliating years of the Yeltsin era. Means towards this end are a rapid military build-up, the creation and exploitation of rifts within the "West" and the de-legitimisation of NATO and weakening of the European Union. The fact that this strategy has borne only limited fruit so far is not likely to lead Russia to change its course. NATO and the EU have maintained their cohesion, the aggression against Crimea was conducted at significant political and financial cost and Russia's economic perspectives are disastrous.

Steps towards cooperation and more stability

Still, the Putin regime continues to cultivate at domestic level the illusion of a leading world power, investing in costly interna-



Photo: Federal Academy for Security Policy

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tional engagements like the military operations in Syria. How to deal with a Russia that sticks to its confrontational course even if it appears to be punching significantly above its weight? First of all, there is an urgent need to re-establish deterrence and defence on the side of NATO and the EU. Russia's current policies have taken the Euro-Atlantic community back to an "Article 5 world" in which territorial defence is the primary task of military forces and alliances. Secondly, it is worth noting that protection from Russia does not exclude cooperation with it. Russia is still an important international player and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. The nuclear agreement with Iran and the current efforts to stabilise the situation in the Near and Middle East have shown that Moscow can be instrumental in enabling international crises to be tackled cooperatively and constructively. Thus cooperation in areas of common concern could well be possible. Thirdly, it is urgently necessary to manage the conflict with Russia by establishing crisis-proof lines of communication and procedures to avoid misunderstandings and misperceptions. Otherwise, the nuclear capabilities on both sides, in particular, could lead to misinterpretations with unintended consequences. Finally, there is a need to give serious thought to the consequences of a further economic downturn in Russia – the result not only of consistently low oil prices but decades of missed economic and political modernisation. If the government is no longer able to satisfy the needs of its population at home, patriotic propaganda or a show of force abroad will lose their integrative power. In the longer run, the dangers of a disintegrating Russia might be more significant than those of an expansive one.

¹ The author takes sole responsibility for the views expressed in this article.