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Russia and Europe in 2030 Conflict or cooperation?

by *Sir Andrew Wood*

The Russian stance towards Europe and the US has undergone severe changes, rendering any cooperation in European and other regional security increasingly difficult. With the idea of Western-inspired Russian modernisation gone, and President Putin's self-portrayal as "strong man", this is not about to change. The deterioration of the Russian economy and fears of regime survival make the situation even more problematic. Under these conditions any proposal for new security institutions remains futile. Consequently, the West should instead remain both patient and consistent in its current position towards the Kremlin.

Western hopes disappointed

Europe's long-term strategic interests in its relationship with Russia are easy enough to describe, but in practice they are increasingly difficult to realise: First, a Russia at peace with itself, and at peace with its neighbours, second, a Russia with a growing economy securely integrated into the global economy, and third, a Russia reviving its cultural and intellectual heritage as a confident actor within the European context.

These are of course, generalised ambitions. A good number of intermediate steps would have to contribute to their ultimate realisation, such as full and accountable membership of suitably adapted European or Atlantic institutions, or secure progress towards such membership. But the aspiration behind such propositions would be as much in Russian national interests as it would be in the general interest of Europe. However, Russia's present rulers do not share these aspirations.

The Russian analyst Vladislav Inozemtsev has recently argued that the West has been gravely mistaken in not working to include Russia in European and Atlantic institutions over the past decade, or at least making it clear that bringing Russia into them over time is a principal aim of Western policy. Perhaps so, but the argument leaves out of account the disturbing story of the way that Russia has dealt with its troubles, both before and after the fall of the USSR following the failed putsch of 1991 against Gorbachev. Enough has happened over the years to frighten Russia's neighbours as to the risks of what might develop in Russia, even before the Kremlin's seizure of Crimea in February 2014. The lazy assumption that in the end Russia would in its own interests evolve into a simulacrum, however pale, of other states transitioning from their socialist past has faded. A more general pessimism in the West as to Russia's future now prevails.

Russian convictions

The Russian establishment has moved with increasing speed away from the idea that Russia might become a "normal" country, on the lines hoped for by its westernisers in the early 90s. On the contrary, the prevail-

ing conviction is now the one once again set out by President Putin in his speech of 24 October 2015 to the “Valdai Club” meeting in Sochi: Russia is a besieged victim, facing a hostile West, directed by a malevolent United States. A whole legend has grown up to support this resentful narcissism. It is in part a reflection of an underlying and suppressed recognition of Russia’s own failure to achieve a transition from its authoritarian past to the secure and accountable governance that would bring it true security and prosperity. It certainly illustrates the blindness of the Kremlin and its supporting cadres as to the reactions of other countries to the way it often behaves. Putin told the “Valdai Club”:

- first, that the victors of World War II had established a system whose solidity rested on foundations that included that its “founding fathers” had respect for each other, did not put the squeeze on others, and attempted to reach agreements. He said much the same in his presentation to the opening session of the UN General Assembly this year, in praise of the Yalta settlement. But even a cursory glance through the history of the Cold War era shows that Europe and the world were by no means secure because of the Yalta system.
- second, that the Cold War did not end, as by implication Putin believes that it should have done, with a peace treaty establishing clear and transparent rules. But in reality a whole set of rules had been coming into force as the USSR broke up, like for instance INF, CFE, the Helsinki Act, START, OSCE, and the international guarantees for Ukraine. Moscow was fully involved in the negotiation of all of these. No one can in any case give a clear date for the end of the Cold War, making the idea that it was a conflict to be settled by a formal treaty fanciful, even absurd.
- third, that the USA “and its satellites” like for example the UK and Germany have forced international law into retreat, exercising “total control of the mass media”. Putin regularly comments on the wickedness of the United States, and duly worked the theme further in Sochi. But are we really in a period of unipolar domination? European criticism of the Obama administration’s perceived failure to give a proper lead in international affairs suggests not.
- fourth, that a world wide run of colour revolutions, leading to international chaos, has been initiated by the United States. In reality, it is the failures of the relevant national authorities that have been the cause of popular uprisings, not the interference of an all-powerful and infinitely cunning United States. The results have not always been welcome to the West, so if the Americans are plotting colour revolutions they are not making much of a job of it.
- fifth, that Russia was not consulted about the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine, and that its objections were brushed aside, leading to the violent overthrow of the legitimate government in Kiev. This is another untruth, as Putin surely knew once.

The Russian President’s remarks in Sochi were by no means exceptional. They were on the contrary another rehearsal of Russia’s theme as a besieged fortress, a theme that has a purchase on the Russian imagination. While it would be wrong to exaggerate the longevity and strength of that grip, it goes along with the atmosphere in Russia that has been induced over the past year and a half of hyper patriotism. It also has its influence on some sections of foreign opinion, including those already persuaded of the vices of the United States.

But a more interesting question is, how far does Putin himself believe in this specific narrative? Probably he does so quite far. Repetition induces conviction, and he has been saying more and more of this over the years. Those who report to him must know what will be well received, and no doubt they report accordingly to the Kremlin. Putin has been in effective power for sixteen years. Russia has not been doing well at home, and leaders too long in office often compensate for domestic problems that they cannot resolve by taking an increasing interest in foreign affairs. The personal emotions and convictions of “strong men” at the top are of state importance. Some of Putin’s decisions on foreign matters since his return to the Kremlin in May 2012 look more like snap decisions than ones that have been argued through and tested by due process.

New rules?

Putin has argued before that new rules for the conduct of international affairs should be agreed – and he did so again on 24 October in Sochi. But he has not so far been specific as to what these rules should be. The nearest he has come to it, is to suggest that “powerful regional organisations” should act in concert. That idea would clearly sit well with the pursuit and protection of zones of influence – like the one that Ukraine has refused to join. But although Russia is a member of a number of regional organisations, the Kremlin is strikingly free of reliable friends. It was notable that Putin’s military adventure in Syria got no support at the 15–16 October Astana meeting of CIS leaders. His Eurasian Union colleagues were reported, on the contrary, to have been outspoken in expressing their concern at Russia’s recent behaviour.

If we are to have a reliable security architecture in Europe by 2030, engaging Russia, that would require some common understanding of the underlying facts, such as that which prevailed at least to some degree during the Cold War. That is now absent between Russia and the West. Putin is in denial of obvious truths, for instance in relation to Ukraine and Syria. The construction of an agreed and reliable security system would also require some degree of confidence between the leaders of the countries trying to build such a system, and that too is now absent. There would moreover also have to be a sufficient degree of general confidence in the future of the countries developing the structure. Russia’s, however, is in doubt.

Five risks for Russia

The Russian state is ruled by a shrinking group around Putin, unmediated by independent and autonomous institutions. There appears to be no stable group of advisers for the President, and both information and decision making is thereby distorted. Analysts suggest that he listens as occasion demands to only four or five persons, if that, but that their makeup varies. Putin is however the linchpin of a system, not a dictator. He has to bear in mind the interests of his nominees for managing the major divisions of the economy, and the wider bureaucracy dependent on it, notably the security organs. It will be obvious that this is a personalized, corrupted, and eventually vulnerable set up.

On his return to the Kremlin in May 2012, following on the unrest of 2011–2012, Putin turned his back on ideas for the diversification of the economy which had been mooted under Medvedev, in favour of increased state control, meaning increased control by his appointees; growing suppression of criticism; and the heightened pursuit of Russia’s ambitions to be recognised as a Great Power with its recognised sphere of interest. Calls for vigilance against the threat of colour revolution in Russia have continued to be a significant strain in the regime’s rhetoric. These essentially defensive policies based on the survival instincts of the Putin circle have had at least five serious consequences for Russia:

- The rentier model based on exploiting the revenue from natural resources between 2000 and 2008 had run its course before Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012. The Russian economy was already suffering from a lack of investment before the Ukraine crisis. Its performance has been hit by that and of course the fall in the price of oil, but the root causes of its continued difficulties lie in the inability, or fear, of the ruling circle to face up to the risks of change. The government appears to have no answers in mind beyond hoping for the best.
- The regions are under growing financial strain but still expected to fulfil social and other obligations laid on them by Putin in his 2012 May decrees. Education and health expenditure has been squeezed in favour of military expenditure, with questionable results. The same goes for infrastructure.
- As the available pie for sharing within the Putin system shrinks, so the infighting for its funds increases. Ironically perhaps the result for now at least is not to demand change but to work towards its strengthening for the benefit of individual interests. But the fall of previous stalwarts like Vladimir Yakunin, whose hold on the railways had seemed secure, and the dismissal of some governors like those of Komi and Sakhalin is evidence of tensions within the governing group.

- The particular case of Chechnya is further evidence of that, and of a wider problem in Russia – ensuring the centre’s monopoly of the use of force. Ramzan Kadyrov has that monopoly in Chechnya and the ability to kill beyond it, in Russia as well as out of it. Semi authorized violence is now a feature of the Russian system, with the immediate perpetrators sometimes identified and even prosecuted, but those ultimately responsible never.
- The courts are at least as biddable as ever, and the bureaucracy is as predatory.

These observations are instances of a deteriorating structure, but not necessarily of irreparable damage. It is however too late for Putin to change course, even if he wanted to. A “strong man” and especially one who has resorted to compulsion cannot admit to error, no matter how high his poll ratings may seem to be. He has resorted to nationalism as his principal source of authority but that needs regularly renewed doses for its appeal to be maintained. Part of his appeal lies in the fear of what would happen if he were not in charge. But it is a sign of weakness that no one in Russia or outside it can know what would happen, what will happen indeed, when he goes. Russia is adrift without definable purpose. Its ruling cabal has no sustainable view of a wider purpose than its self-preservation. It is sometimes argued that whoever succeeds Putin will be worse than him, but in truth there is no effective succession system in place. He cannot himself bring on an heir without compromising his own power, and splitting his immediate entourage. Any heir will have his or strictly notionally her agenda, whether developed or not. That must address correcting or worsening his/her inheritance. Either choice will be difficult for Russia. The West should be prepared for a rough passage.

Some conclusions

First, it would be a mistake in present and currently foreseeable circumstances to seek to set up comprehensive new security architecture in an effort to engage with Russia more effectively. The proposals mooted by the Russians during the Medvedev presidency, when conditions were more favourable, were vacuous. Putin’s conjecture that regional centres might be tasked to work together is in reality dependent on a belief that lesser states should be instructed by greater powers – meaning Moscow, Washington, and Beijing. Is Kyiv now ready to join the Eurasian Union? It is certainly not.

Second, Russia’s future course is in any case too uncertain for a reinvented security system to be effective while Putin, and Putinism, prevail. The arbitrary is the essence of his rule.

Third, the Kremlin’s approach to for instance resolving the Ukraine crisis is governed not by the give-and-take of diplomatic negotiation but by its recognition of the possible, and the risks of going too far too fast. The West has therefore been right to look to its security interests through both NATO and in a wider sense through the EU. Bolstering these institutions has been a necessary precondition for perhaps in due course reaching a durable resolution of the Ukraine problem, and for bringing Russia to the recognition that its incursions have come at a heavy and unwelcome cost. Any solution must ensure that Ukraine regains full control over its borders if it is to endure.

Fourth, none of this is to rule out western cooperation with Russia over particular issues where mutual interests and expectations can be defined and accountably traded. That is, however, not the case in Syria.

Fifth, patience and consistency are needed in dealing with Russia. The country’s leaders and many of its people are in the grip of a distorted, even bitter, anti-western narrative, focused on the United States. But Russia is also facing an internal crisis. Putin and his cabal have no answers to it. The West should in opposing Putin and in criticising Putinism try also to get across the message that we have positive hopes for benign evolution in Russia, in accordance with our common long-term strategic interests.

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