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Between Old and New World Order: **Russia's Foreign and Security Policy Rationale**

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Political decision-making under Vladimir Putin is informed by a military-technological rationale, and military might is seen as a main tool of Russian foreign policy. Modern nuclear capabilities are key for Russia as they are regarded an effective bargaining chip that will also bring Moscow back to eye-level vis-à-vis the US. Yet, the Kremlin regards all manners of hybrid warfare – including disinformation, cyber-attacks and Russian-engineered international media coverage – as equally legitimate.

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Military Might Replaces Realpolitik: President Vladimir Putin Leaves the Liberal World Order

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The way Russia thinks and acts in foreign and security policy differs fundamentally from that of Germany. While Berlin pursues a multilateral strategy geared towards reinforcing collective security, international institutions, and international law, Russia's elites believe in the role of strength – especially military power – in a multipolar world. In this world, only limited, interest-based alliances with other states are conceivable. Compromise is seen as a sign of weakness and acceptable only from a position of strength. From the Russian leadership's perspective, one player's success in international relations implies the defeat of another. This "win-lose" thinking is diametrically opposed to the German "win-win" one.

The gap between Russia's and Germany's ways of thinking leads both countries to misinterpret the other's statements and actions, particularly in times of mutual distrust. It is important therefore to understand how Russian elites think in terms of foreign and security policy to be able to assess their actions correctly and respond to them appropriately. As a post-imperial power, Russia has been struggling with the legacy of its own history and is searching for a place in the international order that it considers legitimate. This situation has led to conflicts with Russia's neighbors and with those states or institutions with which post-Soviet countries have developed close relations, such as the European Union. From the perspective of the Russian leadership, all post-Soviet states – with the exception of the Baltic states as members of NATO and the EU – are part of the Russian sphere of influence and therefore not fully sovereign. Russia reserves the right to interfere in their domestic affairs, even by military means.

The current Russian leadership sees the world as dominated by big powers which enjoy more sovereignty than small countries. Following this rationale, international crises and conflicts can only be solved within the concert of the leading powers, comparable to a Yalta-type system. The rule of law in international relations is being provided by these major powers; on its own, law would not prevail. From Russia's point of view, the West broke international law when it recognized Kosovo, and – having opened the box of Pandora – it has foregone any right to call Russia's annexation of Crimea illegitimate.

The End of the West

Seen from Moscow, the end of US hegemony has given rise to a new multipolar world order in which stability is being guaranteed by great powers like Russia, China, and the United States. At the Munich Security Conference in 2017, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov even spoke of a "post-Western order" to describe the current transformation of international relations.[1] From Russia's perspective, President Donald Trump is actually accelerating the end of the West by destroying the liberal order from the inside. The fact that the US president has distanced himself from the policy of global democratization certainly meets with strong approval in Moscow. According to Russia, the "color revolutions"[2] in the post-Soviet states as well as the Arab Spring had largely been instigated by the United States and are seen as the biggest threat to the post-Soviet ruling elites. It was a nightmare for President Vladimir Putin to see Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya overthrown by US-led alliances. To prevent a similar scenario has since been among Russia's most important objectives, especially since Putin's return to the presidency. Moscow's scope of actions has, in this context, been widened by the rift Trump has caused in transatlantic relations and by the emergence of populist movements.

Russia has revived the term of "the West" – once key Cold-War terminology – in recent years. As for the United States and the EU, they have also gone back to using the expression in antagonism towards Russia. It is debatable, however, whether Russia genuinely is the key driver in the disintegration of the Western-led order. Apart from many internal factors, it is China which has been rising as a global power in the slipstream of the West's conflict with Russia. Being recognized as a major global power, and with its status enhanced as an 'enemy of the West', has allowed Russia to assume a bigger role than it would otherwise be able to play. For, Russia's successes in Syria and the Middle East have mostly been the result of the United States' retreat from the region which has created the vacuum now filled by Russia. Russia itself lacks the economic and military resources required to genuinely become a truly global power. The Russian leadership is able to intervene and disrupt, but it cannot re-order the playing field in a sustainable fashion. As a result, Moscow can also only play a limited role as a partner for sustainable conflict resolution.

Russia and the West in a Systemic Conflict

Russia and 'the West' are in conflict over the future order of the world. From a Russian perspective, Europe's security order is outdated and should be adapted to reflect the changed situation following the end of the East-West conflict. While the EU remains committed to extant agreements and principles – e.g. the Paris Charter and the Budapest Memorandum – the Russian leadership feels no longer adequately represented or bound by them. It does not see itself as part of the current, NATO-dominated European security order. As Aleksandr Golts argues in his contribution to this volume,[3] this conflict between Russia and the West can be solved by neither diplomatic nor military means. Equally, Putin has only a limited number of instruments – above all, military might – to assert his interests. According to Golts, Russian political decision-making increasingly follows a military and technical rationale, due to the growing militarization of Russian domestic and foreign policy.

Golts argues that much of what the Russian elites perceive as dangers – for instance, the perceived threat by the United States or NATO – is either imagined or constructed, and therefore hard to counter. Before the Ukraine conflict, the transatlantic alliance was actually shifting its attention to other regions of the world so as to focus on the fight against terrorism. Yet Russia believed it was being encircled and weakened by NATO. At the same time, its leaders have also been instrumentalizing the conflict with the West to distract from internal deficits. According to Golts, we are now back to the 1950s, without rules or institutions that would be accepted by both sides, and without trust or enough substantive communications.

Russia has strategic goals but no strategic vision, Irina Busygina argues in her contribution to this collection.[4] It seeks acceptance by the United States as an equal power; it wants its post-Soviet neighbors to be recognized as part of the Russian sphere of influence and with only limited sovereignty on their own. Finally, it wants to ensure non-interference in its internal affairs and an end to all democratization policies. At the same time, the Russian leadership is able to adapt its relevant goals to current circumstances and to react flexibly to new developments.

Russia's Modernization Deficit

Russia's conflict with the West has to be seen in the context of the domestic crisis of legitimacy which the Putin system experienced in the wake of the global financial crisis 2008-09. Until then, Russia's social contract had involved improving people's incomes while increasingly depoliticizing public life. When, due to the crisis, the Russian leadership could not keep up its side of the bargain, it needed the enemy image of "the West" to distract from its own political deficits. This "bogeyman" narrative has been successful as it reminds large parts of Russian society of the Cold War. Putin, therefore, has no interest in resolving the conflict with the United States, NATO, and the EU in the foreseeable future. On the contrary, he continues to fuel tensions up to a certain level of escalation. As long as trade relations continue and large-scale projects such as North Stream 2 are not at risk, he is happy to accept the current Ukraine sanctions.[5] This might only change with further tough US economic sanctions.[6] But even on this issue, it is attractive for him to explore the rift in transatlantic relations, especially, when the United States is not consulting the EU on its sanctions, yet much of the price has to be paid by EU member states.

Despite Russia's modernization deficits, its leadership believes that it can win the conflict with the West. It is increasingly confident that the liberal order is doomed, and that it can benefit from the emergence of a new multipolar world order.[7] More than any "Western" state, Putin's Russia is adept at dealing with chaos, insecurity, and the lack of statehood. Corruption and informal channels correspond to the nature of Putin's system and provide Russian actors with scope for influence to counterbalance deficits in economic competitiveness and technological know-how. The ongoing controlled destabilization of the post-Soviet countries between Russia and the EU is therefore part of Russia's strategy.

However, while Russia's strategic goal is to weaken the Western liberal order and strengthen alternative centers of power, it lacks economic and social policies to go beyond disruption. Moscow can speed up the disintegration of the liberal order but will not be a key actor in any new one, given its current economic and political system. Currently, Putin is pursuing a double tactic. On the one hand, he presents Russia internationally as a responsible player that forges coalitions against international terrorism and applies tough measures to stabilize the "legitimate" regime in Syria. On the other hand, he deliberately creates or maintains grey zones of instability in Russia's neighboring regions – such as in Ukraine's Donbas, and Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia – to keep their respective parent-states dependent on Russia. These areas are therefore left to be dominated by warlords, without the rule of law or functioning institutions.

Disinformation as an Instrument of War

The Russian leadership feels under attack by the West through the "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet states

and through Western support for NGOs, the opposition, and the media at home. It also maintains that the US-led interventions in Iraq and Libya have led to the overthrow of regimes and destabilized the Middle East without offering plans for rebuilding the region – ultimately leaving a catastrophic impact on the stability of the entire region. From Putin's point of view, it was vital to prevent the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad in Syria in order to avoid a replay of the scenarios experienced in Iraq and Libya.

Russia is determined to limit any scope for the United States, NATO, or the EU to interfere in its internal affairs. This goal represents a key task for Russia's leadership. From their perspective, Putin's campaign of hybrid warfare and disinformation abroad,[8] combined with the repression of civil society, independent media, and opposition forces within Russia, is merely a reaction to US interference in the domestic politics of Russia and its neighbors. It is seen as using the same instruments as the West, i.e. the media, NGOs, and the opposition, in order to weaken opponents and assert Russian interests. From an initially fairly defensive policy, involving restrictions on domestic and foreign NGOs and media as well as limits on foreign financing for non-state actors, it has turned into an aggressive and proactive policy, using disinformation, government-organized NGOs and state media like RT or Sputnik. Putin's main goal is to improve his negotiating position by weakening his foreign opponents and undermining their self-confidence. As part of Russia's overall security policy, the disinformation activities are being implemented in cooperation with the military and the secret services.

Russia's Ambiguous Rapprochement with China

Russia's foreign and security policy thinking remains centered on the United States and NATO; nearly all activities are reactions to what the US does. This became visible in Syria where Russia intervened not only to save Bashar al-Assad, but also to assert an equal status with the United States. In international crises, Russia does not want to be ignored as a player by Washington anymore and has been acting to fill the gap left by President Barack Obama in the region.[9] The more the US leaves a vacuum in international relations, the more Putin will seek to use it to assert Russia's own relevance as an important international player.

As a result of the Ukraine conflict and the subsequent sanctions by the West, the Russian leadership has found itself very much isolated from the Western-dominated part of the world. Russia's pivot to Asia and the Middle East since 2012, and especially since 2014, has primarily been a reaction to declining relations with the United States and the EU. It also aims to lessen the economic and political fallout and improve Russia's negotiating position.

While Russia has not achieved a comprehensive realignment with China, the differences in thinking and interests between both countries do not stand in the way of cooperation. The Russian leadership has every interest to work with states like China and also Iran to create an alternative to the US-dominated world order. The Chinese and Russian leadership also share another interest: they are keen to keep their authoritarian regimes stable.

Despite these similarities, China and Russia pursue largely different approaches to globalization and global governance. Under Putin, Russia wants to renegotiate the existing global order in order to redefine its own position. China, by contrast, sees itself as the major winner of the existing US-led political and economic order – or it did so at least until Donald Trump became US president. It therefore mainly wishes to strengthen its own role and influence within the existing system. Thus for Beijing, the US is the only indispensable partner and of much greater importance than Russia. President Xi Jinping conceives the global order as a bipolar system, with China and the US in the lead.[10] By comparison, Russia acts more as a spoiler while China is, at least in part, willing to assume more responsibility within the existing system.

Seen in this context, the changing role of the United States under President Trump weakens the liberal international order. It enforces Putin's view of the international order as a balance between great powers that allows only temporary alliances of interest and otherwise regards allies as weakening the sovereignty of the leading powers. From this perspective, only China and Russia are truly sovereign because their decision-making ability is not restricted by allies. The United States under Trump could possibly join that group in the foreseeable future.

Until 2014, the Russian-American relationship worked best when the two countries cooperated as equal partners in regions where both had an interest. That was the case with ISAF's cooperation with Russia in Afghanistan, arms-control issues like the New START Treaty, the nuclear deal with Iran or the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria. The loss of trust over the past several years has, however, made any such cooperation more difficult.[11] Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran and Washington's unwillingness to talk about renewing the arms-control treaties have rattled the Russian leadership. The Trump-Putin meeting in Helsinki in July 2018 has underlined the current US president's lack of responsibility. His unreliability towards US allies and the actions he has taken against the liberal order will ultimately enhance

Putin's position as a negotiator, tactician, and broker in the Middle East and elsewhere. They will also strengthen his position vis-à-vis the European Union and the United States.

Russia's View on the European Union: A Weak Security Player

Since 2004, there has been a fundamental change in Russia's security priorities, accompanied by massive increases in its defense budget. Having failed to achieve a partnership on an equal footing with the United States,[12] Russia has shifted its priorities towards real deterrence and modernizing its weapons arsenal,[13] particularly since 2008. Part of this stance is a growing willingness to include nuclear weapons in Russian strategic and military planning.[14] "We are stuck in a pre-war situation, and only nuclear deterrence is keeping us from war", political scientist Dmitri Suslov describes the Russian position.[15] At the same time, he argues, neither Russia nor NATO is ready for a conventional war.

Against this backdrop, the EU plays no relevant role in Russian security thinking. It is perceived as a weak and rather unimportant player in security terms and as an appendage of the United States. This explains why, in 2016, Russia hardly reacted to disarmament proposals by Germany's then foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. When it comes to disarmament or arms control, neither Germany nor the EU institutions are seen as relevant counterparts; these are issues that Russia will only discuss with the United States.

This situation is particularly critical for Europe, as the US under its current administration has little interest in disarmament negotiations and is modernizing its own weapons systems instead. Both, Russia and the US are currently also upgrading their nuclear arsenal. Despite Russia's military modernization drive since 2008, however, its conventional weapons and technology arsenal will remain asymmetrical to that of the US for a long time. As Aleksandr Kolbin argues in his contribution, Russia is trying to offset this imbalance by prioritizing investment in the nuclear sector in order to develop an instrument suited for hedging and negotiating.[16]

Russia aims to renegotiate existing arms-control treaties in order to adapt them to new realities. In doing so, however, it has no counterpart in Washington to talk to. Its situation is made even more difficult due to the lack of confidence-building measures, missing communications at the political level and the fact that existing forums like the NATO-Russia Council are very little used in any serious way.[17] Moscow is also somewhat disconcerted by the US' domestic debate on Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election campaign. For, while Russian authorities certainly relish that such capabilities are ascribed to them, they are also realistic enough to recognize the very limited effect of their activities. Congress's actions against Russia, the polarization in the American domestic debate on Russia, and the lack of direct channels of communication with the White House are meeting with criticism among the Russian leadership.

Assessing the Russia Risk Correctly

Reestablishing political dialogue with Russia over arms control and disarmament should be an absolute priority at this time. The same goes for regular military-to-military contacts that would make it possible to directly address possible mistakes and misjudgments. Aleksandr Golts sees the current peaceful coexistence of Russia and the United States/EU as the best possible scenario achievable at this stage. Regular personal contacts at the highest political and military level are important, even if people speak only to maintain a line of contact. According to Angela Stent,[18] a "grand bargain" between Washington and Moscow is unlikely, and only small steps will promise success. In the medium term, relevant areas of cooperation include contacts at military level, issues of arms control – particularly regarding the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the New Start treaties – as well as common rules for dealing with cyber space and contacts between the secret services in the fight against international terrorism.

Given the internal deadlock in US policy toward Russia under President Trump, all of this is problematic and hardly in the interest of the EU. The fact that the US did not coordinate its sanctions on Russia sanctions with the EU further hampers trust and cooperation between the two sides. The chances of necessary contacts between Washington and Moscow are also diminished given the overrated view of Russia's role in the 2016 presidential election and attempts by several political camps to use the Russia issue to damage – or even topple – Trump. This development is highly alarming for the EU which holds closer economic ties to Russia than the United States does, but, at the same time, depends entirely on Washington for its security. US economic sanctions against Russia, in fact, mostly hurt European businesses. It is not inconceivable that Trump could use such sanctions also to improve his negotiating position toward the EU on trade issues or on matters such as North Stream 2.

The EU and its member states would be well advised to find ways to communicate better and more regularly with

Russia without surrendering their principles of sovereignty and the inviolability of borders. There should be no "bargaining" with Moscow that would offer compromises towards a rapprochement with Russia only to counterbalance the deteriorating relations with the United States. Any such course would undermine the EU's interest in a values- and rules-based order. More EU engagement is needed in the Minsk process in regard to setting up a UN peacekeeping mission in the occupied territories in eastern Ukraine. The same is true for supporting domestic reforms in Ukraine and the other countries of the Eastern Partnership. All of these are areas in which the Franco-German tandem could play an important role while also involving other EU members such as Poland, the Baltic states, Sweden, and Finland. At the same time, the EU needs to define its medium- and long-term goals vis-à-vis Russia beyond the current crisis management: Where to should relations be developed? Which vision does the EU pursue? Which partners does it have in Russia? How can these goals be reached?

Germany and its partners in the EU and NATO should neither under- nor overestimate the risks Russia represents. At this point in time, Russia does not plan any attack on the Baltic states or Poland. Nonetheless, it has practiced this option in military maneuvers in order to be prepared for it under certain special, highly unlikely circumstances. Credible deterrence is required first and foremost to counter any such risk, and this also requires an increase in defense spending in Germany and other EU countries. This is the only option to compensate for the United States' creeping retreat from Europe in the medium and long term and to give any offers of cooperation the required weight in terms of security policy. The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) appears to be an important step in the right direction, while avoiding the duplication of NATO structures. Deterrence, a solid understanding of costs and benefits, and clear red lines – that is the language that Moscow understands.

Russia's leadership and elites are in a new "Cold" war with NATO and the EU, and they are preparing for the unlikely event of a real war. In this context, the term "Cold War" does not carry the same meaning as during the East-West conflict following World War II. Instead, it describes a situation in which no war has been declared, yet the other side is seen as a strategic opponent. Russia has certainly also taken security measures designed to weaken the "enemy", but these measures – disinformation, subversion, military testing, deterrence – have remained below the threshold of a "hot" war so far. Russia's policy has been triggered by its perception of being under threat from NATO despite the growing division in transatlantic relations. The EU and its member states are well advised to take heed of this perception and prepare themselves with appropriate measures. Russia is certainly preparing for a possible military conflict, for example with comprehensive exercises like ZAPAD 2017 which enact scenarios involving mock attacks on NATO member states.[19]

NATO's and the EU's strategy should include offers of communication and cooperation with Russia without giving way to the belief that these can reduce the risks in the short term. It is all the more important to invest in a robust defense based on a new assessment of the current security situation. The spaces neglected by the EU and NATO, in which Russia is increasingly active, need to be closed off. This concerns social networks and public debates in the EU member states as well as conflict zones in the Middle East or in regions of weak statehood like the Balkans from which the EU and the United States appear to be retreating. In any offers of dialogue and cooperation, compromises should not be agreed without getting something concrete in return. For instance, the Donbas sanctions should not be weakened in any step-by-step fashion without Russia actually supporting a functioning ceasefire.

Protecting existing treaties (the Paris Charter, the INF and the New START treaties) and institutions (OSCE) remains a key interest for Germany in dealing with Russia. At stake is the credibility of its principles. It is therefore in the fundamental interest of German foreign and security policy that Germany allocates the necessary resources – military budget, diplomacy, research and expertise – and develops a political strategy on Russia. This requires a systemic and cultural shift away from the current focus on crisis management and public diplomacy toward more comprehensive, long-term, and pro-active foreign and security policies that include Germany's European partners.

This publication is the result of a strategy group workshop and conference in 2017. It provides the perspective of key Russian and international authors on Russia's security policy rationale. Its main aim is to improve the understanding of the functioning and logic of Russian foreign, security, and disinformation policy, and to advise key decision makers in Germany. The strategy group was made possible through the generous support of the Robert Bosch Foundation.

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Notes

1 "Lavrov calls for 'post-West' world order; dismisses NATO as Cold War relict," *DW*, February 18, 2017 <http://www.dw.com/en/lavrov-calls-for-post-west-world-order-dismisses-nato-as-cold-war-relic/a-37614099> (accessed August 22, 2018).

2 In most cases, there were mass demonstrations supported by society which led to a change of power at the head of the state. From the perspective of the Russian elites, these mass demonstrations receive crucial support from the U.S. through its financing of NGOs and similar organisation which then organize such demonstrations. Among them are Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003, the Orange Revolution/Euromaidan in Ukraine 2004-5 and 2013-14, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and mass demonstrations in Russia in 2011-12.

3 Cf. Aleksandr Golts in this publication.

4 Quoted from a lecture by Irina Busygina at a conference of the Strategic Group, Russia-Eastern Partnership, Russia and the West – A security dilemma in a multi-polar world, November 27, 2017, Berlin, DGAP.

5 Stefan Meister, "Russia, Germany and Nord Stream 2 – Ostpolitik 2.0?", Transatlantic Academy (December 7, 2015) <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/node/874> (accessed August 22, 2018).

6 United States Committee on Foreign Relations, "Menendez Announces New Comprehensive Sanctions Legislation Against Russia," July 19, 2018, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/menendez-announces-new-comprehensive-sanctions-legislation-against-russia> (accessed August 22, 2018).

7 The Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council Andrey Kortunov has doubts whether the world is really becoming multipolar as the Russian leadership predicts; Andrey Kortunov, "Why the world is not becoming multipolar," Russian International Affairs Council, June 27, 2018, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/why-the-world-is-not-becoming-multipolar/> (accessed August 22, 2018).

8 Cf. the article on disinformation of Stefan Meister in this publication.

9 Leonid Bershidski, "Putin's goals in Syria went beyond saving Assad (Op-ed)," *The Moscow Times*, January 5, 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/putins-goals-in-syria-went-beyond-saving-assad-60121> (accessed August 22, 2018).

10 Cf. Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Order* (London, Washington D.C., 2015).

11 Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: US-Russian Relations in the Twenty-first Century* (Washington D.C., 2015.)

12 Former President Barack Obama, by calling Russia a regional power, provoked counter-reactions motivated by wounded pride; Julian Borger, "Barack Obama: Russia is a regional power showing weakness over Ukraine," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/25/barack-obama-russia-regional-power-ukraine-weakness> (accessed August 22, 2018).

13 Cf. Pavel Felgenhauer in this publication.

14 Cf. Aleksandr Kolbin in this publication.

15 Quoted from a lecture by Dmitri Suslov, Director of the Program for Globalization and Regionalization of the Valdai Club and Deputy Director of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the Moscow Higher School of Economics, at a conference of the Strategic Group, Russia-Eastern Partnership, Russia and the West – A security dilemma in a multi-polar world, November 27, 2017, Berlin, DGAP

16 Cf. Aleksandr Kolbin and Pavel Felgenhauer in this publication.

17 The fact that military-to-military contacts were taking place again in the first place was worth a newspaper headline: John Hudson, "Trump administration set for broad engagement with Russia in early 2018", *Buzzfeed*, January 7, 2018 <https://www.buzzfeed.com/johnhudson/trump-administration-set-for-broad-engagement-with-russia?utm_term=.er4d83DARq#.vyADKWVnA9, 08.01.2018> (accessed August 22, 2018).

18 Quoted from a lecture by Angela Stent at a conference of the Strategic Group, Russia-Eastern Partnership, Russia and the West – A security dilemma in a multi-polar world, November 27, 2017, Berlin, DGAP

19 Roger McDermott, "Zapad 2017 and the initial period of war," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 115 (September 2017), Jamestown Foundation <https://jamestown.org/program/zapad-2017-and-the-initial-period-of-war/> (accessed August 22, 2018).

Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy: Realpolitik, Militarism and the Vertical of Power

Aleksandr Golts

After Russia's annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, many Western analysts highlighted the 'unpredictability' of Russia strategic decisions. There is certainly a risk of unpredictability in a system in which no one can balance the unilateral decisions of the president. However, it is possible to judge the direction of Russia's foreign policy on the basis of a correct understanding of the ideological, political, and bureaucratic framework of its leader(s)' decision-making. This framework is rooted in the Realpolitik of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, as well as on a militarism that sees any international or domestic conflict situation as requiring a military response. This militarism has contributed to a concentration of decision-making that excludes competing or alternative sources of information. The intelligence background of President Vladimir Putin and many of the Russian leadership reinforces the system's tendency towards secrecy.

The Zero-Sum World of Putin's Realpolitik

Russia's foreign policy decisions have solid ideological foundations as Putin is looking at the world through the lens of realpolitik. However, this is not the sophisticated realpolitik envisaged by the likes of Henry Kissinger, in which the balance of interests between the leading world powers is very complex.[1] In this modern realpolitik, balance is reached by considering not only military interests, but also above all economic ones. By contrast, Putin's worldview is based on the older realpolitik of Bismarck, Metternich, and Stalin. It is a simple, if not primitive, view in which leading world powers divide the world among themselves through endless zero-sum negotiations.

Putin's speech at the UN General Assembly in 2015 was an exemplary exposition of his concept of a 'Yalta system' with zones of special interests.[2] The Russian president seems to believe that this kind of Cold War division of the world benefits peace. For example, he said in 2016 that 'the strategic balance of force that emerged in the late 40s/50s of the last century helped the world to avoid global armed conflict.'[3] In such a system, weaker countries – especially those with weaker militaries – are like pieces on a global chessboard, doomed to obey the great powers. Periodically, when he wished to taunt them, Putin has talked about the 'limited sovereignty' of the European states.

This thinking has led Putin to the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea. Simultaneously, given his belief that any popular movement is the result of a foreign conspiracy, as explained below, he viewed Ukraine's Maidan Revolution as a Western attempt to remove him from the table of great powers. Therefore, Putin immediately retaliated by annexing Crimea and starting the 'secret' war in Donbas.

Militarism and Putin's Power Hierarchy

The only tool Russia has to win the perceived realpolitik competition is military force. As a result, it has become a militarist state. The most important political decisions are based on military-technical calculations rather than a comprehensive analysis of state interests. Equally, the attitudes of the elite and the public towards major international issues are shaped by a military rationale.[4] Military thinking and military values have deeply penetrated all spheres of society.

Putin is sure that the "vertical of power", the strict military-type hierarchy he has built is the best way to rule Russia. In it, the president sits at the top of the pyramid and acts as the supreme commander, while loyal officials below him execute his will in every corner of the vast country. This system is based on military-feudal principles: Power is monolithic, the separation of powers is heresy, and the military principle of unity of command also applies to the political system.

In this context, any crisis is seen as the result of activities by hostile forces that want to weaken Russia. This was most clearly demonstrated by Putin's response to the Beslan tragedy in 2004, when more than 300 people, including 186 children, were killed as security forces stormed a school building where Chechen terrorists were holding about a thousand hostages. At the time, Putin blamed external forces who, in his words, supported the terrorists because they, "believed that Russia – as one of the largest nuclear powers in the world – is a threat. Therefore, it is necessary to eliminate this threat. And terrorism is, of course, just a tool to achieve these goals."[5] For Putin, global powers, above all the United States, are adversaries that use terrorists as instruments.

This sounded like a vestige of Cold War thinking at the time, but Putin reiterated almost the same statement 10 years later when he explained Russia's conflict with the West in terms of a permanent desire of other great powers to disarm his country. "You know, at the Valdai Club I gave an example of our most recognizable symbol. It is the bear protecting his taiga. You see, if we continue the analogy, sometimes I think that maybe it would be best if our bear just sat still. [...] Maybe then he would be left alone. But no, he won't be! Because someone will always try to chain him up. And as soon as he is chained they will tear out his teeth and claws. I apply this analogy to the power of nuclear deterrence. As soon as – God forbid! – it happens and they no longer need the bear, the taiga will be taken over."[6]

In Putin's eyes, the country's 1,550 nuclear warheads are what puts Russia at a peer level with the most powerful state in the world. This explains the Kremlin's strong reaction to the United States' withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002[7] and to its intention to deploy a missile-defense system in Poland and Romania. The treaty was a unique international document in that it stated that there was a state, Russia, capable of destroying the United States and that the United States had to put up with this fact.

The idea of deterring non-nuclear, and even non-military, threats with nuclear weapons implies an internal contradiction, however. Nuclear might is an effective element of political pressure only if others see its owner as reckless. Putin initially had the reputation to be quite rational, but he then began to change this by indicating that he was willing to push the nuclear button if necessary. From this moment on, Russian decision-making took on an aggressive nuclear rhetoric.

Putin's constant preoccupation with nuclear issues is the backdrop against which Western leaders are prone to misinterpret Russian actions. He is convinced that the United States is trying to deploy missile-defense systems, not to protect Europe against strikes from the Middle East – this is the officially stated goal – but in order to destroy Russia's missiles at the launch stage. Nobody seems to have informed him that the US Congress stopped financing research in this field in 2009.

Yet Russia's militaristic rationale has not only given rise to 'phantom' fears about the West. It has also had a decisive impact on Russia's policy in the post-Soviet space. The logic behind Russia's actions in Ukraine and Georgia is based on the belief that any rapprochement of these countries with the West will inevitably lead to NATO bases there. As a result, Russia finds itself embroiled in a lengthy and pointless conflict in Ukraine, and in painful isolation internationally.

Presidial Might Instead of Separated Powers

In creating the vertical of power, Putin removed any checks and balances from Russia's political system, consolidated enormous power in his hands, and became the sole decision-maker. His small inner circle of advisors plays only a minor role. As a case in point, it was Putin's personal decision to annex Crimea. He did not need to coordinate his actions with the parliament, and it took less than an hour for the second chamber, the Federation Council, to allow the use of troops in Ukraine. In a similar fashion, parliament adopted the resolution on the use of troops in Syria within 10 minutes. Putin does not even feel the need to inform Russia's allies of his decisions. In 2015, the leaders of the other countries in the Collective Security Treaty Organization learned from media reports that Russia had started to launch Kalibr cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea into Syria.

The vertical of power has formalized a strongly concentrated decision-making process. According to the constitution, it is the Security Council which should be the most important body for core issues of national security. Chaired by the president, it is composed of key ministers and agency heads and was established in 1991 as a forum for coordinating and integrating national security policy. In reality, however, its authority and responsibilities are much more limited than, for example, the Politburo under Leonid Brezhnev in Soviet times, whose members represented the positions of the ministries and agencies they headed, and whose secretary general was only the first among equals. By comparison, the Security Council is just an advisory body, and the president appoints its members according to his personal preferences. Its members do not necessarily hold leadership positions in particular 'power' agencies. For example, Sergey Ivanov and Boris Grizlov remained members even after they lost their respective positions as chiefs of the Presidential Administration in 2016 and the State Duma in 2011. Finally, Putin is not obliged to take any of the council's advice into account when making decisions.

The secretary of the Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, and his staff play a central role in decision-making. Putin prepares meetings by giving orders to the council's staff, who then turn to the relevant state agencies, scientific institutions, and even NGOs for proposals and ideas. Not all of these ultimately reach Putin; it is the council's staff who decide which ones are passed on to him.

Leaders who do not ask the advice of others and decide everything on their own become, by necessity, hostage to the information they receive and to the officials involved in their decision-making. Putin's military advisers prepare scenarios and plans for him that aim to meet his expectations, even if these have no connection to reality. A case in point is the idea that US missile-defense interceptors could be replaced by cruise missiles and later by nuclear warheads. Another example is the theory that hostile forces are collecting "biological material" from Russian citizens to prepare for a bacteriological war. By pushing such scenarios, the military has increasingly gained the confidence of the president. In doing so, however, it has also been leading him to false conclusions and erroneous decisions with potentially serious consequences. For instance, the US deployment of a missile-defense system has been falsely interpreted – a mistake which has brought the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty to the brink of collapse.

A decision-making system of this kind is, therefore, a source of crises. Any of the leader's ideas can be accepted and implemented without any serious expert assessment. The annexation of Crimea came down to an emotional reaction by Putin, who was facing the overthrow of the pro-Russian regime in Ukraine and interpreted it as the result of a conspiracy by Western countries. The same holds true for the decision to launch the military operation in Syria, which embroiled Russia in a conflict for which it had no plan, let alone a strategy. At the time, Putin only stated that Russia's goal was to stabilize the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Strikingly, when asked about the details of the Syrian operation at a press conference in 2016, he answered "I don't know" 11 times.[8] Since then, the Kremlin has tried but failed to withdraw troops from Syria several times.[9]

Militarizing Domestic Conflicts

Military force is the one strong card Russia can play, and there is no doubt that Putin will use it if a domestic crisis should occur in a neighboring country. The Kremlin tends to militarize any conflict; their main phobia, the fear of 'color revolutions', was therefore bound to acquire a military dimension. In the eyes of Russia's leaders, any attempt by a people to remove its authoritarian rulers is the result of a conspiracy instigated by Western intelligence agencies. "The 'color revolutions' increasingly take on the form of armed conflict; they are designed according the rules of military art and utilize all available instruments", Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu stated in 2014.[10] Accordingly, public protest in any form was defined as a new form of warfare in the military doctrine signed by the president in the same year.[11] The section outlining the main internal military risks especially refers to "subversive information activities against the population, especially young citizens of the State, aimed at undermining the historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions related to the defense of the fatherland." In characterizing the essential features of modern military conflicts, the doctrine highlights the "integrated use of military force and of political, economic, informational or other non-military measures applied by extensively utilizing the people's potential for protest and special operations forces".

This rationale enables the authorities to cast as traitor any Russian protesting against the government. The military doctrine renders all public protest an act of sabotage organized by hostile special forces. Should propaganda fail to quell them, military force is the main instrument at the regime's disposal. Defense Minister Shoigu, therefore, directed the armed forces to develop plans to counter non-military threats, such as public unrest in Russian cities, by military means. However, the General Staff and the General Staff Academy subsequently ignored this order to prepare plans to counter a Russian 'color revolution'. It looked as if Russian officers did not want to shoot at their own people. As a result, the Kremlin established the National Guard, setting up a chain of command that seems to ensure that all orders will be carried out.

Secrecy and (Dis)information

Another sign of the Russian leadership's inherently militarist thinking is the securitization of decision-making. The intelligence background of President Putin and those around him strongly influences how they approach the information they receive. Given their professional inclination towards secrecy, they also tend to consider covertly acquired information as more – or even the only – important information. In turn, all publicly available information is seen as subject to deception, that is as unconfirmed rumors retold in questionable circumstances which need not be brought to the attention of the head of state and his decision-makers.

The emphasis on covert methods of control also goes along with an absolute disregard for the public's interest in information. Nothing is more contrary to Putin's method of governance than transparent and candid statements on the tasks and objectives of his government. From his perspective, all public declarations are either acts of deception or deliberate disinformation. For Putin, foreign policy is the business of kings: a secret, personal relationship among leaders.

In consequence, the Kremlin has cut itself off from virtually all independent sources of information. Putin has not only destroyed the free press; they, too, are seen as part of the ongoing psychological warfare aimed at possible adversaries and Russian citizens alike. Ironically, this means the Kremlin itself ultimately falls prey to the disinformation it creates: Its own decision-making is affected, for instance, when disinformation fuels popular support for certain policies. In the Ukraine conflict, for example, it led to the media whipping up militarist sentiments.

A Sense of Destiny

A crucial assumption that all will go well in the end seems to underpin much of Putin's foreign policy. Fortune was simply on his side, he said during an appearance on a TV show a few years ago. He apparently believes that luck has helped him to prevail against all odds so far. In the same vein, the Kremlin believes the future to be unpredictable; in their view, unforeseeable events may dramatically improve Russia's position on the international stage. Even the 2008 economic crisis in the West was interpreted to feed the Kreml's illusion that a "new world order" will allow Russia a rebirth and a new rise as a superpower.

Speaking in 2012, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated: "A radically changed 'new deck of cards' will allow a new beginning in many aspects, and the rules governing the international hierarchy today will not necessarily hold in the future. For example, it may be that what counts then is not where a technology was created, but who can use it better. In light of this, Russia holds obvious advantages with its literate and daring population and its enormous resources".[12] The rationale is baffling: Thanks to its own "daring" population, future changes will put Russia into the position to use other people's achievements. In other words: Due to their particular talents, Russians will be able to use new technologies better than they who invented them. Meanwhile, however, there are no indications how the country will solve its demographic problem or exactly which of Russia's "enormous resources" will propel it forward. The rationale of Russia's leadership is not that of an analyst but of a casino gambler.

Implications and Recommendations

The 'unpredictability' of Russia's leadership hinges on a system of views and approaches that is not likely to change. Attempts to convince the Kremlin that the modern world is different from the way it is seen in Moscow are equally unlikely to be successful. Putin will hardly accept the argument of his Western "counterparts" that the days when Churchill and Stalin drew other countries' borders at will are irrevocably gone. To make it worse, he will see any such effort as an act of hypocrisy and an attempt to exclude Russia from international affairs. This is why it seems nearly impossible to resolve the conflict between Russia and the West by diplomatic means.

It is also clear that such a deeply militaristic system of views and approaches can lead to new crises, slide toward a new Cold War, or even to direct military confrontation. Given this situation, it is advisable for the West to try to get back to the Cold War situation of peaceful coexistence. It is necessary to avoid any direct military confrontation. The West should therefore concentrate on the practical work of mutually verifying military activities, of developing new military confidence-building measures, and of working towards agreements on the limitations of conventional and nuclear weapons.

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The Russian Military: Under-Reformed and Over-Stretched Instrument of Choice

Pavel Baev

Russia's leadership has invested strongly into modernizing the country's military and turning it into a heavy-impact instrument of foreign policy, and it sees the readiness to apply it as a crucial advantage in the evolving confrontation with the West. Even though the Kremlin has overcommitted its diminishing resources to a half-accomplished rearmament and to building positions of military strength in many theatres, NATO should take the security risks generated by Russia's military activities very seriously. In addition, the alliance needs to make sure that Russian efforts to exploit differences among its member states are defeated.

Reforms and Rearmament

The modernization of Russia's armed forces is wrapped in so many layers of secrecy, disinformation, propaganda, and corruption that any net assessment comes with a wide margin of error. The much-anticipated Russian-Belarussian Zapad-2017 exercise in September 2017 provided new evidence for the need to strengthen NATO's capabilities to contain Russia, but it did not reveal preparations for a massive offensive in the Baltic theatre. Meanwhile, Russia is keen to claim a "victory" in the conflict in Syria, yet also faces a long-term military engagement there from which a fast withdrawal is not possible. Protracted economic stagnation reduces the state's revenues, but the leadership refuses to execute necessary budget cuts in defense expenditures. The sustainability of Russia's old-fashioned military machine is diminishing, but the Kremlin is still determined to exploit it as the prime instrument of foreign policy.

Russia launched a strikingly radical military reform in 2008, immediately after the war with Georgia, seeking to turn its armed forces into a versatile instrument of policy. It was not an opportune moment as the economy plunged into a deep five-quarters-long recession, so the decision on rearmament, which should have complemented the structural reorganizations, was postponed in 2011, when the ambitious 2020 State Armament program was approved.[1] It is clear in hindsight that the decisions on reform were not sufficiently conceptualized and that many crucial choices, for instance on professionalizing the armed forces, were not made. The new set of official documents, which ranges from the Military Doctrine of December 2014 to the Naval Policy of July 2017, contains long lists of threats and demands, but no mention of reform and few guidelines for implementation. Hugely expensive state orders for new weapon systems have been poorly coordinated with the transformation of the military, so that the main priority is the modernization of the nuclear arsenal and, in particular, the acquisition of the Borei-class submarines. Meanwhile, the strategic forces are completely excluded from the reform.

Determined efforts at restructuring the conventional forces have made the newly formed army brigades more capable of deploying rapidly to various theatres, from the Arctic to the Caucasus, and they have also improved the preparedness of the air force and the navy. However, the vast mobilization infrastructure that was supposed to support the deployment of reserve capabilities for a protracted conventional war was effectively dismantled between 2009 and 2011. That particular reform is probably now deplored but cannot be undone. The special operations forces have been strengthened significantly, but the aim of professionalization has been postponed indefinitely. As a result, the regular army units still depend heavily upon conscription and are practically unable to perform combat tasks during the spring and autumn draft periods. The armed forces have gained new capabilities for waging "hybrid wars", but the combat units are lagging in high-tech command-and-control as well as in the communications and reconnaissance systems crucial for waging a modern war.[2]

The massive increases in defense expenditure – from $47.3 billion in 2011 to $66.3 in 2017 – produced a positive momentum in modernizing the armed forces and made it possible, for instance, to expand several brigades back into divisions.[3] Currently, however, the accumulated effect of economic recession and the prospects of prolonged stagnation are forcing the government to cut defense spending.[4] The approval of a new 2025 State Armament Program has been postponed due to Russia's inability to set realistic new guidelines for procurement; it is currently reconfigured into a 2018–2027 timeframe, with many projects in limbo.[5]

The top brass, led by the popular defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, insist on more funding for the heavily engaged conventional forces, but there is also a strong political imperative to continue prioritizing the strategic forces. Nuclear capabilities are currently the main underutilized asset for Russia's policy, but finding a way to turn

them into a useful political instrument is difficult.[6] Many high-profile projects, like the Yasen-class cruise-missile nuclear submarines or the T-50 (PAK-FA) "fifth generation" fighter have been postponed, and the orders for the main battle tanks (T-14) and infantry fighting vehicles (T-15) have been reduced. Nonetheless, such economizing cannot solve the problem of worsening underfunding.

Overall, Russia's leadership follows the usual bureaucratic pattern of exaggerating successes and downplaying shortcomings. This is dangerous as it overestimates capabilities and underestimates the deepening problems.

Experiences and Shortcomings

The swift and flawless military operation that secured the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was followed by engaging the army in the undeclared war in Donbas later that same year and the intervention in Syria, launched in 2015. Each of these operations involved a different combination of key elements of military power: Crimea saw a rapid deployment of special operations forces backed by naval infantry and airborne battalions; Donbas involved trench battles with armor and artillery units; Syria has been targeted by air power with an added element of long-distance missile strikes and, more recently, the use of military police and private contractors.[7] Russia's leadership has reasons to perceive each of these experiments in projecting power as a success. However, they also require sustained commitments of personnel and resources, and thus constitute a significant burden that limits the "free capacity" for possible new operations.

Crimea has been converted into a militarized "bastion" that dominates the Black Sea theatre, but it is quite difficult to operate the new bases there and, equally, the old naval base in Sevastopol, because every bit of supply has to be delivered by sea. Similar problems complicate strategic planning regarding the grouping of forces deployed in the Kaliningrad exclave, where Iskander tactical missiles are now deployed on a permanent basis.[8] Russia is also building several small but heavy-maintenance bases in the Arctic. The "ceasefire" in the Donbas war zone is broken by daily artillery duels, and Russia needs to rotate the units exposed to this war of attrition. Any operation aimed at expanding this "rump Novorossiya" would require a concentration of almost all available army brigades.[9]

The most complicated problems are generated by the need to sustain the intervention in Syria, where a "victory" is proclaimed but heavy fighting goes on. This high-profile projection of power beyond Russia's immediate border areas gave the high command opportunities to test newly developed weapon systems and to demonstrate the capabilities for long-range high-precision missile strikes.[10] At the same time, it has put the navy, which has to deliver a large volume of supplies for the operation, under heavy stress, while the deployment of Russia's only aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, was far from successful and the vessel is now docked for extensive repairs. The air force has performed above expectations, but maintenance issues are accumulating, resulting in the loss of two Tu-95MS strategic bombers, while a Tu-22M3 long-range bomber crashed during the Zapad-2017 exercises. At present, besides the mixed squadron deployed at the Hmeimim airbase in Syria, which came under a series of attacks in January 2018, various military police and special forces units are taking part in the intervention, as well as military advisers and private security contractors. The casualties increase accordingly.[11]

Overall, the new experiences in using military force as an instrument of foreign policy are evaluated by President Vladimir Putin and the military leadership as positive: They boosted Russia's international status while sustaining domestic mobilization in support of the regime. The desire for more proactive steps is checked, nevertheless, by the imperative to continue the ongoing "victorious" but burdensome and high-risk endeavors.

Implications and Recommendations

Russia's leaders understand that the overall balance of forces in the confrontation with the West is not in the country's favor, but they assume that they can exploit divisions and disagreements within the EU and NATO. They perceive their own readiness to use military instruments as a crucial advantage in particular crisis situations where Western unity is challenged and NATO's decision-making is awkward. This advantage may be negated, however, by the extremely closed and capricious character of decision-making in the Kremlin, which scorns careful assessments of risks and consequences. The matter of the availability and reliability of military instruments is coming gradually to the fore because Russia has overcommitted its diminishing resources to half-accomplished rearmament and to building positions of military strength in many theatres from the Arctic to Abkhazia and from Kaliningrad to Syria. Time is also not on Russia's side as its economic decline continues, despite the relative stability of oil prices. This could prompt its authoritarian regime to try to score another "victory" sooner rather than later, and before its Western adversaries manage to come together to contain Russia.

NATO should take very seriously the security risks generated by Russia's military activities and by the temptations in the Kremlin for more power-projecting experiments. At the same time, the alliance needs to make sure that Russia's tactics for exploiting differences in the Western camp are defeated. This requires careful assessments of counter-measures that would ensure Russia's sufficient containment without damaging the unity of NATO. The question of increasing defense expenditures is typically at the center of Western debates, and it is essential for European leaders to accept that this issue is not merely related to demands by US President Donald Trump, but also emerges as a necessary response to the changed security environment.

It is important to avoid fanning alarmism about Russia's readiness to launch a massive offensive in the Baltic theatre. Instead, NATO, together with Finland and Sweden, should continue their work of strengthening the collective defense in this vulnerable but duly prioritized part of interface with Russia. In the Black Sea theatre, it is of pivotal importance for the United States and Europe to rehabilitate the strained ties with Turkey, which remains a NATO member despite its difficult behavior and its ambivalent rapprochement with Russia.

The combination of containment and engagement designed by NATO is set to remain fluid, and the alliance is at a disadvantage because it needs to respond to Russia's proactive and determined testing of Western resolve. The containment track is relatively straightforward, and the main challenge there is to prevent Russia from exploiting every crack in the transatlantic and European unity. The engagement track is more uncertain, and Western leaders cannot put any trust in Russian commitments to uphold stability in specific conflict areas or to promote security in Europe. Traditional arms-control methods could hardly yield fruit in the new environment of "hybrid" contestation by Russia, which spreads across a spectrum from cyber-attacks to missile defenses. Negotiated risk-reduction measures, for that matter, could work only insofar as Russia finds it useful to avoid provocative incidents at sea or in the air. One high-priority task is to re-energize discussions on nuclear-security matters which are aimed at preventing the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Russia has invested massively in modernizing its nuclear arsenal, and it is crucial to ensure that it is firmly dissuaded from attempting to turn it into a useful instrument of foreign policy.

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Russian Information Policy: Disinformation as a Tool of Russia's Security Strategy

Stefan Meister

The Rise of Russian Disinformation

While cyberattacks have been part of Russia's security policy since the 2000s – one example is the 20017 cyber-attack on Estonia –, the Kremlin was relatively late in adapting its global information strategy to respond to the changes of the 21st century. As a result, the Russian government did not dominate the national or international discourse on domestic issues like the 2004 Beslan terror attack. Equally, it failed to do so in its post-Soviet neighborhood during the Russian-Georgian war in 2008. The launch of a more comprehensive Russian information strategy was ultimately triggered by the 2011/12 mass demonstrations in Moscow and St Petersburg around the parliamentary and presidential elections. The regime saw these protests as inspired by foreign actors, mainly by the United States. It was at this moment that Russia started to invest heavily in a disinformation strategy. It was based on the view that security policies in the 21st century had to comprise the domination and manipulation of the information sphere. Russia had tested many instruments aimed at this goal during the Cold War. However, the digital sphere provided the security and intelligence services with new tools to undermine the credibility of the West – even without being able to offer an attractive alternative model.

As a result, disinformation has been part of the security strategy and hybrid warfare developed by Russia's general staff and intelligence services since about 2012/13, following Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency. With a general perception of being under attack by the West, Russia's leadership has been reacting from a position of weakness, using cyberattacks and disinformation to counter Western soft power and to compensate for its own conventional strategic weakness. While Russia's perception of being vulnerable and under threat was mainly prompted by the color revolutions in the post-Soviet countries and the 2011/12 mass demonstrations in Russia, it has also been fed by a general impression that the West wages a media war and uses NGOs to weaken Russia.

For the Russian authorities, then, their policy is nothing but a tit-for-tat to activities previously suffered by the West: They claim to do what everybody else is also doing. Initially, Russia's strategy was rather reactive. It was only after it proved to be effective in confusing Western governments and societies that a more offensive approach was developed. This includes a shift by Russian international media outlets like RT and Sputnik away from merely casting positive pictures of Russia toward presenting Russian perspectives on perceived negative developments in Europe and the United States. Part of this policy is manipulating public opinion in the West via social networks, troll factories, and bot nets. Another is boosting anti-US, anti-NATO, and anti-elite narratives.

In doing so, Russia's disinformation strategy largely functions by trial and error. It is tailor-made to every target country, focusing on the narratives and bad news that work best in any particular environment. Many of the instruments used to influence the public and to discredit politicians, experts, institutions, and the media in the West have been tested before in Russia and the post-Soviet countries.

The Russian regime first developed and tested at home all the practices and tools which were later used abroad, especially following the start of the Ukraine conflict.[1] The post-Soviet Russian media had initially been developed as a system of public relations for the ruling elites and, therefore, lack an ethos of balanced information or fact checking. Equally, they do not understand themselves as the "Fourth Estate" in a democracy. Instead, they have adopted aggressive, biased approaches and practices from Western public-relations agencies and TV channels such as Fox News in the United States. The regime uses the media to influence public opinion at home and abroad by means of a communication strategy that functions as a self-learning system: The actors involved test and learn what works best to have an impact on the audience and subsequently implement it at their own volition in a political framework set by the Russian leadership. Applied at home and abroad, this system also frequently operates in a public-private partnership with Russian oligarchs or businessmen and by intelligence agencies co-opting "independent" hackers.

Although it may have appeared differently in the cases of the French presidential candidacy of François Fillon in 2017 and the Czech presidential election of Miloš Zeman in 2018, the main aim of Russia's disinformation campaigns in the West is not primarily to further the election of Kremlin-friendly politicians. Rather, it is geared toward disruption: It seeks to reduce the credibility of governments and politicians, to disturb the functioning of democratic institutions or the media, and to discredit Western liberalism in general. With these goals in mind, the Russian state and its security forces, for instance, use

cyberattacks to obtain information about leaders they consider as opponents and make it public via WikiLeaks and other websites. This took place, most notoriously, in regard to Hillary Clinton during the 2016 US presidential elections.

The Kremlin's policy is aimed at showing the Russian public that the West offers no alternative to the Putin system – however dysfunctional, unreliable, and riddled with deficits the latter may be – and that Putin is the president of choice to guarantee stability for the Russian people. In a global context, the disinformation strategy also centers around projecting an alternative paradigm to the Western liberal value system. Russia's disinformation, thus, accentuates and exaggerates the existing weaknesses of European and Western states and societies. It seeks to undermine the self-confidence of Western societies and to erode their trust in their own media and state institutions.

Russian Disinformation in Germany

The countries of the European Union, and particularly Germany, are important targets of Russian disinformation and cyberattacks. In the case of Germany, this is due to Chancellor Angela Merkel's leading role in the Ukraine conflict and the sanctions against Russia as well as Germany's crucial importance for the stability of the EU in general. Russian disinformation typically plays into paradigms relating to World War II and fascism, perceived American aggression against the pacifist part of German society, general resentment of the United States and NATO, as well as migration and radical Islamism.

The instruments of Russian disinformation in Germany include:

- Russian international media such as RT and its national branches like RT Deutsch, the media platform Sputnik and its German branch, as well as Internet trolls manipulating social networks;
- the Russian security services, especially the foreign military intelligence agency (GRU), which works with co-opted hacker groups like Fancy Bear in cyberattacks to gather sensitive information, often about politicians, which is subsequently used to manipulate public opinion, especially in the context of elections;
- increasing connections with left- and right-wing populist parties and groups like Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the anti-Islamic movement PEGIDA, but also with parts of the left-wing party Die Linke; and
- Putin- and Russia-friendly national and regional networks in Germany that have been built up over the past 15 years. Using Russian propaganda arguments, for instance against Ukraine, these now argue for lifting sanctions against Russia and recognizing Moscow's annexation of Crimea.

Despite these efforts, however, Russia's international media are not the most successful instrument of disinformation in Germany. In fact, they only represent a niche product targeting particular groups. More effective has been the growing interconnection of Russian disinformation with Germany's populist groups and parties, as well as the peace movement, and the targeted distribution of disinformation content via social networks. Another key factor is the instrumentalization of minorities via online social networks, as exemplified by the case of "Lisa F." in 2016, in which Russian authorities and media pounced on the alleged – and later disproved – kidnapping and rape of a 13-year-old Russian-German girl in Berlin. Russia has been increasingly successful in spreading disinformation content through such groups and networks.[2] At the same time, members of groups and parties like AfD, PEGIDA, and Die Linke have been adopting arguments provided by Russian disinformation and propaganda, and pro-Russia ex-politicians, journalists, and alleged experts have helped to bring such arguments into the mainstream media via interviews or talk-show appearances.

Meanwhile, the number of interviews with representatives of AfD, PEGIDA, or Die Linke on Sputnik or Voice of Russia is disproportionate to their actual importance in Germany's public discourse.

In a related move, the Kremlin has also pursued the policy of building up the connections of Germany's right-wing populist and anti-liberal groups with Russian institutions and actors. The Russian writer Aleksandr Dugin, who plays a crucial role in Russian intellectual debates about conservative national values, Russia's perceivedly unique civilization, and Eurasianism plays a key role in this context. The Kremlin's spin doctors have been using him to develop and maintain conservative networks abroad, and to shape the discussion on values and Russia's role in the world at home.[3] Dugin has comprehensive links with right-wing groups across Europe such as Golden Dawn in Greece and Jobbik in Hungary.

Much more important than the sophisticated disinformation instruments now at the hands of Russia's media and security services is, how they have been applied to promote existing anti-US, anti-EU, anti-media, anti-establishment, and anti-migrant feelings and movements among the German and European public. Most of the narratives pushed by Russia play into perceptions that have, in some form, been simmering in growing parts of European societies, including Germany. The criticism that the governing elites have been unable to solve their countries'

social problems in a more and more complex world is one such storyline. Russia's international media have supported an increasing feeling of insecurity within society in their drive to "build up a counter-public as well as show media manipulation" in Germany's public discourse.[4]

Disinformation and the 2017 German Federal Elections

Russia also used its disinformation toolbox in the campaign for the 2017 Bundestag elections, although the Kremlin's effort during France's presidential election earlier in the year seemed to have been much more comprehensive, with fake news and attacks on Emmanuel Macron. German political and security circles especially feared that Russia might use the huge amount of data and emails stolen in a 2015 cyberattack on the Bundestag – very likely by Fancy Bear and the GRU – to impact the electoral outcome. As a result, the threat alone of such an attack had an indirect impact on the public debate even though Russian disinformation efforts seemed to be comparatively constrained: Russia's elites apparently understood that Germany is much more stable than France, that its political discourse is less polarized, and that support for Chancellor Merkel was strong enough to counterweigh a possible comprehensive attack. In a way, Russia's attack did not occur precisely because Germany's authorities and the public very much expected it to happen, and, having learned from the "Lisa F." case, Russia realized it might turn out counterproductive to the Kremlin's interests.

German decision-makers had long underestimated Russian disinformation campaigns; neither politicians nor security services used to pay special attention to the domestic risk they posed. However, the case of "Lisa F." and the 2015 cyberattack on the Bundestag were wake-up calls. Since then, several institutions have focused on the issue, including the Federal Intelligence Service, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the Foreign Office, and the Ministry of the Interior. According to news reports in January 2018, a center for defense against disinformation at the Ministry of the Interior is being planned but not yet decided.[5] The key challenge in this context is the comprehensive nature of the attacks: As the issue affects foreign, domestic, and security policy, every involved ministry has its related tasks and focuses, which makes coordination and the pooling of responsibility more difficult and complex. For instance, a new department for strategic communication in the Foreign Ministry is also dealing with Russian disinformation in particular.

Recommendations

Despite their important role as the "Fourth Estate", the Western media have been undergoing a deep crisis as the digital revolution has affected their traditional business model and hit quality standards and credibility as a result. Investing in the quality of journalism is therefore vital if the media are to play their role at the heart of democratic societies. Due to their complex nature, there is also a need to invest into the analysis of disinformation, fake news, and cyberattacks worldwide, and to explain to societies how disinformation works. This is the task not just of the media, the think tanks, and the expert community, but also of politicians.

Much of the success of Russian disinformation is due to the vulnerabilities of the societies it targets. Therefore, it is important to strengthen their resilience through media education as well as funding for independent media and for research on disinformation and the impact of social media on modern societies. Western societies and governments also need to do their homework in regard to reforms that respond to social demands and the roots and causes of growing populism. Many of the West's vulnerabilities are homemade and only Western societies and governments can solve them. At the same time, it is crucial adequately to counter Russian disinformation – and also disinformation by other countries such as Turkey and China – in Germany, the EU and its neighborhood.

It is also important not to enhance Russia's disinformation by building it up as something stronger than it is, or to use it as a scapegoat for the own shortcomings of Western states as seems to be the case in the United States. It is important not to panic about Russia's disinformation or to see it as more effective than it really is. Crucially required is an improved coordination of countermeasures among domestic institutions and civil society, and also among the member states and the institutions of the EU. Equally, the institutions at the level of the EU (EU vs Disinformation) and NATO (NATO-Stratcom) which deal with disinformation issues need to be strengthened. Especially in the EU, there is a lack of funding on disinformation by the member states and a deficit in coordination. Countries like Germany can learn a lot of from the experiences of the Baltic states and Finland in countering Russian disinformation and propaganda.

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Russian Activities in Germany's 2017 Elections

Peter Pomerantsev

Media utopians liked to dream of a global information village, with ideas and facts flowing freely across borders, contributing to a stronger and more diverse public space, all bolstering deliberative democracy. However, something more complex is happening. Transnational networks of disinformation and toxic speech have expanded rapidly, and they can organize activities around events such as elections. These networks combine state and non-state actors, and they form rapidly shifting alliances around a variety of interests and aims. It is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of "outside" groups, let alone merely of other states that influence a coherent "domestic" information space. Instead, a malign version of the originally optimistic idea of a global information village is emerging.

This development was very evident in the 2017 parliamentary elections in Germany. An array of international actors, including the Kremlin, teamed up with German anti-establishment movements and parties to try and influence the elections through a mix of inaccurate news and social-media manipulation.

The Nationalist Right

In the months leading up to the elections, the media-monitoring organization Memo 98 revealed a strong bias in favor of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) part by the Russian state-supported, German-language broadcast media outlet Sputnik, often through the promotion of anti-migration themes. Its stories were amplified by pro-AfD twitter accounts displaying automated or bot-like activity. At the same time, US-based alt-right accounts used platforms on 4Chan and Discord to give tactical advice to German far-right activists on matters like memetic warfare, creating fake and parody accounts, and obfuscation. According to research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the hashtag #MGGA (Make Germany Great Again) appeared in 2,961 posts on public forums, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube between 1 July and 6 September 2017. A Russian bot-net based in Nizhny Novgorod was also involved in promoting AfD memes.

The Left

Since 2014, there have been significant political intersections between the extreme right and the extreme left in Germany, for example, with regard to Ukrainian politics. German political observers speak of a "cross-front" (Querfront) between them.[1] In the context of the elections, this overlap manifested itself most obviously around anti-NATO, anti-establishment, and anti-West sentiments that appeal to far-right and far-left audiences of Kremlin-sponsored outlets like Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik. This is not a new phenomenon, but it is used and supported by the Kremlin's disinformation strategy.

The Russian-German Diaspora

Media monitoring revealed that Russian-language broadcasters popular among Russian-Germans devoted significant coverage during the elections period to the idea of a strong Russia and a weak Europe, particularly through topics such as the "Crisis of the European Union", the "Western Plot against Russia", and the "Decadent Western Values". These are similar themes to the ones pursued by the AfD, which took out election adverts on Russian channels rebroadcast in Germany and whose representatives appeared on Russian-language state media channels.

Meanwhile, dedicated Russian-German groups on Odnoklassniki, the most popular Russian platform, which is similar to Facebook in style, were dominated by reposts of anti-immigrant material from Russian and German media. For example, the timeline for the group Russlanddeutsche für AfD in NRW – Russian-German supporters of the AfD in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia – featured a mix of AfD campaign material, anti-immigrant reporting, and glossy current affairs shows from Kremlin-affiliated media that featured AfD spokespeople.

While no official data is available on how Russian-Germans voted in 2017, there were strong votes for the AfD in areas with a high percentage of voters with Russian heritage.

As Germany's civil society, policymakers and media consider responses to the influence of networks of disinformation and toxic speech, they should aim to address domestic fault lines and coordinate internationally with others facing the same problem.

Recommendations for Civil Society and Foundations

Civil society bodies that oppose extremism, as well as academic and philanthropic foundations must learn how to operate online as skillfully and tactically as the international far right. This implies building technological capacity and working closely with social-media platforms and experts. A first step is to cooperate with fact-checking and civic-engagement groups across Europe and the United States. Civil society groups need to be able to operate as speedily and globally as far-right groups in order to disrupt and limit the exposure of disinformation and toxic-speech campaigns. This will mean working with online activists who have credibility in alienated communities and can reach out to them. For fact-checkers, cooperation with the EU vs Disinformation campaign is critical to avoid duplication of efforts.[2]

Organizations in this sector also need to improve their understanding of the far right. Their online engagement must go beyond the largest social media platforms to alternative ones where far-right audiences congregate. Efforts to penetrate these echo chambers must tap into legitimate grievances and offer alternative remedies.

Likewise, there is a need to engage with Russian-speaking diaspora communities on social networks and to enhance media literacy among Russian-Germans, including older members of these communities who have a poor knowledge of German and watch Russian state television channels. One example of such work is the "Learn to Discern" project of the US organization IREX, which has carried out pioneering work in Ukraine to enhance media-literacy skills through workshops in local libraries and social centers.[3]

Recommendations for Policymakers

Many actors at home, including populist groups at different points on the political spectrum, as well as actors abroad – beside Russian ones, these can be actors from democratic countries like the United States or from authoritarian countries like China or Turkey – seek to polarize German society by emphasizing and exacerbating existing concerns that have been dividing society. Policymakers and political parties must engage in more transparent, cross-party debate on topics such as immigration and the social divide so as not to leave these issues to extremists. Policymakers should also support research networks that reach across borders to analyze far-right and far-left networks. Doing this in a sustained and coordinated way can provide policymakers with valuable information as well as a network of experts to consult on potential policy measures and regulations.

Political actors must also present evidence of foreign interference to the general public and raise awareness. Since the issue of state-sponsored disinformation is already topical in other countries such as France and Spain, and the European Parliament has adopted the EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Anti-EU Propaganda by Third Parties in 2016,[4] Germany – the leading European power and with strong media standards – is well positioned to lead an EU-wide plan of action on this issue.

German political parties and those in other European countries should explore joint initiatives to challenge Russian interference. In the United Kingdom, for example, members of the Labour Party along with the Electoral Commission are leading efforts to investigate Kremlin attempts to subvert the 2016 Brexit referendum. German politicians with similar concerns should ally with them.

Mainstream political parties need to engage with Russian-speaking diaspora populations. German ones, along with those in other European countries with large Russian minorities, must ensure that their political campaigns and documents are accessible to these communities in Russian.

Recommendations for the Media

Germany's mainstream media are losing authority within parts of the population which live in increasingly closed echo chambers rife with disinformation. They need to find ways to re-engage with them and reduce polarization. To this end, they should use data-analysis techniques to understand these alienated audiences and create forms of content that these groups are prepared to engage with. The mainstream media should thoroughly analyze the cognitive and narrative patterns in heavily partisan echo chambers, and experiment with delivering accurate information to their inhabitants in various ways. The London School of Economics' Arena Program, for example, is collaborating with the Italian newspaper Corriere della Serra as well as data scientists to experiment with different ways of covering immigration in order to reduce polarization and encourage alienated audiences to engage with evidence-based research.

The mainstream media need to understand that the Kremlin and the international far right aim to polarize German society. As a result, the mainstream media also need to develop an understanding of how their content can enhance social fissures when it is misleading or sensationalist.

A larger problem is that disinformation actually makes money: Sensationalist lies present good clickbait. Media outlets should work in tandem with advertisers and advertising analytics companies to initiate processes that can help to demonetize disinformation sites and content. An example of this kind of collaboration is the Open Brand Safety Initiative launched by Moat, Storyful, and the City University of New York School of Journalism.[5]

Last, but not least, it is important for all players – in the media, civil society and government – to support quality Russian-language media in Germany and internationally. The Russian-German TV channel RTVD provided a balanced coverage of the 2017 elections and gained 300,000 viewers inside Germany, demonstrating that there is scope and a market for quality Russian-language media in the country. However, such outlets currently cannot compete with the entertainment content and budgets of Kremlin broadcasters. At the same time, Russian-language online journalists often repeat Kremlin-backed far-right disinformation through a lack of professionalism rather than ideology. Support for quality journalism in TV channels, websites, radio stations, and newspapers is urgently needed. A comprehensive training and internship program at mainstream German outlets would help to improve standards.

It is also imperative to strengthen international, non-Kremlin Russian-language media so that Russian minorities in other countries are provided with an alternative view on international affairs. These efforts are best coordinated with other countries to increase their impact. The European Endowment for Democracy, for example, has launched a content fund for independent Russian-language video productions that Germany could support.[6]

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Notes

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Nuclear Deterrence: Russia's Priority for a New Cold War

Pavel Felgenhauer

In the context of increasing talk of a new Cold War and Russia's vulnerability, the issue of nuclear deterrence and the modernization of Russia's nuclear arsenal has gained greater importance. In 2017, Russia allocated some 1.4 trillion rubles (30 billion USD) to procure arms. This equates to more than two per cent of GDP, while the overall defense spending is at least twice as high.[1] Modernizing Russia's nuclear weapons is the leadership's key priority: It is *the* security domain where Russia is on a par with the United States.

Russia's defense strategy is laid out in the Plan of Defense of the Russian Federation (Plan Oborony Rossyskoy Federatsiy, or PoDoRF), a top-secret document outlining a compilation of threats as well as rearmament, mobilization, and integrated defense plans for different ministries and departments. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Army Valery Gerasimov presented President Vladimir Putin with the draft text of the plan in January 2013. Shoigu stated that "the PoDoRF is very detailed and has been worked out with the input of 49 ministries and departments." According to him, it would define Russian defense for decades and serve as a "live document" that integrates all defense plans and efforts. It would be updated regularly to take into account any changing threat environment as well as "other events".[2]

The plan is a new type of integrated strategic blueprint that does not have a direct equivalent in Soviet planning practice. At the time, Shoigu told Putin that it was ready to be signed into law, and this apparently did take place. However, to this day the Kremlin website does not provide any other information about the PoDoRF whatsoever.

Of course, concrete plans of military action to defend Russia and its allies against all possible threats are classified "top secret", as are most of the tactical and technical capabilities of deployed and newly developed weapon systems. Yet the underlying threat assessment of the PoDoRF is less of a secret. Two weeks after it was presented in the Kremlin, Gerasimov gave a gloomy forecast of impending dangers. "In the period up to 2030, the level of existing and potential military threats may grow substantially," he said. Leading world powers would be fighting to control natural energy resources, markets, and "Lebensraum", and they would actively use military means to achieve national goals.[3] In such an environment, Russia must urgently rearm its military, especially with "new weapons", and make nuclear rearmament the priority, he argued.

Since the adoption of the PoDoRF, the concept of a Russia under siege and threatened by an imminent enemy attack has dominated military planning and rearmament, as well as foreign and domestic policy. The military's threat assessments became even gloomier as the Ukrainian crisis unfolded in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea, the Moscow-inspired proxy war in the Donbas region of Ukraine, and the resulting punitive sanctions imposed by the West.

The New Cold War and the Nuclear Option

By late 2014, a new Cold War with the West seemed in the making. Russia considered itself under attack and was ready to use any means of defense at its disposal – including the nuclear option. In October 2014, Putin accused the United States of deliberately provoking the Ukrainian crisis by supporting extreme nationalists in Kyiv, which in turn had ignited a civil war. "Now they [the US] accuse us of causing this crisis," he exclaimed. "It's madness to blackmail Russia, let them remember, a discord between major nuclear powers may undermine strategic stability".[4] Perceiving their country under pressure from the West, Russia's leaders unambiguously reminded the West of the threat of mutual assured, nuclear destruction.

This rhetoric escalated and became more frequent in the past year while the military continued to rearm and conduct massive exercises in preparation for a possible war. In January 2017, Defense Minister Shoigu described the global situation as a volatile one in which different powers confronted each other, increasingly using military might as an argument. He accused the West of "continuing to ignore Russia's vital interests and seeing the strengthening of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space as a security threat."[5] To counter this, he said, Russia would continue a balanced development of its armed forces; in doing so, the unmitigated priority would be strategic nuclear forces that guaranteed the deterrence of enemy aggression. Russia would enhance its strategic attack capabilities while at the same time developing anti-aircraft, anti-cruise-missile, and ballistic missile defenses.

At the annual Moscow Conference on International Security in April 2017, Russia's top brass again listed an array of mounting Western threats that could lead to the demise of the Russian Federation if not met with adequate

countermeasures. Gerasimov stated: "Mounting NATO military and reconnaissance activities on the perimeter of Russia's borders, the continued expansion of NATO is destructive and provocative – it is disrupting the regional balance of power and increasing the risk of military incidents [unintended confrontations]. Europe – once the most militarily stable and quiet region – is becoming a zone of tension and confrontation." He accused NATO of the forward deployment of an increased number of combat units and offensive assets on its "eastern flank", and of preparing to send in rapid-reaction forces. Gerasimov also complained that military-to-military expert contacts between Russia and NATO had been severed, and accused the West of running a vicious anti-Russian information-warfare campaign.[6] Russia's permanent representative to NATO, Aleksandr Grushko, accused European members of the alliance of spending too much on defense – €250 billion annually according to his calculations. Additional NATO defense spending as decided at the Warsaw summit in 2016 would lead to a buildup of armaments in Europe and more tension "in the logic of the Cold War", he argued.[7]

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, who oversees arms control and relations with the United States in the Foreign Ministry, subsequently said the present standoff "is comparable with the Cold War."[8] The situation was serious and unpredictable, exacerbated by the absence of clear, mutually accepted guidelines on how to manage crises and avoid dangerous escalations, he said. According to Sergei Rogov of the official Institute for the US and Canada, this "Second Cold War is somewhat different from the first one, but the overall mode of confrontation and the military standoff on the line separating Russia and NATO is similar in nature."[9] He added that he did not see any prospects for relations to improve any time soon. Rogov further accused the EU of provoking this new Cold War between Russia and the United States by pushing through association agreements with Ukraine and other former Soviet republics "while absolutely ignoring Russian interests."

Nuclear-Arms Modernization

The question of nuclear deterrence and the modernization of Russia's nuclear arsenal have become increasingly important against the backdrop of Russian threat perceptions. Speaking at the 2017 Moscow security conference, the deputy chief of the Operational Main Directorate of the General Staff, Viktor Poznikhir, announced that, by 2020, the United States would acquire the capability for a so-called Prompt Global Strike (PGS) that could destroy Russia's strategic nuclear weapons and its command-and-control assets in a sudden stealth attack, possibly by precision weapons from orbit in space. According to him, the United States was also developing its missile-defense capabilities and may have more interceptors than Russia had nuclear warheads. Russia would therefore continue to develop its nuclear strategic forces to counter these combined threats.[10]

Addressing a meeting of Russia's top military commanders in December 2017, President Putin accused NATO and the United States of "rapidly deploying offensive infrastructure" in Europe and of violating the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty by deploying missile-defense SM-3 interceptors of the land-based Aegis system to bases in Romania and Poland. According to him, the same bases may be used to launch long-range cruise missiles at Russia. To counter this and other threats, Putin said, Russia would further expand and modernize its strategic nuclear forces. By the end of 2017, he announced, 79 percent of the Russian strategic nuclear triad would be armed with modern systems, and by 2021, more than 90 percent should be modern and able to penetrate any possible missile-defense shield.[11] The meeting was held on the outskirts of Moscow in the newly-built premises of the Strategic Rocket Force (RVSN) Academy in Balashykha. During a tour of the facility, Putin visited a display of deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in a huge hangar. The RVSN commander reportedly told the president that "one such missile is enough to wipeout three [US] states. The low accuracy of our rockets is compensated by the high yield of the warheads".[12] Building on Russia's theory of nuclear deterrence and presenting specific developments of military modernization, Putin specified in his speech to the Federal Assembly on March 1, 2018, that "any use of nuclear weapons against Russia or its allies, by weapons of short, medium or any range at all, will be considered as a nuclear attack on this country. Retaliation will be immediate, with all the attendant consequences."[13]

Over the past decade, Russia has spent hundreds of billions of dollars to vastly enhance its nuclear arsenal, including building an array of new long-range delivery vehicles. The navy has deployed three newly built Borey-class strategic nuclear submarines, and five more are under construction. A new intercontinental sea-based ballistic Bulava missile was developed and deployed with the Borey-class submarines. Tens of nuclear and non-nuclear attack submarines are being built, as well as surface warships equipped with long-range nuclear-capable cruise missiles. A new program is in the works to build a next generation of strategic nuclear Hasky-class

submarines carrying ballistic missiles, for when the Borey-class building program has been completed.[14] An array of new, land-based ICBMs – super-heavy silo-based (Sarmat) ICBMs, land-mobile Yars and Rubez ICBMs – has reached the stage of launch testing and may soon go into production.[15] By 2020, Russia may have more than 10 types of land-based ICBMs and up to five different sea-based ballistic missiles. Having spent a significant amount of money, Russia sees itself ahead of the United States in nuclear armaments. The US arsenal consists of decades-old delivery systems, while Russia is in the process of deploying brand-new systems, which seems to give it at least a quality advantage.

During Soviet times, the backbone of Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent was the land-based ICBMs of the Strategic Rocket Force (RVSN). After 1991, the nuclear navy and the Long Range Air Force (Dalnaya Aviatsiya – DA) became increasingly dysfunctional. Today, the RVSN is seen as the part of the nuclear triad most vulnerable to a possible sudden PGS-type disarming attack. Great effort has been made to revive the nuclear navy and to build additional surface ships as well as attack submarines to defend the precious strategic nuclear submarines. With the Arctic ice melting and the nuclear submarines in the Barents Sea increasingly exposed to preemptive attacks, a sustained effort is underway to build a secure position for them in the Sea of Okhotsk by reinforcing the air and sea defenses of the Kuril Island chain, Sakhalin, and Kamchatka.

DA bombers will be armed with a new stealth super-long-range cruise missile Kh-101/Kh-102 (the latter being a nuclear-tipped version) that has been developed and tested in Syria. The Kh-101/Kh-102 has a range of 5,000 to 5,500 kilometers, which could possibly be further extended by modifying its jet engine and increasing fuel capacity. Equipped with Kh-101/Kh-102 missiles, the firing positions of DA bombers could be 2,000 to 3,000 kilometers closer to Russian territory than before; thus, they could be escorted up to their firing positions by new long-range fighters, giving them an even better chance of accomplishing their mission. A next-generation stealth strategic bomber is also being designed for possible production after 2025.[16]

Russia's strategic plans are based on the mass production and deployment of its cruise missiles. Until 2014, all jet engines for these were produced in Ukraine, yet their delivery stopped as the crisis in the country became imminent. The problem this poses would seem to have been solved, as the production of Russian-made cruise missile engines appears to have begun in Rybinsk.

Recommendations: Effective Crisis Management by EU and NATO

Europe, the Middle East, and the Korean peninsula are facing a high risk that military conflicts and tensions could escalate and regional confrontations could go nuclear. The EU, the United States, Russia, and other major Western and Eastern countries should urgently do their utmost to reinstate, develop, and institutionalize effective crisis-management protocols and procedures to help prevent escalating tensions from turning into all-out or "limited" nuclear war. This goal is achievable since no one in the East or West today is fully ready for, or truly seeks an all-out showdown. This Second Cold War may stay "cold" in a mode of mutual deterrence, both nuclear and conventional, but this will not happen by default without constant, patient, and effective crisis management by the EU, NATO and national governments.

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Arms-Control Hedging as an Explanation of Russia's Stance on Nuclear Arms Control

Aleksandr Kolbin

There is a certain prejudice in the West against almost every major Russian foreign policy move. This increased dramatically in 2014 because of Russia's actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, and it is now particularly evident in the sphere of nuclear arms control. Today, Russia's national-security priorities are too often interpreted by the West as revisionist or aimed at re-establishing Russia as a superpower by any means and chances available. As a result, it is now much harder for Russia to convey its security concerns to its Western partners. At the same time, it is much easier for the West to convince its own public that Russia is not only "bullying" Ukraine or interfering in elections all over the world, but also cheating on nuclear arms control treaties and arrangements.

Russia's current official stance on nuclear arms control consists of three major elements. First, it rejects as unreasonable all claims by the United States regarding Moscow's cheating on bilateral and international treaties. Second, it accuses the United States of non-compliance with those treaties and thus of creating threats to Russia's national security. And, third, it regularly calls for compromises and a return to the previous status quo, provided the United States takes into account Russia's claims and concerns. As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently stated, "Russia […] hopes Washington reverts to the tried and tested method of settling disputes and differences through full-fledged talks, comprehensively reviewing the essence of the matter without playing to the gallery or making far-fetched accusations."[1]

However, given the current politico-military confrontation between Russia and the West, the goal of its arms-control policy may be not just to invite the West to the negotiation table. Another aim could be to buy time for developing certain threshold weapon systems that are still in compliance with the formal limits of existing arms-control treaties but also allow Russia to prepare itself for the perceived risk that the West decides to withdraw from those treaties first. Therefore, some elements of Russia's nuclear arms control policy can be characterized as "arms-control hedging". Two of the most recent examples in this context concern the 2000 US-Russia Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement (PMDA) and the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

In October 2016, President Vladimir Putin signed the Federal Law on the Suspension of the PMDA. Numerous experts described this move as mainly politically motivated to register political dissatisfaction, and another asymmetric response to US sanctions and to numerous unfriendly statements by US officials on Russia's actions in Ukraine and Syria. This assessment is supported by the content of the law and some public comments made by Russian officials.

In particular, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that, by suspending the PMDA, Russia wanted the United States "to understand that it cannot introduce sanctions against Russia that can do relatively little harm to Americans and at the same time continue selective cooperation with Russia when it benefits the United States."[2] The then director of the ministry's Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control, Mikhail Ulyanov, added that "the creation and further development of a ballistic missile defence system to the detriment of Russia's national security and global strategic stability"[3] was an additional reason for the suspension, although this reason was not mentioned in either the draft or final version of the law. He also claimed that Russia considered the situation concerning the PMDA as "not affecting the international agenda." Ulyanov added: "It concerns relations between Russia and the United States exclusively and is the result of Washington's myopic policy and failure to honor its obligations."[4]

Leaving the PDMA Treaty in Response to US Sanctions

According to the law of October 2016, three reasons were behind the decision. First, there had been "a fundamental change in the circumstances that existed at the date the PMDA entered into force" as well as "the emergence of a threat to strategic stability"[5] as a result of increases in the military infrastructure and the size of the US military contingent stationed on the territories of countries that joined NATO in 2000. Second, the law refers to hostile US actions. Included among them were the Magnitsky Act, the Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014, and sanctions against Russian legal entities and individuals, as well as the financial damage caused by sanctions, including losses as a result of the introduction of Russia's "counter-sanctions" against the United States. Third, the law mentions the United States' failure to implement its own obligations under the PMDA.

Evidence demonstrates that several driving forces were behind Russia's decision to suspend the PMDA. Norms

of equality and prestige are evident in the references to the problems of sanctions and selective cooperation with Russia by the United States. Another aspect is that, within the context of increasing political tension with the United States, the decision became a natural part of internal propaganda – especially considering that Russia had formally fulfilled its obligations under the agreement while the United States had not. The desire to speed up the development of the national closed nuclear cycle program formed the technological and economic drivers. Speaking before parliament in October 2016, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said that Russia intended "to use the situation with the PMDA in the interests of the national program of developing a closed nuclear cycle."[6]

Though mentioned in the law and the public statements by officials, the security driver at first glance seems to be less relevant in the decision to suspend the PMDA. It is particularly unclear how canceling the agreement would make the United States change its policy of sanctions or prevent further NATO enlargement. Furthermore, the link between "the emergence of a threat to strategic stability" because of NATO enlargement and US sanctions and the decision to suspend the PMDA also remains unclear. However, apart from being related to the question of technological development, the decision has a national security rationale if it is considered as an example of arms-control hedging. As President Putin noted in April 2017, the United States "announced that they plan to dispose of their accumulated highly enriched nuclear fuel by using a method other than what we agreed on when we signed the corresponding agreement […]. This means that they preserve what is known as the breakout potential, in other words it can be retrieved, reprocessed and converted into weapons-grade plutonium again. This is not what we agreed on."[7]

Arms-control hedging can also be seen in the case of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). Russia could try to minimize – or prepare itself for – the risk that the West will not hear its concerns about NATO enlargement and the deployment of US ballistic missiles in Europe, or even the risk that the administration of President Donald Trump will decide to withdraw from the treaty first, along the lines of the decision of the previous administration unter George W. Bush to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Another side of the hedging logic is that, by violating the INF treaty – as the West interprets some of its actions – Russia may be trying to demonstrate that it is able to develop and deploy new cruise missiles very shortly in case of a possible major future crisis in Russian-Western relations.

Russia's clear intention to regularly – both at home an internationally – demonstrate its compliance with all arms-control and disarmament obligations that do not reduce its ability to defend itself forms another important aspect of the hedging policy. The most recent example of this relates to the Chemical Weapons Convention. In 2017, the United States said it intended to eliminate its stockpile of chemical weapons only by 2023.[8] Russia saw a chance to demonstrate its leadership in this area of disarmament, and in September 2017, President Putin publicly ordered the destruction of the last chemical munition in Russia's possession – a step which he described as a "historic event." On that day, he complained that the United States had not fulfilled its own obligations to destroy chemical weapons, which, he said, it had put off three times, citing the lack of financial resources.[9]

The idea of arms-control hedging can also help to explain why the United States' deployment of the anti-ballistic-missile (ABM) system in Europe is one of the central Russian concerns in arms control today. Russia's military-political leadership has frequently articulated that it feared its nuclear forces would become less effective as a result of this US move, because Russia's nuclear forces structure and strategy appeared to be completely unprepared for the collapse of the ABM Treaty in 2002.

Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the United States will address Russia's concerns regarding its ABM system in the way Moscow wants it to. It is also clear that NATO will not retreat from Russia's borders and that sanctions will not be cancelled anytime soon. Moreover, Russia's reaction to the most recent US Nuclear Posture Review demonstrates that it will most likely be prompted to continue its policy of arms-control hedging. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated the day after it was made public that the Russian authorities were "deeply disappointed with the new US Nuclear Posture Review." It added: "The first impression is: The document is focused on confrontation and is anti-Russian. It is regrettable that the United States justifies its policy of massive nuclear build-up with references to Russia's policy of nuclear modernization and the allegedly increased reliance on nuclear weapons in Russia's doctrines. We have been accused of lowering the threshold for the first use of nuclear weapons and aggressive strategies. None of this has any connection with reality."[10]

Accordingly, an end to the current crisis in arms control between Russia and the West anytime soon can hardly be expected. Moreover, it seems that the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) could be its next victim, especially after both sides met the treaty's central limits on strategic arms by 5 February 2018.[11] Russia continues to develop and test new strategic delivery

systems, probably because it wants, among other reasons, to be prepared for such a turn of events.

In this context, the only way to persuade Russia to abandon its arms-control hedging policy is to develop and negotiate confidence-building measures, including increasing mutual transparency on Russia's and the West's nuclear and conventional defensive and offensive capabilities. The EU member states can and should play a role in the process because, figuratively speaking, they will be the only "insurer" obliged to pay the full cost of a weakened European security should Russia claim "insurance" under its hedging policy, i.e. by deciding to deploy weapon systems prohibited under the existing arms-control treaties.

While it is true that the majority of Russia's security concerns are now focused on its European borders, and that it has called on many occasions for mutual security cooperation with the rest of Europe, it is a good time for the EU to play a mediating role in the current US-Russian arms-control crisis. The alternative could be much worse.

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