



## ANALYSIS

# Going legit? The foreign policy of Vladimir Putin

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LOWY INSTITUTE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vladimir Putin's re-election for a fourth presidential term in May 2018 has enshrined his position as the dominant personality of the post-Soviet era. Over the next six years, there will be few major changes to Russian foreign policy. There is broad consensus in Moscow that this has been outstandingly successful, and that Russia has emerged as a formidable power.

But alongside an overall sense of confidence, there is also caution and even anxiety. Putin recognises the importance of tactical flexibility in an international environment that is increasingly fluid and unpredictable. He is also aware that Russia's foreign policy gains are fragile and potentially reversible, and that the country faces considerable obstacles in its quest to become a rule-maker in a new, post-American world order.

Putin will aim to be all things to all people: strongman of a resurgent great power, committed multilateralist, and regional and global problem-solver. At times, Moscow will appear relatively accommodating. At other times, it will be assertive and even confrontational. But Putin will be unrelenting in the pursuit of core goals: the consolidation of political authority at home; and the promotion of Russia as an indispensable power, without whom there can be no real security in the world.

Vladimir Putin's re-election for a fourth presidential term in May 2018<sup>1</sup> has enshrined his position as the dominant personality of the post-Soviet era. Over the past 18 years, he has become synonymous with power and policy in contemporary Russia. It is commonplace today to speak not just of 'the Putin system' or the quasi-ideology 'Putinism', but of 'Putin's Russia' — an association between leader and country as intimate as that between Stalin and the Soviet Union more than six decades ago.

At the same time, many observers expect Putin's current presidential term to be his last. Staying beyond the next six years would require a change to the Constitution, or a repeat of the 'castling' (*rokirovka*) manoeuvre that enabled him to remain in power as prime minister during the nominal presidency of his acolyte Dmitry Medvedev between 2008 and 2012. Although either outcome is possible, there is an additional consideration: Putin will be 72 in 2024, when the next presidential election is scheduled. He has already stated that he does not intend to be president-for-life,<sup>2</sup> perhaps wary of unflattering comparisons with the gerontocratic leaders of the late Soviet era. Yet it is also counter-intuitive to give up office in a country where a voluntary transfer of power is virtually unknown.<sup>3</sup>

The tension between the ultra-concentration of authority in one individual, and heightened speculation about a post-Putin succession, suggests that the next few years could be truly defining for Russia's relations with the outside world. Putin's previous presidential term has already given rise to a remarkable transformation. As recently as March 2014, US President Barack Obama dismissed Russia as a mere "regional power", whose annexation of Crimea was a sign of weakness not strength.<sup>4</sup> That narrative has since been demolished, not least in the United States. There is growing talk of a "new Cold War" and even of possible military confrontation between Russia and the West.<sup>5</sup> The 2017 US National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy and Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) identify Russia as the most significant threat, along with China, to America's national interests.<sup>6</sup> Policymakers in Moscow condemn the 'demonisation' of Russia, yet revel in the knowledge that it is back on the world stage, disliked by some but ignored by none.

Against this background, Putin faces a critical strategic choice. Does he persist with the provocative and sometimes confrontational policies that have raised Russia's profile to a post-Soviet high and boosted his popular legitimacy? Or does he seek to mitigate the negative consequences of his high-risk behaviour by adopting a more accommodating stance, confident that Russia is no longer in any danger of being taken lightly? The choice is not simply binary or Western-centric. One possible course

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is to shift the centre of gravity of Russian foreign policy towards the non-West, focusing in particular on China, but also on India, Turkey, and so-called 'Greater Eurasia'. More ambitiously still, Russia, having gone global, may aim to position itself as a game-maker in the post-Western world of the twenty-first century.

This Analysis argues that Putin's foreign policy will be defined by strategic constancy allied to tactical flexibility. It will remain grounded in long-standing assumptions about Russia, the West, and international order. It will be infused with a sense of *relative* confidence — the belief that Russia, despite its problems, is a rising power — but also a certain caution and even anxiety. Putin will seek broader international respectability and legitimacy, yet his goals will remain essentially the same, with any changes being stylistic rather than transformative. And, as in previous presidential terms, Kremlin policymaking will be opportunistic and tactically alert, whether to international events, Russia's domestic circumstances, or the actions of others.

## THE DRIVERS OF PUTIN'S FOREIGN POLICY

Four sets of drivers will shape Russia's international relations over the next few years: Putin's personal interpretation of the national interest; ideology and notions of identity; Russian strategic culture; and improvisation in response to events.

### THE PUTIN INTEREST

It has become axiomatic that Russia's leaders since Tsarist times have been guided by a clear understanding of its national interests.<sup>7</sup> Yet the very notion of national interests is problematic. For one thing, what are these interests? The motherhood goals of national security, political stability, and economic prosperity are near-abstractions that can be stretched to mean almost anything — and nothing. And whose interests are we talking about? Putin's? Those of particular groups within the ruling elite? The Russian people's?

An 'objective' national or even state interest is an artificial construct, and nowhere more so than in today's Russia. In the personalised authoritarian system over which Putin presides, he is the ultimate arbiter of what constitutes the national interest. Unlike in liberal democracies, competing interpretations are either suppressed or marginalised. That does not mean, however, that Putin is inspired by a selfless and immaculate vision of the national interest. As with many leaders, his agenda is as much personal as it is political and national.

The distinction between the 'Putin interest' and Russian national interests is illustrated by events in Ukraine. Moscow's annexation of Crimea and subsequent military intervention in the Donbas region have been counterproductive in many respects. They have alienated Kyiv and driven Ukraine further towards integration with an EU-centred Europe.<sup>8</sup>

They have given fresh purpose to NATO. They have increased Russia's strategic dependence on China. And they have incurred Western sanctions, aggravating Russia's economic problems.

Yet judged by the criteria that matter most to Putin — his personal self-respect and political authority, the messaging of a strong Russia — the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine have been vindicated. Crucially, he has succeeded in conflating his personal and the Russian national interest, to the extent that in many people's eyes they have become indistinguishable from one another. The Russian public has largely bought into the regime narrative that the annexation of Crimea was at once an act of national regeneration and a necessary response to Western subversion, Ukrainian lawlessness, and the purported threat of NATO enlargement.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Western sanctions are viewed through the lens of a confirmation bias assiduously cultivated by the Kremlin: the perception that the West, and the United States in particular, has always been jealous of Russia and sought to weaken it. Politically, it scarcely matters that such narratives bear little relationship to the facts. Truth and the national interest are what Putin make of them. In the case of Crimea, as elsewhere, Putin's credibility has become entwined with Russia's, and Russia's subsequent 'triumphs' have cemented his popular legitimacy.

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Putin clearly underestimated the strength of the Western reaction to events in Ukraine, and the resilience of the transatlantic consensus on sanctions. Yet there is no reason to believe that he would behave very differently in future given similar circumstances to 2014. There would perhaps be less complacency towards Germany and France, and more care given to some of the optics. But Russian foreign policy would continue to be based on the primacy of the Putin interest and the premise that the perpetuation of the regime is the highest good from which all other objectives flow.<sup>10</sup> This intense personalisation of the Russian national interest will remain in place as long as Putin sits in the Kremlin, and probably long after.

## IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

It is fashionable to claim that Russian foreign policy is non-ideological. Whereas the USSR was driven by an overarching world view of the epic struggle between two clashing value systems, communism and capitalism, 'pragmatism' is said to characterise Moscow's international relations today. If anyone is guilty of allowing the intrusion of ideology, so the argument goes, then it is the West whose universalising mission and moral hubris have destabilised the international system.<sup>11</sup>

In reality, the notion that Russian foreign policy is without ideological bias is bogus. It is based on the pretence that the Kremlin is guided by a clear-sighted vision of the 'national interest'. Yet if we understand ideology to mean a "set of beliefs characteristic of a social group or individual"<sup>12</sup> or a "set of predispositional influences",<sup>13</sup> then Putin's

approach to international politics is more ideologically driven than most. There may be no grand proselytising mission akin to Soviet messianism, and few Russians believe in universal norms and values, except as an instrument to highlight Western ‘double standards’. However, this is not de-ideologisation so much as re-ideologisation, one that is highly eclectic in its inspiration.<sup>14</sup>

Putin’s foreign policy is influenced by belief systems from the Tsarist and Soviet past. Take, for example, the triad of tenets that underpinned the rule of Tsar Nicholas I (1825–1855) — autocracy (*samoderzhavie*), Orthodoxy (*pravoslavie*) and nation-mindedness (*narodnost*).<sup>15</sup> These concepts are almost as influential today as they were in the mid-nineteenth century. An increasingly authoritarian Putin is Tsar in all but name, with some regime voices even calling him *vozhda*, denoting a ruler of exceptional power and authority.<sup>16</sup> The Russian Orthodox Church is more prominent than it has been in a century, and the ‘moral-spiritual values’ it propagates have become ubiquitous, not least as keynotes in the government’s major foreign policy statements. And ‘nation-mindedness’, reflected in resurgent historical narratives, ‘patriotic’ education of the young, and popular mobilisation, has become a mass political and cultural phenomenon.

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In like spirit, the Kremlin regards Western notions of liberal democracy and the rule of law with acute suspicion, indeed as existential threats that must be countered at all costs.<sup>17</sup> The Cold War ideological confrontation between communism and capitalism is defunct, but in its place we are witnessing a new normative struggle, this time between conservative nationalism and liberal internationalism. Putin has positioned himself as ‘defender of the faith’ — not only of Russian values, but also of the essence of European civilisation.<sup>18</sup>

Putin’s brand of conservative nationalism rests on two core assumptions particular to Russia. The first is its *spetsifika*, a term connoting uniqueness and ‘specialness’.<sup>19</sup> In the context of foreign policy, this translates into a firm belief that Russia is not some ordinary nation, but a civilisation unto itself as well as an integral part of European civilisation. As such, it cannot be a mere rule-taker, especially when other great powers, principally the United States, have themselves adopted an exceptionalist attitude towards ‘universal’ rules and norms. Putin believes Russia is entitled to no less.<sup>20</sup>

Related to this is a second basic assumption: Russia is a great power by virtue of historical destiny. It is of secondary importance that its economy is heavily dependent on natural resources and that growth is sluggish, or that by a number of metrics Russia ranks poorly in world terms. It is a great power nonetheless. The criteria of economic performance and technological sophistication are seen here as less relevant than the innate sense of being a great power, historical tradition, geographical extent, permanent membership of the UN Security Council, formidable



nuclear and conventional military capabilities, and a singularity of purpose. Such assets may not be very ‘twenty-first century’, but the Kremlin — and the Russian public — could hardly care less.<sup>21</sup>

Russia’s great power identity (*derzhavnost*) is an enduring legacy of its imperial past. Although it is nearly three decades since the Soviet Union collapsed, the allure of empire remains. As the political commentator Andrei Kolesnikov notes, “modern Russia is not an empire, but the country’s political regime has imperial aspirations”.<sup>22</sup> Not in terms of conquering or regaining territory, but in the realisation of several fundamental ‘rights’: a de facto sphere of interests extending the breadth of the former Soviet Union (with the partial exception of the Baltic states); significant practical constraints on the sovereignty of the ex-Soviet republics; and co-identification with them on the basis of culture, language, and history.<sup>23</sup>

The Kremlin’s post-modern version of imperialism<sup>24</sup> is evident in its approach towards Ukraine. Putin has no interest in annexing the Donbas region in the southeast of the country, since this would be both unpopular in Russia and hugely expensive. Instead, he has sought to leverage the conflict for wider purposes, exploiting the volatility and uncertain status of the region to pressure Kyiv and undermine support for it in the West. Putin is partly motivated here by geopolitical and security considerations — Ukraine occupies a strategic position on the European continent — but the ideological component is central. In insisting that Russia and Ukraine are one people and one civilisation,<sup>25</sup> he refuses to acknowledge the existence of a distinct Ukrainian identity, let alone Kyiv’s right to pursue a sovereign foreign policy.

Ideas and ideology will continue to influence Putin’s foreign policy over the current presidential term. They will serve a vital legitimating role, sanctifying self-interest by tapping into particular conceptions of identity and civilisation, above all the conviction that Russia is special and therefore free to act as it — or rather its rulers — see fit. At times, Moscow may choose to underplay traditional beliefs and instead emphasise more cosmopolitan themes, such as Russia’s integration into the twenty-first century globalised community.<sup>26</sup> However, the attractions of ideology will remain compelling, whether as an instrument for projecting power, something ‘higher’ to believe in, or in mobilising the people on behalf of the regime.

## STRATEGIC CULTURE

The centrality of geopolitics in Russian foreign policy owes much to the strategic culture in which successive generations of leaders have been raised. This culture is based on realist assumptions that borrow, in spirit at least, from Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli. The most important is a belief in the primacy of hard power.<sup>27</sup> International politics is not a popularity contest. The end-goal is not to be liked by others, but

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to win by whatever means necessary. Such an attitude helps explain why Western condemnation of Russian actions in Ukraine and Syria has had so little effect on Moscow. The political elite (and public) there sees only that Putin has been able to realise many of his aims — in stark contrast to his predecessor, the internationally more popular but thoroughly ineffectual Boris Yeltsin.<sup>28</sup>

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The Kremlin's realist outlook on the world has been reinforced by events since the fall of the Soviet Union. Over the past 25 years, an official narrative has grown in which the principal tropes are Western ingratitude and perfidy, and Russian good faith amounting at times to gullibility. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, Russia put its trust in a new world order in which it would be afforded equal status. Instead, the Western powers took advantage of its weakness, ruining its economy through 'shock therapy' reforms, expanding NATO into Eastern Europe, and generally treating it as a defeated power. At various times since then Moscow has attempted to establish strategic cooperation with the United States and Europe, but each time it has been let down.<sup>29</sup>

While much of this grievance narrative is ill-founded, the motif of Western betrayal has become an article of faith in Putin's foreign policy. It is also used to illustrate a larger 'truth': in an unforgiving world, victory goes to the most committed and resolute, while defeat is the fate of those who would be gulled by illusions.<sup>30</sup> The mentality this reveals is not necessarily zero-sum, since it accepts that gains can sometimes be made by more than one side — whether in strong bilateral relationships, great power 'Concerts', or multilateral forums. But for the Kremlin, the key lies in negotiating from strength, utilising leverage where this is available, and being prepared to absorb pain rather than surrender to others. It also means playing to Russia's principal assets, in particular its military might and geopolitical reach. Major military exercises, such as Vostok-2018, are intended above all to convey the message of Russian power and self-confidence.

The result is a foreign policy that blends ideological biases with cold calculation. Putin acts on the basis of certain preconceptions: an unwavering belief in Russia's timeless 'greatness' and unique identity; an ingrained political and social conservatism; and a deep mistrust of democratic sentiments. Yet he also recognises that Russia must operate in an increasingly fluid and unpredictable international environment. Understanding this does not obviate ideological inclinations but requires that they be adapted to circumstances. Sometimes it pays to underplay their influence, for example when establishing military deconfliction arrangements, or, in the past, concluding nuclear disarmament agreements. At other times, though, ideology and strategic calculus are mutually reinforcing. Thus, highlighting Russia's 'specialness' reflects both genuine conviction and an awareness of its utility in promoting the idea that Russian interests deserve special consideration from others — be it in Ukraine, the Middle East, or global governance.

Despite this sense of self-entitlement, Russian strategic culture is nevertheless characterised by doubts and contradictions. On the one hand, Russia demands that it be treated as an equal, that is an equal to the United States and China. On the other hand, it has shown little desire to become the 'go-to' power along the lines of the United States and previously the Soviet Union. The assertiveness of Moscow's words and actions masks an anxiety about the limitations of Russian power. When the Kremlin talks up the threats facing Russia it does so partly to mobilise public support for the regime.<sup>31</sup> However, it is also an allergic response to real vulnerabilities — not the threat of further NATO enlargement or missile defence deployment, but something far more dangerous, the potential unravelling of the Putin system itself.

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It is unrealistic to expect any major change in the strategic culture of the Putin political generation. The resort to traditional constructs of power and influence; a 'national humiliation' complex founded in a deep sense of grievance towards the West; the conviction that Russia's natural state is that of a global great power;<sup>32</sup> a lasting sense of insecurity — these are attitudes that will remain in place for decades.

#### IMPROVISATION IN RESPONSE TO EVENTS

Although the Russian Government's principal foreign policy documents — the Foreign Policy Concept and the National Security Concept — suggest long-term strategic thinking, real decision-making is often driven by unforeseen events, leading to considerable improvisation. After 9/11, for example, Putin saw an opportunity to achieve a rapprochement with a hitherto hostile Washington. He was the first foreign leader to phone George W Bush, and hoped to position Russia as a global partner of the United States. In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis he intensified the partnership with China, alarmed by the extent of Russia's economic dependence on the West. And in 2014, the overthrow of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich prompted the annexation of Crimea. Although contingency plans had been in place for some time, they remained dormant as long as there was a Moscow-friendly administration in Kyiv. It was more important to influence Ukrainian behaviour than to acquire territory. But circumstances changed, and therefore so did Russian policy.<sup>33</sup>

Kremlin decision-making is also susceptible to domestic political and economic pressures. Putin's emphasis on national-patriotic themes after 2012 was not, as some commentators have claimed, an inevitable response to NATO and EU enlargement, missile defence, and Western 'interference' in the post-Soviet space. It was driven above all by the need to reinforce his domestic position following large popular protests against him in several Russian cities in late 2011 and early 2012.<sup>34</sup>

More broadly, economic stagnation and the subsequent recession undermined what had been the principal basis of his legitimacy for more

than a decade, the so-called 'social contract' whereby the regime ensured rising living standards in return for the public's political acquiescence.<sup>35</sup> When this contract started to break down, Putin sought other sources of legitimisation: mobilising nationalist feelings, giving the people foreign policy 'victories', and tapping into anti-Western and especially anti-American sentiment.<sup>36</sup>

In all these cases — the opportunistic response to 9/11; the prioritisation of the Sino-Russian partnership post-Crimea and Western sanctions; and the nationalistic turn in the aftermath of the anti-Putin protests — the Kremlin has packaged its decision-making in terms of long-standing national interests. In the process, it has persuaded many observers in the West as well as in Russia that what looks like (and is) tactical improvisation is the product of strategic insight and firm principle.

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We should not be deceived. Putin may seem like the 'man with the plan', but the conduct of Russian foreign policy is more ad hoc and reactive than it often appears. Although decision-making is shaped by core ideas and strategic culture, events play a vital role, skewing more 'rational' foreign policy choices and prior intentions. They also serve as a constant reminder to the Kremlin of the need for tactical flexibility in pursuing strategic goals.

Paradoxically, the unpredictable nature of events is likely to strengthen existing trends in Russian foreign policy. The country's ongoing economic struggles<sup>37</sup> suggest Putin will continue to stand on a nationalist platform in which the primary virtues are military strength, Russia's special identity and history, and its 'greatness' on the world stage, and where the United States fulfils the role of 'useful enemy'.<sup>38</sup> The fluidity of the contemporary international environment likewise reinforces the appeal of strategic constancy — of continuing to bet on relative certainties, such as Russia's comparative advantages (military power and natural resources) and key partnerships, notably with China.

## RUSSIA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY WORLD

Putin's personal interest, ideological preconceptions, strategic culture, and events have resulted in the Russian foreign policy we see today — assertive, unapologetic, and unbending in the pursuit of its goals. Moscow's behaviour has been pilloried in the West, and even non-Western perceptions are often negative.<sup>39</sup> There is no sign, however, that Putin has absorbed the lesson and is intending to alter the trajectory of Russian foreign policy.

The most compelling reason for maintaining his present course is the conviction that it has been overwhelmingly successful. This is not just the view of the Kremlin and the Russian political elite. It is also shared by some liberal critics of the regime, the public, and many commentators in the West. Russian successes are not only apparent in their own right,

especially in the Middle East and the partnership with China, but are accentuated by the contrast with the failures of Western policymaking. In the vacuum left by the abdication of US leadership, Russia has emerged as a formidable power, and Putin himself has acquired the status of a global player.<sup>40</sup>

Yet despite these successes, both real and apparent, there is unfinished business. The strategic course of Russia's foreign policy may be set, but recent gains are fragile and potentially reversible. So the next few years are likely to prove critical — in defining Russia's role in global governance; regulating its interaction with the United States and Europe; expanding its footprint in Asia; and consolidating its position in the Middle East.

#### THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

The biggest challenge Russia faces is to reinvent itself as a rule-maker in a new world order. This is self-evidently a long-term project, well beyond the time frame of the current presidential term. However, in the Kremlin's eyes the process has already begun. The US-led order is imploding; the West is losing its monopoly on 'universal' norms and values; and the centre of gravity in world affairs is shifting to the non-West. All this is creating an environment in which Russia has a real opportunity to repackage itself as a responsible international citizen and global problem-solver — in other words, of 'going legit'.

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In practice, though, the obstacles to such a transformation are formidable. While Putin has succeeded in raising Russia's international profile, this has been at significant cost to its reputation. The issue here is not Western condemnation of its actions in Ukraine and Syria, which Moscow rationalises away as 'Russophobia'.<sup>41</sup> Of greater importance is that it has demonstrated little capacity to act as more than a spoiler. It can undermine the interests of others, most obviously the United States, but it has rarely been able to implement a positive program of its own, let alone take the lead on the big issues of global governance. The comparison with China is striking. Under Xi Jinping, Beijing has become increasingly influential in addressing twenty-first century challenges, such as economic globalisation, free trade, and climate change. Tellingly, it is also moving into areas that were once the preserve of others: post-Soviet Eurasia, the Middle East, and the Arctic.

So the first task for Putin in his fourth term is to address this policy deficit, which, crucially, is also a great power deficit. Over the past two years, Moscow has pushed the idea of a Greater Eurasia, extending from the Pacific Ocean to Europe. Part of its rationale is to retain some control over the post-Soviet space in the face of China's rapidly expanding influence, in particular through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>42</sup> But ultimately the Greater Eurasia venture is less about Eurasia than it is about promoting a non-Western international order, with its own rules, norms, and institutions.<sup>43</sup> This has already been attempted with the

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BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) framework. However, the latter has proved somewhat of a disappointment, too unwieldy to be credible, and hamstrung by growing strategic tensions between China and India. Moscow will not abandon the BRICS, given its symbolic importance — Russia was the driving force behind its transformation from a Goldman Sachs idea into a structured format — but we are already seeing a shift of emphasis to Greater Eurasia.

In general, Moscow will pursue a dual-track approach to global governance. It will step up engagement with multilateral mechanisms, both well established (the UN Security Council P5) and emerging (Greater Eurasia). It will advertise the virtues of regional multilateralism through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). And it will proclaim its scrupulous adherence to international agreements, most topically the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, Moscow will continue to prioritise bilateral relationships. This is consistent with its long-time belief in the primacy of state actors in international politics. Thus, the Greater Eurasia vision centres on the partnership with China. A political settlement of the Syrian conflict hinges on Russia's separate relations with key regional players — Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel — rather than the multilateral Astana peace process, initiated in December 2016 as an alternative to the Geneva talks. And when it comes to the West, Moscow pays far greater heed to individual countries than it does to NATO and the European Union, which it regards as mere instrumentalities of the major Western powers.

For all the talk about a new “polycentric world”,<sup>45</sup> Moscow seeks a return to traditional constructs, such as a de facto Concert of Great Powers. Clearly, there are differences from the original nineteenth-century Concert, particularly in its composition.<sup>46</sup> However, the underlying principles remain intact: the great powers set the rules of the international system; they ‘respect’ each other's vital interests; and while they naturally compete with one another, they also work together to maintain global order.<sup>47</sup> In the twenty-first-century version envisaged in Moscow, multilateral institutions would provide a legitimating framework that enshrines the decisions of the great powers, while smaller states would know their place and accept the implicit limitations on their sovereignty.

In today's increasingly anarchic international environment, such Concert ideas appear more unrealistic than ever, while Russia's system-building capacities are limited compared to those of the United States or even China. Yet such truths are not likely to alter the Kremlin's great power-centred view of the world. They will simply mean that it will be more versatile in its methods. Putin will aim to be all things to all people: strongman of a resurgent great power, committed multilateralist, and

regional and global problem-solver. But above all he will be unrelenting in his efforts to promote Russia as an indispensable power, without whom there can be no geopolitical equilibrium or real security in the world.

#### STABILISING RELATIONS WITH THE WEST?

Looking ahead, the defining feature of Russia's relations with the West will be their disaggregation. For the Kremlin, the West no longer exists as a coherent political and normative entity. There are only individual Western countries, most of them weak, and all of them devoted to pursuing their own selfish agendas. This perception has reinforced Moscow's propensity to bilateral interaction, focusing in particular on the United States, France, and Germany.

The **United States** under Donald Trump presents Russia with major problems, but also significant opportunities. On the one hand, a hostile Washington has the capacity to inflict serious damage on Russian interests almost anywhere in the world. The United States is also the one country with military capabilities superior to Russia's, and with the capacity to destroy it altogether. Consequently, the ongoing crisis in their relations is of existential concern to Putin.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, the enormous harm the Trump presidency has caused to the transatlantic alliance, to America's international reputation, and to the very idea of a liberal world order, has considerably enhanced Russia's room for geopolitical manoeuvre. This is most evident in the Middle East, but it is also true across the board. In July 2018, for example, Trump nearly derailed the Brussels NATO summit,<sup>49</sup> while his subsequent humiliation of British Prime Minister Theresa May during a visit to the United Kingdom belied his claim that the US–UK relationship was the “highest level of special”.<sup>50</sup> Such destructive behaviour reinforces the case for a post-American world, one that would be much more palatable to Putin and the Russian political elite.

The Putin–Trump summit in Helsinki on 16 July 2018 signalled the Kremlin's likely approach to the United States over the next few years. Putin proposed the creation of various bilateral mechanisms: an Experts Council, a US–Russia business forum, a regular dialogue between the respective national security heads, and joint working groups on counterterrorism and cybersecurity. He also suggested a referendum in the Donbas to break the stalemate over Ukraine, as well as ideas for humanitarian relief in Syria and the return of refugees. Most importantly, he suggested extending the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (START) for five years beyond its current expiry date of 2021.

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Putin's proposals served two main purposes. First, they were an attempt to achieve some movement, however modest, on contentious issues in the relationship. The development of new bilateral mechanisms, in particular, might establish a better basis for cooperation, and defuse some of the tensions with Washington. Second, these proposals, and



the Kremlin's leaking of them, were intended to showcase Russia as strong but also constructive, committed to finding solutions to previously intractable problems. Here, the attempt to gain the moral and political high ground was directed more to America's allies and the wider international audience than to the United States.

Viewed in these latter terms, the Helsinki summit could hardly have gone better for Putin. When Foreign Minister Lavrov described its outcomes as "better than super", he was referring above all to the optics of the meeting and the joint press conference.<sup>51</sup> There, next to an uncharacteristically meek Trump, Putin appeared fully in command, formidable in the pursuit of his country's interests. Conversely, Trump's evident inclination to believe Putin rather than his own intelligence agencies on the question of Russian interference in the US democratic process marked him out as Putin's patsy.<sup>52</sup>

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For the time being at least, Putin will reserve his options. He will look to maintain a personal rapport with Trump, in the hope (rather than the expectation) that the US president will rein in the hawks in his own administration and Congress. But even if Trump is unable to deliver, as seems highly likely, Putin may choose to exercise strategic patience nonetheless, satisfied in the knowledge that Trump's actions have already done much to discredit the United States in the eyes of its allies and partners.<sup>53</sup>

This relative equilibrium, however, is fragile. The imbalance between the two presidents is so stark that it has resulted, paradoxically, in a hardening of US policy — as if compensating for Trump's failure to call Putin to account for Russian actions.<sup>54</sup> The disjunction between the Putin–Trump bromance and the widening policy divide between the two governments could become more serious still. Much will depend on political developments in the United States. If, for example, the Republican Party retains control of both houses in the US Congressional mid-term elections in November, the Kremlin will no doubt sustain its efforts to establish a functional relationship with Washington. However, if Trump's presidency were to implode or he were to lose the 2020 presidential election, Putin might then conclude that he had little to lose by upping the ante in Ukraine, the Middle East, and northern Europe.<sup>55</sup> This would substantially increase the chances of confrontation between Russian and American/NATO forces. The evaporation of any last hopes in the Trump factor could also see a sharp escalation in Russian cyberattacks and other forms of informational warfare, including direct interference in future US elections.

In **Europe**, Putin will portray Russia as a pragmatic and hitherto misunderstood partner. He has already taken some steps in this direction, moving from overt support for far-right (and far-left) parties to re-engaging with the political mainstream in Paris and Berlin. French President Emmanuel Macron was the guest of honour at the 2018



St Petersburg International Economic Forum, Russia's equivalent of Davos. And the Kremlin has intensified its lobbying of the German Government to ensure early completion of the Nordstream II gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea.

In both cases, changing external circumstances foreshadow new possibilities. Macron's desire to project France as a global player could improve the chances of an eventual accommodation over Ukraine, lead to a gradual easing of EU sanctions, and pave the way to economic burden-sharing in a post-conflict Syria. Similarly, Chancellor Angela Merkel's weakened position following the September 2017 Bundestag elections has made it more likely that German self-interest will eventually prevail over moral principle. Although a return to business as usual is said to be unlikely, there are signs that German elite opinion is already wobbling towards a softer stance on Russia.<sup>56</sup> Add to this the emergence of well-disposed governments in Italy and Austria, and the prospects appear quite promising viewed from Moscow.

The Kremlin's hopes of an unravelling of transatlantic and European unity may or may not be realised. Either way we can expect it to persevere with a customised approach to the West, even in the face of setbacks. For example, it reacted relatively mildly to French participation in retaliatory air strikes against the Assad regime in April 2018<sup>57</sup> — perhaps because it sees France, with its tradition of *realpolitik*, as the most reasonable of the Western powers. Meanwhile, it will continue to seek 'compromises' in its dealings with German politicians and business.

Moscow's piecemeal handling of Western countries reveals that good or 'normal' relations are not ends in themselves, but are only valuable insofar as they advance concrete Russian interests. Getting Paris and Berlin onside will be pivotal in securing EU funds for post-conflict reconstruction in Syria, thereby consolidating Russia's strategic gains. Equally, any hope of a political accommodation in Ukraine on Moscow's terms depends on some level of constructive engagement with France and Germany through the Minsk process. The goal here is not peace for its own sake, but a Ukraine that is weak, susceptible to Russian pressure, and increasingly unattractive to Western partners.<sup>58</sup> By contrast, the Kremlin has no compunction in offending the United Kingdom, as the Skripal affair has highlighted. A post-Brexit Britain is seen as both irremediably hostile and of diminishing relevance.

To sum up, Putin will not resile from core Russian foreign policy positions, and there will be few if any concessions to Western governments. The Kremlin will expend little effort in striving for a broader accommodation, much less a grand bargain, but will instead probe the anxieties and doubts of those EU/NATO members who subscribe to 'pragmatic' engagement with Russia.

There are, however, **two major imponderables** that could lead to a further and potentially catastrophic deterioration in Russia–West

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relations. The first is the breakdown of the US–Russia arms control regime, starting with the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and extending to the non-renewal of START.<sup>59</sup> If this regime unravels, then the ensuing arms race will have a multiplier effect on the many other crises that dot US–Russia relations. More fundamentally, it would see the removal of one of the last remaining commonalities between the world’s two nuclear superpowers.<sup>60</sup>

The second imponderable is that particular armed ‘incidents’ — in Ukraine, the Middle East, the Baltic Sea region — may become more difficult to manage. One of the striking features of Putin’s conduct of foreign policy over the years has been the transition from a largely cautious approach during his first two presidential terms (2000–08) to a mindset that seems to regard brinkmanship as a virtue and a weapon.<sup>61</sup> Moscow’s reckless involvement in the 2016 US presidential election, the Skripal affair, the stepping-up of hostile cyber activity, the tacit encouragement of Assad’s use of chemical weapons, and the increasingly fashionable notion of ‘escalate to de-escalate’<sup>62</sup> suggest a much greater inclination to gamble. Given the possibility of confrontation, Putin may well choose to face down Western leaders, fortified by the belief that he is tougher, smarter, and more committed than anyone else.

#### STEPPING UP ENGAGEMENT IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

*Russia will significantly expand its presence in Asia over the next few years.*

Russia will significantly expand its presence in Asia over the next few years. This is partly because Putin sees the Asia-Pacific region as the crucible of twenty-first century international politics and economics. More immediately, the dismal state of Russia–US relations, Trump’s unpredictability, and continuing difficulties in Europe leave Moscow with little alternative. Fully-fledged engagement with Asian countries and organisations may still be counter-intuitive to sections of the elite. But even the most avid Europhile recognises that it is essential to Russia’s future prospects.

Putin will continue to give particular attention to the Sino-Russian partnership. There are a multitude of reasons why this should be so, including authoritarian empathy, shared threat perceptions, economic complementarities, and personal rapport between the two presidents.<sup>63</sup> The main motivation, however, is the promotion of Russia — and Putin personally — as a global player. While Moscow is wary about the growing asymmetry of Sino-Russian relations, this concern pales in comparison to the perceived benefits of association with the world’s next superpower. For it is only in tandem with China that Russia can hope to subvert the geopolitical primacy of the United States and normative dominance of the West, and advance its core aim of building a post-Western world order in which it stands as an independent and ‘equal’ power. In effect, the Sino-Russian partnership has become the primary instrument of Putin’s globalist foreign policy.

Yet if China remains the cornerstone of Russia's engagement with Asia, Putin has nevertheless sought to develop options elsewhere. Globally, that means preserving close economic ties with Europe and some level of functional stability with the United States. Regionally, it entails diversifying Russia's relations in Asia — principally with Japan and India, but also with the two Koreas and Southeast Asia — and deepening its participation in multilateral structures. And bilaterally with China, it translates into a focus on Russia's comparative advantages as a nuclear superpower and the pre-eminent security provider in Central Eurasia. Underpinning all these moves is the principle that an independent Russian foreign policy is predicated on strategic flexibility — being beholden to no one, but instead disposing of multiple options. Just as Putin has resisted subordination to a US-led world order, he will also reject being relegated to the position of Xi Jinping's loyal helper.

*The growing asymmetry of the Sino-Russian partnership undermines Moscow's capacity to pursue a truly independent foreign policy...*

Of course, that is easier said than done. Russian influence in Asia is largely limited to the post-Soviet space and the Near East, and the vision of a revived Kissingerian triangle between the United States, China, and Russia remains a fantasy.<sup>64</sup> The growing asymmetry of the Sino-Russian partnership undermines Moscow's capacity to pursue a truly independent foreign policy, let alone be a 'swing' player between Washington and Beijing. In the improbable event of a major improvement in Russia-US relations, Xi will still call the shots in the Sino-Russian partnership, while being careful to give 'face' to Putin. The Kremlin may envisage Greater Eurasia as a joint enterprise, but the reality is that it will take shape, if at all, on Beijing's terms.

Putin will also struggle to put Russia's relations in Asia on a more balanced footing. His conspicuous prioritisation of the Sino-Russian partnership has constrained the growth of political and economic ties with Japan and India, and limited Russia's capacity to pursue an independent policy line on North Korea,<sup>65</sup> maritime issues in the western Pacific, and counterterrorism. The growing assertiveness of Chinese foreign policy, evident in the BRI among other things, has encouraged New Delhi to move closer to Washington,<sup>66</sup> thereby cutting across Moscow's goal of a non-aligned, sympathetic India.

Putin will be anxious to avoid the spectre of a new bipolarity in Asia, with China and Russia on one side, and the United States and leading Asian powers on the other. This is not only geopolitically unpalatable, but would incur the risk of dangerous entanglements in East Asia, and of Russia being caught in the middle of a potential confrontation between the United States and China.<sup>67</sup> Such concerns have become all the more pertinent against the background of the escalating trade war between Washington and Beijing, disputes over freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, revived tensions over Taiwan, and uncertainties about the future of the Korean Peninsula.<sup>68</sup>

Despite the obvious difficulties, then, Putin will persist with an ‘all-fronts’ policy in Asia. He will intensify contacts with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and other Asian leaders. There will be more active Russian participation in Asian multilateral structures, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, APEC and the East Asia Summit. Moscow will strive to expand the Greater Eurasia idea from a de facto Sino-Russian condominium into something larger and more inclusive in which Chinese influence would be mitigated by other major players.<sup>69</sup> Russian state corporations will continue to hawk arms, oil and gas, and nuclear technology across the continent. Issues of food and water security will become more prominent, as Russia seeks to position itself as the strategic supplier of choice. All this will be pursued, not in the expectation that Russia will become a real force in the Asia-Pacific imminently, but because a strengthened presence there is critical to its self-identification as a resurgent global power.

#### GLOBAL RUSSIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

*Putin has enjoyed some of his greatest foreign policy successes in the Middle East.*

Putin has enjoyed some of his greatest foreign policy successes in the Middle East. After decades on the outer, Russia has once again become a central player. In Syria, it has realised its principal aims while exposing the feebleness of Western decision-making. Strikingly, it has managed to do so while maintaining good or reasonable relations with the main regional players — Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. It has re-established its influence in Libya and Egypt.<sup>70</sup> It has used events in the Middle East to project itself as a good regional citizen, promoting a peace settlement in Syria through the Astana process. And it has worked with the Saudis and other oil-producing countries to push up global energy prices.<sup>71</sup> There have been occasional operational setbacks, such as the killing of 200 Russian ‘mercenaries’ in February 2018 in the Deir ez-Zor region of eastern Syria, and Moscow has attracted international opprobrium for supporting Assad’s use of chemical weapons against his own people. However, so far there has been little to impede Russia’s smooth progress to real influence in the Middle East.

Now that he believes the war in Syria is won, Putin is intent on consolidating Russia’s gains. In the first instance, that means completing military operations, in particular the elimination of the last significant anti-Assad enclave in the northern province of Idlib. Longer term, consolidation implies a comprehensive political settlement and large-scale economic reconstruction, the latter to be mainly financed by others. Cooperation here might also offer an additional path to normalising relations with France and Germany. Putin will back Assad for the time being, and will certainly not give him up in response to Western pressure. However, Russian support for Assad is not unconditional, and there are circumstances in which this could be reduced or even withdrawn — for example, if he became too beholden

to the Iranians, provoked Israel into a major military intervention, or simply stopped listening to Russian advice.

More broadly, Putin will aim to expand Russian influence across the Middle East, but cautiously and as cheaply as possible. Moscow's approach will be largely reactive, shaped in particular by how various rivalries and confrontations play out — between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel, Turkey and the Kurds, and the United States and Iran. We are likely to see a policy of flexible game management rather than an attempt to implement a grand vision. Moscow will try to avoid being sucked into wider and long-term conflicts in the region. It will seek to exploit commercial and security opportunities as they arise, notably in arms sales and the development of energy infrastructure. Most importantly, it will strive to maintain good relations with all state parties while being careful not to overcommit to any one side.

This events-driven and relatively conservative approach points to the limits of Putin's ambitions in the Middle East. He is keen to parlay Russia's increased involvement in the region into larger gains, reinforcing its claims to be an independent centre of global power and responsible international citizen. However, there is little evidence of any desire to replace the United States as the leading power in the Middle East, given the costs of such an enterprise and the risks of overextension. The disasters of American decision-making over the past 15 years stand as a salutary lesson. Still, Putin's best intentions could be overtaken by fast-breaking developments over which he has no control, such as a major conflict between Israel and Iran.<sup>72</sup> In that event, Russia might be forced to take on additional diplomatic and military commitments or face the prospect of losing the ground it has worked so hard to regain.

## THE PUTIN ENDGAME

All this brings us to the question of Putin's endgame: how does he see Russia's place in the world when he eventually departs the political stage? So far, Moscow's actions form a somewhat confusing picture — a combination of public swagger and allergic responses; 'grand design'<sup>73</sup> and improvisation; an almost casual disregard for reputational damage counterbalanced by a craving for respect and 'face'.

But amid the white noise, several themes emerge very clearly. The first is that the supreme foreign policy goal of the Putin regime is domestic, namely its own self-preservation. This goal is timeless and all-encompassing, and comes with its own iconology. For Putin, international relations, good or bad, are ultimately an extension and a subset of domestic politics and his personal interest.

Second, Putin's legitimacy is bound more tightly than ever with the quasi-mystical ideal of Russian greatness. The old social contract

*...the supreme foreign policy goal of the Putin regime is domestic, namely its own self-preservation.*

between state and people — material prosperity in exchange for political acquiescence — has become obsolete, to be superseded by a new compact based on the mobilisation of national pride and self-belief in the face of Russia's enemies. Putin is the incarnation of this mindset, at once its symbol and its messenger.

Third, the much-discussed notion of a Putin legacy is problematic. It implies that Putin is preparing to leave, when there is no sign of this at all. Tellingly, the cult of personality surrounding him has become more pronounced in recent years. He has taken great pains to establish himself as indispensable and even infallible,<sup>74</sup> a leader whose fate is indistinguishable from Russia's.<sup>75</sup> Despite the faux-modest disclaimer about not wanting to be president-for-life, Putin sees himself as Russia's future, whether as president or in some 'father of the nation' capacity.<sup>76</sup>

*...Putin believes he has little to prove, at least in foreign policy. Measured by his own standards, he has been hugely successful.*

True, there are still tasks to be completed. Yet the evidence indicates that Putin believes he has little to prove, at least in foreign policy. Measured by his own standards, he has been hugely successful. Russia has become an increasingly prominent and influential international actor. It has seized the initiative in its dealings with the West. There is strong domestic support for the Kremlin's management of foreign relations. A renascent nationalism has become one of the pillars of regime legitimacy.<sup>77</sup> Russia's enemies are in a state of confusion. And the liberal world order has self-detonated, opening the way to a new international system more favourable to Moscow.

In short, as far as Putin is concerned, Russia has made it. The fundamentals are sound. The achievements are obvious. All that remains is to build on them, polish them, safeguard them, and ensure that others recognise them. Russian foreign policy is an organic phenomenon, requiring constant attention and frequent modifications. But for Putin and the political elite, these are matters of detail, not of principle or strategic direction.

Over the next few years, then, the chances of substantive change in Russian foreign policy are minimal. At times Moscow will appear relatively accommodating and pragmatic. At other times it will be assertive and confrontational, employing an array of instruments, traditional (nuclear and conventional military power) and new (such as cyber capabilities and social media). Putin will indulge his penchant for tactical surprises, both to realise specific objectives and as a matter of sound operating practice. And he will project himself as an international statesman, a voice of moderation and wisdom in a world lacking in either.

Yet such fluctuations should always be seen in the context of a world view that regards Russian actions as invariably justified. In time, the Kremlin's conviction in its own righteousness may become diluted and give way to a more open-minded and questioning attitude. But this will not happen as long as Putin remains the dominant political figure in Russia, and certainly not during the current presidential term.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to Russia's Central Election Commission, Putin obtained 76.69 per cent of the votes cast, while turnout was 67.54 per cent: "Putin Wins Presidential Polls with 76.69% — Election Commission", TASS, 23 March 2018, <http://tass.com/politics/995729>. There was never any doubt that Putin would receive a very large majority of the votes, but the regime had been concerned that popular apathy could result in a low turnout. In the end, a vigorous 'get out the vote' campaign, pressure in workplaces, incentives (such as free food at polling stations), and some creative accounting resulted in a high turnout figure.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Putin press conference, 18 March 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/57085>.

<sup>3</sup> Although Boris Yeltsin resigned the presidency in December 1999, the circumstances were very specific. He was extremely ill and no longer capable of exercising real authority. Crucially, too, the succession deal with Putin included guarantees that Yeltsin, his family, and their property would not be touched – guarantees Putin kept.

<sup>4</sup> Barack Obama, press conference at the Nuclear Security Summit, 25 March 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkQUzeZbLEs>.

<sup>5</sup> David Majumdar, "Stumbling into a War with Russia", *The National Interest*, 26 March 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/stumbling-war-russia-25089>. The prominent journalist Edward Lucas came up with the term 'new Cold War' as early as 2008, but was criticised for overstating the tensions between Russia and the West. More recently, however, the term has become much more common.

<sup>6</sup> The US National Security Strategy asserts that "China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity": <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>, 2. In a similar vein, the US National Defense Strategy claims that the "central challenge to US prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition* [original italics] by ... revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model": <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Yevgeny Primakov, regarded by many as the doyen of Russian foreign policy in the post-Cold War period, once stated that "Russia does not have permanent friends, it has permanent interests", in "Ministr, kotorogo ne rugaet oppozitsiya [The Minister whom the Opposition Does Not Abuse]", interview in *Obshchaya Gazeta*, No 37, 19–25 September 1996, 4. Primakov adapted the original aphorism of the nineteenth century British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston: "We have no eternal allies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow", Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, Third Series, Vol 97, Col 122, 1 March 1848, [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1848/mar/01/treaty-of-adrianople-charges-against#column\\_122](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1848/mar/01/treaty-of-adrianople-charges-against#column_122).

<sup>8</sup> For a sober Russian assessment of the failures of Moscow's Ukraine policy, see Dmitri Trenin, "Russia and Ukraine: From Brothers to Neighbors", Carnegie Moscow Center, 21 March 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75847>.



<sup>9</sup> In a poll conducted by the Levada Center in March 2018, 70 per cent of respondents thought that “reunification with Crimea” had “mostly helped” Russia, as opposed to 15 per cent who considered that it had “mostly harmed” it: see “Crimea”, Levada Center press release, 17 April 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/04/17/crimea-2/>.

<sup>10</sup> In this respect, the Kremlin’s attitude parallels that of the Chinese Communist Party.

<sup>11</sup> Sergei Karaganov, “The West’s Unilateral Cold War”, *Project Syndicate*, 20 March 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/west-and-russia-no-new-cold-war-by-sergei-karaganov-2018-03>.

<sup>12</sup> Definition of “ideology” in *Oxford English Dictionary* online, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ideology>.

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller discussion of the role of ideas and ideology, see Dmitri Trenin and Bobo Lo, *The Landscape of Russian Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2005), 14–16.

<sup>14</sup> See Marlene Laruelle, “The Kremlin’s Ideological Ecosystems: Equilibrium and Competition”, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No 493, November 2017, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/kremlins-ideological-ecosystems-equilibrium-and-competition>.

<sup>15</sup> Iver Neumann, *Russia and The Idea of Europe* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 25.

<sup>16</sup> The Director of the Russian media organisation RT, Margarita Simonyan, thus described Putin as “our *vozhd*”, a term most commonly associated with Stalin: see Fred Weir, “With Russians Feeling Besieged, Some Give Putin a Loaded Title: *Vozhd*”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2018/0402/With-Russians-feeling-besieged-some-give-Putin-a-loaded-title-vozhd>. I am indebted to John Besemeres for drawing Simonyan’s comment to my attention.

<sup>17</sup> Andrei Kolesnikov writes of the Putin regime being engaged in a “permanent counterrevolution”, in “Frozen Landscape: The Russian Political System Ahead of the 2018 Presidential Election”, Carnegie Moscow Center, March 2018, 5, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kolesnikov\\_Consensus\\_Article\\_March2018\\_WEB.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kolesnikov_Consensus_Article_March2018_WEB.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Putin’s remarks to the Valdai Club, 19 September 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>: “... many Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual.”

<sup>19</sup> Russian journalist and political commentator Konstantin von Eggert nicely captured this self-perception of uniqueness: “All peoples think they are unique, but Russians think they are more unique than the others.” The idea of Russia’s ‘specialness’ is also encapsulated in the notion of it being neither East nor West, but a “civilization of a third kind”: see Vladislav Surkov, “*Oдиночество полукровки* [The Loneliness of the Half-blood”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 9 April 2018, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/-19490>.

<sup>20</sup> “Just like the United States, Russia has its own version of universalism and messianic consciousness, expressed in the formulation ‘Sacred Russia’”: Dmitri Trenin, *Rossiya i mir v XXI veke [Russia and the World in the 21st Century]* (Moscow: Russkii Put’ Publishers, 2015), 115. When the question of possible NATO membership came up soon after Putin entered the Kremlin in 2000, he rejected the suggestion that Russia would have to apply through the usual channels by meeting the alliance’s stringent entry criteria: “I am not standing in any queue with a lot of countries that don’t matter” — see “Remarks by former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson”, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, 25 February 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/event/nato-60-symposium-remarks-former-nato-secretary-general-lord-robertson>.

<sup>21</sup> According to a recent VTsIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) survey, 49 per cent of respondents believed that Russia was already a great power, while another 35 per cent thought it would become one in the next 15–20 years. Revealingly, the main factors cited in support of this view were a “combat-effective and well-armed army” (26 per cent), the “will power and spirit of the people” (22 per cent), and a “good and strong president” (17 per cent): see “Russia Is a Great Power”, VTsIOM press release, 21 May 2018, <https://wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1540>. A Levada survey found that 82 per cent of those polled agreed with the statement that “Russia should maintain its role as a superpower”: see “Pride and Patriotism”, Levada Center press release, 2 February 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/02/02/pride-and-patriotism-2/>.

<sup>22</sup> Kolesnikov, “Frozen Landscape”, 4.

<sup>23</sup> See Alexander Gabuev, “Russian–US Flashpoints in the post-Soviet Space: The View from Moscow”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 23 February 2018, 2, <https://carnegie.ru/2018/02/23/russian-u.s.-flashpoints-in-post-soviet-space-view-from-moscow-pub-75631>.

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the notion of a post-modern empire, see Bobo Lo, *Russia and the World Disorder* (London; Washington DC: Chatham House and Brookings, 2015), 101–105.

<sup>25</sup> See Putin’s remarks to the Valdai Club, 19 September 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>. More recently, he has been even more explicit on Ukraine: “I believe that we are one nation with practically no differences. There are some cultural differences, and the linguistic colouring is a little different ... But in essence ... we are one people”: Q&A at the Lebedinsky GOK, 14 July 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/55052>.

<sup>26</sup> Marlene Laruelle identifies attachment to a “globalized, multicultural, and multilateral Russia” as one of the Kremlin’s “ideological ecosystems”: see Laruelle, “The Kremlin’s Ideological Ecosystems: Equilibrium and Competition”.

<sup>27</sup> It is no coincidence that Tsar Alexander III (1881–94) has become something of a secular icon. He famously remarked that Russia had only two allies — its army and its navy. See “Putin Agrees with Emperor that Russia’s Only Allies are Army and Navy”, TASS, 16 April 2015, <http://tass.com/russia/789866>.

<sup>28</sup> A Levada poll from October 2017 asked respondents, “What do you like about Vladimir Putin?”. The top two (out of 20) reasons given were: “Decisive, manly, firm, strong-willed, strong, calm, brave, clear-cut, self-confident, a real man” and “Foreign policy, defending against the West, respected around the world, doesn’t let others push him around, is supported by the military, maintains a high status”. See “Vladimir Putin’s Work”, Levada Center press release, 11 December 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2017/12/11/vladimir-putin-s-work/>.

<sup>29</sup> The idea of the West taking advantage of Russia or wishing it harm is a frequent theme in former Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov’s writings. See, for example, ‘Russia’s post-Election Foreign Policy: New Challenges, New Horizons’, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 28 March 2018, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Russias-Post-Election-Foreign-Policy-New-Challenges-New-Horizons-19458>.

<sup>30</sup> As the leading Russian commentator Fyodor Lukyanov notes, “[t]he liberal world order discourse — a positive-sum game which honors interdependence instead of competition, economy above security — has never been taken seriously in Moscow”: see “Trump’s Defense Strategy is Perfect for Russia”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 24 January 2018, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Trumps-defense-strategy-is-perfect-for-Russia-19312>.

<sup>31</sup> Andrei Kolesnikov refers in particular to the “post-Crimea negative consensus”: “Frozen landscape”, 6.

<sup>32</sup> It is often overlooked that Boris Yeltsin, seen by many in the West as a symbol of democracy, was as fixated on the idea of Russian ‘greatness’ as his more reactionary and nationalist opponents.

<sup>33</sup> As James Sherr notes, had Yanukovich managed to hold on, “Russia would have had no evident reason to annex Crimea or foment insurgency in Donbas”: see “Geopolitics and Security”, in *The Struggle for Ukraine*, Chatham House Report, October 2017, 18, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2017-10-18-struggle-for-ukraine-ash-gunn-lough-lutsevych-nixey-sherr-wolczukV5.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Putin’s sense of insecurity was exacerbated by the US government openly supporting the protesters. See Will Englund, “The Roots of the Hostility between Putin and Clinton”, *The Washington Post*, 28 July 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-roots-of-the-hostility-between-putin-and-clinton/2016/07/28/85ca74ca-5402-11e6-b652-315ae5d4d4dd\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.8d562e438b28](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-roots-of-the-hostility-between-putin-and-clinton/2016/07/28/85ca74ca-5402-11e6-b652-315ae5d4d4dd_story.html?utm_term=.8d562e438b28).

<sup>35</sup> “Putin for the Fourth Time: The State of and Prospects for Russia (2018–2024)”, Center for Eastern Studies, Warsaw, 20 March 2018, 19, [https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/report\\_putin-for-the-fourth\\_net.pdf](https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/report_putin-for-the-fourth_net.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Putin is hardly unique in this regard. In recent years a growing number of countries have followed the nationalist template — China, the Philippines, Turkey, and even EU member-states such as Poland and Hungary.

<sup>37</sup> There has been a return to growth, but this is expected to remain modest, around 1.5 per cent for the medium term: see Andrey Biryukov and Anna Andrianova, “Russia to Lower Forecast of Economic Growth”, *Bloomberg*, 27 June 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-27/russia-said-to-lower-view-of-economic-growth-on-planned-tax-hike>.

<sup>38</sup> “Russia’s Biggest Enemy is US — Poll”, *The Moscow Times*, 18 January 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russias-biggest-enemy-is-us-poll-60146>.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Vice, “Publics Worldwide Unfavorable toward Putin, Russia”, Pew Global Attitudes Survey, 16 August 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/16/publics-worldwide-unfavorable-toward-putin-russia/>.

<sup>40</sup> Ivan Krastev and Gleb Pavlovsky (Putin’s chief ‘political technologist’ for many years) claim that “it is Putin rather than the Russian state that has regained the status of a great power”: see “The Arrival of post-Putin Russia”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2 March 2018, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/The-arrival-of-post-Putin-Russia-19399>.

<sup>41</sup> See Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s interview with Stephen Sackur on the BBC HARDtalk program, 17 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zJ41whNgR0>.

<sup>42</sup> For a detailed analysis of the BRI, see Peter Cai, *Understanding China’s Belt and Road Initiative*, Lowy Institute Analysis, 22 March 2017, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/understanding-belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>43</sup> The commentator Sergei Karaganov has called for Eurasia to “become the cradle of a new fairer and more stable world order that would replace the crumbling old one”: “From East to West, or Greater Eurasia”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 25 October 2016, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/From-East-to-West-or-Greater-Eurasia-18440>.

<sup>44</sup> Trump’s decision on 8 May 2018 to pull the United States out of the JCPOA was a gift to the Kremlin, highlighting the contrast between a unilateralist America and a Russia committed to multilateral cooperation. The subsequent imposition of US sanctions on Iran in August 2018 only reinforced this distinction.

<sup>45</sup> See Russian National Security Concept, full text translation, 31 December 2015, <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> The original ‘Concert’, the Concert of Europe, emerged out of the 1815 Congress of Vienna. Its main goals were to re-establish authoritarian order across Europe after the defeat of Napoleon, suppress revolutionary nationalism, and preserve the balance of power between the major European powers.

<sup>47</sup> Putin has extolled the Yalta (Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt) agreement of 1945 as a model of how great power cooperation can ensure international peace and stability: see Putin’s remarks to the Valdai Club, 19 September 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>. On the virtues of the Concert more generally, see Sergei Karaganov and Elisabeth Hellenbroich, “Russia’s Victory, New Concert of Nations”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 31 March 2017, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Russias-Victory-new-Concert-of-Nations-18641>.

<sup>48</sup> See Foreign Minister Lavrov’s interview on BBC HARDtalk, 17 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zJ41whNgR0>.

<sup>49</sup> Ewen MacAskill, “How Trump’s Nato Summit Meltdown Unfolded”, *The Guardian*, 12 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/12/how-trumps-nato-summit-meltdown-unfolded>.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Walker, “The Highest Level of Special’: Trump Praises US Relationship with UK”, *The Guardian*, 13 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/13/the-highest-level-of-special-trump-praises-us-relationship-with-uk>. During the visit, Trump publicly criticised May’s handling of the Brexit negotiations with the European Union, and claimed that the recently departed Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, would make a “great Prime Minister”.

<sup>51</sup> “Putin–Trump Talks Were Better than Super, Says Russian Top Diplomat”, TASS, 16 July 2018, <http://tass.com/politics/1013439>. Lavrov’s public enthusiasm was widely shared in Moscow: see “Russian Officials Hail Putin’s Success at Trump Helsinki Summit”, *The Moscow Times*, 17 July 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-officials-hail-putins-success-trump-helsinki-summit-62268>.

<sup>52</sup> Senator John McCain spoke for many when he called Trump’s performance in Helsinki “one of the most disgraceful performances by an American president”: see Dan Mangan, “Sen John McCain Says Trump Gave ‘One of the most disgraceful performances by an American president’ at Putin Summit”, CNBC, 16 July 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/16/john-mccain-says-trump-abased-himself-before-putin-at-summit.html>. Even prominent Trump supporters were critical. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich described Trump’s remarks at the joint press conference as the “most serious mistake of his presidency”: Meg Wagner et al, “Fallout after Trump–Putin Meeting”, CNN, 17 July 2018, [https://edition.cnn.com/politics/live-news/trump-putin-helsinki/h\\_40500a225df3ce482d7d70a5af6e061e](https://edition.cnn.com/politics/live-news/trump-putin-helsinki/h_40500a225df3ce482d7d70a5af6e061e).

<sup>53</sup> Tatiana Stanovaya, “Two Trumps in Helsinki: Russia’s Approach to the US President”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 2 August 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76962>.

<sup>54</sup> Matthew Bodner, “How Russians Saw the Helsinki Summit”, *The New Republic*, 17 July 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/149950/russians-saw-helsinki-summit>; Fyodor Lukyanov, “Shadows over the Putin–Trump Summit”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 19 July 2018, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Shadows-Over-the-Putin-Trump-Summit-19687>.

<sup>55</sup> Bobo Lo, *An Accident Waiting to Happen: Trump, Putin and the US–Russia Relationship*, Lowy Institute Analysis (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2017), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/accident-waiting-happen-trump-putin-and-us-russia-relationship>.

<sup>56</sup> As John Lough notes, “it is by no means certain that Germany’s Russia policy will retain the substance and momentum it acquired in 2014”: see “Germany’s Russia Challenge”, Center for Security Studies, Zürich, 2 March 2018, 12, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/fc72f896-819d-4763-b72f-7a442c7a694c/pdf>. See also Markus Wacket and Thomas Eschritt, “Merkel’s Tougher Russia Stance Meets Resistance in Germany”, *Reuters*, 16 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-russia/merkels-tougher-russia-stance-meets-resistance-in-germany-idUSKBN1HN1XU>.

<sup>57</sup> On 7 April 2018, the Syrian Army launched a chemical weapons attack on the Damascus suburb of Douma. Although Assad denied responsibility for the attack, the weight of evidence indicated that he was culpable. A week later, American, French, and British planes launched retaliatory air strikes against selected Syrian chemical weapons facilities.

<sup>58</sup> Sherr, "Geopolitics and Security", 22.

<sup>59</sup> Steven Pifer, "Arms Control, Security Cooperation, and US–Russian Relations", Valdai Paper No 78, 17 November 2017, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/arms-control-security-cooperation-and-u-s-russian/>.

<sup>60</sup> Eugene Rumer observes that the end of arms control would pose "fundamental questions" about Russia's broader "post-Cold War security arrangements with the West and revisionist plans for alternative arrangements that go well beyond arms control": see "A Farewell to Arms ... Control", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2018, 7, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Arms\\_Control-Rumer.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Arms_Control-Rumer.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> There were occasions during Putin's first two presidential terms when he was bold and assertive, for example his speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference condemning US foreign policy in the strongest terms (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>). And after he formally stepped down as president in 2008, he approved the Russian military intervention against Georgia in August that year. Nevertheless, there is a stark contrast between Putin's relative caution before 2012, and his much more confident and sometimes aggressive approach thereafter.

<sup>62</sup> 'Escalate to de-escalate' is based on the paradoxical idea that a selective military escalation may achieve the de-escalation of conflict by forcing the other side to back down for fear of catastrophic consequences.

<sup>63</sup> See Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China–Russia Relationship Means for the World*, A Lowy Institute Paper (Melbourne: Penguin Random House Australia, 2017).

<sup>64</sup> The heyday of the strategic triangle followed US President Richard Nixon's visit to China in February 1972. Its premise was that reaching out to China on the basis of a shared interest in countering Soviet power would arrest the slide in America's strategic fortunes (then under pressure from the Vietnam War and the build-up of the Soviet nuclear arsenal) and weaken those of America's principal rival. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Advisor, was widely regarded as the architect of this policy, although he himself credited his president with the strategic wisdom to prioritise national interests over ideological differences. See Chapter 28, "Foreign Policy as Geopolitics: Nixon's Triangular Diplomacy", in Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 703–732.

<sup>65</sup> Artyom Lukin, "Why Russia Is Still Playing Second Fiddle in Korean Geopolitics", Valdai Club, 21 August 2018, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-second-fiddle-in-korea/>.

<sup>66</sup> Evan Moore, "Strengthen the US–India Relationship", *National Review*, 1 February 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/02/india-united-states-relations-trade-military-strategy-alliance/>.

<sup>67</sup> Timofey Bordachev, “Main Results of 2017: Energetic Russia and the Greater Eurasia Community”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 29 December 2017, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Main-Results-of-2017-Energetic-Russia-and-the-Greater-Eurasia-Community-19276>.

<sup>68</sup> It is one thing for Moscow to invite Chinese participation in Russian military exercises, such as Vostok-2018; it is quite another to offer active military (rather than just diplomatic) support to Beijing in its bilateral disputes with the United States.

<sup>69</sup> Karaganov, “From East to West, Or Greater Eurasia”.

<sup>70</sup> Nikolai Kozhanov, *Russian Policy across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods*, Chatham House Research Paper, February 2018, 23–24, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2018-02-21-russian-policy-middle-east-kozhanov.pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>72</sup> “Putin for the Fourth Time”, 39.

<sup>73</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Has Grand Designs for the International Order”, *The Moscow Times*, 24 October 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russias-formative-plan-c-foreign-policy-59357>.

<sup>74</sup> Once when asked whether he had regretted any of his actions or errors, Putin responded: “I cannot recollect anything of the kind. By the grace of God, I have nothing to regret in my life”: interview with *Il Corriere della Sera*, 7 June 2015, [http://www.corriere.it/english/15\\_giugno\\_07/vladimir-putin-interview-to-the-italian-newspaper-corriere-sera-44c5a66c-0d12-11e5-8612-1eda5b996824.shtml?refresh\\_ce-cp](http://www.corriere.it/english/15_giugno_07/vladimir-putin-interview-to-the-italian-newspaper-corriere-sera-44c5a66c-0d12-11e5-8612-1eda5b996824.shtml?refresh_ce-cp).

<sup>75</sup> In 2014, then Deputy Chief of Staff (and current speaker of the Duma – the Russian parliament) Vyacheslav Volodin famously declared that “there is no Russia today if there is no Putin”: “‘No Putin, No Russia’, Says Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff”, *Moscow Times*, 23 October 2014, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/no-putin-no-russia-says-kremlin-deputy-chief-of-staff-40702>.

<sup>76</sup> Or as Andrei Kolesnikov puts it, “Putin is transitioning from being the father of the nation to its grandfather”, as per Generalissimo Franco in his later years: see “Project Inertia: The Outlook for Putin’s Fourth Term”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 25 January 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75339>.

<sup>77</sup> Andrei Kolesnikov, “History Is the Future: Russia in Search of the Lost Empire”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 15 February 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75544>.



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