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Russian Grand Strategy and the COVID crisis

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The sense of Great Power competition and challenge to the liberal international order that characterised the Euro-Atlantic community's debate through the 2010s has become more acute in 2020. Government responses to the spread of COVID-19 have provided much ammunition for those who describe a weakening of the liberal order and the threat posed by authoritarian regimes. And the sense of competition between the powers was illustrated by the race to create a vaccine, redolent for many of the Cold War era, with Russia's "Sputnik V" vaccine controversially being registered first in August.

Yet the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests a new stage, with a greater emphasis on emergent bipolarity in international affairs. If Russia was the original point of focus in the "New Cold War/ Cold War 2.0" of the 2010s, attention has now shifted to the rise of China. In September 2020, then-US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper stated that China is now the main concentration for his department, and that departmental attention would be on the Indo-Pacific region. Other senior officials consider Russia to be "bursts of bad weather", while China represents "climate change", the greater long-term adversary.¹

China's economic recovery – already returning in late 2020 to growth while the US, UK and Eurozone remain in red and facing surging debt – is seen to be the foundation for a more assertive international activity.²

What, then, of Russia? What has the crisis meant for Russian strategy? Does the pandemic change Moscow's view of international affairs and its international posture?

Russia and COVID: dissonant views

Some see Russia continuing to pose challenges: the COVID crisis has offered Moscow opportunities to take advantage of Western discomfort, continuing with military deployments and exercises, interfering in the domestic politics of member states, and running disinformation campaigns against NATO. Senior officials also condemned Russia for stealing vaccine development research.

For others, however, especially in the first few months of the pandemic, the spread of the disease in spring 2020 encouraged another turn in the cycle of the view that the end of the Putin era was nigh. President Putin was widely considered to be "having a poor crisis". On the international stage, observers suggested that Russia had not shown leadership, even in Eurasia, only following in China's wake. Russia suffered one of the highest infection rates in the world, and senior figures, including

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1 "Secretary of Defence Speech at RAND", 16 September 2020, Website of the Department of Defence; "MI5 Chief: Russia's intelligence services provide bursts of bad weather while China is climate change", *The Telegraph*, 14 October 2020.

2 L. Diamond, "Democracy versus the pandemic", *Foreign Affairs*, June 2020; K. Rudd, "The coming post-COVID Anarchy", *Foreign Affairs*, May 2020; "A new Cold War: Trump, Xi and the escalating US-China confrontation", *Financial Times*, 4 October 2020; see also B. Gill, "China in the COVID world: continued challenges for a rising power", *NDC Policy Brief* No.20, NATO Defense College, November 2020.

Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, were hospitalised. The pandemic disrupted the political calendar: celebrations to mark the 75th anniversary of victory in World War II and plans to hold a constitutional referendum both had to be postponed. And Putin himself was criticised for being an absent president, and for devolving responsibility for handling the virus to regional governors; polls indicated a sharp decline in his popularity.³

The pandemic has dominated Moscow's policy agenda, featuring in national Security Council meetings, in the Prime Minister's report on the Government's annual performance, or as the core theme of this year's meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, entitled "The lessons of the pandemic and the new agenda: how to turn the world crisis into an opportunity for the world".⁴ Superficially, the discussion in Russia appears similar to that in the Euro-Atlantic community: key features are the complex nature of the challenge, and the socio-economic impact of stalling trade, growing unemployment and looming global recession (Russia's economy contracted some

The pandemic has served to emphasise the assumptions underpinning Moscow's policy planning and priorities

8 percent year-on-year in the second quarter of 2020, the steepest contraction for over a decade). And there is talk of the blow to globalisation and international integration, and a focus on the organising role of the state. Officials and observers speak of

the pandemic causing "a split in time", therefore, with a "before" the outbreak and an "after".

But the discussion looks very different in Russia. Moscow rejects the West's accusations of Russian political interference and vaccine espionage. In turn, the Russian leadership accuses the Euro-Atlantic community of continuing to wage information war against Russia, and of a failure to act collectively, even of "maximally selfish behaviour" and of double standards in maintaining coercive sanctions on states during the humanitarian disaster caused by the pandemic.⁵

Russian strategy in the age of COVID: facing fog and friction

Despite the hints of "opportunities" and a new, "post-COVID" era emerging after the outbreak, there is a strong sense of continuity in Russian strategy. If Putin has suggested that the "serious challenges" posed by the pandemic will be taken into "account while making and adjusting our strategic plans", he has also stated that Russia would "keep long-term macroeconomic policy guidelines unchanged". Parameters of Russia's national projects may be adjusted, but the "benchmarks" and Moscow's priorities remain unchanged.⁶

More specifically, though, the Russian leadership's response to the pandemic has reflected a continuation of the "mobilisation" approach that has characterised Russian strategy for the last decade, with senior officials seeking to "rally the efforts of all of the national facilities in the fight against the coronavirus".⁷ Rhetorical references to historical challenges, including World War II, emphasise societal resilience. And the Ministry of Defence has played a prominent role both coordinating responses with other ministries, including Health and Industry and Trade, and in building medical centres.

In terms of the formulation and implementation of plans, the pandemic has highlighted recurrent approaches and problems. Alongside established bodies such as the Security Council and national Situation Centres, the Russian leadership created additional ones to coordinate activities and monitor the implementation of measures – including the Government Coordination Council and a State Council Working Group. If the leadership has claimed success, it has acknowledged a chequered performance, including the slow preparation of government plans and the disruption to their implementation. Yet the response to the pandemic has illuminated the flaws of ordinary practice: Putin and Mishustin have contrasted the "expeditious" implementation of emergency measures with the burdensome and expensive nature of usual procedures, and the need to address this.⁸

Equally, the pandemic has been just one of several simultaneous crises Moscow has faced this year, each in their way important and revealing of persistent chal-

3 A. Baunov, "Where is Vladimir Putin in the C-19 Crisis?", *Foreign Affairs*, May 2020; "He is failing": Putin's approval rating slides as COVID-19 grips Russia", *The Guardian*, 11 May 2020.

4 "Annual government report on its performance to the State Duma", Website of the Russian Government, 22 July 2020; 17th Annual Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, 20-22 October 2020.

5 Speeches by Putin and Lavrov at Valdai. "Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club", Website of the Presidential Administration, 22 October 2020.

6 "Address to the Nation", Website of the Presidential Administration, 23 June 2020; "Meeting with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu", Website of the Presidential Administration, 26 May 2020; "Mikhail Mishustin's Interview with Rossiya 24 Television Channel", Website of the Russian Government, 23 July 2020.

7 "Meeting of the Praesidium of the Government Coordination Council to control the incidence of the novel Coronavirus infection in the Russian Federation", Website of the Russian Government, 1 June 2020.

8 "Government meeting", Website of the Russian Government, 16 July 2020; "Mishustin's interview".

lenges to strategy making. The Russian economy was hampered in the spring by a significant drop in oil prices, which, according to Mishustin, increased “volatility on financial and foreign exchange markets and triggered capital outflows”. And the leadership faced domestic challenges which put pressure on the chain of command. The spread of wildfires across large parts of Siberia obliged the government to introduce a state of emergency in several regions. And, in late May, a major diesel fuel leak at Norilsk revealed the serious flaws and failures of the chain of command.⁹ Regardless of COVID, Moscow still finds strategy difficult.

Moscow’s strategic assumptions and international activity: what change?

Despite suggestions of opportunities afforded by a new era, there is also little to suggest a major change in Moscow’s assumptions about international affairs. The Russian leadership has long pointed to the emergence of a polycentric world due to the rise of states like China, and the declining international influence of the Euro-Atlantic community. Altogether, this has been seen to herald a “post-West” world. Such a world order is considered to be competitive as states vie for access to resources and trade routes.¹⁰

Indeed, Russian observers and officials explicitly state that the impact of the virus was already foreseen by Russian foresight analysis. Thus, the “crumbling world” described at previous Valdai discussions has “ceased to be a metaphor and turned into a palpable reality before our very eyes”. COVID-19 has “accelerated an evolution of the international situation”, but “failed to add to it anything fundamentally new”. This was subsequently echoed by Putin, who pointed to the “rapid, exponential development of processes repeatedly discussed at Valdai before”.¹¹

Others suggest that the pandemic has even “validated the correctness” of Moscow’s worldview: the fragility of globalism and the receding of the liberal order, the return of the significance of the state as the primary actor (alongside the importance of self-reliance in international affairs as states attend to their

own self-interest), the weaknesses and failures of the EU and NATO, and the emergence of US-Chinese bipolarity.¹²

Leading on from this, the pandemic has not fundamentally altered the situation regarding Moscow’s international policy or longer-term priorities. If anything, according to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the pandemic has only “aggravated” pre-existing problems such as international terrorism and conflicts.¹³ And if COVID is a major international question, it has not driven developments in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Syria, Libya and the war that broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which have all posed different challenges. And though it may complicate logistics now, the pandemic has not altered Moscow’s longer-term strategic concerns and priorities such as the competition for energy leadership through the 2020s and the development of the Northern Sea Route.

The terse exchanges between Moscow and the Euro-Atlantic community writ-large since the pandemic accord with the longer-term dissonance in values, policies and interests that has become increasingly systemic since the early 2000s. There is little immediate scope for an improvement in relations as a result of the pandemic; indeed, in the words of one senior Russian observer, if some hoped that COVID-19 might create the conditions for a “ceasefire”, this “never happened”, “let alone a fully-fledged peace agreement”, and there have been no positive steps in relations during 2020; and in the words of another, the stronger US-China confrontation has not led to a “slackening of the US-Russia confrontation”.¹⁴

Moscow’s view of the Euro-Atlantic organisations is little better. Moscow has often pointed to what it sees as NATO’s shortcomings, and relations with the EU have shown little progress for years. If Lavrov threat-

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9 “Annual government report”; “Meeting with Deputy Prime Ministers”, Website of the Russian Government, 20 July 2020. Russia’s own role in the oil price war was significant: see M. Bradshaw and R. Connolly, “Russia’s energy paradox: the new energy order, global crisis and enduring resource addiction”, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 30 April 2020. On Norilsk: “Bitva pod Norilskom: Putin srazilsya s vertikalny vlas-ti”, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 4 June 2020.

10 “Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s address and answers to questions at the 53rd Munich Security Conference”, Website of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 18 February 2017.

11 O. Barabanov *et al.*, *History, to be continued: the utopia of a diverse world*, Valdai Report, October 2020; “Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club”.

12 S. Lavrov, “Russia and the Post-COVID world”, speech at the Primakov International Readings Forum, 10 July 2020, Website of the Russian Foreign Ministry; D. Trenin, “Confronting the challenges of Coronavirus, Russia sees its worldview vindicated”, Carnegie Moscow, 20 March 2020.

13 Lavrov, “Russia and the Post-COVID world”.

14 A. Kortunov, “Why the Coronavirus ceasefire never happened”, *RLAC Report*, 17 September 2020; D. Suslov, “Non-western multilateralism: BRICS and the SCO in a post-COVID world”, *Valdai Paper*, 29 July 2020.

ened to halt all dialogue with the EU in October after it imposed further sanctions on Moscow following Alexei Navalny's poisoning, prominent Russian observers only remarked that such words had been long in the making. The pandemic may have provided further ammunition for these long-running tensions – Putin stated in November, for instance, that NATO had not only failed to respond to Moscow's proposals to reduce military activity during the pandemic, but that it increased

the activity of air forces and navies.¹⁵ The pandemic has not, however, substantively driven the tensions.

The inverse has happened in Moscow's relationship with China. Though relations are not free from problems, the longer-term trajectory has been one of increasing cooperation. As Putin stated in October, Russia-China relations have attained an "unprecedented level", including in military and

defence industry; though he does not consider military alliance to be a goal, he did not rule it out.¹⁶ The pandemic has contributed to this, with Russia and China cooperating to develop a vaccine, playing as "one team". Some observers suggest that for Moscow this cooperation is also intended to use China as a springboard for accessing the wider Asian market: in this respect, the pandemic has accelerated trends in Russian policy.¹⁷ But this too reflects a longer-term trajectory that has become more pronounced through the 2010s as Moscow has sought to respond to Western sanctions and reach other markets in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

15 "Meeting with Senior Defence Ministry Officials, Heads of Federal Agencies and Defence Industry Executives", Website of the Presidential Administration, 10 November 2020.

16 Putin, "Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club".

17 "China and Russia adopt 'one team' mindset on COVID vaccines vs US", *Asian Nikkei*, 18 September 2020.

Global power competition: to be continued...

COVID-19 has magnified certain challenges for the Russian leadership, and at the time of writing it is unclear what the implications of a second wave in Russia may be. Nevertheless, despite some sustained public protest in the Russian far east (unrelated to COVID-19), the wider political and economic situation has largely stabilised. The referendum on the Constitution was held and passed, and, having fallen some 10 percent between February and May 2020, by October Putin's popularity in polling returned to 69 percent.¹⁸ Officials also suggest that the economic impact has not been as deep as initially anticipated, projecting both that the contraction for 2020 will be less than 4 percent, and a return to growth in 2021, even that Russia will be a top five world economy in 2020.¹⁹

The pandemic has served to emphasise the assumptions underpinning Moscow's policy planning and priorities. Whether it explicitly influences the updating of the National Security Strategy, originally scheduled for publication in 2020, or other similar documents, and with what practical consequences, remains to be seen. But it is significant that Russian officials and observers consider the implications of the pandemic to align with – even prove correct – their foresight analysis. COVID-19 has not changed the foundation assumptions on which Moscow's strategy is based.

If Russian observers and officials agree with their counterparts in the Euro-Atlantic community on anything in terms of international affairs, it is about the emergence of a more bipolar world and looming US-China confrontation. But there the agreement ends; Moscow leans more towards China. As US attention shifts to China and the Indo-Pacific region and NATO considers a more global role, policy makers should not overlook Russia in this wider global horizon, or that Moscow seeks to position itself as a key player – including acting in the Indo-Pacific region – in the global power competition.

18 See results of polling conducted by the Levada Centre at <https://www.levada.ru/>

19 "Russia can join ranks of top five economies this year, Presidential Aide says", Tass, 31 August 2020.

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