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Russia's Emerging Global Ambitions

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Research Division

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List of abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China
CEFC	China Energy Company Limited
CNODC	China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) Exploration & Development Company
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Corporation
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
COMAC	Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China
CRAIC	China-Russia Commercial Aircraft International Corporation Limited
ESPO	Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean
EU	European Union
FSB	Federal Security Service
LNG	Liquefied natural gas
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPP	Nuclear Power Plant
OAK	United Aircraft Corporation
SC	(Russian National) Security Council
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UN	United Nations
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organization

Foreword

Marc Ozawa

Russia's operations and reach are increasingly becoming global. This is the common message affirmed by the four articles contained in this special edition collection. Given Russia's growing presence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), particularly in Syria and Libya, and the deepening level of cooperation with China, what is one to make of it? Six years ago, President Obama dubbed Russia to be "a regional power", and Russia's actions along its borders would certainly attest to having at least aspirations of projecting power in the region. This was most clearly observable in, first, Georgia and then Ukraine through military and clandestine operations. Indeed going back over a decade, Moscow has made no secret of the fact that it has a right to "privileged" status in its neighbourhood as then President Medvedev claimed.¹

However, Russia's most recent foreign endeavours are increasingly pointing to the emergence of a broader and more global approach, one that not only asserts Russian economic interests, but also an intention to shape the global environment. The picture is still emerging, but Russia's actions in Asia and the MENA region could represent bellwethers for what is to come. These articles explore Russia's actions in both regions in addition to the question of Russia's global strategy.

In the first article, Andrew Monaghan dispels the notion that Russia is behaving simply opportunistically rather than strategically. He outlines the main tenets of an emerging global strategy that includes the central principle of growing "Great Power competition". With a new Russian national security strategy set to be released in 2020, Monaghan argues that the Alliance's approach to deterrence, defence, and dialogue must be forward looking and global in perspective, accounting for Russia's strategic approach to the world instead of focusing merely on country level issues.

Next, Marcin Kaczmarek analyses Russia's reorientation towards China, the great "pivot to the East" following the imposition of sanctions as a result of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. Where much of the research on Russia's relations with China has focused on economic and military cooperation to gauge the substance of that relationship, Kaczmarek investigates the domestic reasons that would favour deepened relations with China. He

¹ *Intervyu Dimitriya Medvedeva rossiiskim telekanalam*, President Rossii, 31 August 2008, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/1276> (accessed 8 June 2020).

identifies prominent domestic actors, most of whom have something to gain from working with China. According to the author, the fact that domestic interests align with Moscow's foreign policy goals creates added incentives to reinforce cooperation with China, and thus, forming a more stable bilateral relationship.

Turning then to the MENA region, Wojciech Michnik examines Russia's recent operations in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Michnik aims to build a framework for understanding Russia's actions that are best suited to events taking place on the ground. He argues that Russia has made a type of "strategic calculus" and that opportunism does not explain current developments. Drawing from recent history, Michnik cites the roots of Russia's current policies, identifying parallels to those of Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov during the 1990s. However, Michnik also points out that Russia's approach to the region has shifted over time from that of a "revisionist power" to a "status quo power" best expressed in the case of Syria. Thus, for NATO and member states on the Southern Flank, there is a new factor to contend with in the region whose operating principle is fundamentally opposed to NATO. The article ends by advocating for greater engagement with Partners particularly through the platforms of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

The final piece returns to Russia's relations and posture toward NATO. Through an examination of Russian narratives about NATO, Vasile Rotaru argues that Russia's position about issues such as NATO expansion has shifted over time from tacitly supportive to outright opposition. The author's analysis of official statements and public debates also highlights the role that NATO plays in Russian domestic politics. Rotaru makes the case that, when convenient for domestic policies, Russian leadership has taken advantage of Cold War archetypal images of NATO among the population by instrumentalizing anti-NATO rhetoric. Although this pattern has shifted over time much like Moscow's position on NATO expansion, the article makes clear that 2014 marked a turning point in NATO-related rhetoric with a rise in the frequency and voracity of anti-NATO sentiments. The author concludes with recommendations for a more tailored messaging approach in order to counter specific types of anti-NATO rhetoric.

Russian Grand Strategy: avoiding the barracuda effect

Andrew Monaghan

NATO's position on Russia is clear. Its statements emphasise that Russian activities make the Euro-Atlantic security “less stable and predictable”, and that Russia’s “aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security”. Consequently, NATO is increasing its activity at sea and in the air, and strengthening its ability to “deter and defend with an appropriate mix” of capabilities. Equally, the Alliance “remains open for dialogue and to a constructive relationship with Russia when Russia’s actions make that possible”.¹ This approach has much that is commendable, especially if these strands are treated not as ends in themselves, but as parts of a broader, longer-term strategy for dealing with Russia.

But the success of such an approach depends on having a clear understanding of Russian activity. Though there is a broad consensus on Russia’s role in the “Great Power Competition”, there is less agreement on how to characterise Moscow’s behaviour. Officials and observers are divided, for instance, over whether Russian activity is opportunistic or driven by strategy.

The barracuda effect

For many, Moscow is opportunistic, seizing opportunities apparently with little, if any, planning or goal in mind.² Russian activity is divided into specific areas or localised initiatives, described as “meddling” or “mischief”, and as guided largely by the prospect of economic benefits for (non-state) domestic constituencies. The implications of this understanding are far reaching. One is that the opportunities Moscow seizes are merely those offered by Western inaction, mistakes or failure, not Russian interests. Another is that Moscow’s activity is essentially short-term and provisional, that Moscow could compromise or drop

1 NATO, Brussels Summit Declaration, 11 July 2018; NATO, London Declaration, 4 December 2019. The Brussels Declaration included a lengthy list of Russian destabilising activities, including both military and “hybrid” measures.

2 For instance, “Vystuplenie na rashirennom zasedaniye Gosudarstvenno soveta ‘O strategii razvitiya Rossii do 2020 goda’”, Website of the Presidential Administration, 8 February 2008, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24825> (accessed 1 June 2020); “Prezident podpisal Ukaz ‘O natsionalnykh tselyakh I strategicheskikh zadachakh razvitiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii na period 2024 goda’”, Website of the Presidential Administration, 7 May 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57425>

such policies. Indeed, all told, it suggests a context in which Russian successes can be depicted as essentially temporary or limited in scope, while failures appear to be frequent.³

But this view misses much evidence of Russian attempts to generate strategy, and masks the longer and broader trajectory of Russian global activity. Indeed, it is this approach that creates the all-too frequent sense of surprise at Russian actions. It unnecessarily gives Russia the characteristics of a barracuda: drifting in unnoticed before quickly striking its target. It is hard to think of a worse foundation for implementing successful policies for defence, deterrence and dialogue. Thinking in terms of Russian strategy, in contrast, offers a better foundation: the Russian leadership often gives clear signs of its intentions.

The rebirth of Russian Grand Strategy

When he came to power in 2000, Putin stated his intention to formulate and pursue a long-term strategy, and this is a theme he and the wider Russian leadership team have repeatedly restated. Since the late 2000s, Moscow has regularly emphasised the importance of strategic planning to address the economic, social and national security problems that Russia faced, and set out a strategic agenda for Russia's long-term development. These were re-stated in May 2018.⁴ Though the broader picture has evolved since the early 2000s, therefore, a longer-term structural approach has emerged.

Moscow has established a system for strategic planning. Legislation that provides structure for formulating documents and monitoring their implementation has been prepared – albeit after a protracted and rather difficult process. And since 2006, legislation has also incrementally strengthened the Russian national Security Council (SC), such that it plays a more important role in the process of strategic planning, contributing forecasting and threat assessment, and oversight of both formulation and interagency coordination. In the early 2010s, the SC became the main interagency coordinator, forming the main directions of Russian state foreign and domestic policy.

This is the platform for the formulation of nearly 65,000 concepts, strategies, doctrines and programmes for federal, regional and local authorities. Alongside the major documents such as the National Security Strategy, Foreign Policy Concept and Military Doctrine, these specify priorities from issues such as energy and food security strategies, and maritime

3 P. Stronski and R. Sokolsky, *The return of global Russia: an analytical framework*, Carnegie, 14 December 2017; H. Meddeb, *Opportunism as strategy*, Carnegie, 22 October 2018; F. Wehrey and J. Harchaoui, "How to stop Libya's collapse", *Foreign Affairs*, 7 January 2020; E. Dreyfus, *Moscow's limited prospects in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Kennan Cable No.47, February 2020.

4 "Vystuplenie na rashirennom zasedaniye Gosudarstvenno soveta 'O strategii razvitiya Rossii do 2020 goda'", Website of the Presidential Administration, 8 February 2008, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24825> (accessed 1 June 2020); "Prezident podpisal Ukaz 'O natsionalnykh tselyakh i strategicheskikh zadachakh razvitiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii na period 2024 goda'", Website of the Presidential Administration, 7 May 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57425>

doctrines, to regional development strategies.⁵ This process reflects the attempt to include foresight to shape Moscow's agenda: many of those published in the mid-2000s were focused on 2020.⁶

True, the Russian leadership continues to have long-standing problems implementing these plans, from coherent drafting to the allocation of resources as the economy slowed to recession in the mid-2010s, and from coordinating the various entities responsible for policy to dealing with considerable bureaucratic dysfunction. But since the early 2010s, the leadership has made extensive efforts to remedy these problems, including reshaping the political landscape to improve the process. This is illustrated by the establishment of a nationwide network of Situation Centres, a process formalised in 2013 with the intention of enhancing the coordination of state organs and improving the quality of state management.⁷

What the Russian leadership does *not* lack, therefore, is strategic planning or a strategic agenda. As one observer suggests, any assertion of Russian opportunism must be assessed in this context of Moscow having a vision.⁸ "Opportunism" is thus a set of circumstances that makes achieving goals possible and is only relevant in the context of Russian strategic planning. Much of Moscow's activity – the modernisation of the armed forces, or international moves – should be seen in the light of this planning agenda.

New phase of strategic planning

A new wave of strategic planning is currently underway. Some plans, such as the new State Armaments Programme to 2027, and the new Energy Strategy to 2035, published in April 2020, are already live, illuminating Moscow's thinking about national security over this period. The SC is very active: in February 2020, it announced the preparation of a "Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and National Security to 2035", and in March published a Presidential Decree "On the Foundation of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic to 2035". The latter is a "strategic planning document for national security" for the "purpose of defending Russia's national interests in the Arctic". It frames the aims, main directions and tasks as well as the mechanisms for realising state policy.⁹ The SC has also announced the formulation of a new National

5 See the website of the Government Automated Information System, <http://gasu.gov.ru> (accessed 27 May 2020).

6 Reviews of some of these documents and the planning process are featured in the NDC's *Russian Studies* series: <http://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=6>

7 J. Cooper, "Strategic planning, situation centres and the management of defence in Russia: an update", *CCW Research Paper*, November 2018.

8 M. Kofman, *Drivers of Russian Grand Strategy*, Friväld Briefing No.6, April 2019, p.1.

9 "Prezident Rossii utverdil Osnovy gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2035 goda", Web-

Security Strategy for publication in 2020. These all deserve the Alliance's detailed attention since they – along with major speeches and other publications – will clarify Moscow's priorities, domestic and international.

Second, this basis sheds light on the appointments in January 2020 of Mikhail Mishustin as Prime Minister, and Dmitri Medvedev's move to become Deputy Secretary of the Security Council. Mishustin, who is 54, was widely considered to be merely an anonymous technocrat without personal power. But Putin explained Mishustin's promotion from being head of the Federal Tax Service thus: Mishustin "understands what needs to be done, knows how to do it, and produces concrete results".¹⁰ He had achieved considerable success digitalising the tax system (thus fulfilling a priority task) and his appointment fits with the ongoing invigoration of the planning system and search for effective implementers of plans.

Medvedev's move is also interesting: though he was already a permanent member of the SC, the post of Deputy of the SC was created for him, and a new Presidential Decree sets out the roles and responsibilities of the position. Medvedev thus has a role in the development and implementation of international policy. He has a wide-ranging portfolio: reporting directly to Putin, he has roles in coordinating the SC with other state organs, and in national security questions, including planning and personnel.¹¹ The move seems to strengthen the SC, therefore, particularly its role in strategic planning.

Moscow's global view of Great Power competition

The attempt to generate strategy is motivated by Moscow's geopolitical and geoeconomic view that competition among great powers is growing and the international architecture is unstable. Indeed, already by the mid-to-late 2000s, the Russian leadership was concluding that a new era of Great Power Competition was emerging based on shifts in the structure of the international architecture, with power moving from the West to the East, and growing competition for resources, trade routes and access to markets. It is this global dimension of competition that is central to understanding Russian strategy.

Much of this is visible in the strategic planning discussed above. The view that the

site of the Security Council, 5 March 2020, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2750/>; *Ob osnovakh gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v Arktike do 2035 goda*, Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii No.164, 5 March 2020, http://portnews.ru/upload/basefiles/2203_0001202003050019.pdf

10 Cited in "Mishustina ne bylo v predlozhennom Putinu spiske kandidatov v prem'yu", *Vedomosti*, 19 February 2020.

11 Presidential Decree No.175, "Polozhenie o sovete bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii", Website of the Security Council, 7 March 2020. <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/about/regulations/> (accessed 20 May 2020); "Intervyu Zamestitelya Predsedatelya Soveta Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii Dmitriya Medvedeva Pervomu Kanalu", Website of the Security Council, 19 January 2020, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2708/> (accessed 17 May 2020).

majority of contemporary problems assume a regional and global scale, underpins Moscow's attempts to strengthen Russia's international positions and develop cooperation with other states.¹² This global horizon is evident, for example, in the sustained effort by the Russian military to create capabilities able to conduct strategic missions in remote theatres. By 2017, therefore, Chief of the General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov noted that improvements to Russian armed forces over the previous five years had made it possible to extend significantly Russia's military presence in global strategic areas. This trend has continued, as shown by numerous exercises from the Atlantic to the Pacific – and linking these regions.

Russian economic activity also has a pronounced global aspect. The Russian leadership often speaks of the “global energy context”, or the “unified global energy market”, and there is a clear effort to enhance Russia's global footprint, both in terms of its vertical capabilities up- and downstream and through a coordinated wider geographical presence.¹³ Russian defence and grain exports are also important elements of this. If the scale of Russian defence exports is well known, Russia's emergence as the world's largest wheat exporter, with a substantial role on the global grain market is much less appreciated. Russia has greatly increased its market share and now has a leading position in the wheat markets of North Africa and the Middle East.¹⁴

An important feature of this global approach is the sustained attempt to link capacity across regions. Putin has emphasised Russia's interest in connecting Europe via Russia to the Caspian region, Iran and India, and the Northern Sea Route with the Pacific and Indian Oceans.¹⁵ These are ambitious projects, and illuminate intention. Other examples are already visible: how Moscow links the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean has become obvious during Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war.

Through the 2010s there has been an effort to link Russian capabilities across North Africa, with growing activity in Algeria, Egypt and Libya. Despite setbacks, this broader trend has evolved persistently during the last decade. Moscow seeks to maintain a “Strategic Partnership” with Algeria based on arms sales and energy deals (Algeria is Russia's main African client). Relations have grown similarly with Cairo, and Russia has held diplomatic meetings to discuss regional politics and military exercises with Egypt.

Moscow has also become more active in Libya. Though the presence of Russian private

12 V. Gerasimov, “Po opytu Syrii”, *Voenno-Promyshlenny Kurier*, 7 March 2016.

13 N. Mehdiyeva, “Energy companies in Russia's globally integrated operations”, *CCW Russia Brief*, No.5, June 2019.

14 “Grain exports from Russia”, *Russian Analytical Digest* No.244, December 2019; “Russia eyes new wheat export frontiers in challenge to EU, US”, *Reuters*, 22 November 2018.

15 “Zasedaniye diskussionnovo kluba ‘Valdai’”, Website of the Presidential Administration, 3 October 2019, <http://krem-lin.ru/events/president/news/61719> (accessed 27 May 2020).

military companies is usually most remarked upon, the Russian state has become ever more involved: the Agriculture Ministry and Rosneft, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, the Prime Minister's office and now the President.

Much less remarked upon is Russian activity in the Indian Ocean and Antarctica. Set out in documents such as the Maritime Doctrine and Foreign Policy Concept, this includes joint naval exercises with Iran and China in the Sea of Oman and Northern Indian Ocean, diplomatic efforts in the Gulf, including a proposal for Persian Gulf regional stability, and, further south with South Africa. The government has also announced plans to expand Russia's presence in Antarctica in 2021.

Dealing with the strategy of a ubiquitous state

Russian strategy is a flawed, confused and disjointed process, in both planning and implementation. It is also hampered by perennial problems that face all strategists: fog and friction, limited resources and difficulties conducting the orchestra of players. But it is clear that Moscow seeks to make Russia an indispensable actor, one involved in all major international questions. Moreover, the intent to maintain (and increase) a Russian presence in regions that involve Russian national interests is clear: because of its geography, Moscow sees Russia as a ubiquitous state, with interests across the globe.

This poses a variety of questions to those seeking to defend, deter and, where possible, have dialogue with Moscow. First, rather than treating Russian activity in a country-by-country way – e.g. in Libya – a more holistic picture of Russian activity is necessary, including connecting a geographical scope that links regional activity to a chronological trajectory over the last decade. Far from being “merely opportunistic”, Moscow appears to have been attempting a sustained effort to preposition itself for looming competition in the 2020s. Given the trajectory of Moscow's efforts, deterring this in specific places may become harder over time. Four years ago, for instance, the Russian footprint in Libya was insubstantial – but by 2020 a large part of the state is explicitly invested there. Libya is strategically placed for Russia, and despite setbacks it seems likely that Moscow will sustain its efforts to position itself there.

Second, the lines separating war and peace are often said to have become blurred. But the lines separating *offensive* and *defensive* have also blurred, and are likely to become more so. This will complicate deterrence, defence and dialogue, since Moscow appears to be pursuing a much more active defence beyond its own borders to defend what it sees as its national interests.

Indeed, given the intention to pursue “active defence”, Russian moves during the last decade – and plans for the next – have important implications for the wider Euro-Atlantic

security architecture. What do Russia's plans for the development of the Arctic region mean for NATO's deterrence and defence in five years time? What might a greater Russian naval presence in the central Mediterranean mean for NATO? What does a strengthened Russian position in *both* the Arctic and North Africa and central Mediterranean look like for NATO?

This leads to the final point that deterrence, defence and dialogue can only be effective when placed in this broader context and trajectory of Russian activity. It is currently difficult to envisage NATO-Russia agreement on (m)any of the old questions – but what of the new ones that are emerging? How, for instance, does NATO's wider regional horizon correlate to Russia's in negotiations in Libya, or Iran and the Gulf, or, further afield, considering NATO's Global Partnership? Answers to such questions provide the basis for a coherent, forward looking strategy for dealing with Russia. Without them, NATO's plans for deterrence, defence and dialogue run the risk of becoming reactive, even out-manoeuvred.

Russia's policy towards China: the role of domestic actors

Marcin Kaczmarek

Most observers of international politics – including Russian and Chinese scholars – recognize that striking a balance between countering US domination and responding to US pressures as *the* driver behind ever closer Russian-Chinese cooperation. Other factors, such as domestic political-economic arrangements, remain underestimated.¹ In the case of Russia's policy towards China, domestic politics can help explain the relative ease of Russia's adaptation to China's rise despite the growing gap between the two states in material capabilities and influence in third countries.²

Domestic politics have provided conducive conditions for Russia's ever closer cooperation with China. It has moderated the increasing gap in power and influence between the two states. Domestic actors have contributed to Russia's policy towards China in two ways: by influencing the leadership's threat assessment and by implementing particular policies. Domestic actors represent a broad spectrum of attitudes towards China: direct beneficiaries; actors forced to cooperate; and actors who must weigh the benefits and risks of cooperation. There is, however, no openly anti-Chinese lobby among the ruling elite and its supporters.

The aim of this paper is not to deny that Russian policy towards China tends to be formulated in the Kremlin by Vladimir Putin and his inner circle of trustees. Nor does it claim that strategic considerations do not matter for this policy. It instead aims to demonstrate how domestic politics have led to conducive conditions for Russia's rapprochement with China and how it continues to navigate power asymmetry between the two states that

1 For the theory of state transformation, see: S. Hameiri and L. Jones, "Rising powers and state transformation: the case of China", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol.22, No.1, 2016, pp.72-98; S. Hameiri and L. Jones, "China challenges global governance? Chinese international development finance and the Aiiib", *International Affairs*, Vol.94, No.3, 2018, pp.573-93; S. Hameiri *et al.*, "Reframing the rising powers debate: state transformation and foreign policy", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.40, No.8, 2019, pp.1397-1414.

2 See for instance: K. Marten, "Informal political networks and Putin's foreign policy: the examples of Iran and Syria", *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, No.2, 2015, pp.71-87; K. Marten, "Reckless ambition: Moscow's policy toward the United States, 2016/17", *International Politics*, Vol.56, No.6, 2019, pp.743-61.

otherwise could have prompted a more cautious stance on the part of the Kremlin.

Importance of Russian domestic actors

Russia's domestic actors represent a spectrum of attitudes towards China; however, there are practically no major players who would perceive China as a threat to their political and economic interests. Even those who have not benefitted from closer cooperation as expected in the wake of Russian-Western post-2014 tensions – due partly to Chinese companies' unwillingness to risk secondary sanctions from the US – have not formed an active anti-Chinese lobby. Meanwhile, the structure of the Russian political economy that favours the select few who enjoy close ties to the Kremlin means that the voices of those who benefit tend to matter more.³

The actors have been selected by the author on the basis of the following: their importance in maintaining Vladimir Putin and his inner circle's political domination (e.g. intelligence and security services); their strategic importance for Russia's economy and, as a consequence, the stability of the ruling regime (e.g. energy companies); their relevance to achieving foreign and security policy goals (e.g. the Rosoboronexport); the (alleged) closeness of their CEOs/leaders to Vladimir Putin. In other words, all these actors have been chosen as they are considered to constitute the pillars of Putinism and Putin's political-economic power.

In order to reconstruct the attitudes of these groups towards China, this analysis divides them in four categories: (a) the beneficiaries of closer collaboration who can be deemed the "China lobby"; (b) the "converts" – actors who changed their attitudes towards China from sceptical/cautious to positive; (c) the "caught-in-between" – players who both benefit from cooperation with their Chinese counterparts and whose interests are at once exposed to Chinese competition; and (d) the "forced to collaborate" – actors who embraced cooperation with China under pressure from the Kremlin.

There are two ways in which domestic actors influence Russia's policy towards China. First, their views have a bearing on the leadership's respective perception and assessment of threat. The absence of strong players within the Russian political-economic system who would regard China's rise as a threat to their parochial interests and thus would try to enrol the state's assistance, makes it easier for the Kremlin to pursue the policy of rapprochement with Beijing. Thus, these actors, at the very least, partially "filter" international pressures and opportunities, such as power asymmetry, and mitigate factors such as historical grievances or suspicions. Second, domestic actors are of primary importance in the implementation

³ For instance, see C. Miller, *Putinomics: power and money in resurgent Russia*, Raleigh, UNC Press Books, 2018; R. Sakwa, *The Putin paradox*, London and New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

process, in the course of which they are able to modify policies' outcomes depending on the original intentions of the leadership. On top of this, the attitudes of particular domestic players, governmental bureaucracies in particular, have been additionally shaped by a general trend of more frequent meetings between the two states' representatives. These contacts have offered more opportunities to get to know their counterparts better (which was not the case a decade ago), and to share "best practices".

A methodological qualification is necessary here. The limited access to primary sources constitutes the major challenge in studying the influence of particular actors in the context of contemporary Russia. As a result, conclusions offered in this text are tentative. Nonetheless, the inclusion of domestic factors and opening the "black box" of the Kremlin can broaden our understanding of the dynamics in Russia-China relations and push us out of the comfort zone provided by geopolitical reasoning and the assumption of inherent rationality in Moscow and Beijing.

The beneficiaries

This first group includes domestic actors who have systematically benefitted from cooperation with China and can be deemed an informal 'lobby' for further cooperation. This category comprises Rosneft, the Russian state-owned oil company; Novatek, a private gas company; Russian Railways, a state-owned monopoly; Roskomnadzor, a state cyberspace watchdog; and Rosgvardya, a military-cum-police entity. While some of these actors profit mostly in material and financial terms (Rosneft, Novatek and Russian Railways), others can benefit primarily by sharing experience and authoritarian "best practices" (Roskomnadzor and Rosgvardya).

Rosneft

Rosneft can be considered the oldest beneficiary of China's rise and closer cooperation between Russia and China. Chinese banks provided the loan that allowed Rosneft (with the help of the bank Vneshekonombank acting as intermediary) to take over the Yuganskneftegas (gas company) and subsequently profit from dismantling Yukos, the company owned by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in 2004.⁴ This financial assistance was followed by another loan in 2009 and two major oil contracts in 2009 and 2013.⁵ Following the 2013 deal, Rosneft's

4 M. Meidan, *China's loans for oil: asset or liability?*, OIES Paper 70, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, December 2016, p.11, <https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Chinas-loans-for-oil-WPM-70.pdf> (accessed 12 May 2020).

5 R. Paxton, *China lends Russia \$25 billion to get 20 years of oil*, Reuters, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-china-oil-sb/china-lends-russia-25-billion-to-get-20-years-of-oil-idUKTRE51G3S620090217>; Rosneft's press release on the 2013 contract (accessed 20 April 2020); *Rosneft and CNPC sign agreements on crude oil supplies*, Rosneft, <https://www.rosneft.com/press/releas->

Chinese partner, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), provided it with USD70 billion in prepayments.⁶ Rosneft used this stack of cash to complete a takeover of the TNK-BP joint venture in a USD55 billion deal that made the Russian behemoth the largest listed oil producer. In 2015, another injection of cash (USD15 billion) allowed for debt repayment despite Western sanctions.⁷

The unintended outcome of Rosneft's close ties with Chinese counterparts marks the *de facto* revision of Russia's energy strategy. Since 2003, the Kremlin planned to diversify oil exports to Asia, having hoped to reach the level of a third to be sent eastward. The construction of two branches of the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean, ESPO pipeline, one to China, the other to the Pacific coast, was to ensure that diversification. However, as a result of Rosneft's activities, China has emerged as the dominant buyer, purchasing between 70 and 80 percent of oil sent to Asia.⁸

Even temporary setbacks did not discourage Rosneft from increasing cooperation with China. These included the dispute over pricing in 2011, in which Rosneft had agreed to reduce the price for oil sold to China, and the failure to complete a somewhat murky deal with the Chinese private company, CEFC, in 2017. The China Energy Company Limited (CEFC) was to purchase 14 percent of Rosneft's shares. However, before the transaction was concluded, the Chinese authorities arrested the company's owner and nationalized the company.⁹

What adds to Rosneft's weight is the position of its CEO and the *de facto* curator of the Russian oil industry, Igor Sechin, who operates within the narrow circle of the ruling elite. Sechin is considered to be one of Putin's most trusted allies, which may also explain why Rosneft's setbacks have not weakened his position. With Rosneft as his main asset, Sechin is probably the most powerful proponent of close cooperation with China in Putin's entourage.

Novatek

Novatek initiated its cooperation with China in 2013. At that time, having faced the stalemate in talks with Gazprom over a gas pipeline route, Beijing decided to engage with the Russian nascent liquefied natural gas (LNG) sector. The Chinese energy company,

es/item/114364/ (accessed 12 March 2020).

6 Rosneft says China starts prepayments for oil deals, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/rosneft-china/update-1-rosneft-says-china-starts-prepayments-for-oil-deals-idUSL5N0KP2AY20140115> (accessed 9 April 2020).

7 J. Farchy, "Rosneft's \$15bn financing beats sanctions", *Financial Times*, 25 November 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/ed669468-935c-11e5-bd82-c1fb87bef7af> (accessed 1 March 2020).

8 *Viewpoint: China to maintain grip on ESPO Blend crude*, Argus, 28 December 2018, <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/1818919-viewpoint-china-to-maintain-grip-on-espo-blend-crude> (accessed 20 February 2020).

9 D. Zhdannikov, *China's CEFC investigation hits \$9 Billion Russian oil deal*, Reuters, 22 March 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-rosneft-cefc/chinas-cefc-investigation-hits-9-billion-russian-oil-deal-idUKKBN1GY2XX> (accessed 12 April 2020).

CNPC, purchased a 20 percent stake in Novatek's Yamal LNG project. China's Silk Road Fund, created to help with the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, bought another 9.9 percent of the project's shares in 2016.¹⁰ This move was followed by USD12 billion loans provided to Novatek by the Chinese banks.¹¹ This financial injection enabled the company to start the Yamal LNG project ahead of schedule and avoid the fallout from Western sanctions. In 2019, two Chinese energy companies, CNOOC and CNODC, acquired 20 percent shares of another Novatek's LNG project, the Arctic LNG-2.¹²

While Novatek remains a privately-owned energy company, its owners, Leonid Mikhelson and Gennady Timchenko, are considered to belong to Putin's circle of friends (a connection they vehemently deny, although Novatek's successes in the tight-knit Russian political economy are difficult to explain without receiving some support from the Kremlin).¹³

Russian Railways

Russian Railways has joined the circle of beneficiaries with the establishment of China-Europe cargo railway connections. What is now part of the overarching Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), began in 2011 with cargo trains sent from China's central and western provinces to Germany and Poland. The route via Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus offers the most convenient, shortest and cheapest connection. Russian Railways, as the operator on the territory of the Russian Federation, has benefitted from a surging number of trains travelling both ways (it also established the Eurasian Railway Alliance with railway operators from Kazakhstan and Belarus).

Roskomnadzor

Roskomnadzor, the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, has been increasingly burdened with the task of stricter control over Russian cyberspace. For the last couple of years, Russian authorities have been exploring different options of Internet and cyberspace control, with informal censorship hidden behind the façade of a law against extremism and the concept of the sovereign

10 *Novatek and China's silk road fund conclude selling 9.9% stake in yamal LNG*, Novatek, 15 March 2016, http://www.novatek.ru/en/press/releases/index.php?id_4=1165 (accessed 12 March 2020).

11 *China lenders provide \$12 bln loan for Russia's Yamal LNG project-sources*, Reuters, 28 April 2016, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/russia-china-yamal/china-lenders-provide-12-bln-loan-for-russias-yamal-lng-project-sources-idUKL2N17V2MI> (accessed 20 February 2020).

12 *Novatek and CNOOC sign entrance agreement to Arctic LNG 2*, Novatek, http://www.novatek.ru/en/investors/events/archive/index.php?id_4=3174 (accessed 19 March 2020).

13 The US government recognized Timchenko's links with the Kremlin as it included him on the sanctions list in July 2014; see also C. Belton, *Putin's People*, London, William Collins, 2020.

Internet as the most recent iteration of these plans.

In this area, its Chinese counterpart, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), seems to have most to offer among potential international partners. Formal and informal cooperation with China offers an opportunity to exchange ‘best practices’ and transplant at least some Chinese solutions – both legislative and practical-technical – on Russian territory. Both commercial cooperation, particularly in the 5G area, and international collaboration in international fora, will strengthen this link.

Rosgvardya

Rosgvardya, the Federal Service of the Troops of the National Guard, was established in April 2016 with the major, albeit unofficial task to protect regime security. Its Chinese counterpart, the People’s Armed Police, can share authoritarian “best practices”. Less than a month after it was established, Rosgvardya signed the agreement with its Chinese counterpart to conduct joint “anti-terrorist” exercises. The first edition, code-named “Cooperation 2016”, took place in summer 2016, with subsequent joint drills in 2017 and 2019.¹⁴

The “converts”

This second category comprises domestic security services and the armed forces.

FSB

FSB, the Federal Security Service, whose responsibilities range from counter-espionage to preventing illegal migration and border security, used to regard China as a potential challenge. Illegal migration was the biggest perceived threat in the Russian Far East. Industrial and traditional espionage used to be the major threat emanating from China.

A number of factors can be said to lead to the change in FSB’s attitudes. Legislative solutions and heavier policing led to the stabilisation of the situation in the Russian Far East. The rise in anti-Western attitudes, coupled with the authoritarian turn observed since Putin’s return to the presidency in early 2012 have paved the way for closer collaboration with China. As in the case of Rosgvardya, Chinese domestic security structures have a lot to offer in terms of sharing experiences and “best practices”.

14 Rosgvardya’s official website, *Sovmestnoye uchenie Rosgvardii i narodnoj vooruzhennoj politsii Kitaya “Sotrudnichestvo-2017”*, Rosgvardya, <https://www.rosgvard.ru/ru/page/index/sovmestnoe-uchenie-rosgvardii-i-narodnoj-vooruzhennoj-politsii-kitaya-sotrudnichestvo2017> (accessed on 1 March 2020); A. Stepanov, “Spetsnaz Rosgvardii i politsii KNP proveli antiterroristicheskiye ucheniya”, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, <https://rg.ru/2019/10/18/specnaz-rosgvardii-i-politsii-knp-proveli-anti-terroristicheskie-ucheniia.html> (accessed 18 April 2020).

General Staff and the armed forces

The most visible sign of changing attitudes on the part of the General Staff and the armed forces is the observed shift in scenarios of the *Vostok* strategic military exercises. The scenarios of 2010 and 2014 editions could have revealed China as a potential military threat. This changed with *Vostok-2018*, in which the Chinese troops participated.¹⁵

However, as the majority of observers agree that the armed forces follow political directives and do not play an independent political role, this shift can be the result of a political decision by the Kremlin rather than a sign of evolving perception on the part of the military. It is difficult to assess to what extent internal assessments of Chinese power and intentions have mattered. The consideration of the Chinese armed forces as a necessary partner and the experience gathered in the course of joint exercises and contacts might have played a role in this regard.

The “caught in-between”

Actors comprising this third group face contradictory incentives. On the one hand, cooperation with China offers economic benefits; on the other, Chinese counterparts emerge as potential competitors in third markets. The former factor prevents these actors from forming an “anti-Chinese lobby”. This group includes Rosatom, Rosoboronexport and OAK.

Rosatom

Rosatom, a state-owned corporation that is a major exporter of civilian nuclear technology, has been present in the Chinese market since the 1990s. It constructed four nuclear units at the Tianwan nuclear power plant (NPP).¹⁶ Recently, it signed contracts for four additional blocks, two at Tianwan NPP, and two at Xudapu NPP.¹⁷ Thus, Rosatom has managed to maintain its presence in the Chinese nuclear market even though China's domestic sector has made enormous progress over the last decade.

At the same time, Chinese companies have the potential to emerge as competitors in third country markets, even though they are still newcomers. So far, China has been building

15 M. Boulègue, *Russia's Vostok Exercises were both serious planning and a show*, Chatham House, 17 September 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russia-s-vostok-exercises-were-both-serious-planning-and-show> (accessed 20 March 2020).

16 The project's overview: *Tianwan nuclear power plant*, NS Energy, <https://www.nsenerybusiness.com/projects/tianwan-nuclear-power-plant/> (accessed 25 March 2020).

17 Rosatom's website: “Rosatom inks fuel contract for China's tianwan NPP new power units”, Rosatom, <https://www.rosatom.ru/en/press-centre/news/rosatom-inks-fuel-contract-for-china-s-tianwan-npp-new-power-units/> (accessed 21 April 2020); “Projects”, Rosatom, <https://www.rosatom.ru/en/investors/projects/> (accessed 21 April 2020).

nuclear power plants only in Pakistan and Argentina but its prospects in the market grow with its impressive domestic developments.¹⁸ Its cooperation with France has made its entrance on the British nuclear market highly plausible.

Rosoboronexport

In the case of Rosoboronexport, the Russian state-owned arms exporter monopoly, China remains a potential buyer of high-end weapon systems as well as a customer in its servicing. The defiance of US sanctions by Rosoboronexport raised the importance of China as a customer unwilling to bow to US pressure (even though India and Turkey challenged the US on this point as well). At the same time, China's growing military-industrial complex adds to the number of competitors that Russia faces in the international arms market. While the intervention in Syria in particular showcased and advertised Russian weapons, the Chinese military-industrial complex can offer both competitive prices and technologies better developed than their Russian counterpart, such as UAVs.

OAK

OAK, United Aircraft Corporation, is engaged in a joint venture with the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (COMAC), named China-Russia Commercial Aircraft International Corporation Limited (CRAIC). They aim at producing a wide-bodied passenger jet (CR929) that aspires to challenge the Boeing-Airbus duopoly.¹⁹ At the same time, both states compete in the future market of narrow-bodied jets. OAK is about to launch the aircraft MC-21, while COMAC develops a comparable narrow-bodied airliner, the C919, in the coming years.²⁰ While both states' domestic airlines may be forced to purchase their own types of planes, fierce competition in third markets can be expected.

The “forced to collaborate”

This fourth group of actors would prefer to remain on the sidelines of Russian-Chinese cooperation but have been incorporated as a result of pressure exerted from top leadership.

18 The details of China's exports of civilian nuclear technology can be found at: “Nuclear power in China”, World Nuclear Association, <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-a-f/china-nuclear-power.aspx> (accessed 21 May 2020).

19 D. Reid, “Evidence is building that China and Russia's long-haul passenger plane won't arrive on time”, CNBC, 20 August 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/20/china-and-russia-want-the-craic-cr929-aircraft-to-challenge-airbus-and-boeing.html> (accessed 15 May 2020).

20 A. Pask, “Irkut MC-21 vs Comac C919: the future of regional air travel?”, *International Aviation HQ*, 8 April 2020, <https://internationalaviationhq.com/2020/04/08/irkut-mc-21-vs-comac-c919/> (accessed 15 May 2020).

Gazprom

Gazprom's cooperation with China can be interpreted as mainly politically-driven, especially when compared to other players in the energy sector. While Gazprom has attempted to enter the Chinese market since the mid-2000s, many of these attempts appear to be either half-hearted or insincere. Both Gazprom and the Kremlin attempted to convince China to construct the so-called *Altai* pipeline, which would link West Siberian gas fields with north-western China.²¹ From the Russian perspective, such a solution would allow the exercise of leverage over the European Union as these fields supply European customers. China's unwillingness to pay European prices and the successful construction of pipelines from Turkmenistan (to the complete surprise of Russian observers) further weakened Gazprom's negotiating position. The conclusion of the contract on the eastern pipeline, *Power of Siberia*, in 2014, should be ascribed to pressure from the very top, i.e. probably Vladimir Putin himself, on Gazprom to agree to Chinese conditions. However, even this contract did not lead to closer ties as Gazprom refused the Chinese offer of prepayment for gas deliveries and invested its own capital into the construction of the pipeline and the necessary accompanying infrastructure.

Moscow's shifting position?

The attitudes of key domestic players in the Russian political-economic system are not set in stone. Particular actors can be expected to change their stance towards cooperation with China in the event of either changes in Russia's domestic political-economic arrangements, or in shifts in Chinese foreign and security policy. The closing of the Chinese market for Russian corporate behemoths (such as Rosatom) and pressure on Russian energy partners (Rosneft or Novatek) can weaken their enthusiasm for close cooperation with China, thus indirectly influencing the Kremlin's policies.

One possible scenario that may lead to shifts in the attitudes of Russian domestic actors is the escalation of Chinese practices in cyber-, industrial and traditional espionage. In such a case, the FSB in particular – but also other intelligence agencies – could rethink their threat assessments and begin to lobby the Kremlin towards a more assertive policy. China's technological advantage over Russia, as illustrated by the case of 5G, may be tempting for the Chinese intelligence services.

However, the current conducive domestic backdrop for Russia's cooperation with China makes the bilateral relationship more durable and resilient to potential changes. The

21 J. Henderson, *The commercial and political logic for the Altai pipeline*, Oxford Energy Comment, December 2014, <https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/The-Commercial-and-Political-Logic-for-the-Altai-Pipeline-GPC-4.pdf> (accessed 15 May 2020).

practical complication for the West is that “pulling Russia away from China” may turn out to be more difficult than one would assume on the basis of rational/geopolitical/strategic analysis, especially taking into consideration the asymmetry between the two states.

The existing Western sanctions have not weakened Russian domestic actors’ support for cooperation with China, even though Beijing’s assistance is more limited than many in Russia expected. On the contrary, China’s selective application of its support entrenched the pro-Chinese orientation of key players in the Russian political economy. China helped both Rosneft (with prepayments) and Novatek (with loans) to circumvent financial barriers erected by the West. Beijing’s open defiance of US sanctions imposed on Chinese companies for the arms purchase from Rosoboronexport could reinforce the perception of China as a reliable client. This instance demonstrated possible difficulties the West will face when attempting to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing.

As Russia’s cooperation with China is not only driven by strategic calculation but also facilitated by a conducive domestic environment, changes in Moscow’s policy can be expected to take place only if a number of factors change, ranging from the international environment to domestic political circumstances in Russia.

Russia's new strategic calculus in the Middle East *

Wojciech Michnik

There has been a lot of ambiguity concerning Russia's recent policy in the Middle East, especially about its causes, scope and consequences. While some say that Moscow "does not have a Grand Strategy for the Middle East it has a clear view of its interests in specific situations within the region"¹ that serves the Kremlin's higher and broader goals of reestablishing Russia as one of the key actors in international affairs. This article argues that Moscow's diplomatic, military and economic actions in the Middle East, represent an example of a type of grand strategic behaviour embodied in a flexible and pragmatic policy that goes far beyond *ad hoc* tactical gains.

Making sense of Russia's strategic behaviour

Since 2015, there has been a significant increase in Russia's military and diplomatic presence in the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA). The most notable was the country's intervention in Syria (launched in September 2015) that helped the regime of President Bashar al-Assad to remain in power. With the relative success of Moscow's actions in Syria, Russia reasserted itself in the MENA region as a major actor and serious weapons supplier. In terms of diplomatic gains, the Kremlin has become an important player in mediating conflicts from Libya to Yemen and an aspiring power broker in Syria. Moreover, Russia's economic and energy activities in the region have also been on the rise: state-owned companies (Rosneft, Lukoil) have oil and gas projects in Algeria, and Libya while in Egypt, Russian nuclear energy giant Rosatom is set to build and operate a 4,800 MW nuclear plant.²

Russia's presence in the region has stirred many debates on Russian foreign policy and the degree to which it constitutes a strategic design or rather something more opportunistic.

* This paper is the result of a research conducted by the author while being an Eisenhower Fellow at the NATO Defense College between September and November 2019.

1 D. Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Cambridge, Polity, 2018, p.86.

2 M. Russell, E. Pichon, "Russia in Africa", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, November 2019.

While most experts acknowledge the return of Russia to the Middle East, there is no consensus about the scope and policy goals.³ As a 2017 RAND report stated, Russia's actions suggest that it is "applying a generalized, functional strategy. It constantly seeks to improve its short-term economic, military, and political advantages while reducing the short-term advantages of prospective adversaries".⁴

However, in an attempt to understand Russia's actions in the Middle East and beyond, it is helpful to apply a slightly different framework that offers a more substantive explanation for the character and nature of the Kremlin's policies. According to such a framework, three different meanings of Grand Strategy should be differentiated: grand plans; grand principles and grand behaviour.⁵

Grand Strategy is a multifaceted and thoroughly debated concept. For the purpose of this analysis, grand strategy is understood to be, in the words of Barry Posen, "a nation-state's theory about how to produce security for itself" and is mainly used here as a "conceptual framework that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they ought to get there".⁶ This article does not refer to its more restricted meaning of "a plan for using military means to achieve political ends", but rather to a broader overarching scheme of ideas, plans and behavior that explains state's vital strategic policies in international affairs.⁷ This provides a more practical and up to date approach of analysis for Russia's circumstances in the region.

The argument here underscores the idea that Russia has a type of grand (strategic) behaviour in world affairs, in which behaviour in the Middle East region is only one – not necessarily the most important – element. As the political nature of the Russian Federation's regime makes it difficult to monitor Moscow's *grand plans*; and as interests rather than *grand principles* traditionally drive Russia's foreign policy, grand strategic behaviour appears to be the most tangible (and visible) element of Russian statecraft. In other words, since the longstanding autocratic political system prevents transparent access to studying both official strategic objectives (*grand plans*) and the policy-making process, it is through examining the long-term pattern in Russia's allocation of military, diplomatic and economic resources (grand behaviour), that one is able to make sense of the Kremlin's increased activity in the

3 A. Shumilin, I. Shumilina, "Russia as a gravity pole of the GCC's new foreign policy pragmatism", *The International Spectator*, 2017; M. Kofman and M. Rojansky, "What kind of victory for Russia in Syria?", *Military Review*, 2018.

4 J. Sladden, B. Wasser, B. Connable, S. Grand-Clement, "Russian strategy in the Middle East", *Perspective Paper*, RAND Corporation, Washington, DC, 2017.

5 N. Silove, "Beyond the buzzword: the three meanings of 'Grand Strategy'", *Security Studies*, Vol.27, No.1, 2017, pp.27-57.

6 H. Brands, *What good is Grand Strategy? Power and purpose in American statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2014, p.3; B. R. Posen, *Restraint: a new foundation for US Grand Strategy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2014, p.1.

7 R. K. Betts, "Is strategy an illusion?", *International Security*, Vol.25. No.2, Fall 2000, p.6.

Middle East.

Even though Russia does not have a conventionally understood Grand Strategy, neither at the regional nor global level, its policy in the Middle East could be viewed functionally as a type of *grand behaviour* – defined as “the long-term pattern in [a] state’s distribution and employment of military, diplomatic, and economic resources towards ends”⁸ – typical of great powers. Thus, Russia’s Middle East policy is a sort of indirect strategy with limited objectives and relatively modest resources. The Kremlin seems to view its regional behaviour as a chance to build up international prestige on the cheap (military engagement in Syria; paramilitaries present in both Syria and Libya; tightening the economic ties with Egypt and Algeria; increasing arms sales to regional powers). Additionally, Moscow’s diplomatic, economic and military presence in the region should be understood not only in terms of a response to power vacuums and the weakness of external actors in the Middle East, but also in the context of a more proactive domestically-driven Kremlin approach towards international affairs in its attempts to remake the international order.

Old game made new?

The roots of contemporary Russian foreign policy behaviour can be traced to the 1990s, to the so-called Primakov Doctrine. As it was named after former Foreign Minister (1996–98) and Prime Minister (1998–99) Yevgeny Primakov, the doctrine stated that a unipolar world dominated by the United States would be unacceptable to Russia. And therefore it offered countermeasures or guidelines for Russian foreign policy: “Russia should strive toward a multipolar world managed by a concert of major powers that can counterbalance US unilateral power. Russia should insist on its primacy in the post-Soviet space and lead integration in that region. Russia should oppose NATO expansion”.⁹ All of these elements remain at the core of Russia’s foreign policy with the first point directly related to Russian engagement in the Middle East. Thus, Russia’s actions today signal a return to policies resembling those of Primakov in a new context.

One of the predominant narratives about Moscow’s return to the Middle East frames Russian intervention in Syria as a first and initial step on the way to Russian increased diplomatic, economic and military presence in the region. Experts seem to agree on the scope of the Kremlin’s policy in the Middle East, stressing that military intervention in Syria plays an important role in Russia’s greater plan or even “broader strategy”.¹⁰ According to

8 *Ibid.*, p.49.

9 E. Rumer, *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in action*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 June, 2019.

10 See F. C. Hof, V. Inozemtsev *et al.*, “The Kremlin’s actions in Syria: origins, timing, and prospects”, Atlantic Council, 2016; N. Popescu, S. Secieru (eds.), “Russia’s return to the Middle East. Building sandcastles?”, *Chaillot Papers* 146, Paris,

some, there are elements of strategic thinking in Moscow's behaviour that go not only beyond Syria but beyond the Middle Eastern context. They include domestic concerns about potential terrorist connections (Moscow's fears of radical jihadi movements in the Caucasus); bringing Russia back to the main stage of world affairs; and forcing NATO and the West (mainly the United States) to talk to Russia "as an equal", thereby making the issue of Ukraine and Crimea less relevant.¹¹ Indeed, Russia's relative success in Syria created the foundation for its comeback as a significant regional player equipped with substantial negotiating power to shape the future of Syria and the broader region itself.¹² In this way Syria has been a testing ground for Russia's reformed military, showcasing new weapons for arms exports in the region and beyond.

From revisionist to status quo power

Yet Moscow's growing interest in the region predates its military intervention in Syria and can be traced back to the year 2011 and the aftermath of Arab Uprisings,¹³ including the war in Libya. In fact, NATO's intervention in Libya – that (inadvertently) resulted in the toppling of the Gadhafi regime – has often been cited by Russian officials as the trigger that hastened Russian diplomatic, economic and military engagement in the MENA region. In February 2012 Vladimir Putin stated that since basic "principles of international law were eroded and degraded" directly affecting international security, "Russia cannot fall back on diplomatic and economic methods alone to settle contradiction and resolve conflict".¹⁴ Therefore "it faces the task of developing its military potential as part of a deterrence strategy".¹⁵ This view was reinforced by the Russian political elite's fear of so-called "coloured revolutions" in Russia's immediate neighbourhood, perceived by the Kremlin in terms of a security threat.

In the context of the Arab uprisings, the Kremlin framed itself as a status quo power (that resonated well with regional regimes concerned about losing their power grip in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings), blaming the US and NATO for "meddling in the domestic affairs of other states" and consequently for regime changes and chaos that ensued in the

European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2018.

11 E. Stepanova, "Russia in the Middle East: back to a 'Grand Strategy' – or enforcing multilateralism?", *Politique étrangère*, No.2/2016, p.8.

12 For more on the drivers behind Russia's new policy in the Middle East, see E. Stepanova, "Russia and conflicts in the Middle East: regionalisation and implications for the West", *The International Spectator*, 2018.

13 N. Kozhanov, *Russian policy across the Middle East: motivations and methods*, Chatham House, London, 2018.

14 V. Putin, "Being strong: national security guarantees for Russia", *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 20 February 2012.

15 *Ibid.*

region.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Russia's presence and actions in the region are not without limits. Moscow does not appear to have the intention or resources to "own" the Middle East; rather Russia's "strategic game plan is to construct a 'polycentric world order' where the US will not be a hegemon [and] more non-Western states have a role to play".¹⁷ In other words, Russia's *grand behaviour* in the Middle East constitutes a type of modern version of the Primakov Doctrine.¹⁸

Projecting Instability? Implications for NATO's Southern Flank

Russia's renewed interests and behaviour may be analyzed in both a regional and global framework. From a regional perspective, the Kremlin's engagement in the Middle East indicates a mutual understanding between Moscow and its partners, that the Russian diplomatic and economic (and to some extent military) presence represents a positive and stabilizing force in a region that for the last two decades has been struggling with foreign military interventions, civil wars and popular uprisings. Beyond the Middle East, Russia's regional policy is interconnected with Moscow's ambition to counter the West – most notably the United States, which has been increasingly viewed as an adversary. In this regard, Russia's role in the region can be viewed as a by-product of confrontation with the West.¹⁹ If one accepts the above statement, this raises the question of the practical effects of Russia's new military (Syria, Libya) and diplomatic (i.e. Egypt, Iran, Turkey, the Gulf States) activities *vis-a-vis* NATO's security on the Southern Flank.

Considering NATO's relations with regional partners (i.e. Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and Mediterranean Dialogue) and its broader agenda of Projecting Stability, the Alliance should be wary of any emerging initiatives that could potentially undermine partnerships with MENA states.

There is the obvious connection between Russia's policy in MENA and NATO's security on the Southern Flank. It stems from the fact that threats from North Africa and the Middle East – ungoverned spaces, weak states and transnational threats such as terrorism, drug gangs, human traffickers and weapons smugglers – are of a different security nature than those coming from the Eastern Flank. Wars in Syria and Libya have

16 B. Renz, "Russian responses to the changing character of war", *International Affairs*, Vol.95, Iss.4, July 2019, p.829.

17 M. Suchkov quoted in T. O'Connor, "The new Middle East: US military, Russia's diplomacy and China's Money", *Newsweek*, 22 October 2019.

18 E. Rumer, *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 June, 2019.

19 N. Kozhanov, *Russian policy across the Middle East: motivations and methods*, Chatham House, London, 2018.

caused the largest refugee crisis affecting the EU and NATO's European member states since World War II. And even though NATO does not need to deter Russia in the south, this does not mean that the Kremlin cannot indirectly impact NATO's security with its activities in the region. On the contrary, Russia's restored presence in the Middle East – especially its military intervention in Syria – made Moscow a serious, if not the main, player in the Syrian peace process. This includes any important negotiations concerning external powers in the conflict (Turkey and Iran). Likewise, Kremlin's support of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army has added to the already complicated civil war in Libya.

Considering the complex relations and interdependence of most actors engaged in the Syrian and Libyan wars, a scenario in which Russia uses its deal-making power to affect one of NATO's southern member states or partners is not unlikely. And such a move would constitute a textbook justification of Kremlin policy in the Middle East, one aimed at regaining Moscow's status as a major global and regional player. Secondly, Russia's improved relations with other significant powers in the region provide opportunities for the Kremlin to position itself as the main outside power in the MENA Region. With closer economic ties to Algeria and Egypt (the energy project to build a nuclear power plant) and active “investments” and “weapon systems sales” diplomacy in the Gulf, Moscow is looking to cement its role in the region as a shareholder of the overall security architecture.²⁰ Given the delicate balance of power in the Gulf Region between Iran and Arab monarchies and the military campaign in Syria, demand for Russian defence systems (mainly S-400s) among Gulf States is high.²¹

Notwithstanding the fact that certain local countries (i.e. Saudi Arabia; the United Arab Emirates; Jordan) rely on the security guarantees of some member states (mainly the US, the UK and France), a possible change of status quo could affect regional security unfavourably and undermine NATO's Projecting Stability project.

In short, on the Southern Flank there is a new (returning) power that has to be reckoned with. Whether in Syria, Libya, Egypt, or (to a lesser extent) the Gulf States, Russia has established a foothold. For NATO's European members, this means that there is another, potentially threatening factor to consider in the region.

Misperceptions on Russia's “grand behaviour”?

Russia's grand behaviour in the region could potentially create a challenge for NATO's cohesion and unity. Considering how important the Southern Flank is for the Alliance and how complex threats emerging from the region are, allowing a major adversarial power

20 L. Watanbe, “Russia's Renaissance in the Arab World”, *Strategic Trends* 2019.

21 J. Raine, “Russia in the Middle East: hard power, hard fact”, London, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018.

– and for the time being, Russia remains one²² – to become a key playmaker across the MENA region for years to come, is a costly mistake. The recent spat between some NATO member states over Turkey's military intervention in Syria, coupled with a looming danger to stability from various violent non-state actors and state-sponsored militias, underscore the need for approaching disruption on the Southern Flank comprehensively.

A potential first step to counter Russia's "grand behaviour" would be stronger engagement with partners (Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative) and raising the situational awareness of the Southern NATO members about the Kremlin's ability to shape the situation in their immediate neighbourhood (i.e. Syria, Libya, potentially Egypt). What NATO can offer to its partners in MENA (that Russia cannot) is a long-lasting cooperation scheme that goes beyond ad hoc interests and addresses common security challenges (securing trade sea-lanes; transnational crime and terrorist threats) that, due to geographic proximity, affect both NATO members in the Southern Flank and the Alliance's partners.

22 NATO Leaders' Meeting in London reaffirmed that "Russia's aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security", "London Declaration", North Atlantic Council, London, 3-4 December 2019.

When words are sharper than swords Russia's post-2014 narrative on NATO *

Vasile Rotaru

Russia-NATO relations have been volatile since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The phases of succession between cooperation and confrontation progressed in almost cyclical fashion. The periods of engagement culminating with declarations of Russian presidents Yeltsin and Putin about Moscow's intentions to join NATO have contrasted with periods of distrust after the Alliance's military operation in the former Republic of Yugoslavia or the Russian invasion of Georgia. However, the tension between the two actors never reached as low a level as that which followed the annexation of Crimea. This has been especially evident in Russian official discourse.

By using qualitative content analysis, this article argues that official Russian anti-NATO rhetoric has escalated since 2014. This can be attributed to the following factors: the expansion of the Alliance towards Russia's borders; Moscow's perception of being a "besieged fortress"; the Kremlin's need for both a scapegoat for its foreign policy failures and an impetus to rally the population around the flag; and a strategy to both secure the annexation of Crimea and consolidate Russia's foreign policy positions. While all of the above arguments may be valid, their influence has varied. Some derive from NATO's actions (e.g. the expansion of the Alliance, the installation of anti-missile systems), and others more likely represent a clear instrumentalization of anti-NATO rhetoric.

This research draws on a wide range of documents along with audio and video records in both English and Russian. The collected data covers the period 2000-2019, since Vladimir Putin came to power. It consists of strategic documents, official speeches, media statements, and interviews of the main Russian foreign policy makers (the president, prime minister, foreign minister, minister of defence, ambassador to NATO, etc.).

* This paper is the result of a research conducted by the author while being a Partnership for Peace Fellow at the NATO Defense College between September and December 2019.

From “mechanism for stability” to “threat to peace”

Vladimir Putin came to power at a difficult moment for NATO-Russia relations – in the aftermath of the 1999 NATO bombing of the former Republic of Yugoslavia. Yet, from the very beginning he showed great interest in improving cooperation with NATO, signaling even a return to the “honeymoon” period of Russia-NATO relations in the early 1990s, when foreign minister Kozyrev regarded the Alliance as one of the mechanisms for stability in Europe and in the world as a whole. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US presented Vladimir Putin with a favourable opportunity to engage with NATO and already in 2003, he pointed out that in the fight against terrorism, “[NATO and Russia] act not only as strategic partners, but as allies”.¹

The 2003 Iraqi war and NATO’s expansion eastward did not reverse the positive rhetoric with Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Ivanov remarking that “for Russia the cooperation with the US in the fight against terrorism is more important than the disagreements over the war in Iraq”,² while President Putin declared that “if [a country] wants to join NATO, let it join [...] We need to respect the choice of any nation”.³

Within this context, Vladimir Putin’s tone at the February 2007 Munich Conference took the West by surprise when he pointed out that “NATO’s enlargement is a serious provoking factor that reduces the level of mutual trust”.⁴ The rhetoric became even harsher after the 2008 war with Georgia, when Moscow accused NATO of having deliberately provoked the war.

Despite the gravity of the war and subsequent Russian accusations, relations between Russia and NATO quickly recovered. In fact, already in November 2008, President Medvedev was declaring that Russia joining NATO was not possible for the moment, however, “never say never”.⁵ Then, in October 2010, during a meeting with foreign experts, President Medvedev urged Russians to overcome “the false notion of NATO aggression”.⁶

The annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Southeastern Ukraine were a turning point in NATO-Russia relations. In addition to the harsh declarations of Russian officials, the main strategic documents (Military Doctrine, National Security Strategy,

1 V. Putin, “President Bush meets with Russian President Putin at Camp David”, The White House Archives, 27 September 2003.

2 Quoted in *Radio Svoboda*, 7 April 2004, available at: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24172590.html> (accessed 27 May 2020).

3 V. Putin, “*Stenograficheskiĭ otchet o press-konferentsii dlya rossiiskikh i inostrannykh zhurnalistov*” [Press Conference Transcript for Russian and Foreign Journalists], 24 June 2002.

4 V. Putin, “*Vystuplenie i diskussiya na Myunkhenskoi konferentsii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti*” [Speech and discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy], 10 February 2007.

5 D. Medvedev, “*Prisoedinenie Rossii k NATO poka nevozmozhno*” [Russia’s accession to NATO is not yet possible], 16 November 2008.

6 Quoted in *Unian*, 21 October 2010.

Foreign Policy Concept) were revised indicating a clear deterioration in relations with NATO. The most important difference appears in the Military Doctrine. If the 2010 version of this strategic paper presented a margin of probability of “NATO danger” – it was only the “desire to endow the force potential of NATO with global functions” that worried Moscow; in the 2014 Doctrine, the strengthening of the Alliance became a clear external danger for Russia.

A more bellicose tone has been apparent in public declarations. As one example, for President Putin the advancement of NATO infrastructure towards Russia's borders “poses a threat, and [Russia's] reaction to it will be extremely negative”.⁷ Likewise in 2018, Prime Minister Medvedev drew attention to NATO “trying to encircle Russia” and categorized NATO's reaffirmed commitment to eventually admit Georgia into the Alliance as a “threat to peace”.⁸ In 2019, Russian Minister of Defence, Sergey Shoigu also indicated that “retaliatory measures will be taken” if NATO's actions lead to rising tension.⁹

These post-2014 narratives represent the most belligerent and aggressive Russian discourse on NATO since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While six years have passed since the annexation of Crimea, the tone in Russian anti-NATO public discourse has only harshened with the passing of time. This begs the question, why would Russia continue belligerent narratives towards NATO instead of signaling openness to a “reset” as it did quickly after the war with Georgia?

Reactive response or instrumentalization of narratives?

The increase in the belligerence of Russian official narratives may have several explanations. For analytical purposes, six main causes have been identified, combining the content of official narratives with the geopolitical context of their formulation. They are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but they represent the clearest patterns emerging over the past six years.

NATO's expansion towards Russian borders

First, NATO's expansion has often been invoked by Russian politicians after the annexation of Crimea. President Putin underscored this during the famous 2014 address to the Federal Council, “we have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO”.¹⁰ This argument has been used in official discourse for both legitimizing the land grab (not to let “a historical part of the Russian territory with a predominantly Russian population” to be incorporated into NATO) and explaining Moscow's negative attitude

7 V. Putin, “Interview on Fox News Channel”, 17 July 2018.

8 Quoted in *Tass*, 6 August 2018.

9 Quoted in *Svobodnaya Pressa*, 24 April 2019.

10 V. Putin, “Interview with Radio Europe 1 and TF1 TV channel”, 4 June 2014.

towards NATO (the expansion of the Alliance's infrastructure towards Russian borders "poses a threat" to Russia's security).¹¹

Russia as a "besieged fortress"

Second, examples of this narrative include the 2018 Russian Prime Minister Medvedev pointing out that NATO "is trying to encircle Russia".¹² The Russian Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, warned that NATO military activity in the vicinity of Russian borders reached an unprecedented level.¹³ While the image of Russia as a "besieged fortress" was not new, it became more poignant after the annexation of Crimea. NATO missile defence facilities in Poland and Romania were also invoked because they "[create] a threat to [Russia's] strategic nuclear forces and [disrupt] the strategic balance",¹⁴ as well as the "unfair" punitive actions of the international community after the annexation of Crimea. In President Putin's view, "Russia did not commit any violations of international law". Rather "sanctions were imposed on Russia in violation of World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, international law and the United Nations (UN) Charter – again unilaterally and illegitimately".¹⁵ Within this context, President Putin explains Russia's negative rhetoric towards NATO as not being intended to threaten anyone, but rather as reactive: "all we do in terms of security is simply a response, which means that our actions are defensive."¹⁶

Scapegoat for foreign policy failures

Third, both in 2008 and in 2014, Russia alienated itself from the majority of the population of Georgia and Ukraine and faced strong condemnation from the international community. While the Kremlin secured outposts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and gained Crimea, it "lost" both Georgia and Ukraine. Actually, the very fact that Russia had to resort to military intervention and a land grab to secure its positions in the region illustrates the failure of its policies in these countries.

The change of Ukrainian perceptions toward Russia was visible with the events of 2014, as depicted in Figure 1. And as the Georgian example demonstrates, the loss of influence may be enduring. Even after a decade public perceptions in Georgia remain anti-Russian. According to the 2017 poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute, 63 percent of Georgians consider Russia to be the biggest external threat.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Quoted in *Tass*, 6 August 2018.

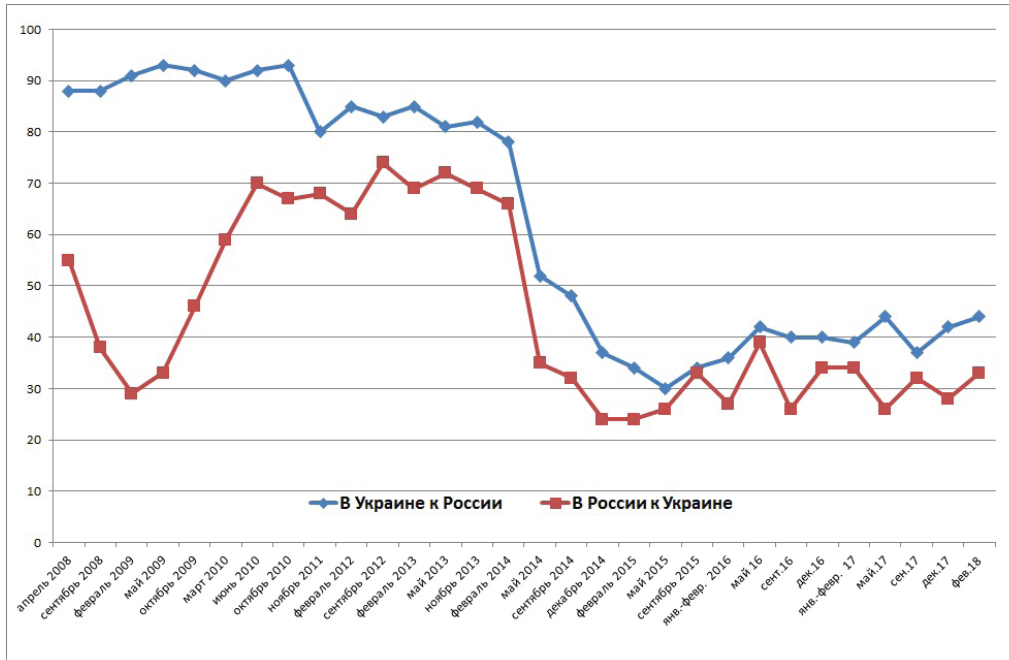
13 Quoted in *Radio Sloboda*, 24 October 2018.

14 V. Putin, "Interview with *Le Figaro*", 31 May 2017.

15 V. Putin, "News conference", 18 December 2014.

16 V. Putin, "*Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniyu*" [Address to the Federal Assembly], 20 February 2019.

Figure 1: The evolution of positive perceptions of Ukrainians towards Russia (blue) and Russians towards Ukraine (red)



Source: Kiev International Institute of Sociology (<https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=754&page=1>)

In addition, Russian actions have helped to both consolidate the EU and NATO's stance in the former Soviet space and propel the latter's actions in the region. For example, in June 2019, 53.9 percent of Ukrainians were in favour of joining NATO compared to only 35 percent before the Bucharest Summit or 21 percent in 2010.¹⁷ Similarly, while in 2006 only 31 percent of Ukrainians were in favour of joining the EU, 56 percent preferring instead the Union of Russia with Belarus, in June 2019, 66.2 percent of Ukrainians opted for joining the EU.¹⁸ Thus, after “losing” Ukraine and Georgia, the Kremlin found NATO to be a perfect scapegoat for political mistakes.

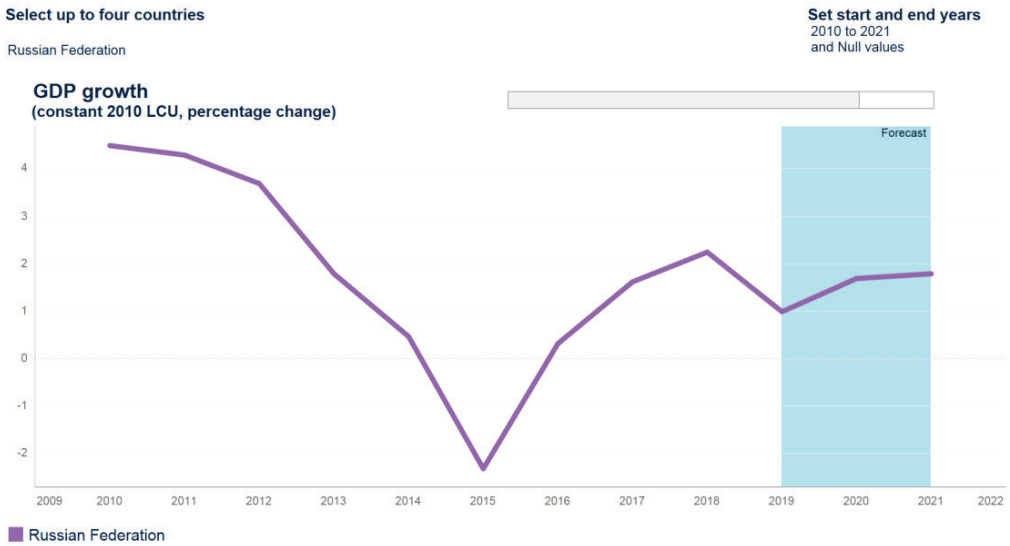
17 See Mk.ru, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2019/06/21/opros-bolshinstvo-ukraincev-za-vstuplenie-v-nato-i-es.html>, Tut.by, <https://news.tut.by/world/105378.html> (accessed 15 May 2020); Unian, <https://www.unian.net/politics/331248-es-li-bi-referendum-o-vstuplenii-v-nato-sostoyalsya-seychas-opros.html> (17 March 2020).

18 See Regnum.ru, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/588074.html> (accessed 16 May 2020); Mk.ru, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2019/06/21/opros-bolshinstvo-ukraincev-za-vstuplenie-v-nato-i-es.html> (accessed 21 April 2020).

“Rally round the flag”

Fourth, the integration of Crimea happened at a difficult time economically for Russia (see Figure 2). The fall in the price of oil hit the Russian economy hard. Adding to this, Western economic sanctions only deepened the crisis.

Figure 2: GDP growth in Russia



Source: World Bank

(<https://dataviz.worldbank.org/authoring/TableauMPOECACheckDashboard/GDPgrowth>)

In this difficult situation, Russian politicians needed public support in order to justify the costs for the annexation of Crimea, not to mention the ongoing expensive military reform and costly military operations overseas (Syria). The integration of Crimea was costly for Moscow not only in terms of sanctions and international prestige, but also with respect to economic investments. Just for the construction of the Kerch Strait bridge, Moscow had to reallocate USD2.4 billion, which led to the suspension of investments for two other big infrastructure projects: the Taman port in the Krasnodar region and the Lena river bridge near Yakutsk. Therefore, an external threat helped to both convince the Russian population

of the necessity for sacrifice for the country's security and to make them proud of their leaders for "kneeling" to the West. Russia now had a strong leader who could openly criticize a clearly identified, "old" enemy – NATO.

In this way, when the Russian Finance Minister announced in 2015 that despite a 10 percent budget cut, defence spending would be the exception, there was no popular unrest and no one protested against Russia's involvement in Syria, even though the economic contraction was felt most poignantly by ordinary people. The Russian ruble also went through a drastic devaluation with the exchange rate reaching 91 rubles for 1 euro in December 2014, compared to 40 rubles in December 2012.¹⁹

Bullying the West

Fifth, after President Putin highlighted the 'vital' importance of Crimea for Russia – "[it] stands out in the Black Sea, as if in the center, and if NATO had entered the peninsula and put their strike means there, Russia would have been practically squeezed out of the Black Sea"²⁰ – he warned that the Kremlin "will never allow anyone to completely ignore [Russia's] interests".²¹ In this way, Russia was showing its readiness to escalate the conflict if the West did not accept the illegal annexation of Crimea.

In this context, NATO-phobic rhetoric can be interpreted as part of a strategy of bullying the West – not admitting to accusations of an illegal annexation, and threatening NATO countries. This aggressive rhetoric is also consistent with Putin's view that "if the fight is inevitable, be the first to strike".²²

Another explanation is that this could be part of a deterrence strategy. As during the Cold War when the two camps were trying to avoid escalation, Russia may expect that by playing the bully, the West, in wanting to avoid escalation, will, if not officially at least *de facto*, acknowledge the annexation of Crimea.

Consolidation of foreign policy positions

Finally, through anti-NATO and anti-West rhetoric, Russia may also be seeking to consolidate its international position: to get an equal footing in international affairs with Western countries. It shows that it is not willing to negotiate on Crimea or its "sphere of privileged interests". Vladimir Putin clearly stated that "the most important condition for the restoration of normal relations [with the West] is respect for Russia and respect for its

19 European Central Bank Statistical Database.

20 V. Putin, *Direct line*, 17 April 2014.

21 V. Putin, *Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club*, 24 October 2014.

22 V. Putin, *Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club*, 22 October 2015.

interests”.²³

For Russia, the reset of relations with NATO and the US must reflect the principle of parity similar to the “old days”, when the Soviet Union and the United States were shaping the bipolar world affairs. In other words, as Rachwald argues,²⁴ the reset would not mean the return to a pre-Crimea status but rather the consecration of a multipolar world, whereby Russia would be entitled to a “sphere of privileged interests”, ruling out membership in either NATO or the EU for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

Disassembling the matryoshka

While all of the above views help to explain the growth in Russian NATO-phobic rhetoric, their explanatory power differs. If NATO expansion, for instance, seems a logical explanation for the deterioration of relations in 2014, it does not explain the escalation of NATO-phobic rhetoric thereafter. The negative framing of NATO expansion has been present in every Russian strategic document regarding foreign policy, however, there was little public debate about the 2004 round of expansion, when three former Soviet republics – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – joined the Alliance. And during the 2013-2014 events in Ukraine, NATO accession was not even a topic in public debates or protests. Euromaidan erupted as a reaction to Ukrainian President Yanukovich’s refusal to initiate the Association Agreement with the EU.

In fact, less than two weeks before the annexation of Crimea, during the 6 March 2014 meeting with NATO Secretary General Rasmussen, when asked by the media whether Ukraine was considering joining NATO, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yatseniuk responded that “it [was not on their] radars”.²⁵ Indeed, in January 2008, before the Bucharest Summit, then Ukrainian President Yushchenko asked the US President for support for the initiation of the Action Plan for joining NATO. A month later, a similar gesture was followed by Georgian President Saakashvili. Had NATO membership been the main, or only reason, for Russia’s military actions in the “near abroad”, this would have suggested that Russia should not have waited for the Euromaidan protests to take military action against Ukraine.

In reality, the very idea of keeping NATO far from Russian borders as a deterrent seems to be outdated. When cruise missiles can be launched from hundreds of kilometres away, the physical proximity of NATO infrastructure in the vicinity of Russia is of reduced military significance.

Likewise the “besieged fortress” argument appears questionable. Both NATO

23 V. Putin, *Direct line*, 16 April 2015.

24 A. Rachwald, “A ‘reset’ of NATO-Russia relations: real or imaginary?”, *European Security*, Vol.20, Iss.1, 2011, pp.117-126.

25 A. Yatseniuk, “NATO Secretary General with Prime Minister of Ukraine – Joint Press Point”, 6 March 2014.

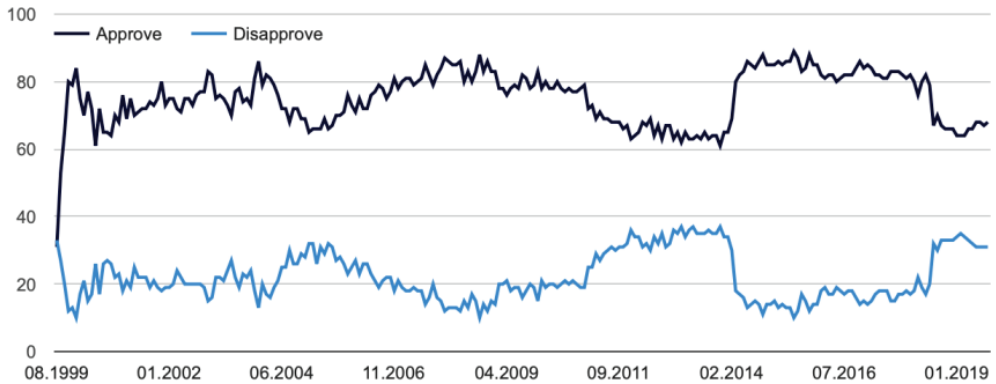
expansion and the building of anti-missile components in Romania and Poland were on the agenda before 2014. If Russia had felt encircled, why would it have let NATO use its military airport in Ulyanovsk from 2012 to 2015 for the transit of military cargo to Afghanistan? Moreover, one could question the rationale for why NATO would “encircle” Russia, since as the Russian president himself has acknowledged “the aggregate military spending of NATO countries is 10 times higher than that of the Russian Federation”, and the current military tactical approach already allows for conducting effective interventions from thousands of kilometers away.²⁶

By building up the perception of a “besieged fortress”, Moscow can further distract public attention from domestic problems, not to mention justify certain unpopular policies/actions. Projecting the image of a foreign enemy that is encircling Russia, Russian citizens may be determined to rally around their leader, ready to endure sacrifices/shortages for the sake of securing the homeland. As recent history shows, it would not be the first time that Russia uses NATO as a scapegoat. At the beginning of the 2001 Kursk disaster, the Russian military spread the story that a foreign (NATO) vessel could have collided with the Kursk submarine, provoking the accident.

A military threat could also be useful in the current domestic context when politicians have to introduce unpopular policies such as pension reform. As revealed by the Levada Centre, a Russian independent, non-governmental polling research organization (see Figure 3), the Russian President has always been popular during belligerent periods. Both in 2007-2008 and 2014-2018, when there was strong anti-NATO and anti-West rhetoric, Vladimir Putin's ratings were at their highest. This was also the case at the beginning of the 2000s, during the Chechen war.

26 V. Putin, “Interview”, *Il Corriere della Sera*, 6 June 2015.

Figure 3: Putin's Approval Rating



Do you approve the activities of V. Putin as the President (Prime Minister) of Russia?

	04.2019	05.2019	06.2019	07.2019	08.2019	09.2019
Approve	66	66	68	68	67	68
Disapprove	33	32	31	31	31	31
No answer	1	2	1	1	1	1

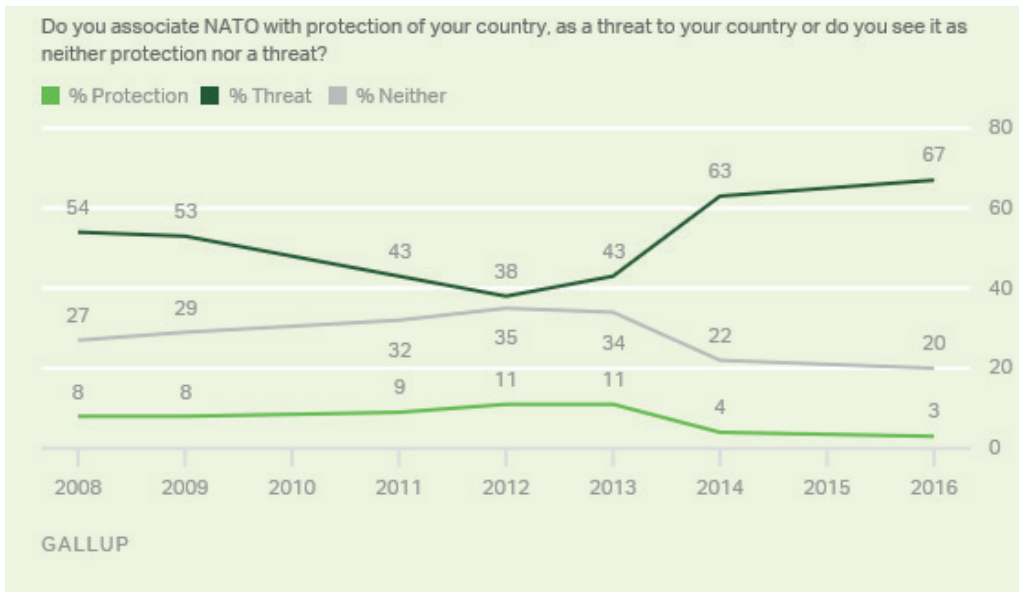
Source: Levada Centre September 2019 (<https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>)

While the first two causes – NATO expansion and the “besieged fortress” perception – drawn from Russian official rhetoric may have a ring of truth, the above analysis shows that they do not explain the escalation of rhetoric after 2014. Rather the need for a scapegoat for foreign policy failures; the usefulness of a clearly identified external enemy for rallying around the flag; a strategy for securing the annexation and consolidation of foreign policy positions, are better explanations. These arguments may not be stated in any official speech or document, however, they indicate a clear instrumentalization of NATO-phobic rhetoric by the Russian political leadership.

Why is Russian rhetoric important for NATO

Anti-NATO rhetoric is not projected into a cultural vacuum. It has always been actively or latently present in the perceptions of Russian society, a large part of the population having been educated during the Cold War. Therefore, the post-2014 NATO-phobic rhetoric has been easily assimilated into the worldview of many Russians, with public perceptions being reinforced by the narratives. The 2016 Gallup poll is illustrative in this regard (see Figure 4). After 2014, the number of Russians who viewed NATO as a threat clearly increased, reaching 67 percent of the population in 2016, which represented the highest number since Gallup started to record Russian opinions of NATO in 2008. By comparison, in 2012 only 38 percent of Russians saw NATO as a threat.

Figure 4: Russians' Views of NATO



Source: Gallup

(https://news.gallup.com/poll/203819/nato-members-eastern-europe-protection.aspx?g_source=World&g_medium=newsfeed&g_campaign=tiles)

The rise in anti-NATO perceptions may suit the incumbent political leadership in Russia. However, this also signals that the improvement of Russia-NATO relations will be more difficult than before. Whether or not there is a change of leadership, the next generation will still have to shape its policy in accordance with Russians worldviews. As such, initiatives in rapprochement with the Alliance could encounter criticism. There is one example in the 1990s. After President Yeltsin signed the Partnership for Peace framework document with NATO in 1994, the government unexpectedly refused to sign the individual partnership document. The document was eventually signed, but only after Yeltsin was assured by the US administration that NATO enlargement would not be officially announced before the Duma and presidential elections in 1996. Likewise, while the first comments by President Yeltsin regarding Poland's possible NATO membership were positive, shortly thereafter, NATO expansion became the most problematic security concern for Moscow who accused NATO of encirclement and betrayal.²⁷

Back in the 1990s, the Russian Duma had a significant number of MPs from the Communist Party and the views of many Russian citizens were still framed in the terms of Cold War confrontation. President Yeltsin had to adapt to those realities. Russia's incumbent or future political leaders will undoubtedly encounter similar constraints, given anti-NATO sentiment in the public's perception. As the annexation of Crimea is presented by Russian politicians as being directly linked to NATO's actions, NATO-phobic perceptions further complicate any move towards solving the Crimea issue.

The need for a counter-narrative

The anti-NATO rhetoric suits the incumbent Russian political leadership. The identification of a clear external threat/enemy, which resonates with a large part of the population educated during the Cold War, offers the Kremlin a framework for legitimizing its foreign policy in the former Soviet space and in overseas military campaigns. Additionally, the narrative helps to raise domestic support for unpopular policies (military reform, the redirection of strategic investments towards expensive infrastructure projects in Crimea, the amendment of the Constitution, etc.)

However, while the public narratives are instrumental and strategically constructed by political leaders, they also influence the worldviews of the entire spectrum of the population, shaping the domestic and international behaviour of a country. The decision-makers act in accordance with the perceptions they construct. As such, anti-NATO rhetoric can have lasting effects on Russia-NATO relations. Any potential attempt to reset

27 T. Forsberg, "Russia's relationship with NATO: A qualitative change or old wine in new bottles?", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol.21, No.3, 2005, p.335.

the current strained climate will be constrained by the public narrative and worldview of the Russian population. The incumbent or future Russian leadership will have to shape its policy in accordance with these perceptions of foreign threats.

It follows that if NATO wants to improve relations with Russia, regardless of who is in power, the recent reinforcement of negative images toward NATO underscores the need to prioritize public actions that would help to change anti-NATO perceptions among the Russian population. Any public diplomacy campaign will need to address the particularities of anti-NATO images and narratives which Putin's regime has propagated since 2014. As such, the communication strategy should focus less on the military/defence aspects of the Alliance, highlighting instead the political characteristics of NATO: a community of states that share values, promote democracy and the rule of law, and where each member state has the same voting power.

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