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# Demands on Russian Foreign Policy And Its Drivers: Looking Out Five Years

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*Russia's foreign policy priorities in the coming years hinge upon solidifying Russia's great power status outside the post-Soviet space as well as reducing the country's political isolation.*

In 2014, amid the Ukraine crisis, Russia broke out of the post-Cold War system and openly challenged U.S. dominance. This move effectively ended a quarter-century of cooperative relations among great powers and ushered in an era of intense competition between them. Three years on, Moscow continues to be in defiance. Meanwhile, the conflict with the West has deepened, and confrontation with the United States and estrangement from EU countries are now the salient and permanent features of Russia's international environment. Russia has also suffered a severe economic crisis, brought about by the demise of its oil-dependent economic model and exacerbated both by Western sanctions in response to Moscow's actions in Ukraine and especially by the plunge in oil prices. Russia is now slowly exiting from recession and entering stagnation, or at best only anemic growth.

Russia has stood up to Western pressure externally and kept a modicum of political and social stability internally, but it is still essentially muddling through. This dynamic will last a number of years, until such time as a more active cohort of Russian elites, capitalizing on President Putin's eventual departure from power, decides to change the rules of the game for its own benefit. For now, however, it remains vital to examine the forces driving Russian foreign policy, and how they may change in the short term.

*This is the first article in a series looking ahead at the drivers of Russian foreign policy from 2017 to 2022.*

## Russia's Primary Foreign Policy Priorities

Moscow's immediate foreign policy goal is to withstand the pressure imposed on it by Washington and its allies. Having adjusted its economy to sanctions and low oil prices, Russia continues to seek ways to reduce its political isolation, and has moved from defense to offense in the information space. Since February 2014, the Kremlin has been de facto operating in a war mode, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has been acting as a wartime leader. So far, the Kremlin has been holding firm, giving no ground to its opponents.

Russia, however, has been disappointed in its hopes that the Trump administration in the United States would take a

more understanding approach to Moscow. It has also been surprised by the early defeat in the French presidential elections of its favorite candidate, the center-right former prime minister Francois Fillon. Donald Trump's much tougher approach toward Russia than he had exhibited during the election campaign; the broad consensus within the German political establishment that the West should continue to pressure Russia; and pro-EU, pro-Atlanticist Emmanuel Macron's victory in France have minimized the chances that either the United States or Europe might ease its attitudes toward Moscow in the next four to five years.

Looking ahead, the Kremlin is adamant that it stands firm on its current foreign policy course. It has no intention of stepping back and reconciling itself with the West through concessions and promises of improved behavior. In the words of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, appeasement of the West at the expense of Russian national interests is over. On the contrary, Russia's operation in Syria, which began in the fall of 2015, poses a fresh challenge to the U.S.-dominated order. Moscow has broken a post-Cold War U.S. monopoly on the global use of force and has staged a spectacular geopolitical comeback in a region it had abandoned in the waning years of the Soviet Union.

Thus, Russia's principal foreign policy priorities, as evidenced by its actions in Ukraine and Syria, are checking any further advance of NATO in Eastern Europe and confirming Russia's status as a great power outside the post-Soviet space. Moscow's strategy is to create facts on the ground to coerce its former partners turned rivals, above all the United States, to acknowledge Russia's security interests—as defined by the Kremlin, not Washington—and accept Russia's importance as a great power to be reckoned with globally.

Moscow's engagement with the West on issues such as Ukraine, Syria, or Iranian and North Korean nuclear matters is geared to these priorities. By means of the Minsk II agreement of February 2015, Moscow seeks to create an insurmountable constitutional obstacle in Ukraine to that country's accession to NATO and to insert a pro-Russian element into the Ukrainian body politic. By means of an eventual peace settlement in Syria, Russia seeks to get U.S. recognition of its equal status, regain the role of a major outside power in the region, and keep Syria as its geopolitical and military stronghold.

Russia's willingness to engage with the Europeans on Ukraine and its offer of a coalition against the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria are linked to Moscow's objectives of lifting or progressively easing EU-imposed sanctions and restoring a modicum of economic relations with Western Europe. However, Russian hopes that European business communities—particularly in Germany, France, and Italy—would eventually get their governments to repeal the sanctions regime have not materialized.

Russia also hoped that developments in the European Union, including Brexit and elections in France and elsewhere, would lead to a less Atlanticist, less Russoskeptic EU, and that increased emphasis on the national interests of EU member states would open new opportunities for better bilateral relations between Russia and individual European states. These hopes have also, thus far, been disappointed.

Russia's rupture with the West has increased the importance of the country's non-Western partners. Making relations with China (a rising global power and the biggest economy that has not joined the anti-Russian sanctions regime) more productive is central to that outreach. However, the Sino-Russian entente has clear limits. The Chinese are cautious not to damage their business ties with the United States; Russia is cautious not to fall under the sway of an economically dominant partner; and the two countries' interests and strategies do not always coincide. Bolstering ties with China and keeping the relationship friendly are major priorities; forging an alliance with Beijing, in which Moscow would be the junior partner, is not.

China and Russia have agreed to harmonize the Belt and Road Initiative with the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and started consultations on free trade between them. In May 2017, President Putin attended the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Summit to highlight the salience of the grand Eurasian vector in Moscow's foreign policy. In the Kremlin's thinking, the EEU-OBOR axis could be extended to ASEAN countries, where Russia relies on Vietnam as a gateway to the region, and has been courting the regional giant Indonesia.

With the G20 and BRICS having replaced for Russia the former G8 (now the G7), from which it was expelled, and with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) replacing in the public mind the imagery of the Russia-EU summitry and NATO-Russia Council, Moscow is in the process of settling down in the non-Western world. This process, however, is not easy. Moscow's relations with India, Brazil, and South Africa, cordial as they are, have not expanded much, due mainly to Russia's economic weakness. The fall of oil prices has led to contraction of Russian exports by about a third. Expansion of Russian arms sales has not compensated for this shortfall.

However, 2017 will see India and Pakistan formally join the SCO—a move Moscow has long supported, in an effort to reduce China's dominance in the project. As Moscow grows increasingly worried about Islamic State's presence in Afghanistan, its ties with Islamabad have grown stronger, despite New Delhi's apprehensions. Russia also favors

SCO's expansion to include Iran, but faces opposition from Farsi-speaking Tajikistan, which is fearful of the destabilizing effect that closer ties with the Iranian theocracy could have internally.

Russia's intervention in Syria has brought Moscow into a situational alliance with Iran, and has led to close and not always friendly interaction with Turkey. The Russo-Turkish relationship has been on a roller coaster since 2015. Moscow severed most of its ties with Ankara following the downing of a Russian bomber by Turkey, but then cooperated in a quasi-alliance, both diplomatically and militarily, in Syria. All this has happened against the background of a serious deterioration of Turkey's relationship with the European Union.

Rhetorically, furthering Eurasian economic integration is among Moscow's major priorities. In reality, the economic crisis that has affected all of post-Soviet Eurasia, particularly Russia itself, as well as Russia's political confrontation with the West, has put the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) on the back burner of Moscow's foreign policy, where it will probably remain for the foreseeable future. Keeping close bilateral relations with the key partner countries Belarus and Kazakhstan, however, will be a priority—even as both Minsk and Astana demonstrate their independence from Moscow.

It should be clarified what is not a priority or even an objective for the Kremlin. The list includes conquering the Baltic states or establishing pro-Russian enclaves there and taking over Ukraine by force. Even integration of the part of Ukraine's Donbass region controlled by the anti-Maidan separatists presents a major problem for Russia, both in economic and legal terms.

Having entered information warfare with the Western mainstream media in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, Russia has massively stepped up its activities in the field, both domestically and internationally. Information operations are generally considered unrestricted, and conducted with no holds barred. Internally, information warfare is focused on mobilizing popular support by presenting itself as a country under attack from the West for standing up for Russian national interests. Internationally, Russian propaganda seeks to highlight and exploit problems and conflicts in the adversarial camp, undermining the confidence of Western peoples in democracy and U.S. leadership.

There is only so much, of course, that a state can hope to achieve by acting as just described. Russia's main tools in information warfare, RT television and Sputnik news agency, are tiny operations in comparison with leading Western news outlets. Their main selling point in the media marketplace is that they present an alternative to what's seen as the mainstream media, that they question things that are believed to be well-established, and expose unseemly actions or behavior by various Western public figures and institutions—essentially doing the job of erstwhile left-wing publications in Europe, which have become extinct by now in the general climate of conformity.

There are reasons to argue that Russian activism does not stop there. Taking its cue from what it regards as Western interference in other countries' politics, including pre- and post-Maidan Ukraine and Russia itself, Moscow has crossed the lines that it had steered clear of after the breakup of the Communist system. It has become actively engaged in the Western political debate, including during election campaigns. In the presidential elections of 2016 in the United States and 2017 in France, Moscow made its preferences fully known. This trend is likely to continue, widening the battleground in the new confrontation between Russia and the West.

It has been widely reported that Russia's political activism in the West also has a covert dimension. Evidence of this is understandably patchy and unreliable. Given publicly available information, however, it is difficult to conclude that Russia was able to manipulate U.S. elections, and impose its choice on the American people. To do so betrays a lack of self-confidence among the U.S. political establishment, and its skepticism regarding American voters who, according to this theory, can be so easily manipulated with minimal resources by a distant and hardly very attractive foreign country.

It is also safe to assume that the West itself is hardly passive in this engagement. To Putin, Western sanctions have had an unintended upside in restricting Russian officials' exposure to the West, and thus Western governments' capacity to influence and pressure them. But it is clear that top Russians have many more dealings with the West that could, at least in theory, be exploited against the Kremlin. This makes the Kremlin far more vulnerable to this sort of exploitation than the other way around.

Russia also has opposition politicians like Mikhail Khodorkovsky and others, prominent opposition bloggers who reside abroad, and the West's media that streams into Russian living rooms. In the run-up to Russia's own presidential elections in March 2018, information activities will multiply, but they will not cease in 2018. Though Putin likely enters his fourth formal, and fifth actual, presidential term in 2018, the post-Putin future will loom larger with every passing year. The stakes for all involved, both in Russia and the West, will be very high.



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