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Russian Neo-Revisionism

Richard Sakwa

Abstract:

A revisionist state would seek to challenge the existing balance of power in the system and threaten the foundations of the system itself. This does not apply to contemporary Russia. It seeks to enhance its status within the existing framework of international society. Russian neo-revisionism does not attempt to create new rules or to advance an alternative model of the international system but to ensure the universal and consistent application of existing norms. Russia's neo-revisionism represents a critique of western practices in defence of the universal proclaimed principles. It is not the principles of international law and governance that Russia condemns but the practices that accompany their implementation. This reflected Russia's broader perception in the post-Cold War era that it was locked into a strategic stalemate, and that the country was forced into a politics of resistance. This has taken many forms, including the creation of an anti-hegemonic alignment with China and others. For Moscow, it was the West that had become revisionist, not Russia. Although the implementation of applicable norms was patchy, Russia did not repudiate them. In its relations with the European Union, Russia's neo-revisionist stance means that it was unable to become simply the passive recipient of EU norms, and instead tried to become a co-creator of Europe's destiny. The struggle is not only over contested norms, but also over who has the prerogative to claim their norms as universal. However, it was precisely at the level of practices that there was least room for compromise, and thus Russian neo-revisionism became another form of the impasse, and only intensified tensions between Russia and the Atlantic system.

Key words:

Russia; revisionism; neo-revisionism; hegemony; anti-hegemonic alignment; China; Cold War; *ressentiment*; the West.

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From 2012 Russian foreign policy was conducted within the framework of the neo-revisionist paradigm, focused not on changing the structure of international politics but on modifying its practices so that the concerns of rising powers are better reflected in what Moscow insisted has become a multi-polar (or in Russian terminology, polycentric) system. In the domestic context the cultural turn represented the re-assertion of the autonomy of tradition. Neo-revisionism emerged out of the long-term post-Cold War strategic impasse in which Russia feels it is trapped.

Once it became clear that there would be no transformational politics at the end of the Cold War, and that instead the logic of enlargement would prevail, Russia was faced by a fundamental dilemma. Should it associate itself with the Historical West and the smaller Europe as a subaltern, and adapt to the existing institutions and norms; or should it assert its

own autonomous great power and normative identity? Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin tried to finesse the question by finding some sort of middle course, but both failed in this endeavour. By the time he returned to power in 2012, Putin had given up the search, accompanied by a deep disillusion with western hegemonic practices, and now unequivocally advanced the view that Russia would be an independent source of sovereign power in the international system. This gave rise to a neo-revisionist foreign policy: one that remained committed on the vertical axis to the institutions of international law and governance, above all the UN, but in horizontal relations with other states challenged the hegemony of the US-led liberal order. This inevitably brought Russia into confrontation with the Atlantic system, but this was balanced by the reinforcement of an anti-hegemonic alignment with China and some other states.

The policy of neo-revisionism basically accepted that good relations with the West could only be achieved under conditions of Moscow renouncing what it held most dear, namely its autonomy in foreign policy and recognition of its status as a founding member of international society; and Russia was not prepared to do that. Russia entered what could be called its 'post-Western' phase. This was a 'Russia that says no', in which it used 'social creativity' to devise an international relations of its own, no longer constrained by the attempt to transform the Historical West into the Greater West.¹ This was not revisionism but neo-revisionism.

Russia's policy of resistance is certainly high risk, and lacks the sustained economic foundations to say 'no'. Its actions in Ukraine and Syria soon brought upon its head the wrath of the West. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that while the quest for status was certainly a central concern, this striving is not driven by short-term instrumental factors. Russian foreign policy is embedded in a certain way of looking at the world, and the epistemological community sustaining this viewpoint encompasses most of the political elite and the population, and is deeply grounded in historical experience and traditions. Only a small and relatively isolated group of radical liberals believe that the condition for Russian success is the renunciation of its great power status. Although Solzhenitsyn-style nationalists argue that Russia should abandon the burden of empire and focus on national development, even they understand that Russia bears a certain responsibility in international affairs.

The issue ultimately is not so much Russia as the practices of the unipolar US-led power system in the post-communist era. It is charged with acting in a hubristic and irresponsible manner. The overthrow of Mohamed Najibullah in Afghanistan in the early 1990s and the attacks on Iraq and Libya were accompanied by the destruction of monuments that had survived for centuries if not millennia. Western power is seen as destructive when not catastrophic. In this model, the European Union (EU) has been less than useless, since not only has it done little to temper America's alleged imperial arrogance, but its new Eastern European powers and aspirant states from the former Soviet Union only encouraged the worst practices. In other words, while the quest for status is important, it is not a goal in itself. It is part of an understanding of the international system asserting that multipolarity would restore balance and allow more rational policy-making in international affairs.

The clash of post-Cold War world orders

The end of the Cold War was accompanied by a startling claim by the Soviet Union, and then by Russia: that by remaking itself with Russian membership, the West would revive and save itself, and overall would become a stronger presence and more enduring presence in

¹ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Russia says No: Power, Status, and Emotions in Foreign Policy', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3-4, 2014, pp. 269-79.

international affairs. The Soviet and Russian leaderships insisted that the end of the Cold War was a common achievement. Certainly, Mikhail Gorbachev believed that it was a common transcendence of the increasingly archaic but no less dangerous confrontation across the heart of Europe and globally. Russia was committed to a democratic transformation, but given its heavy legacy of authoritarianism, repeated attempts to modernise, and dangerous security environment, the Gorbachevian logic – taken up later by Russian leaders – that it would be better for the historical West to include the rough and ready Russia, and allow the transformation to take place within the framework of what would now have become a greater West. The initial Gorbachev position was that the reformed Soviet Union would co-exist alongside the historical West, but that their relationship would no longer be one of conflict, since with the end of the Cold War and the USSR's shift towards democracy, there was no reason for security competition to continue. Russia's early post-communist leaders built on this, but with the important shift that instead of a pluralist and cooperative international system with multiple centres of power, Russia sought to internalise pluralism within a transformed West itself. Liberal Atlanticists like the foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, wanted Russia to join the historical West, adopted a variant of this position that downgraded the attempt to transform the historical west into a greater west, but the idea never went away.

The tension remained between those who wanted Russia to be in the West, and those who considered that Russia should be alongside the West. On the western side, there was an understandable reluctance for Russia, with all of its enormous problems and unresolved conflicts, to be taken in prematurely and on its own terms. As in a business merger, there was a tension between two companies retaining their own identity after coming together, or one effectively taking over the other. The Gorbachevian line represented a dialogical third option: that both sides would change their identity to create something new entirely. The West was naturally reluctant to change its identity, since after all it had come out on top at the end of the Cold War, in military, economic and ideological terms. Russia was a much reduced power, so what need was there to undertake institutional change (for example, by dissolving NATO and creating common security bodies – notably under the aegis of the OSCE – in which Russia's voice would enjoy veto powers). There was also the danger of normative dilution, since Russia by any standard had a poor record of respect for human rights and for resolving conflicts by legal means. Although the West supported Yeltsin's forceful crushing of the parliamentary *fronde* in autumn 1993, it only intensified concerns about a 'premature partnership' with Russia.² These concerns were greatly intensified by the start of the brutal Chechen war in December 1994.

Despite the manifest roughness, the West took a benign view of Yeltsin's Russia, and even helped devise the manipulative strategies that ensured his re-election in 1996, but there was no transformation of the historical West, and instead Russia and the West stood face to face. Russia, too, feared to undertake an internal transformation that would deny the elements of its own identity that made it a separate actor in world politics, and which was taken to make Russia distinctive. Russia's emergence as a separate state was accompanied by the explicit attempt to join the world as a liberal democracy, but one shaped by its own traditions and able to assert its views in international affairs. Russia's internal transformation was considered its choice, and certainly not part of any western 'democracy promotion' strategy. Russia embraced democracy as an ideal that was its own and not an import from abroad, and its transformation was considered a function of internal developments and not a manifestation of any alleged western victory.

² Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'The Premature Partnership', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2, March-April 1994, pp. 67-82.

The debate over the international implications of democratic development continues to this day. As far as the Russian elite is concerned, democracy may represent the only universally acceptable and legitimate form of government, but it does not resolve fundamental questions of political economy or security. Democracy in the abstract does not come with ready-made answers about problems of national identity, state coherence, security or the balance to be drawn between traditionalism and what used to be called modernisation. Neither does it resolve the structural problems of international order. For Russia's leaders, Russia's status as a great power was not something that could be gifted or withdrawn by external actors but was part of Russia's character and destiny. When this status is not recognised, it generates feelings of *ressentiment* and encourages intensified social competition.³ The Atlantic community certainly wanted Russia to be part of its community, and thus exclusion was by no means a defined strategy. The problem was a structural one – an incompatible understanding of the international system and Russia's part in it. Russia could join the historical West, but as a subaltern; whereas Russia wanted to join a greater West, transformed, and in Russia's view, rejuvenated by Russia's membership.

In terms of its practice of international diplomacy, the Kremlin separates domestic issues from international politics, a distinction between systemic and structural logics. The complex process of transcendence, adaptation and continuity gave birth to the cold peace. As far as Russia was concerned, this was an asymmetrical peace in which Russia's role in overcoming the Cold War was not given institutional recognition. The end of the Cold War was accompanied by an astonishing lack of institutional innovation, and in time this also reproduced the ideological stereotypes of the past. This was reinforced by the absence of serious institutional innovation. There had been various ideas to create new bodies, such as a European security council under the CSCE, but they were not developed. Instead, Western bodies expanded to fill the available space. The Atlantic community's emphasis on international law and a rule-based order, as defined by that community, prevented a structural transformation of that community to encompass Russia.

Ambitions for a fundamental transformation to create a Greater West appear were abandoned, but insistence on Russia's special status remained. Anything less would represent the conclusive dissolution of Russian self-identity as a great power and as a separate civilisation, and a continuation of its disintegration as an actor in post-Soviet Eurasia and in world politics. The costs of taking this route appeared too high, but what was the alternative? The reassertion of geopolitical ambitions and a sphere of influence alarmed Russia's neighbours and appeared to be a revival of archaic patterns of international politics. Russia had nowhere to go. The normative space was covered by the apparent triumph of liberal democracy as exemplified by the Atlantic powers and the EU, and Putin was certainly not going to revive the communist ideological challenge. Russia was also stymied at all turns in geopolitical space, since any attempt to reassert even 'privileged' relations in post-Soviet Eurasia met with resistance from the new states as well as by condemnation by the Atlantic community.

Post-communist Russia has been a permanently dissatisfied power. There was not much it could do about it in the 1990s, even though there were permanent growls of dissatisfaction. Already in 1992 the liberal foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, talked about the onset of a period of 'cold peace'. This was the term used by Yeltsin in December 1994. It was clear that Russia was uncomfortable with the structure of international power as it had developed since the end of the Cold War. The growls became stronger when Yevgeny

³ Olga Malinova, 'Obsession with Status and Ressentiment: Historical Backgrounds of the Russian Discursive Identity Construction', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3-4, 2014, pp. 291-303.

Primakov took over as foreign minister in January 1996. He shifted policy away from Kozyrev's Atlanticism towards a greater emphasis on the assertion of Russia's great power status, closer links with other 'rising powers' such as China and India, and overall advanced 'multipolarity' as the desired model of the international system. The growls turned into a roar when the NATO powers bombed Serbia from March 1999 without authorisation of the UN Security Council, to stop attacks in Kosovo. The bombing demonstrated to Moscow that it had failed to achieve the social status that it desired, as an equal partner in the management of European security. Strobe Talbott, Clinton's advisor on Russia, records the former Russian foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev commenting: 'You know, it's bad enough having you people tell us what you're going to do whether we like it or not. Don't add insult to injury by also telling us that it's *in our interests* to obey your orders!' (italics in original).⁴ Although relations were re-established soon after, the long-term effect of the Kosovo crisis can hardly be under-estimated, contributing to the long-term decline in mutual trust.⁵

In the 1990s the structural tensions were masked by a strong personal relationship between Yeltsin and Clinton, which allowed a functioning relationship to develop. Russia became deeply embedded into a European international society, signing a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU in 1994 (although because of the Chechen War it only came into effect in 1997), and joining the Council of Europe (CoE) in 1996.

When Yevgeny Primakov took over as foreign minister in January 1996, he changed the model of unification with the West. The emphasis now was on both retaining their own identity. His call for multipolarity and critique of uncritical adaptation to western norms represented an enduring aspiration for ideational and geopolitical pluralism that shapes Russian foreign to this day. However, the common identity model did not disappear, and in his early years Putin envisaged Russia joining NATO founded on the continuing belief that it would be in the interests of all to transform the historical into the greater West. Despite the sharp deterioration in relations later and the emergence of an anti-hegemonic alignment with China, the two models of Russo-western relations – the common identity and the separate but merged – still interact in sometimes surprising ways. In the event, and not through conscious choice, a third model – demerger and competition – came to predominate. There is no evidence that this was the Kremlin's preferred option, and in fact all the evidence points the other way; and neither was it the policy option desired by most of the historical West's leaders.

However, it did enjoy significant support in what can be called the 'new West', the former communist countries of Eastern Europe. Some countries were more virulent than others in viewing Russia as the once and future enemy, and with the support of those in Washington who shared their concerns, a powerful alliance was formed that helped shape a policy towards Russia that ultimately provoked a rift and conflict. In other words, instead of creating a greater West (with Russia inside), or even a wider West (with Russia a 'strategic partner' substantiated by some sort of institutional and ideational underpinnings), the traditional anti-Russian animus of the historical West, forged during the Cold War, was not dismantled at the end of the Cold war but was radicalised. The enemy earlier had been the Soviet Union, with its programme to advance a world revolution to displace the capitalist ruling classes of the West, but it now became Russia, with its stubborn insistence on autonomy in international affairs and its claims to be a great power and thus an equal with the US. The radicalisation of the West meant that the denunciations of Russian behaviour and

⁴ Cited in Richard Lourie, *Putin: His Downfall and Russia's Coming Crash* (New York, Thomas Dunne Books, 2017), p. 81.

⁵ Regina Heller, 'Russia's Quest for Respect in the International Conflict Management in Kosovo', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 304, 2014, pp. 333-43.

identity became more extreme. In the Cold War years there had always been an implicit assumption that the object of attack was Soviet communism and the associated power complex, which held the 'captive nations' in thrall, but now Russia itself as independent subject of international affairs and even as a country became the subject of condemnation. What began as a relatively narrow strand of east European revanchism became a flood after the 'orange revolution' in Ukraine in autumn 2004, and a tempest during and after the 'Maidan' revolution of 2013-14.

A parallel process was underway in Russia. There had always been powerful strands critical of merger with the West on any terms, notably among the neo-traditionalists and Eurasianists, but their views gradually entered elite discourse. The shift was in part prompted by structural factors, above all the contradiction between liberal aspirations and great power ambitions. In the Putin years this became the defining feature of his rule. This does not mean that Russia cannot be a great power and a democracy at the same time, but this required a transformation of the international environment. Even France under Charles de Gaulle faced problems of adaptation after the loss of its empire, provoking tension with the Atlantic community of which it was a founding member. The challenges for Russia were incommensurately compounded by cultural and historical traditions that questioned Russia's European credentials. On the other side, the Atlantic community was buoyed by the myth of victory in the Cold War, and by the new challenges of terrorism and global insurgency, and could see no reason to embrace fundamental change, let alone its dissolution. Russian critiques of the world order that it represented were condemned as typically Soviet attempts to drive a wedge between the two wings of the Atlantic alliance. These fears were greatly enhanced by the accession of the east European states, who saw in the Atlantic community the guarantee of their security and development. The key point is that joining the historical West (the existing liberal order) would have deprived Russia of its great power status, hence the attempts to create a transformed greater West in which Russia would have been a founding member and a great power in a more endogenously pluralist order. In the end, even the exogenous pluralism represented association in a wider West was foreclosed, and the new West line of maintaining the hermetic and closed character of the historic West prevailed.

The situation in Europe was homologous to the broader picture. In Europe and the West as a whole there was no strategic space for the reassertion of Russian power and status to develop. The only path that remained open was adaptation to the norms and institutions of the Atlantic community, a path that Putin did not reject as long as it was accompanied by flexibility in the management of the historical West. One way he tried to achieve this was by returning to Gorbachev's idea of a common European home, now 'rebranded' as the project for a greater Europe. The greater European concept reprises the old Gaullist idea of pan-European integration, when he argued in his famous speech in Strasbourg on 23 November 1959 'Yes, it is Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals, it is Europe, it is the whole of Europe, that will decide the fate of the world'. This was stymied in the years of the cold peace by structural factors (the predominance of Atlanticism and American hegemony), and systemic issues – the alleged incommensurability between Russia and EU ideas of democracy and human rights prompted by governance problems in Russia. Instead of greater Europe, the EU advanced its own wider Europe agenda to draw its neighbours into the EU's orbit of good governance and democracy. By contrast with the pluralism of greater Europe, the wider Europe project is based on a series of concentric rings emanating from Brussels, weakening at the edges but nevertheless focused on a single centre. Russia's concern about the monist character of wider Europe were intensified by the development of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), formally launched in May 2009 in Prague. The result was a new division of Europe. Despite the aspirations voiced in the Charter of Paris, new dividing lines were established.

In the context of its apparent victory in the Cold War and Russian weakness and chaos, the historic West was unwilling to share leadership with Russia, and thus the problems that would later divide the continent were already evident. At the same time, Russia's struggle for foreign policy autonomy was not based on anything approaching neo-Soviet notions of Russia as the core of an alternative geopolitical or ideological bloc. In the early years Russia was highly cooperative, and even when there were differences of views, as over Bosnia, Russia continued to work with its western partners. Primakov shifted Russian policy away from what traditionalists condemned as uncritical Atlanticism towards an ill-defined multipolarity and competitive co-existence. However, the cooperative stance was tested in 1999 with the NATO bombing of Serbia. Nevertheless, soon after Putin tried to reboot Russia's engagement with the West through the new realism strategy, but this too soon ran into the sands. By 2007 the disillusionment was complete, yet the new realist strategy continued through the reset and Medvedev's leadership, which sought to find new forms of accommodation.

The Medvedev interregnum represented another experiment with the Gorbachevian reconciliatory approach in foreign policy. However, when faced by what were perceived to be direct threats, Russian policy was consistent. The response to the attack on the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, in August 2008 was at first defensive and then went on to the offensive with an incursion into Georgia. It is hard to describe this as an invasion, since the aim was not to defeat Georgia even when the road to was open. Russian forces limited themselves to some demonstrative and relatively limited measures and then withdrew. This was a limited punitive incursion whose ultimate purpose was demonstrative and didactic: to demonstrate to the West that NATO enlargement to countries in the *limitrof* threatened to draw them into dangerous conflicts with the major Eurasian power; and to teach countries in the borderland to respect Russian interests. The conflict ended with major radicalisation of the Russian position, namely the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The same dynamic was at work in the Ukraine crisis, where what was considered a threatening western action was countered by an escalation in the Russian response. Instead of recognising some sort of autonomy for Crimea, the region was annexed. Despite the intense confrontation in the Cold War years between 1945 and 1989, there were no direct armed conflicts in Europe or changes in international borders, but in the 1990s there were 31 border changes, 23 of which were peaceful. Five of the conflicts gave rise to new proto-states (Transnistria and South Ossetia in 1992, Abkhazia in 1993, Nagorno-Karabakh in 1994 and Kosovo in 1999). The removal of Cold War 'overlay' rendered the situation more fluid, and in the absence of an over-arching mode of reconciliation, the confrontation could only escalate until one side or the other reviewed its position or agreed on the rules to manage their disagreements.

The failure of Medvedev's reconciliation attempts led to the reassertion of resistance with Putin's return to power in 2012. No viable formula had been found to place Russia's relations with its Atlantic partners on a sustainable long-term basis. Putin's return to the presidency, accompanied by protests against electoral fraud that were perceived by Moscow to have been part of western attempts to destabilise the system, signalled the onset of a new spiral in the deterioration of relations. Russia entered a phase of neo-revisionism and resistance. This was accompanied by the consolidation of the regime, a shrill rhetoric of defiance, and attempts to develop an ideology of resistance. Much of this effort was ill-considered, and in many cases counter-productive, yet it reflected the deep sense of strategic suffocation. The failure to establish an order in which Russia could thrive resulted in the internalisation of external tensions and the externalisation of domestic contradictions. In the end, everything was in place for a resumption of confrontation. However, the international context had changed, and the scope for Russian resistance to its perceived encirclement was to break out through an ambitious global agenda.

These changes were reflected in Russia's official documents. Each built on previous iterations, but together they sum up Russia's view of itself and its place in the world. Drawing on earlier versions of April 2000 and February 2010, a new *Military Doctrine* was adopted on 25 December 2014.⁶ A year later on 31 December 2015, drawing on the earlier versions of January 2000 and May 2009, the new *Security Strategy* was signed by Putin.⁷ Then, developing the earlier versions of July 2008 and February 2013, on 30 November 2016 a new *Foreign Policy Concept* was adopted.⁸ The doctrines, strategies and concepts dealt with different issues, but together they convey the main foreign policy concerns of the contemporary Russian state. Some traditional themes were repeated. First, Russia's status as a leading world power whose sovereignty was to be defended and respected, pursuing an independent policy in world affairs. Russia was to be recognised as a great power, as one of the two major nuclear powers and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and has a special responsibility to manage global issues. Second, the documents converge on a view of the world as increasingly chaotic and unmanageable, marked by intensified competition for resources and influence between the major powers. Now even the Arctic was becoming a source of vulnerability. Third, the need to ensure that the post-Soviet space remained a sphere in which Russia's influence could be maintained is stressed, although this is deliberately not couched in the language of a 'sphere of influence'. Russia nevertheless should remain influential both in bilateral relations and through the multilateral institutions such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The development of integration processes in the post-Soviet space is an enduring theme in all the documents.

Some new themes emerged in recent documents. First, as Russia strengthens it encounters increased opposition, if not outright hostility, by the established powers, which reject the country's independent foreign policy stance. This provokes attempt to renew traditional attempts to contain (*sderzhivane*) Russia using the whole of gamut of means from military, economic and informational instruments. Second, interstate relations were becoming more competitive, which runs the whole course of 'hybrid warfare' instruments which include financial and cyber instruments. Third, the dominant position of the West was being eroded by the rise of new powers, which prompts the historic West to defend its declining positions more assertively, above all through the containment of challenger powers. Fourth, the documents shift between the assertion that a multipolar world is in the making to the view that it is an established fact.⁹ All these points reinforce Russia's enduring critique of the Western-led international order, and reflected Russia's perceived structural exclusion from that order as equal and constituent member.

Cold War and revisionism

All this looks like a Cold War, defined as a struggle which is deeply entrenched and with the potential to become an outright military conflict, but in which neither side is actively preparing for immediate war. The original Cold War represented entrenched ideological

⁶ *Voennaya doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 25 December 2014, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/18/129.html>.

⁷ *Strategiya natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 31 December 2015, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/1/133.html>.

⁸ *Kontsepsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 30 November 2016, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/2/25.html>.

⁹ These points, with the exception of the last one, were identified by Isabelle Facon, *Russia's National Security Strategy and Military Doctrine and their Implications for the EU*, Directorate-General for External Policies, Policy Department (European Parliament, 2017), pp. 6-7.

conflict waged on a global scale both within and between states. Robert Legvold is right to argue that this is not a repetition of *the* original Cold War, but represents *a* new Cold War.¹⁰ Andrew Monaghan notes that the notion a new Cold War is anachronistic and misplaced, looking back to the previous conflict rather than examining the dynamics of the present one.¹¹ The renewed confrontation is part of a broader reconfiguration of the international system. Although in Europe and US-Russian relations elements of a new Cold War were restored, these are relatively localised in spatial terms, and lack the intense ideological quality of the earlier conflict. The renewed confrontation has global aspects, and the rhetoric at times has been quite vicious, but the epicentre is no longer a battle between competing visions of Europe. There are elements of an ideational conflict, but this is far from the entrenched and substantive ideological differences sustained by the left-right division that sustained the Cold War. Instead, the conflict is generated by unresolved issues at the end of the Cold War, notably a stable and inclusive security order for Europe, as well as by the radicalisation of positions, in part generated by contestation over the new West in the borderlands of Europe.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that when a state believes that its appropriate status is not accorded adequate recognition is faced with three choices: mobility, creativity, and social competition. However, if none of the three strategies works to address the status concerns, the disappointed state will be tempted to adopt a revisionist strategy. If the status boundaries are impermeable, then the boundaries are liable to be challenged. This appears to apply to Russia. Revisionism is defined as an attempt to change the distribution of international public goods, including territory, as well as the normative basis of the system. As Legro puts it, revisionism refers to states that reject the dominant norms of interaction in a given international society and believe that active involvement in overturning that order serves national interests'.¹²

In the Russian, neither criterion applies in any consistent manner. The annexation of Crimea was undoubtedly a revisionist act, but there is no evidence that it was part of a revisionist strategy. On the contrary, Putin had devoted considerable efforts to stabilising Russia's borders with its neighbours through treaties, and in most cases this had been achieved (although the dispute with Japan over the Northern Territories / Southern Kuriles continued). In no case did Russia advance territorial claims, and even the Crimean case was generated largely by security concerns and fear that the Sevastopol naval base, the home of the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) would fall into American hands – which would represent a catastrophe of the first order. Russia had not fought valiantly to defend the city against the Anglo-French invasion force in 1954 and the German invaders in the Great Patriotic War only for the base to fall without a shot into alien hands. Equally, Russia did not challenge the normative structure of the international system, but only the claim of the US-led liberal international order to be in some way the guardian of international order in its entirety. This claim generated a set of practices that in Russian eyes generated double standards and too often subverted the rules that the liberal order claimed to uphold. Thus, Russia was far from becoming a systemic revisionist state.

A Pentagon report issued by the Defence Intelligence Agency on 28 June 1917 argued that Moscow has a 'deep and abiding distrust of US efforts to promote democracy around the world and what it perceives as a US campaign to impose a single set of global values', with Moscow in particular worried that 'US attempts to dictate a set of acceptable international norms threatens the foundations of Kremlin power by giving license for foreign meddling in

¹⁰ Robert Legvold, *Return to Cold War* (Cambridge, Polity, 2016).

¹¹ Andrew Monaghan, *A 'New Cold War'? Abusing History, Misunderstanding Russia* (London, Chatham House Research Paper, May 2015).

¹² J. W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 9.

Russia's internal affairs' that sought to lay the 'groundwork for regime change in Russia'.¹³ The report argued that 'Moscow seeks to promote a multi-polar world predicated on the principles of respect for state sovereignty and non-interference in other states' internal affairs, the primacy of the United Nations, and a careful balance of power preventing one state or group of states from dominating the international order'.¹⁴ This summary of the logic of Russian behaviour accurately depicted Russia's stated goals and threat perceptions, and it was remarkable only to the extent that the source was the Pentagon. The report provided a sober assessment of Russia's military potential, noting that Russia's intervention had entirely changed the dynamic of the conflict in Syria. The tone of the report eschewed both the language of 'partnership' and of demonisation, and instead represented a reversion to the sober language of Cold War military analysis.

Status is crucial in international affairs, and Russia was certainly disappointed in this respect.¹⁵ Status is defined as the relative position of an actor in some sort recognised hierarchy, and is inter-subjective, in the sense that status is dependent on the recognition of others. In its relatively brief post-communist history, Russia had tried three ways to have its great power status recognised: the bandwagoning of the early Atlanticist period; the balancing strategy of the competitive coexistence Primakov period, when the struggle for multipolarity was used to assert Moscow's autonomy; and the attempt to combine the two in Putin's and Medvedev's new realism between 2000 and 2012. All three effectively worked with the West as the main interlocutor and 'object of desire'. Clunan describes this as 'aspirational constructivism', stressing the way that representations of the past and current groups shape national identity. She argues that 'Putin modified Primakov's social creativity strategy of a multipolar world to highlight Russia's "traditional" role as a joint stabilizer of the international system that, in Russian eyes, had placed Russia on a par with the United States during the Cold War'.¹⁶ With Putin's return in 2012, in the language of social identity theory (SIT), 'social creativity' gave way to 'social competition', moving towards outright resistance. The policy of neo-revisionism basically accepted that good relations with the West could only be achieved under conditions of Moscow renouncing what it held most dear, namely its autonomy in foreign policy and recognition of its status as a founding member of international society; and Russia was not prepared to do that. Russia entered what could be called its 'post-Western' phase. This was a 'Russia that says no', in which it used 'social creativity' to devise an international relations of its own, no longer constrained by the attempt to transform the Historical West into the Greater West.¹⁷ As Japan surged to become the world's second largest economic power, nationalists in the 1980s had also urged Japan to say 'no'.¹⁸ In the event, the country entered the economic doldrums in the 1990s, and fell back into reliance on the US security umbrella in the face of China's noisy rise.

¹³ Defence Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington, DC, June 2017), <http://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf>, p. 15

¹⁴ DIA, *Russia Military Power*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁵ See the special issue of *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* edited by Tuomas Forsberg, Regina Heller and Reinhard Wolf, Vol. 47, No. 3-4, 2017. See Tuomas Forsberg, 'Status Conflicts between Russia and the West: Perceptions and Emotional Biases', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2014, pp. 323-31.

¹⁶ Anne L. Clunan, 'Historical Aspirations and the Domestic Politics of Russia's Pursuit of International Status', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3-4, 2014, p. 287.

¹⁷ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Russia says No: Power, Status, and Emotions in Foreign Policy', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3-4, 2014, pp. 269-79.

¹⁸ Shintaro Ishihara, *A Japan that can Say No* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1992).

At the St Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) in 2016, Putin refused to use the term ‘cold war’ to describe the stand-off between Russia and the West. He stressed the absence of ideological rivalry between two systems and looked to deepen economic ties with countries such as Italy, Germany and even the US, whose business leaders attended the forum in greater number than in earlier years. Despite the geopolitical tensions, Russia increased its total investments in US Treasury bonds from \$72bn in 2015 to \$90.9bn in 2016. The 26 per cent increase placed Russia sixteenth, with China in top place, holding \$1.15 trillion of securities, followed by Japan and Ireland.¹⁹ With Trump advocating a more isolationist America focused on its own problems, Putin repeated his statement that Trump was a ‘vivid’ (*yarkii*) person, while Trump complimented Putin on his leadership qualities.²⁰ The Ukraine crisis reinforced Atlantic solidarity, but at the same time the plethora of challenges exposed the EU’s vulnerability. The Syrian crisis showed that on such issues as terrorism and refugees, NATO was not able to guarantee European security. The EU’s lack of adequate security instruments was also exposed, encouraging member states to take matters into their own hands, undermining the EU’s institutions and policies. The EUGS indicated moves towards greater security coordination within Europe, and the wave of terrorist attacks in France and Germany in 2015 and 2016 highlighted the need for greater coordination of intelligence and border services. The Warsaw summit saw moves towards greater cooperation with NATO in naval patrols and other issues, but this advanced in parallel with the EU developing independent capacities.

In the present period of confrontation, America and its allies mobilised to counter the threat of Russian expansionism that is largely imaginary. As in the original Cold War, the defence industry, security establishment, the new West fear-mongers and their epigones in western think tanks and the media whipped up the propaganda war. A thick tissue of misapprehension lies at its root. At the same time, Russian appeals for a more pluralist international order were undermined by the exaggerated monism at home. This reinforces the broader argument that Russian foreign policy in the post-Cold War years found itself in a strategic impasse. Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine exposed the fundamental weakness of the Russian position and only exacerbated that weakness, but in conditions of an impasse, Russia’s options were severely constrained. They amounted essentially to retreat – and thereby to lose all credibility in the post-Soviet region; or attack, and conclusively alienate the western community. A defining characteristic of the impasse is that all the strategic options facing Russia were bad, defined as choices that lose Russia positions or friends, or both.

Events in Ukraine prompted calls for greater foreign policy coordination as well as the strengthening of the Atlantic security community. The attempt to impose a single voice on the EU tends towards the amplification of Atlanticist positions rather than generating alternatives that could articulate a distinctive continental identity. The failure to transcend the logic of the Cold War and to establish some sort of robust greater Europe within a broader greater West framework returned the continent to its worst traditions. The asymmetrical end of the Cold War now became institutionalised in a new confrontation that resumed the long European civil war. The Cold War had long ended, but its institutions and ideational foundations lived on. Once again Europe failed to overcome its history of division and conflict. The irony this time is that the EU, which had been established as a project for reconciliation, now became part of the frontline of confrontation. Instead of transcending the logic of conflict, it became an instrument to aggravate and perpetuate division. Its normative

¹⁹ ‘Russia Has Bought US Treasury Bonds Worth 91 Billion Dollars’, Lenta.ru, 16 August 2016.

²⁰ Tyler Pager, ‘Putin Repeats Praise of Trump: He’s a “Bright” Person’, Politico, 17 June 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/putin-praises-trump-224485>.

foundations were diluted by expansionary geopolitical practices. The EU was sucked into the logic of geopolitics as it advanced an exclusive ‘wider Europe’ agenda, and in Ukraine *Realpolitik* considerations trumped its value structure.

Neo-revisionism

The Ukraine crisis represented an inflection point signalling a qualitative change in relations, but it came in the context of a long slide towards hostility. On his return to power in 2012 Putin had lost all trust in the western powers, a feeling that was reciprocated. The new realist strategy from 2000 had been predicated on the idea that had to be a better way than the ‘competitive co-existence’ of the late 1990s, a policy that itself was reminiscent of Nikita Khrushchev’s ‘peaceful coexistence’ strategy of the 1950s. To this end, Putin worked hard to find a key to the dilemma of how to enter the historical West while retaining enough of Russia’s autonomy and status to satisfy Russian elite and identity concerns. The more ambitious goal of transforming the historical West into a greater West was tempered, but the need for some new European security arrangement and substantive post-Cold War political settlement had not gone away. Even the Munich speech in February 2007 represented not so much a repudiation of this strategy as a desperate plea for Russian concerns to be heeded. In the event, even Medvedev’s emollient approach was unable to crack the code, and had even been used by Obama to humiliate Putin. The protests of 2011/12 was the final straw, where from Putin’s perspective the popular mobilisation served American foreign policy goals. It was an embittered Putin who returned to the Kremlin in 2012, and policy now reverted to the themes of the Primakov period. This helps explain why Primakov today is held in such high esteem.

The neo-revisionist stance means that there is no longer any anticipation of anything approaching a ‘strategic partnership’ with the EU, while relations with the US will be frosty, even if tempered by moments of cooperation over strategic issues of common concern (nuclear arms control, the Iran nuclear question, non-proliferation issues, notably over North Korea). Putin had always been infuriated by the West’s failure to recognise Russia as an equal partner. This reflected Russia’s sense of strategic isolation, but also a cultural resistance to being placed in a subaltern position. In an interview with *Time* magazine in 2007, after it had named him man of the year, Putin noted that ‘Sometimes one gets the impression that America does not need friends. ... [but] some kind of auxiliary subjects to take command of’, and this gave rise to a dismissive attitude towards Russia, that ‘they are a little bit savage still or they just climbed down from the trees, you know, and probably need to have their hair brushed and their beards trimmed’.²¹ For the hawks in Russia, and in particular the security apparatus (the *siloviki*), the issue was rather more straightforward – the long-term attempt to weaken if not to destroy Russia as a great power. As Nikolai Patrushev, the former head of the FSB who in 2008 became head of the Security Council, argued in a manifesto of October 2014 under the title of ‘Cold War Two’, the western goal was to dismember Russia by supporting its enemies and sponsoring hostile movements. He quoted Madeleine Albright to the effect that it was ‘unjust’ that such vast resource-rich areas as Siberia and the Russian Far East should be ‘under Moscow’s rule’.²² The statement is apocryphal, yet has entered Moscow lore as evidence of the conspiracy against Russia.²³

²¹ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin’s Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York, Public Affairs, 2016), p. 300.

²² I. Egorov, “Kto upravlyaet kaosom” – SShA pytayutsya odolet’ krisiz za schet drugikh, razrushaya tselye strany – intervyyu s nikolaem Patrushevym’, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 15 October 2014.

²³ Zygar, *All the Kremlin’s Men*, p. 343.

The *National Security Strategy* of 31 December 2015 revealed Moscow's increased sense of insecurity. The document starkly warned about the threat:

Expanding the force potential of NATO and endowing it with global functions that are implemented in violation of international legal norms, the bloc's heightened military activity, its continued expansion and the approach of its military infrastructure to Russia's borders, all create a threat to national security.²⁴

The *Strategy* portrayed Russia as a global player with legitimate concerns in its region, and noted the containment strategy deployed against it. Despite the paradigm shift in global affairs towards conflict, the *Strategy* remained remarkably consistent with previous iterations. Confrontation with the West was now defined as a threat, accompanied by warnings of the 'hybrid' wars allegedly conducted against Russia. The country's self-reliance and self-sufficiency was stressed, but there was no substantive shift towards the 'securitisation' of new policy areas. Securitisation is not the same as militarisation, and indicates the way that 'normal' politics gives way to the priority of national security discourses, which then shape policy.²⁵ After 2014 NATO shifted from the language of 'strategic partnership' towards militarisation, and a whole series of policy areas underwent a creeping securitisation (including the monitoring of the media to counter 'Russian propaganda' and 'fake news'), although the process was uneven and divisions remained between the allies.²⁶ While most European countries were reluctant to engage in the wholesale securitisation of relations with Russia, the US went the furthest. Its *National Security Strategy 2015* warned that the US 'will continue to impose significant costs on Russia through sanctions', and would 'deter Russian aggression'.²⁷ Donald Trump's announced intention of improving relations with Russia provoked a storm of hostility in which Republican neo-conservatives and Democrat liberal internationalists united to stymie moves in that direction.

The new *Foreign Policy Concept* issued on 30 November 2016 did not reflect any imputed condition of 'war' between Russia and the Atlantic community. The revised *Concept* stressed Russia's desire for good relations with all of its 'partners', the continued commitment to multilateral organisations and international economic integration, the supremacy of international law, the central role of the UN, the importance of democracy, and Russia's contribution to peace and security in Europe. The general stance remained the same: 'The contemporary world is going through a period of profound changes, the essence of which is the formation of a polycentric international system'. The West's attempt to impede this natural shift generated instability in international relations. Russia would 'resist the attempts of individual states or groups of states to revise the generally recognised principles of international order', for instance, using the principle of Responsibility to Protect to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries. At the heart of the document was a defence of Russia's status as an independent player in international affairs, a reluctance to be drawn into any alliances or putative blocs, and the attempt to strengthen the ability of news media

²⁴ 'Strategiya natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii', *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 31 December 2015, <http://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>, accessed 29 July 2016.

²⁵ Edwin Bacon and Bettina Renz with Julian Cooper, *Securitising Russia: The Domestic Politics of Putin* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006).

²⁶ Bernhard Stahl, Robin Lucke & Anne Felfeli, 'Comeback of the Transatlantic Security Community? Comparative Securitisation in the Crimea Crisis', *East European Politics*, Vol. 32, No. 4, p. 539.

²⁷ 'National Security Strategy of the USA', February 2015, www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf.

‘to convey the Russian viewpoint to broad circles of the world community’. Even though at the time Russia was embroiled in the Syrian conflict, the Middle East was still ranked behind the post-Soviet space, Europe, the US and Asia-Pacific in its regional priorities.

Rather than enunciating an alternative ideological project or the creation of some sort of Eurasian civilisation, the *Concept* reiterated Russia’s support for ‘universal democratic values’. Regional integration would be in conformity with WTO rules, and there was no suggestion that Russia would turn its back on globalisation. Instead, the document stressed Russia’s ambition for establish ‘constructive, stable and predictable cooperation with the countries of the EU. Despite the tensions, the greater Europe ambition was retained in the form of Russia’s wish ‘to create a common economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean on the basis of the harmonisation of the processes of European and Eurasian integration’. Even NATO was spared some of the harshest criticism, although it registered ‘a negative attitude towards NATO’s expansion and the alliance’s military structure approaching Russia’s borders’. Instead, Russia sought ‘an equal partnership’ while establishing ‘mutually beneficial relation with the United States’. The *Concept* accused the US and its allies of undermining ‘global stability’ by trying to ‘contain’ Russia, and reserved the right to ‘react harshly to any unfriendly’ moves. Cooperation was only possible on the basis of ‘equality, mutual respect of interests, and non-interference in one another’s internal affairs’. Russia’s goal was good relations with all states based on ‘mutual respect’, and there was no enunciation of a counter-hegemonic strategy, although ‘polycentrism’ was defended and ‘full-scale’ partnership and cooperation with China was stressed. The tone overall was defensive, although enunciated in a confident tone that suggested a belief that the tide of history was running in Moscow’s favour. The document stressed Russia’s enduring commitment to universal principles, as long as these were not abused to justify interference in the internal affairs of states.²⁸

The confident tone was reflected in Putin annual address to the Federal Assembly on 1 December 2016. The focus was on reform in domestic policy, although there were no substantive ideas on how to tackle economic stagnation, and the foreign policy passages were conciliatory in tone. He noted that ‘Unlike some of our colleagues abroad, who consider Russia an adversary, we do not seek and never have sought enemies. We need friends. But we will not allow our interests to be infringed upon or ignored. We want to and will decide our destiny ourselves and build our present and future without others’ unasked for advice and prompting’.²⁹ The conciliatory tone indicated that Moscow hoped to repair relations with the US in the framework of a multipolar world order and recognition of Russia as a great power. Inevitably, the sticking point would be the tension between a ‘values-based foreign policy’, which in the historical West was code for American leadership of the hegemonic liberal world order, in which there was no room for what was condemned as ‘spheres of interest’, or a more interest-driven recognition of a pluralist international system in which great powers could have divergent concerns, and to avoid conflict some sort of ‘concert’ diplomacy was required.

In his 1 March 2018 Federal Assembly address Putin effectively characterised the US as a force of rampant chaos and disorder in the world, arbitrarily repudiating hard-fought achievements in strategic arms control and thus unleashing an arms race with potentially catastrophic consequences. He spent a third of the two-hour long speech introducing a formidable array of strategic and nuclear-capable weapons that Russia had or was

²⁸ ‘Kontsepsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii’, 30 November 2016, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/2/25.html>.

²⁹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly’, 1 December 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53379>.

developing, confirming that a new arms race had begun. He argued that ‘Missile defence ... is no less, and probably even more important, than NATO’s eastward expansion. Incidentally, our decision on Crimea was partially prompted by this’.³⁰ As far as Russia is concerned, it is the West that has been pursuing a revisionist strategy since the end of the Cold War. Putin has steered a difficult and occasionally inconsistent path between replicating what are perceived as western patterns of revisionism and a more limited politics of resistance within the framework of neo-revisionism. As long as Russian foreign policy remains within the neo-revisionist paradigm, the country will find allies and the new confrontation (the so-called new Cold War) will remain constrained. However, if it strays into the realm of revisionism, the result could well be war.

³⁰ Vladimir Putin, ‘Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly’, 1 March 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>.