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The Pandemic, Russia and the West

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Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic represented a major event in world history, although its political character remains disputed. It is too early to tell what long-term impact the coronavirus will have on international affairs, but its immediate results are clear. The article examines the context of the pandemic and some of the salient effects, noting that it has acted as an accelerant rather than a game changer. The paper then contextualises these changes into the larger pattern of Russian foreign policy, noting the way that the pandemic only deepened and in parts accelerated existing tendencies and trends. International politics remain trapped between post-war patterns in the Atlantic power system and the emergence of new challenges, above all the nascent bipolarity between the United States and China. Russia seeks to manoeuvre in this new constellation, including by advancing its civilisational autonomy. Instead of introducing greater flux into international affairs, the pandemic only confirmed and intensified the existing impasse, and the long-anticipated multipolarity remains more of an aspiration than a reality. The stasis in international affairs remains in place.

Keywords: Pandemic, sovereign internationalism, neo-revisionism, stasis, liberalism, information warfare

Has the pandemic changed the dynamic of relations between Russia and the West, and if so, in what way? This article will argue that the pandemic has not fundamentally changed the structure of relations, but it has intensified the modalities while accelerating the processes. In other words, the pandemic has only added features to a relationship that was already fundamentally broken. Contrary to some early commentary that the pandemic would provide an opportunity for some sort of humanitarian ‘reset’ in the face of a common challenge, in practice the pandemic only reinforced existing divisions, while adding an extra layer of distrust and bitterness. The article describes these processes, and then outlines a structural explanation for the continuing stasis in relations between Russia and the West. It will proceed in four steps. First, some words about the larger context, which locates the problem in the larger pattern of relations and identifies the specific dynamics of Western and Russian responses to the pandemic; second, we then look at the factors shaping the evolution of Russia’s engagement with the world; third, we analyse the impact of the pandemic on Russian policy; and finally, we discuss the character of international politics today, including the enduring patterns of confrontation and ‘information’ wars, that were exacerbated by the coronacrisis.

Stasis and change in the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the four great crises of the twentieth century – the Spanish flu of 1918-19, the great depression from 1929, the build-up to the Second World War, and the social unrest of 1968 – but with all of these occurring simultaneously. More

specifically, the major epidemiological challenge of the global pandemic compounded the damaging consequences of the global financial crisis of 2008, increased the rising stress levels of great power confrontation, and fed the national populist revolt that powered the Brexit vote in June 2016 and then propelled Donald J. Trump to the US presidency in November of that year. There is clearly a growing popular awareness of the need for change, including in response to the accelerating climate crisis, but forces pushing for a transformation in international affairs encounter the institutions and ideologies of the Cold War era, entrenched in the form of a global stasis. Change and stasis are today locked in a stalemate, imbuing international affairs today with an enduring sense of drift and impasse.

Matters are changing, of course, and the pandemic as an event has accelerated these mutations, although the impasse endures. There are elements of transformation at the macro (global) level, but stasis remains at the regional and institutional level. At the macro level several cycles of history are coming to an end, including the 500-year predominance of the West, and new patterns are beginning to emerge [2]. This intensified the interregnum in political affairs identified by Antonio Gramsci in the early years of the twentieth century, in which he argued the old is dying but the new is struggling to be born [1]. There are indications of what the new world will look like, including a diffuse but identifiable bipolarity between a relatively declining Atlantic power system centred on the United States and the rising powers of the East, above all China. This is also a struggle between liberal hegemony, which itself is increasingly challenged from within, and a nascent Euro-Asian system of sovereign (conservative) internationalist powers focused on China. However, in micro terms, the dominant trend remains stasis – a type of equilibrium where the contending forces cancel each other out. The Atlantic power structures and associated ideology (the political West formed in the early years of the Cold War), strive to maintain their primacy against the long-term global changes in the balance of economic and political power.

Russia remains committed to multipolarity, and while elements of this have undoubtedly emerged, the pandemic has accelerated the trend towards the nascent bipolarity between the US and China. In the macro context, Russia strives to maintain its autonomy by developing Eurasian heartland institutions while exploiting developmental and geostrategic opportunities by aligning with China, but in micro terms Moscow welcomes potential openings with the Western powers while diversifying foreign policy strategies by developing a network of bilateral ties with countries such as India, South Africa and other states. The pandemic accelerated these trends, but was unable to resolve the contradiction between the elements of innovation and stasis. However, at a certain point it can be anticipated that the accumulated pressure of the macro changes will burst through the stasis at the micro level, leading at the minimum to a changed balance of power between liberal hegemony and the conservative/traditionalist approach to global affairs, and ultimately even to changes in the international system itself. However, in the immediate term the pandemic as an event was not enough of an exogenous shock to achieve either systemic or structural transformation.

The ‘West’ as a concept and a geopolitical reality is far from homogeneous. As a concept, the political West took shape as a function of the Cold War. Until then the term was rarely deployed, and instead cognates such as ‘the Allies’ or ‘the Atlantic powers’ was used. As the Cold War intensified, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was established in 1949 and the West emerged as the geopolitical and ideological antagonist of the Soviet Union and its allies. In the post-Cold War era the political West maintained itself in institutional terms by ensuring new functions and rationales for the Atlantic alliance, while also reinterpreting its ideological foundations. No longer focused on the ideational struggle between communism and capitalism, the new binary of democracy versus authoritarianism emerged. In all of this Russia was at best tangential, and at all stages considered as something external and potentially dangerous. Russia initially tried to overcome its peripheral status by proposing a

pan-European association, the idea of some sort of Greater Europe that would automatically have made Russia part of a political community rather than an exogenous and threatening force, but in the event representations of Atlantic community prevailed. The pandemic in early 2020 raised hopes that the enormity of the challenge, accompanied by Trump's obvious denigration of America's traditional multilateral ties and alliance system, could provide an impetus for a change in the geopolitical and ideational framework, but in the event stasis once again prevailed.

The pandemic immediately raised some fundamental questions. First, would the world come together to tackle the crisis and prompt the creation of some sort of cooperative global community? Would cooperation provide a panacea for the ills besetting the world? In the early months there was some sharing of personal protective equipment (PPE). Russia sent some incubators to the US, and a convoy of equipment, including a field hospital, was despatched to Northern Italy. China also sent PPE to help many countries in distress. In the event, these acts of humanitarian assistance themselves became the subject of critique, and instead of alleviating the symptoms of crises, only made them worse. Like the virus itself, the response preyed on underlying conditions and vulnerabilities. Some cooperation on vaccine research did take place, amid pledges organised by the UN's World Health Organisation (WHO) to support the Covax programme to share possible antidotes. However, even here the underlying distrust soon came to the surface, as the US withdrew from WHO in the midst of the pandemic, accusing it of colluding with China to suppress early information about the spread of the virus. Russia was accused of hacking into the laboratories of researchers in Oxford and there were persistent claims that it was guilty of spreading disinformation about the pandemic, undermining public protection policies while propagating the mystifications and falsehoods of the 'anti-vaxxer' (anti-vaccine) conspiracy theories. In other words, in the face of a common threat, there was no common response, and instead the impasse was intensified.

Second, at the global level, the pandemic reinforced the already noticeable drive towards a reconstituted bipolarity, this time with Beijing instead of Moscow as one of the anchors. China and the US 'weaponised' the pandemic, accusing each other of responsibility for causing and spreading the virus. The intensification of hostility was symbolised by the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech in July 2020 at the Nixon Centre in California, where he excoriated China for failing to change in the manner anticipated by the US when relations had been re-established by Nixon in the early 1970s [45]. China was no less robust in its response, intensifying its 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy and raising the rhetorical heat. As in the original Cold War, other powers are trapped in the powerful magnetic field generated by the confrontation, and that is why the notion of a Second Cold War is useful. The actors are different, as is the regional and global focus as well as ideological orientations, but in structural terms some of the earlier patterns are reproduced, which the pandemic intensified. In addition, as in the First Cold War, international institutions are overshadowed and to a degree marginalised by the re-emergence of superpower bloc politics [7].

Third, this entailed the marginalisation of medium powers, including some like Russia that had been accustomed in earlier years to acting as a superpower. In strategic nuclear terms Russia remains one of the few powers capable of destroying the US. Arms control, although battered in the Trump years, remains on the agenda, and managing deterrence will remain a priority in years to come. Other than that, Moscow's voice in international affairs remains important, above all because of its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, but its status has undoubtedly fallen. This also applies to the former great powers in the EU, notably Britain and France, as well as to the EU as a whole. They all now have to make choices on terrains not of their choosing, a definition of a medium power. This is why the French president, Emmanuel Macron, revived earlier ideas, although in a greatly attenuated form, about rapprochement with Moscow. The Gaullist-Mitterrandist idea of some sort of greater Europe stretching from Lisbon

to Vladivostok was certainly not on the agenda, but Macron insisted that no major regional problem could be resolved without Russia's participation [35]. However, the poisoning of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny on 20 August 2020, in the lull between the first two great waves of the pandemic, had catastrophic consequences. It not only undermined the already weak support for rapprochement, but emboldened voices critical of Russia, and threatened the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea. The EU clearly prioritised its own development, even survival, above relations with Moscow.

Even as the EU declared that it would become more geopolitical, the focus of geopolitics moved to Asia, 'while Europe has been relegated to the periphery, with its members squeezed between two poles' [32]. Covid-19 reinforced the perceived need for Europe to act as a stronger collective actor, in the first instance to help countries recover from the pandemic (and a multi-billion euro recovery package was agreed in summer 2020), but also in response to global challenges, above all China and Russia. However, the Navalny case only precipitated what had already been long in train. In response, the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, at the Valdai Discussion Club session in October effectively announced the end of substantive engagement:

Those people in the West who are responsible for foreign policy and do not understand the necessity of mutually respectable conversation – well, we must simply stop for a while to communicate with them. Especially since Ursula von der Leyen [the President of the European Commission] states that geopolitical partnership with Russia's leadership is impossible. If this is the way they want it, so be it [30].

This did not represent a total breach, but it did signal that the old tutelary relationship was over – Russia would no longer take lessons from the West. The old ambition to create some sort of 'Greater Europe' had been severely damaged by the Ukraine crisis since 2014, and now the pandemic further reinforced Moscow's shift to various forms of the 'heartland' strategy devised at that time, intended to find 'operational space within narrow mazes', accompanied by a revival of the Gorchakov principle of Russian foreign policy, namely subordinating foreign policy (to the degree possible) to domestic development [34].

While Europe's relations with Moscow deteriorated during the pandemic, fissures with the US also intensified. Trump made no secret of his distaste for multilateral organisations, and this included the traditional allies in the EU and NATO. One of Trump's National Security Advisers, John Bolton, described the EU as 'worse than China, but smaller' [4]. The EU retains its political subjectivity and normative commitments, but like all medium powers, it could only watch the November 2020 election as a bystander, although its outcome would profoundly affect the region [6]. Russia also was a bystander, even though the outcome affected Russia deeply. Joseph Biden's win allowed the EU to focus on rebuilding ties with Washington and to re-consolidate the West, further marginalising Russia. Trump's erratic and ultimately hard-line anti-Russian positions had been partially excused by the Russiagate allegations, but few commentators had expected an improvement in relations even in a Trump second term, when the president would be free of the taint of collusion with Russia in the 2016 election [28]. 'America first' was an enduring phenomenon, irrespective of the outcome [33]. In the event, Biden came to office with deeply critical views of Russia.

Fourth, this came against the background of a move away from old-style globalisation towards greater regionalisation. The pandemic accelerated what had already become apparent – the move away from traditional representations of globalisation. This had been one of the main concerns of the national populist upsurge, whose challenge to the normative foundations represented an existential threat to the coherence of the EU. Europe was far more severely affected by the pandemic than China and most other East Asian states. With 60 per cent of

global population, Asia suffered only 15 per cent of Covid-related deaths whereas Europe, with less than 10 per cent of global population, accounted for nearly a third of all deaths, and the same applies to the US. At the same time, China was on a much steeper V-shaped economic recovery path, with its economic output by the end of 2020 11 per cent above its pre-pandemic level, whereas the Western countries all registered GDP falls in the region of ten per cent. At the same time, Covid-19 changed the way that businesses operated, with the emphasis now on shorter supply chains. This worked both ways, and Western countries tried to increase locally-sourced materials, while Asia reduced its reliance on Europe and the US. By late 2020 about 60 per cent of all trade in Asia took place within the region [58]. The technology wars, above all over the construction of 5G networks, only intensified the trend away from old-style globalisation towards regional economic and technological complexes.

Fifth, Europe's marginalisation is most in evidence when it comes to strategic issues. In this context, there is no 'West' as such, and even the Atlantic security system is not an actor in its own right, and instead we have the enduring bipolar relationship between Moscow and Washington, with Beijing occasionally thrown in as a new factor. This is all the more concerning since the pandemic occurred against the background of the dismantling of the whole architecture of arms control built up in the years of the Cold War. Already the US had withdrawn from the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty in 2002, and then in 2019 the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty and in 2020 declared its withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty. This left Europe more vulnerable, since the INF treaty in the first place was designed to free the continent from the destabilising effects of medium-range cruise missiles, whose deployment in the early 1980s had provoked a massive peace movement. Today, the threat of the return of cruise missiles to the continent has elicited almost no mass public response, demonstrating how the civic sphere in the West is now more thoroughly permeated with a militaristic ethos than even during the Cold War. As the negotiations ground on over whether to renew the 2011 New Start treaty for a period after its expiry in February 2021, Putin in October 2021 offered a moratorium on the deployment of INF on European soil, and later offered deep verification measures (on-site inspections) regarding the Aegis Ashore systems equipped with MK 41 launchers at US and NATO bases in Europe, and the 9M729 missiles at Russian military facilities in the Kaliningrad region [44]. The issue would be at the top of incoming President Biden's to-do list.

The post-Cold War situation: the tide turns against Russia

How can we explain the impasse in which relations between Russia and the West find themselves, a deadlock which the pandemic failed to overcome. To understand this we need to examine how the impasse was created historically. In the interwar years Soviet Bolshevism was opposed by individual European countries and above all the US, but it was only after 1945 that the political West took shape and was given institutional form. This included the creation of NATO and what was to become the European Union in 1957. Together they make up the Atlantic power system, whose unity in the face of the Soviet threat became an obsessive concern, despite occasional break-outs from bloc discipline, as with Charles de Gaulle's France. The struggle to maintain this unity became if anything stronger after the end of the First Cold War in 1989. Overall, in the cold peace years between 1989 and 2014 the unity of the alliance held, despite the absence of a clearly defined enemy against which to unite. Russia has repeatedly been accused of trying to drive a 'wedge' between the two wings of the Atlantic alliance. Objectively a return to fluidity in European security matters would give Russia greater strategic and diplomatic room for manoeuvre by allowing a greater variety of bilateral ties, and would give individual greater leeway for their own diplomatic initiatives. Instead, bloc discipline was by and large maintained. However, as the Second Cold War intensified after

2014 some countries, like Turkey, which had long been on the brink of defecting, gained greater room for independent policy making. Russia has certainly tried to take advantage of this, and despite numerous points of tension, the Moscow-Ankara axis endures, reinforced by the sale of advanced air defence systems and the energy partnership.

At the same time, the Atlantic power system became radicalised by the triumphal discourse of the ‘end of history’. The contradiction between the new opportunities opened up by the end of the Cold War (the liminality of the historical situation), and the stasis in European security affairs (the absence of significant institutional and ideological innovation) was reflected in the radicalised global ambitions of the Atlantic power system. This was expressed in different ways by the various actors (the US, the EU and NATO), but together the spirit was expansive and exclusive, squandering the apparent victory at the end of the Cold War [2]. The Atlantic power system was rebranded as the liberal international order, international economic integration was now called globalisation, and US primacy was called liberal hegemony [37; 63]. There could effectively be no ‘outside’ to such a self-contained order, and the ontological status of the ‘other’ became problematic [46].

American regional hegemony took shape after 1945, but it was only after the end of the Cold War and the shift from bipolarity to a unipolar era that this regional order went global. With the rebranding of the Atlantic power system, a particular order made claims to a universalism that combined a justified sense that it had been the progenitor of a set of relationships and norms that were universally valid, and the rather more contentious claim that the power system in which these norms were embedded deserved primacy as a result. This universalism combined with the ideology of American exceptionalism to devastating effect. The claim of a particular order to be universal was rejected by the ‘anti-hegemonic’ powers, notably Russia and China, who insisted that the universal elements belonged to all of humanity rather than a specific power system [13]. Together they defended a model of world order based on sovereign, or conservative, internationalism. This conservative or traditionalist alternative was clearly articulated in domestic discourses and official strategies, but while it resonated with other independent states (notably India, Indonesia and other members of the Non-Aligned Movement), it made little headway as a critique of liberal order universalism.

In the context of Western support for anti-Russian forces in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, Jonathan Steele noted that ‘Ukraine has been turned into a geostrategic matter not by Moscow but by Washington, which refuses to abandon its Cold War policy of encircling Russia and seeking to pull every former Soviet Republics into its orbit’ [57]. In the US, the Democratic Party regrouped ‘along the most retrograde Cold War lines’ [31]. The assertion of American exceptionalism at home helped forge an enduring alliance between Clintonian Democrats and Republican neo-conservatives, and abroad it worked to advance American hegemonic aspirations. This is the context in which matters in 2014 reverted to accustomed Cold War patterns. Russia was once again identified as a hostile and threatening force, and was later joined by China as an adversary if not outright enemy. Russia’s resistance to the expansive universalism of the liberal order objectively turned it into a ‘revisionist’ power, to the degree that it sought to revise the post-Cold War order.

This was reflected in Trump’s impeachment hearings from autumn 2019. Ukraine from this perspective became the frontline in resistance to Russian aggression. The former National Security Council official Tim Morrison on the third day of the impeachment hearing on 19 November 2019 argued that ‘The United States aids Ukraine and her people so that they can fight Russia over there, and we don’t have to fight Russia over here’ [39]. The assertion was repeated by Adam Schiff, the chair of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, in his marathon opening statement in the Senate impeachment trial, arguing that ‘The Kremlin showed boldly in 2016 that with the malign skills it honed in Ukraine, they would not stay in Ukraine. Instead, Russia employed them here to attack our institutions, and they will do so

again'. In other words, Trump had to be impeached not because of constitutional infringements but because he was part of a Russian conspiracy to undermine US security, spread disinformation, undermine faith in US intelligence agencies and to 'remake the map of Europe by dint of military force' [31].

The US defined Russia as a revisionist power, ranked alongside the 'rogue powers of Iran and North Korea' and the 'transnational threat organisations, particularly jihadist groups' [40, p. 25]. In macro terms this reflects Russia's resistance to being incorporated, necessarily as a subaltern, in the expanding Atlantic power system. This is what provoked Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014, an act of insubordination that will shape European policy for a generation. However, in micro terms, this is a category mistake. Russia seeks to revise the European security order, not to destroy it. Russia is not a revisionist power but a neo-revisionist one, calling for changes to practices rather than to the international system as a whole. In that context, the conflict over Ukraine can only be resolved as part of a broader European security settlement. This was the view of the International Crisis Group when it argued that a sustainable peace in Ukraine 'will require a dialogue on European security and Russian relations with the West'. 'Efforts to make peace in Ukraine by solving problems specific to Ukraine only will fail, because the causes of the conflict are both local and geostrategic. A truly sustainable peace should address European security as a whole to make Russia, its neighbours and the entire continent safer'. It stressed that the war in Ukraine 'is also a war about European security' [23]. While convincing in theoretical terms and entirely laudable in normative terms, this approach does nothing to resolve the contradiction between macro and micro processes, between liminality and stasis.

The exceptionalist ideology was tested by 'forever wars' in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria until repudiated practically by Trump, and conceptually by the partisans of sovereign internationalism. The prospect of change opened up by the potential of 1989 is eroding the post-Cold War stasis, but at a glacial pace until, we may assume, a sudden spring thaw (or winter apocalypse) will sweep all before it. In the Soviet years the Kremlin believed that the 'correlation of forces' was moving ineluctably in favour of the USSR, until it became clear that the power disparity in all major indicators except strategic weapons was moving the other way. Today Moscow believes that the world is undergoing a new redistribution of power, with the historical West weakening as rising or re-emerging powers, notably China, challenged the old balance of power. The 'America century' is slowly dissolving, reinforcing old ideas about changes in the balance of power, but premature anticipations of American decline entail dangers of their own.

On the other side, Russian foreign policy in the post-communist era developed through four phases: from the eager embrace of the West in the early 1990s; to a rather more cautious period of 'competitive coexistence' in the late 1990s; moving on to Vladimir Putin's 'new realism' up to 2012, which sought to combine the previous two into a new synthesis of autonomy and integration; followed by the neo-revisionism that remains to this day [53; 55]. Despite his condemnation of the West's 'double standards' at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin maintained the new realism approach all the way up to his return to the presidency in 2012, although managed by Dmitry Medvedev between 2008 and 2012 [47]. Putin was one of the harshest critics of Western intervention in Libya in 2011, which he believed to be yet another example of the West's post-Cold War 'crusader' mentality leading to ill-considered and ultimately disastrous 'regime change' [15, p. 6]. Clearly, Putin was concerned that the regime change agenda would one day come knocking on the Kremlin's door [21]. More broadly, it appeared that liberalism needed an 'other' to demonstrate its own virtues [24]. As one commentator notes, 'Liberal democracy's ideological providence needs a righteous foe to sublimate its own internal contradictions' [18]. The other, of course, was at

first considered a temporary aberration until it became a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the liberal international order.

Neo-revisionism repudiates that postulate. It is a strategy that does not question the institutions of the international system as presently constituted, but it does challenge the perceived hegemonic practices of the Atlantic power system in the post-communist era [54]. These four periods in Russian foreign policy are *layered*, meaning that they represent not only chronological evolution, but also synchronic accumulation, reflecting the multifaceted character of the Russian polity itself. The latest phase of neo-revisionism is reinforced by a culturally conservative turn [48; 51]. This creates a tripartite structure to Russian foreign policy in which traditional imperatives about Russia’s geopolitical great power status and the political autonomy and security of the regime is now reinforced by ill-defined yet powerful civilisational concerns [12, p. 16]. Putin’s speech of 18 March 2014 defending the annexation of Crimea focused on problems of Russian identity rather than cultural liberalism [49; 29]. The theme of Russia as a state-civilisation fits in with broader discussions about the shift from nation-states to civilizational-states [62; 10].

This is one factor pushing Russia and China to align, although this comes with its own problems. Asked by the *Financial Times* whether he was placing too many eggs in the Chinese basket, Putin plaintively responded ‘We have sufficient eggs but there are not too many baskets to put those eggs in’ [3, p. 9]. This was sober recognition of Russia’s limited range of strategic options, reflecting the deeper impasse, which the pandemic did nothing to alleviate. In fact, in what was in effect Biden’s 2020 foreign policy election manifesto, the Democratic candidate took a hard line against Russia, threatening ‘to impose real costs on Russia for its violation of international norms’ [5, p. 73]. Biden also took a swipe at Putin’s comment on liberalism: ‘Putin wants to tell himself and anyone else he can dupe into believing him, that the liberal idea is “obsolete”. But he does so because he is afraid of its power’ [5, p. 76]. However, Putin’s critique joins those who argue that post-Cold War liberalism erodes its own cultural foundations [42; 43]. Russia’s hybrid political system reflects these ambiguities. Academic studies and polling data suggest that Russians remain committed to what could be styled old-fashioned liberalism: freedom of the press and expression, individual rights to property and personal freedoms, and the separation of business from the state [9; 20]. Liberalism as a model of state building, as practiced in the 1990s, is no longer the operative model and instead an activist state is used to stabilise social order and to maintain traditional values. The normative principles embedded in the constitutional state constrain the authoritarian impulses of the administrative regime, and neither is allowed to predominate. This duality is important when ‘dealing with the Russians’ [38].

Moscow was disappointed once, and it will probably be again. As in the Soviet period, authority in foreign policy cannot be derived from strategic and military parity alone, but requires the foundations of a dynamic economy and society. Instead, the stasis in post-Cold War international relations has helped create a profound stasis in Russian domestic affairs. Given the obvious asymmetry in power, the most that Moscow can hope for is recognition that it is a major power and hence it was in Washington’s interests to cooperate on issues of common concern. In the first instance this affects arms control issues, but also the management of global crisis situations, above all the war in Syria and other Middle Eastern conflicts. In practice, the trend in the historical West is in the other direction, with Moscow dismissed as an irrelevance when it is not condemned as a nuisance [41]. This is a recipe for continued confrontation.

Pandemic wars

Since 2014 a major ‘disinformation industry’ has developed, in which the alleged knights of truth end up purveying their own forms of disinformation. In fact, to use Gramsci’s distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals (the former act independently from structures of power, while the latter serve that power), so today there are plenty of commentators (journalists, academics and other specialists) who maintain the traditional ethics of responsibility and professionalism, whereas others play an ‘organic’ role in defending the Atlantic power system against challengers. The Ukrainian organisation Stop Fake and the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab are two elements in a dense infrastructure created to fight the disinformation war. They are designed to find incriminating material against Russia, and when it cannot be found, it is invented. This has little in common with the work of traditional intellectuals. They are an organic part of the propaganda war with Russia by presenting it as the source of disinformation, even when its ideas may be valid and reasonable. Instead, a narrow repertoire of standard formulations is applied across the board and with intense frequency, namely that Russian disinformation is out to undermine Transatlantic unity, Western democracy, and to sow division in society. It is particularly disturbing that established media, academic and think tank outlets take this material seriously, and in some cases major newspapers that pride themselves on fact-checking have fallen short of their own professional standards [22].

Instead of the common challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic bringing nations together, the war of hostile narratives was intensified. Even former president Barack Obama was drawn into the debate, tweeting that ‘Democracy depends on an informed citizenry and social cohesion. Here’s a look at how misinformation can spread through social media, and why it can hurt our ability to respond to crises’. He was referring to an article in the *New York Times* about Russian Covid-19 disinformation efforts. Dubbed an ‘infodemic’, Putin was accused of playing ‘a principal role in the spread of false information as part of his wider efforts to discredit the West and destroy his enemies from within’ [8]. In fact, the article was full of inaccuracies, quoted obscure troll accounts, and failed to consider the domestic sources of disinformation. The article represented ‘a laundry list of conspiracy theories blaming Russia and Putin personally for wanting to “discredit the West and destroy his enemies from within”’ [36]. The article was unable to produce a single anti-science quotation by Putin. Bellingcat, a UK-based investigative organisation, warned that analysis of Russian disinformation ‘often lacks sufficient context and nuance’, with the *NYT* article held up as an example of the way that comments on Russian or other sites are taken as representative of Russian state positions, and with a ‘little-read or obscure story’ cherry-picked and ‘transformed into something far louder and more dangerous’. Above all, the author noted ‘While it is easy to imagine that every word that is printed in Russian newspapers is personally reviewed by Putin and a small army at Roskomnadzor, similar to Stalin proofreading articles in Pravda before they went to publication, the media landscape in Russia is far from homogenous. A common mistake of disinformation reporting is to ascribe pro-Kremlin or Russian nationalist outlets to being the views of the Kremlin’ [59].

Obama fell into the classic trap of blaming external forces for internal dissension, implying that an ‘innocent democracy is being subverted by shadowy outside forces’. This allows ‘the problems of the US informational sphere’ to be framed as ‘a foreign disease – one that requires inoculation and informational distancing but little in the way of looking after your own health’. In fact, as the author of a perceptive analysis argues, ‘home grown disinformation is making democracy sicker than any foreign efforts can ... The same factors that promote healthy democracies also promote the spread of disinformation’. The problem cannot be framed as ‘democracy versus disinformation’, since ‘disinformation is woven into the very fabric of the system’. In Russia as well, where there ‘a relatively free media landscape’, Chinese-style methods of censorship are less feasible so the government has pioneered new methods of

‘narrative control’ [60]. Authoritarian systems benefit from the social atomisation and political disengagement produced by disinformation, and from this perspective putative Russian attempts to influence US politics should be seen ‘as a process rather than an event’. Above all, ‘trolling, strategic distraction, and disinformation is not something primarily done to the United States by external actors’, but comes primarily from domestic actors. This gives rise to the ‘democrat’s dilemma’, where attempts to check the disinformation that undermines the democratic discourse undermines the free debate that is essential to democracy [19].

NATO’s secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg accused Russia and China of spreading disinformation about the alliance’s response to the pandemic. He asserted that they were trying ‘to undermine the cohesion of NATO allies’ by portraying the alliance as unable to protect elderly people or providing medical support and supplies. In fact, Stoltenberg insisted, ‘That’s exactly what we do’ [25]. Meanwhile, the EU identified a ‘trilateral convergence of disinformation narratives’ being promoted by China, Iran and Russia. They were charged with a coordinated campaign for sanctions against Iran to be lifted, claiming that they undermined the country’s humanitarian and medical response to Covid-19. The document, dated 20 April, was prepared by the Strategic Communications and Analysis division (colloquially known as EUvsDisinfo) of the European External Action Service [26]. This was a follow-up report to one issued on 1 April asserting that state and state-backed actors ‘seek to exploit the public health crisis to advance geopolitical interests, often by directly challenging the credibility of the European Union and its partners’. The campaign posed a danger of public health and effective crisis communication. The report examined various stories trending on Russian social media, including the story that the ‘coronavirus is a biological weapon’, that it did not originate in Wuhan but in an American laboratory, that it was linked to 5G, and that the EU had failed ‘to provide urgent support to its Member States – instead, they have to rely on external support (e.g., Italy), with China mentioned most often as the source of such assistance’ [11].

Instead of coordinated and cooperative work to overcome the pandemic and its far-ranging effects, there was a battle of ‘coronavirus narratives’. In the case of EUvsDisinfo this is understandable, since it was under-written by the EU’s stamp of authority, and hence the material was used in numerous press articles. In the end, this only discredited the EU and reinforced the view of its critics that it is an organic part of the US-led Atlantic power system, and was not even able to establish a regime of traditional truth and professionalism in its own workings.

These narratives include the view that ‘China can never be trusted’, because of its mishandling of the early stages of the crisis and possible cover-up of the true scale of infections and deaths, that ‘it’s all Trump’s fault’, with his gross mismanagement of the US response, all the way through to the neo-socialist idea that socialised health systems and statism in general were more effective in responding than neoliberal market-centred strategies [27]. Certainly, China sought to manage the narrative, stressing how it had practiced solidarity with other countries by providing aid, highlighting the importance of international unity in face of the pandemic (in keeping with its broader concept of a ‘community of shared future for mankind’, in which China is presented as responsible global actor), emphasising China’s success in dealing with pandemic thanks to its technological prowess and social achievements, and challenging criticism of China’s response to the crisis and even that in some way it had incubated the virus in a laboratory in Wuhan or had allowed phyto-sanitary standards to slip in its wet markets [17, p. 37].

The pandemic: opportunity, risk and stasis

The global crisis provoked by the coronavirus pandemic provided an opportunity for Moscow to re-engage with Washington [61]. As so often in the past, a common challenge opens the door

to co-operation between states. This was most spectacularly the case in the Second World War, but also more recently after the 11 September 2001 Al-Qaeda attack on America, when Putin immediately offered assistance and support for anti-terrorist operations. In August 2013, in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria the two countries oversaw the destruction of Syria's resources in this field. In September 2015, faced with the onslaught from so-called Islamic State (Daesh), Putin at the UN offered a new alliance against the common enemy, an offer that was rejected [50]. As the coronavirus pandemic intensified, on 25 April 2020 the White House and the Kremlin simultaneously updated their websites to present a joint statement by the two presidents on 'Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Meeting on the Elbe'. It recalled the moment when the Soviet 5th Guards Army commanded by General Alexei Zhadov and the US First Army of General Courtenay Hodges met in Germany a fortnight before their common victory over the Nazis. However, the 'spirit of the Elbe' could do little to thaw the entrenched confrontation, even when both countries faced one of the biggest crises since the Second World War. In other words, the pandemic represented a crisis and a risk, and although some trends in international affairs were accelerated, the fundamental factor was stasis. There appeared to be no way out of the impasse.

Nevertheless, there were some signs of cooperation. As the pandemic intensified in spring 2020 against the background of a plunge in oil prices, Trump and Putin communicated more in a few weeks than they had done in the previous three years of Trump's presidency. Some opportunities were taken, but overall there was no breakthrough. On the one side, the US since 2012 intensified the sanctions regime in the belief that this would modify Russia's behaviour. This was just as fanciful as the belief that personal engagement with Trump would change the stance of the vast military establishment vis-à-vis Russia. On some issues there was cooperation, as with the Opec+ agreement in April 2020 to stabilise the oil price through production cuts. For Trump this was a way of bolstering the price to save shale oil producers, who faced financial ruin as a result of the collapse of prices provoked by oversupply and the drastic fall in demand caused by the pandemic. This allowed Russia to emerge as part of a new 'energy troika' with the US and Saudi Arabia, but this did not insulate Russia from facing budgetary challenges as a result of the oil price collapse and the increased demands of propping up an economy damaged by the pandemic. At the same time, as noted, the New Start strategic nuclear treaty was due to expire in February 2021, and one of the US demands was for future arms control agreements to include China. This was one of the items on the agenda for the mooted summit meeting in September 2020 of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the 'P5 process'), proposed by Putin earlier that year but in the event shelved because of the pandemic.

Trump's long-term strategic goal had been to drive a wedge between Russia and China. Washington increasingly saw China as its most serious long-term rival, accompanied by an increased awareness of possible vulnerabilities created by dependence on Chinese manufacturing and technology. This is why Trump launched a trade war against China in 2018, and why Washington banned the use of Huawei technology in 5G installations, and tried to convince its allies that use of Chinese technology in this field represented a first order security risk. The intensifying Sino-US rivalry reflected the global shift towards Sino-American bipolarity. Despite American blandishments, Russia was certainly not going to renege on its commitment to China, and in fact the relationship intensified. Given the sanctions on technology transfer and perceived security risks from the West, Russia's 5G development was largely driven by Chinese technology. The energy relationship deepened with the opening of the Power of Siberia pipeline in December 2019, and there was now renewed talk of a second gas pipeline.

With the intensification of Sino-American rivalry, Russia faced the challenge of maintaining 'equilibrium – not equidistance – between the United States and China' [61].

Russia denies that a new bipolarity is in the making, and instead believes that the shift remains towards multipolarity. The two models are not mutually exclusive, and elements of both are emerging. Multipolarity ensures that Russia, India, Brazil and other countries continue to exercise great power prerogatives. At the same time, the character of US hegemony is changing. The traditional Cold War model had been US leadership working through multilateral institutions and a ramified alliance system, as well as more broadly through managing a liberal international order committed to a relatively constrained agenda of free trade, the free flow of capital and services, territorial integrity, and the use of force limited to self-defence and against communist subversion. In the post-Cold War years, flushed with the sense of triumph against the Soviet adversary, this agenda radicalised. The Atlantic power system (NATO and the EU) enlarged to Russia's borders, while the merger of liberal internationalism and neo-conservative exceptionalism inspired a new agenda of democracy promotion, regime change and universal jurisdiction of American norms. Trump's election inaugurated a third post-war phase, which not only repudiated the expanded post-Cold War nation building agenda but also some of the core principles of the original liberal international order. It did not, however, repudiate American primacy.

For a brief period it looked as if Russia could become a natural ally for an America focused on its great power interests and mercantilist concerns. Instead, the 'Russiagate' scandal, driven by the charge of collusion with Russia in the 2016 US presidential election, limited Trump's room for manoeuvre [56]. Russiagate allowed the traditional Cold War concerns of the military-security establishment to block Trump's attempts to break out of that paradigm. Any mainstream Democratic president would return America to the classic postulates of the Cold War liberal international order, and most likely also to elements of the radicalised post-Cold War version. In that context, there could be no fundamental rapprochement between the US and Russia. A limited new 'reset', like the original one launched by President Barack Obama in 2009, is possible, focusing on strategic arms issues, but this is unlikely to broaden out into anything deeper. With Congress the gatekeeper on sanctions, economic, financial and technological pressure will continue and possibly intensify. The room for manoeuvre of Russian foreign policy is remarkably limited.

There was not much greater scope for initiative in Europe either. The rise of national populist forces was welcomed in Moscow to the degree that this offered a path out of the impasse, but while the populist insurgency has the potential to cause disruption, its ability to change the direction of EU policy is limited [16]. This would require a rethink of the EU's policy towards Russia, and in general, a much stronger drive for genuine 'strategic autonomy' beyond the constraints of the Atlantic power system [14]. Although some individual EU countries call for reflection [35], stasis predominates here as well. Governed by Federica Mogherini's 'five principles', the sanctions imposed in 2014 are renewed every six months, amid fears that engagement would undermine European unity. Despite some moves towards 'strategic autonomy' European security is ultimately decided elsewhere. The renewed confrontation in Europe continued as if there was no pandemic. On 4 May 2020 four US navy ships and a Royal Navy frigate entered the Barents Sea North of Norway to conduct what the Pentagon called 'Arctic security operations'. This is the first time that US surface vessels had entered the area since the mid-1980s [52]. At the same time, some NATO military exercises were scaled down, but they nevertheless continued. A new iron curtain was taking shape across Europe.

Conclusion

The pandemic of 2020 had enormous epidemiological, welfare, social and economic consequences, but ultimately it did not have an immediate impact on the conduct of

international affairs. The neo-revisionist trend in Russian foreign policy has been confirmed, reinforced by the long-term shift away from the expansive liberal internationalism pursued in the early years of independence towards sovereign or conservative internationalism. This type of policy is redolent of nineteenth century practices, and hence it is hardly surprising that the Russian elite today defend a nineteenth century type of liberalism. This understandably puts Russia at odds with the radicalised post-Cold War universalism advanced by the Atlantic power system, and even more against the expansive exceptionalism advanced by the US. In conditions of entrenched stasis Russia moved towards alignment with China, creating an incipient new type of bipolarism. However, Russia has not repudiated its commitment to its long-term vision of multipolarity, enunciated in particular by Yevgeny Primakov in the competitive coexistence phase of Russian foreign policy in the second half of the 1990s. To this end Russia affirms its civilisational specificity and seeks to maintain its autonomy as a centre of regional and global power. Relations with the component parts of the Atlantic power system remain strained, and because of the intensification of information warfare, the impasse has in fact deepened. The shock effect of the pandemic was not strong enough to undermine the foundations of the stasis in international affairs, and in practice only deepened divisions and great power alienation along the East-West divide. There is no clear exit route out of the impasse.

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