

THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN POLICY

These lines are written not by a Russia 'expert' but by an historian of European geopolitics who has noted some recurring patterns.

Russia perceives the West as a threat in two ways. First, as a territorial and military challenge. She has repeatedly been invaded from that side over the past 300 years: by Sweden, France, Poland and Germany. This has led her to think of her security in terms of buffers and a territorial glacis so extensively as to make her an aggressively annexationist power herself. Throughout the past 400 years, Russia advanced relentlessly westwards, absorbing swathes of the Baltic, Poland, Germany, Romania and other states. This trend was only reversed after 1991, and has revived again in recent times. Moreover, unlike the West, which sees the stability and prosperity of her neighbourhood as the key to her security, Russia feels safer the more it can make the areas bordering her unsafe and unstable. This means that the security of Russia can only be achieved, in the Kremlin's mind, through the insecurity of others, either by taking territory from them or preventing them from settling down. It is a zero-sum game.

Secondly, Russia fears the West as an ideological challenge to her form of politics: universal and open, as opposed to national and closed. The Tsarist regime worried after the Napoleonic Wars that returning Russian soldiers would bring the contamination of western ideas with them. Stalin feared the same after the Second World War. Today, Putin is concerned about the infiltration of ideas not so much through western NGOs, which he now has largely under control, but across borders from the eastern-most members of the European Union, and the lands between, especially Ukraine. The one thing he cannot risk is a repeat of the Polish experience, after which that country went from having a standard of living roughly comparable to that of the Ukraine to a multiple of that today. If Ukraine were to progress in a similar fashion after joining the EU, then the population of Russia proper would start asking him awkward questions.

It is against this background that Putin's grand strategy should be understood today. He is not, as his biographer Masha Gessen suggests, simply an opportunist – though he will exploit Western weakness quickly once identified. Nor is Mr Putin just nostalgic for the Soviet Union. Putin's aim instead is to give Russia the critical mass it needs to survive in the global great power contest. In October 2011 he announced the launch of a new “many-tiered, multi-speed integration project in the post-Soviet space”, primarily designed to bring Ukraine more closely into his orbit. Mr Putin's objective is nothing less than the creation of what he calls “a higher level of integration – a Eurasian Union”, a “powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world” alongside the EU, China and the United States. What he is driving at, in short, is not the reconstitution of the Soviet Union, still less world hegemony, but a Russian-dominated Eurasian commonwealth which would give him some kind of global parity with the other world ‘poles’.

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The execution of this policy has involved the destabilisation of neighbouring states, to keep them weak, remind them of their weakness, and if possible to draw them back into the Russian orbit. Its modus operandi reminds one of the old Bolsheviks. “When a man sticks in a bayonet and strikes mush, he keeps pushing”, Lenin once remarked approvingly, “but if he hits cold steel, he pulls back”. His successor Nikita Kruschchev was fond of repeating this remark, as he tested the West in Berlin, Cuba and elsewhere during the Cold War. For some years now the Russian leader, and former communist secret service agent, Vladimir Putin has also been sticking in the bayonet and, so far, he has only encountered mush. In 2007 he was behind a ‘cyber attack’ on the Baltic Republic of Estonia. A year later he invaded the sovereign state of Georgia, handed out Russian passports and effectively annexed the territory of South Ossetia. Most recently, he has invaded the sovereign state of Ukraine, annexing Crimea and supporting separatists in the eastern part of the country. At every stage, Mr Putin has proceeded carefully, using hooded ‘deniable’ units in the Crimea, only throwing off the mask, and proceeding to full annexation, when he thought it was safe to do so.

Russia's gamble succeeded largely because the West was slow and weak, but also because it was confused. The public, and even well-informed observers, were temporarily disorientated by Russian propaganda that the Ukrainian revolution was dominated by ‘fascists’ and that intervention was necessary



Familiar ground: British Army Challenger 2 main battle tanks form up on the Polish landscape for the start of Exercise Black Eagle in 2014. The author of this paper argues that such armour should be deployed in Poland today as a deterrent to Putin's Russia.

to rescue the Russian population from them. Mr Putin spoke of “reactionary, nationalist and anti-semitic forces going on the rampage in certain parts of the Ukraine, including Kiev”. There was, in fact, never any serious threat against Ukrainian Jews, the Russian population or any other minority group. But by the time the truth was clear, it was too late to do anything about it.

At the same time, and without any sense of contradiction, Russia has opened a new political front within Europe by supporting the far right against the liberal European Union. She champions their hostility to globalisation, universalism, humanitarian intervention, immigration and much else as part of a global resistance against a western hegemonic project. Moscow specifically invited representatives of European far-right parties, including the French National Front and the Austrian Freedom Party, to observe the recent referendum in the Crimea, hardly the actions of a government concerned about ‘extremism’. There are now governments, for example in Hungary and Greece, which openly sympathise with Putin and his challenge to the European Union. The result is that there is a substantial ‘fifth column’ in western and central Europe which weakens our response to Russian aggression.

Since then, the West has woken up to the threat of ‘hybrid warfare’. “It’s not just the old Fulda gap, for those who remember the Cold War issue of tanks crossing over,” US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter said recently, “it’s the little green men phenomenon as well. This is a new playbook.” Across the continent, the phenomenon is being analysed in conferences and staff colleges. New structures are being devised to cope with it.

Herein, however, lies the danger. We may neglect conventional defence and deterrence. The decisive factor over the past

few years has not been the strength of ‘hybrid warfare’, or any Russian overall military advantage, but the absence of western forces on the spot and in particular the lack of a credible threat to use them. Moscow could have been stopped by early action. If Mr Putin had been deterred from attacking Georgia, or put under such intense political, economic and military pressure as to force him to withdraw, then he would never have dared occupy Crimea. If the Americans, who must have seen the build-up on their satellites, had deployed naval forces to the Black Sea just before or immediately after the Russian incursion, while it was still being conducted at arm’s length by Moscow, Putin’s men could have been overpowered, probably without the use of firearms, and he would probably have disavowed them. He would then never have attacked eastern Ukraine. A similar confrontation at Pristina airport in 1999 at the end of the Kosovo crisis saw NATO intervention to prevent reinforcements from reaching the Russian advance guard and a compromise solution. Failure to respond robustly in the early stages of this crisis, by contrast, has emboldened Mr Putin and led to a crisis which has far from run its course.

The current danger is not that Russia will use hybrid warfare to take over the Baltic states – we are wise to that. It is that she will use the advantages of surprise with massive conventional force to present us with a fait accompli to which we cannot respond without embarking on an unacceptable escalation. We will have failed not because Moscow has bamboozled us with ‘measures short of war’ but because we have failed a Cold War-style test of deterrence. In that sense we must hold on to the old playbook, and quite a lot of the old equipment too. The UK contribution here should be twofold. First, to recognise that Europe is the most important area of national security and that Russia constitutes the most serious challenge there. Secondly, to act on this realisation with the dispatch of substantial ground forces, including armour, to Poland and the Baltic states.

