Between Aspiration and Reality: Russia in the World (Dis)order

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Abstract

The world has rarely seemed more disorderly than it is today. But in this anarchic environment some things never change. Putin's foreign policy is centred on the idea that Russia was, is and always will be a great power, playing a leading role in world affairs. This conviction rests on several pillars: the exercise of sovereign power, civilizational messianism, identification with the Global South, and an enduring sense of grievance and insecurity.

Putin's great power ambitions face considerable constraints. The war in Ukraine has exposed the weaknesses of Russia's much-vaunted military might, and killed off lingering hopes of being a geopolitical balancer between the United States and China. Economic ties with Europe have suffered enormous damage. Strategic dependence on China has grown significantly. And Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet space has been eroded.

Nevertheless, it would be premature to write off Russia's prospects. It is a diminished power, but the shortcomings of others may open up opportunities to restore its position and influence. Putin is counting on a growing « Ukraine-fatigue » in the West, and a Trump victory in the 2024 US presidential election could be a game-changer. Any dilution in Western support for Ukraine would boost Russia's strategic prospects. And attempts to accommodate Putin only encourage his aggressive inclinations.

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Introduction

The world has rarely seemed more turbulent or fluid than it is today. Old certainties appear increasingly tenuous, while new "truths" have yet to emerge with any clarity. Western leaders speak insistently about a "rules-based international order", but, as the war in Ukraine and the Gaza conflict have shown, there is little consensus on what the rules are and who should make them. What passes for order is more akin to disorder, characterized by the rejection of Western moral leadership, a general breakdown of international norms, the diminished authority of the great powers, a crisis of multilateral institutions, and the convergence of multiple threats and challenges, from climate change to geopolitical confrontation.[1]

This essay is about Russia's quest to position itself at the heart of this disorderly world. It seeks to answer five main questions. First, *how does Russia see the current international context*? Putin and other senior figures question the legitimacy of the US-led post-Cold War order, and advocate a multipolar or "polycentric" system. But it is less clear what Moscow understands by this. Does it aim to create a new world order or is it more interested in reverting to past schemes—either a revised "Concert" of great powers or a version of the bipolar world that pits the rest against the West?

Second, *where and how does Russia fit within the contemporary political environment*? That Putin and the ruling elite see Russia as a great power is self-evident. But what kind of power and driven by what principles and goals? Russian foreign policy combines public self-confidence and civilizational messianism with insecurities of various kinds. Is there a coherent understanding of Russia's place in the world, or rather a jumble of interests, instincts and emotions?

Third, *how does Russian foreign policy thinking translate into practice*? To what extent does Putin's world-view influence his decision-making in, say, the post-Soviet space and towards America or China? This, in turn, raises a broader question about the relative influence of ideology *versus* interests in Russian foreign policy.

Fourth, *what are Russia's prospects*? There is a striking contrast between the declinist prognoses of many Western (and some Russian)

1. A. Tooze, "Welcome to the World of the Polycrisis", *Financial Times*, October 28, 2022, available at: www.ft.com.

observers, and the Kremlin's bullishness. One important area of debate concerns the "Ukraine effect". Does the war signal the long-term degradation of Russia's influence in the international arena, or is it simply a temporary hiatus following which Russia will re-assert itself as a leading global player?

Finally, *what are the implications for Western policymaking*? Much will depend not just on Russian actions, but also developments elsewhere—the rise of China, a newly assertive "Global South", the impact of climate change, and politics in the United States. Over the past three decades, Western policy towards Russia has fluctuated between complacency and alarmism. But in a world that faces an unprecedented range of threats and challenges, such dysfunctionality looks increasingly affordable.

The Kremlin's World-View

Russian perceptions of international order are overwhelmingly America-centric. Although partnership with China has become Moscow's most valuable bilateral relationship, the United States remains its primary external point of reference. Unsurprisingly, then, as relations with Washington have deteriorated, the Kremlin has come to view international order mainly in terms of negation—less about what it should look like than on what it must *not* be.

The Kremlin denies the existence of a single "rules-based international order", as propagated by Washington and other Western capitals. This purported order is seen as illegitimate and impractical, and its rules as anything but universal. The "rules-based international order" is identified with the US-led liberal international order and, more concretely, with the Western alliance. It is also regarded as anachronistic. According to Putin, "the world is becoming increasingly diverse, and its complex processes can no longer be maintained with simple governance methods, painting everyone with the same brush".[2]

Viewed from Moscow, the natural alternative to the Western liberal order is the "multipolar order" or "polycentric system". Importantly, though, Moscow does not believe this has yet come into being. At the 2023 UN General Assembly, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov complained that the West was "doing everything [...] to prevent the formation of a truly multipolar and fairer world order".[3] In short, the international system is in transition; the old Western-led version of order is on the way out, but has yet to be replaced. The process—and struggle—is ongoing. Not only are there no agreed rules, but there is little if any order. In this environment, power is key: those who possess it get to the make the "rules"; those who do not must adapt as best they can.

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2. V. Putin, "Intervention in the Plenary Session of the 20th Anniversary Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, October 5, 2023, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru.

3. S. Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergej Lavrov's Statement at the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly", The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, New York, September 23, 2023, available at: https://mid.ru.

It is less clear whether Russia is looking to build a new world order or, rather, to return to old schemes such as a Concert of great powers or a world of bipolar confrontation (and accommodation). The signs are mixed. On the one hand, Moscow speaks of the "democratization" of international relations, partly as an intrinsic good, and partly because it arises logically out of the diffusion of power away from the West to the non-West.[4] International institutions should be reformed so that they are more representative and better able to address issues such as debt relief and the unhealthy dominance of the dollar.[5]

On the other hand, the evidence suggests that the "democratization" envisaged by Moscow is circumscribed, and refers mainly to the devolution of international authority away from the United States to a select group of great powers, including Russia. On the occasion of the 75th UN General Assembly in September 2020, Putin floated the idea of a G-5 summit based on the five permanent members (P-5) of the Security Council. This would "aim at reaffirming the key principles of behaviour in international affairs, elaborating ways to effectively address today's most burning issues".[6] In other words, the great powers—the P-5—would co-manage the world.

Since then, Russia-West relations have plumbed new depths. With no early prospect of great power accommodation, Putin's G-5 idea appears dead in the water. Yet its underlying premise lives on in the Kremlin: the international context is shaped, for better or worse, by the interactions between the great powers. With the war in Ukraine raging on, the dominant reality is the confrontation between the United States (and its allies) and the leading non-Western powers, China and Russia. And even if this should abate, it will be the great powers—or "civilization-states"—that will continue to determine the international order.

4. "Perhaps for the first time since 1945, when the United Nations was established, there is now a chance for genuine democratization of global affairs". *Ibid.*
5. V. Putin, "Adress to the Plenary Session of the 20th Anniversary Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", *op. cit.*; also "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", approved by Presidential Executive Order No. 229, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, available at: https://mid.ru.
6 V. Putin, "Putin's Virtual Address to the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly", Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, September 22, 2020, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru.

Russia's Place in the International System

Russian foreign policy is founded on the idea that Russia was, is and always will be a great power, playing a leading role in world affairs. Crucially, this principle transcends material and political circumstances. In the 1990s, when the economy was crashing and the new democratic Russia's international influence was in freefall, President Boris Yeltsin nevertheless remained strongly committed to a great power and imperial vision.[7]

Putin's approach to "great powerness" (*deržavnost'*) differs from Yeltsin's in important respects, notably in its more aggressive character and the context in which it operates. Yet in asserting a global mission for Russia, he is following in the footsteps of his predecessor. Under Putin, as under Yeltsin, the core assumption is that Russia's natural state is that of a global great power. Anything else is an aberration, more often than not a result of Western perfidy.

The case for Russia's central place in the international system rests on several "pillars": the exercise of sovereign power; a sense of civilizational mission bordering on the mystical; a self-appointed role as defender of the weak; and feelings of insecurity, grievance and victimhood. These pillars are mutually reinforcing, and are largely independent of external factors. It is a particular Western conceit to imagine that more sympathetic policies towards Moscow in the 1990s might have brought about a "normal" Russia—democratic, liberal, and post-imperialist. But historically Russian political elites, including those of a more liberal persuasion, have understood normality as Russia fulfilling its great power destiny.[8]

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7. "I ask you one thing. Just give Europe to Russia. You can take all the other states [...] I will take Europe and provide them security [...] We have the power in Russia to protect all of Europe", remarks by Boris Yeltsin to US President Bill Clinton. See "Memorandum of Conversation: Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin", *National Security Archive*, Istanbul, November 19, 1999, available at: https://nsarchive.gwu.edu.
8. Yeltsin's first foreign minister, the arch-liberal Andrej Kozyrev, argued back in 1994 that "Russia is predestined to be a great power". See A. Kozyrev, "The lagging partnership", *Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 1994, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

Power

The most critical element of Russian self-perceptions of "greatness" is the ability to wield power. Western policymakers tend to focus on Russia's failings: its moribund political system, an excessive dependence on natural resources, the emasculation of civil society. They highlight its weak soft power and low level of international popularity. But little of this matters to the Kremlin. On the contrary, what many in the West identify as weaknesses, the Putin regime views as strengths. Russia's political system has allowed Putin to dominate like no other leader since Stalin (and for almost as long). Global dependence on Russian energy and other natural resource exports have ensured a highly resilient economy even in the face of Western sanctions. International politics is not a popularity contest, but an arena where the aim is to achieve one's goals, however irksome to others. If we put the question in a different way—has the Kremlin been able to realize the objectives it has set itself—then it has proved surprisingly successful over the years.[9]

There is a strong sense of empowerment and indeed impunity within the Putin elite—that whatever happens Russia will remain one of the centres of global power, pursuing an "independent and multi-vector foreign policy".[10] It retains the world's biggest nuclear arsenal, conventional military capabilities ranked second after the United States, and a huge military-industrial complex.[11] Its economy, measured by purchasing power parity (PPP), is the sixth largest in the world.[12] Its vast geographical extent affords it a multi-continental reach as well as strategic depth. It is a member of the UN P-5. And it enjoys a level of sovereignty exceeded only by the United States and China. As Putin has said, "there is no situation imaginable today where something would threaten Russian statehood and the existence of the Russian state".[13]

This sense of impunity helps explain Putin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. He acted in the belief that not only would the "special military operation" end quickly

9 Kathryn Stoner describes Russia as a "good enough" power. See K. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021.

10. V. Putin, "Adress to the Plenary Session of the 20th Anniversary Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", *op. cit.*

11. Global Firepower, 2023 Military Strength Ranking [accessed 28 December 2023], 2023 Military Strength Ranking, available at: www.globalfirepower.com.

12. "Real GDP (purchasing power parity)", The World Factbook, CIA [accessed 23 November 2023], available at: www.cia.gov.

13. V. Putin, "Adress to the Plenary Session of the 20th Anniversary Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", *op. cit.*

in a decisive victory, but also that the inevitable adverse Western reaction would be manageable—as in the case of the 2014 annexation of Crimea. As it turned out, he badly underestimated the determination and capacity of the Ukrainians to defend their sovereignty, and overestimated Russia's military capabilities. But his political calculation that Russia could ride out Western sanctions and other retaliatory measures has since been reinforced. In the Kremlin's narrative, the West has tried almost everything to defeat Russia, and it has failed. The lesson Putin has drawn from the Ukraine war is that if Russia stays resolute, it will prevail.

Putin has looked to translate Russian power into concrete influence in various ways. Prior to the sharp deterioration of relations with the West following the annexation of Crimea, he harboured hopes of positioning Russia as the balancer or pivot between the United States and China, and between East and West.[14] Subsequently, as this vision became increasingly unattainable, he reverted to a Cold War paradigm. As Alexander Gabuev puts it, "only by controlling more territory, confronting the West, and opposing Western security alliances, Moscow has decided, can it assert its power in the world".[15] Putin has also attempted to position Russia as a leader of the Global South, protector of the weak against a rapacious and imperialist West (see below).

The common denominator across these different visions is that Russia will play a central role in the world, regardless of what kind of international order materializes—bipolar, multipolar, UN-based or "democratized". In other words, the external context matters less than the internal imperative that Russia should behave as a global power. That means strengthening its sovereignty in key dimensions—technology, defence and security, the economy and finance. It means preserving strategic stability and autonomy vis-à-vis the United States. And it means exercising its power without fear of giving offence or worrying about breaching rules made (and broken) by others.

Identity and Civilization

In Putin's world-view, Russia is not only a great power, it is also one of the principal centres of global civilization. It is tempting to dismiss this as a cynical device to legitimize authoritarian rule at home and

14. See D. Trenin, "How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in a Post-pandemic World", *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 1, 2020, available at: https://carnegiemoscow.org.
15. A. Gabuev, "The Russia That Might Have Been; How Moscow Squandered Its Power and Influence", *Foreign Affairs*, March 13, 2023, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com

imperialist behaviour in the post-Soviet space. But there is more to it than that. The persistence and intensity with which the Putin regime emphasizes "traditional spiritual and moral values" and criticizes "destructive neoliberal ideological attitudes" suggests that it sees Russia as a modern-day "defender of the faith" against the polluting influence of the West.[16]

This clash of ideas and value-systems is intermingled with geopolitical confrontation. It also highlights the fusion of domestic and foreign policy. Putin not only views the United States as hostile, but regards Western liberalism itself as the "main enemy", one that threatens the fabric of Russian society.[17] There are parallels here with Tsar Nicholas I (1825-55) and his credo of autocracy (*samoderžavie*), Orthodoxy (*pravoslavie*) and nation-mindedness (*narodnost*).[18] Putin, like Nicholas I, has presided over the suppression of liberal ideas; the Russian Orthodox Church has become integral to the regime's legitimacy; and national-patriotic ideas imbue virtually every aspect of Russian domestic and foreign policy. The war in Ukraine has accentuated these elements, but they were already evident more than a decade ago.

Civilizational motifs provide an ideational basis for Russian imperialism. The war in Ukraine is rationalized in terms of "defending our traditions, our culture and our people".[19] But Putin's ambitions extend well beyond the gathering of "Russian lands" and consolidation of the Slavic heartland. He promotes Russia as an indivisible "civilization-state" on a par with (if not better than) the West, China, India and the Islamic world. For him, the Russian world is of a "global nature" and "has no borders". While this does not necessarily imply territorial designs, it conveys the message that Russia alone will decide what rules and limits to observe. The idea of a civilization-state "reflects how we understand not only our own development, but also the main principles of international order". It rejects (a US-led and Western-dominated) "uniformity", and instead affirms that "each state and society strives

16. "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", approved by Presidential Executive Order No. 229, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*
17. Ivan Kurílla sees the rhetoric of traditional values as critical to the Putin regime's efforts "to present Russia as the absolute opposite of the US liberal empire". See I. Kurilla, "Mutual Images of Russia and America as Part of Their Domestic Culture Wars", *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 274, November 24, 2021, p. 6, available at: www.ssoar.info.
18 A. Kolesnikov, "The End of the Russian Idea: What It Will Take to Break Putinism's Grip", *Foreign Affairs*, August 22, 2023, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.
19. V. Putin, "Adress to the Plenary Session of the 20th Anniversary Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", *op. cit.*

to develop its own path of development which is rooted in culture and traditions, and is steeped in geography and historical experiences".[20]

Protector of the Weak

Putin has ratcheted up efforts to portray Russia as defender of the downtrodden. The Kremlin buffs up Russia's anti-imperial credentials, both to counter charges that it is pursuing an imperialist war against Ukraine, and to undermine the moral high ground assumed by the leading Western powers. It is also guided by historical precedent—the USSR's support for Third World liberation movements during the Cold War. Today, it claims, Russia stands on the side of the oppressed peoples of the world—in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Far from being isolated, it is aligned with them in resisting the "yoke" of the US-led "rules-based international order".[21]

This narrative is more about prophylaxis than active power projection. The Kremlin is betting that the best way to neutralize Western opposition to Russian foreign policy goals is to work with as many parties as possible in building a kind of anti-Western consensus. For this to emerge, it is less important that Global South countries should specifically support Russia than that they should resist Western efforts to force them to pick a side, whether it is over Ukraine or in the Middle East or on global order more generally. Moscow's pitch to the Global South is simple: unlike the West, we demand nothing of you, and do not seek to impose our norms and values on others. Like you, we believe in an international order that gives due weight to the interests, and growing importance, of non-Western countries.[22]

Insecurity, Grievance and Victimhood

Insecurity has been a pervasive theme of Russia's historical experience, so it is hardly surprising that Putin should belabour it in his public pronouncements. He has emphasized, in particular, the notion that the United States is out to "get" Russia. According to the latest (2023) Foreign Policy Concept, Washington is "the main

20. *Ibid*.
21. S. Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Statement at the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly", *op. cit*.
22. See S. Karaganov, A. Kramarenko, and D. Trenin, "Russia's Policy Towards World Majority", Moscow, National Research University–Higher School of Economics, 2023, p. 5, available at: www.mid.ru.

inspirer, organizer and executor of the aggressive anti-Russia policy of the collective West, the source of major risks to the security of the Russian Federation", as well as to "international peace" and the "balanced, equitable and progressive development of humanity".[23]

True to this line, the United States stands accused of using the conflict in Ukraine as a pretext to escalate its anti-Russia policy, seeking to weaken Russia "in every possible way".[24] The threat it poses is multi-dimensional, encompassing "hard" security (through military support for Ukraine and the enlargement of NATO), economic pressure (the attempt to constrain Russia's growth), and civilizational (the threat of moral and spiritual contagion).

We should distinguish between sincere feelings of insecurity and the exploitation of insecurity and victimhood for ulterior purposes. The Kremlin views the international environment—and the West specifically—as the source of real dangers. At the same time, threats are instrumentalized in order to justify and strengthen authoritarian control.

The threat is also less physical than geopolitical and psychological. Putin has admitted that there is no external threat to the existence of the Russian state (see above). Rather, the insecurity felt by the Putin elite arises principally from the fear that Russia might be sidelined from international decision-making. Other governments, non-Western as well as Western, would pay less heed to Russian interests, particularly in its post-Soviet neighbourhood. This matters not just in terms of geopolitical weight and economic influence, but also for national self-perceptions and domestic political stability. The mutiny of Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023 magnified Kremlin insecurities, highlighting the nexus between foreign policy and domestic politics.

23. "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", approved by Presidential Executive Order No. 229, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*
24. *Ibid.*

The Practice of Russian Foreign Policy

Ideas and intentions are obviously important, but how do they translate into actual foreign policy? Putin may envisage Russia as a global power in a multipolar world, but this vision faces considerable obstacles. The war in Ukraine, for example, has killed off any possibility of Russia acting as a geopolitical balancer between the United States and China. It has also accentuated Russia's reliance on China, thereby limiting its capacity to be an independent centre of global power.

It is difficult to determine how far ideology—such as Putin's civilization-speak and "traditional moral and spiritual values"—influences decision-making or whether it serves mainly to rationalize realpolitik behaviour. Sometimes ideas and interests are virtually indistinguishable. Thus, Putin identifies a clear strategic interest in subjugating Ukraine, but it is his fevered view of its history and relationship to Russia that animates the pursuit of this goal. He may be "unencumbered by ideological constraints", but he is hardly a bloodless calculating machine.[25] Over the past two decades, Putin has shown time and again that his approach to Ukraine is driven at least as much by emotion as reason.[26]

Putin's personal biases are reflected in the broad conduct of Russian foreign policy. Several themes have emerged clearly in recent years. They include an increasingly vitriolic anti-Americanism; a yen for geopolitics; an unabashedly imperialist mindset; and a growing neediness for approbation from the Global South.

Anti-Americanism and Relations with the West

Consistent with the Kremlin's America-centric view of world order, the United States represents the benchmark against which Russian foreign policy success or failure is measured. Partly this is a trait of all

25. J. Mankoff, "Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 2021, p. 120.
26. A. Kolesnikov, "Did Kennan Foresee Putin? What the Diplomat Got Right About Russia and the West", *Foreign Affairs*., 20 September 2023, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

Soviet and Russian leaders since Stalin. Partly it is a response to US power, which, despite significant reverses, far exceeds that of any other international actor. Putin's America-obsession has been fuelled by the dismissive attitude of successive American presidents who have failed to give Russia the "respect" he believes it deserves. And then there is the enduring fear of a US-induced liberal contagion and the implications this may have for regime stability.

Russian policy towards the United States reflects an abiding zero-sum mindset, above all the conviction that American primacy is bad for Russia. The 1990s witnessed the apogee of American power and Russian "humiliation". In the aftermath of 9/11, Putin sought to position himself as Washington's global partner of choice (and "equal") by endorsing the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan. But such efforts received short shrift, with the George W. Bush administration viewing Russia as, at best, a limited regional partner.

Conversely, Putin and others in the ruling elite have long identified benefits to Russia arising from American failures and shortcomings. This was especially the case during the chaotic presidency of Donald Trump (2017-2021). The latter may not have "delivered" in terms of weakening Western sanctions imposed following the annexation of Crimea and shooting-down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17. But far more relevant was that Trump's words and actions discredited US global leadership, undermined Transatlantic unity, and afforded Moscow opportunities to expand its influence at the expense of the West.

With the war in Ukraine, US-Russia relations have sunk to their lowest point since the early 1980s. Already prior to the invasion, the potential for bilateral cooperation was minimal. There was nothing to counterbalance or mitigate the growing number of disagreements between them. A "controlled antipathy" was the best-case scenario.[27] Now that possibility looks more remote than ever.

There are few bounds to Putin's hostility towards the United States. He has not only accused Washington of fuelling the conflict in Ukraine, but also of engaging in destructive behaviour around the world.[28] He has become much more overtly supportive of China in the latter's rivalry with America. He has withdrawn or suspended Russian participation in various arms control treaties—the CFE (Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty), the INF (Intermediate

27. B. Lo, "Rewinding the clock: US-Russia relations in the Biden era", *Russie.Nei.Reports*, No. 36, IFRI, February 2022, p. 33, available at: www.ifri.org.
28. See V. Putin, "Putin's presidential address to the Federal Assembly", Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, Moscow, February 29, 2024, www.en.kremlin.ru.

Nuclear Forces Treaty), the CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty), and the New START (Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty). And he is attempting to push the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) grouping in a consciously anti-Western direction.

With the Kremlin's focus so heavily on Washington, Europe has become somewhat marginalized in Russian foreign policy. The distinction between "good" Europe and "bad" America has given way to unflattering comparisons between a thriving (if malevolent) United States and a weakened Europe.[29] Russia-EU ties have been drastically scaled down. European investors have pulled out of Russia, and although there is still some trade it is far below pre-invasion levels. The Kremlin is increasingly inclined to treat European countries, individually and collectively, as "satellites" in thrall to Washington, and sees European "strategic autonomy" as a dead letter. For Moscow Europe has become less an actor (or actors) than acted upon—a ready target for disinformation and other subversive activities.[30]

China and Asia

Just as the United States is a magnet for the Kremlin's strategic resentment, so China has become the epicentre of its foreign policy engagement. Although the Sino-Russian partnership falls well short of being an alliance, with both sides acting largely autonomously, it is crucial to Moscow as a force multiplier. For Putin, the relationship is key to realizing his vision of Russia as a resurgent global power.

Yet partnership with China presents the Kremlin with challenges. For one thing, it is increasingly unequal. Beijing is very much the senior partner, a position that the Ukraine war has only reinforced. Chinese President Xi Jinping sets the level and tempo of bilateral cooperation, taking advantage of the fact that China is a vastly more significant international player than Russia, with many more options. The concern for the Kremlin is not so much that Beijing may exploit this superiority to displace Russia from Central Asia, pursue irredentist ambitions in the Russian Far East, or make inroads in the Arctic. It is more that the global rise of China, alongside the continuing might of the United States, could reduce Russia's relative importance in the world.

29. See V. Putin, "Address to the Plenary Session of the 20th Anniversary Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", *op. cit.*
30. V. Putin, "Putin's presidential address to the Federal Assembly", Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, Moscow, February 29, 2024, *op. cit.*

That is why the Kremlin is attempting to reach out to other major countries in Asia, from the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran) to the Indo-Pacific. The most important prospective partner is India, whose rivalry with China offers Moscow a potential point of leverage vis-à-vis Beijing. Putin has expended considerable effort in courting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, both bilaterally and in multilateral formats such as the BRICS and the G-20 (whose 2023 summit was hosted by New Delhi). The intent is transparent: to limit Russia's dependence on China; make good on its claims to be an independent centre of global power, and assert itself as a leading player in a putative post-American order.

But in practice things are not straightforward. Although India has maintained a neutral stance on the Ukraine war, it is much closer to the United States than to Russia, and is an active member of US-led frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("the Quad"). Sino-Indian tensions also place Moscow in an awkward position when it comes to balancing ties with Beijing and New Delhi. The rivalry between them is a serious obstacle to Putin's ambitions to promote the BRICS as a viable multilateral framework. Meanwhile, Russia-India cooperation remains modest—arms transfers, civilian nuclear cooperation, and energy exports from a very low base. From New Delhi's perspective, Russia is a secondary priority.[31]

The upshot of all this is that, despite efforts at diversification, Putin's approach to Asia is more Sinocentric than ever. The relationship with India is in a slow downward spiral. Interaction with Japan is more hostile than in decades, while attempts to court the ASEANs (members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) have achieved little (Russian arms exports have declined further as a result of the Ukraine war). In fact, the most tangible shift in Russia's Asia policy has been the strengthening of military ties with North Korea. Paradoxically, though, cooperation with Pyongyang is more likely to make Russia an outlier than a primary actor in Asia.

The Post-Soviet Space

Putin's full-scale assault on Ukraine highlighted the lengths to which he is prepared to go in pursuing his vision of a Russian *imperium*. And his continuing pursuit of the war indicates he will not give up on this anytime soon. He believes that "Ukraine-fatigue" in Washington

31. See comments by Happymon Jacob. in S. Lalwani and H. Jacob, "Will India Ditch Russia: Debating the Future of an Old Friendship", *Foreign Affairs*, January 24, 2023, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

and other Western capitals, and Russia's superior numbers and military-industrial potential, will eventually lead to victory or a settlement on his terms.[32] Besides, however difficult the way ahead may be, all alternatives are worse from the Kremlin's perspective. A failure to bring Ukraine back into the "civilizational fold" would amount to a crushing defeat, not just for Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space, but also for its global standing. For that reason alone, Putin will not accept any resolution of the conflict that does not leave Russia in a position of dominance. Any ceasefire that may be negotiated would be at best a tactical pause, in which to consolidate existing gains and prepare for future offensive action to consummate his strategic goals.[33]

Against this background, the matter of Ukrainian "neutrality" or "Finlandization" is moot. Putin will never settle for this. He is so ideologically and emotionally committed to Ukraine's integration within a Russian "civilizational space" that all other options are off the table. At most, Ukraine would retain formal sovereignty; in reality, its position would resemble that under Stalin and Catherine the Great—a *de facto* province of the empire.

Elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, the Kremlin's approach is more nuanced—and less ambitious. Although official pronouncements speak of "establishing an integrated economic and political space in Eurasia in the long term", this goal is aspirational at best.[34] The concept of a "Greater Eurasia Partnership" has gone nowhere since Putin officially introduced it at the 2016 St Petersburg International Economic Forum.

Russian policy towards the ex-Soviet republics reflects a clear hierarchy of priorities. Most important is the "Slavic heartland", Ukraine and also Belarus, which are central to Putin's perceptions of Russian power, security and "civilization". Next comes Central Asia, which is bound up in Russia's identity as a great Eurasian power. This region might have become an area of geopolitical contention, but has remained broadly stable. Putin is reassured both by the existence of authoritarian regimes in the Central Asian republics, and by Beijing's

32. See V. Putin "Results of the Year With Vladimir Putin", Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, Moscow, December 14, 2023, available at: www.en.kremlin.ru.
33. Lawrence Freedman points out that "if the war stopped now [November 2023] with a cease-fire [...] it [Russia] would be far short of controlling all the territory hurriedly 'annexed' last autumn and which is now officially presented as part of Russia". See L. Freedman, "Why 'Not Losing' Is Not Tantamount to Winning", *Comment is Freed*, November 23, 2023, available at: https://samf.substack.com.
34. "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", approved by Presidential Executive Order No. 229, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

strategic restraint. The potential tension between Russian geopolitical primacy and Chinese economic domination has been mitigated by a common opposition to US "hegemony" and Western liberal influences, and a desire for easy co-existence. Finally, there are the three states of the South Caucasus—Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia—and Moldova. It is symptomatic of Moscow's targeted approach towards the post-Soviet space that it refused to help Armenia—formally an ally within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—retain Nagorno-Karabakh against Azerbaijan's military takeover. And while it will almost certainly annex the breakaway Moldovan region of Transnistria, this would merely formalize a *de facto* occupation going back more than three decades ago.

Under Putin, Russia acts as an imperial power. Yet this imperialism is selective and often indirect. Despite his rhetoric about a "civilization-state" and the unlimited nature of "the Russian world", Putin appears less concerned with a physical "gathering of the lands"—with the evident exception of Ukraine—than in ensuring a belt of states linked to Russia by close political, economic, cultural and linguistic ties. Strategic control matters more than possession or, to put it another way, it prefers to exercise power and influence without incurring the burdens of direct governance.

Engagement with the Global South

The most visible change to Russian foreign policy in recent times has been Moscow's outreach to the Global South. The description "Global South" covers a wide range of countries, often with very different perspectives, interests and priorities. But although the term is unsatisfactory, it carries considerable political weight, mainly because of the number of UN member states (134) that self-identify as Global South.

Russia has intensified its courtship to Global South countries since the invasion of Ukraine—and with some success. Although most voted in the United Nations to censure it over the invasion, none have joined in sanctions. Western charges of Russian imperialism have little resonance, with many nations instead seeing the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a more serious flouting of international law and the authority of the United Nations. They also incline to the Kremlin narrative that the disruption of food supply chains, high energy prices, and the downturn in the global economy owe more to Western sanctions and "escalation" than to the invasion itself. Putin's ill-advised decision to terminate the grain supply deal through the Bosphorus received much criticism. Yet even in this case Moscow has

managed to deflect some of the blame onto the West by exploiting the perception that the United States and its allies are obsessed with defeating Russia at the expense of Global South priorities.[35]

Importantly, Moscow has not limited itself to generalities about the colonial past of the Western powers and their dominance of international institutions and the global economy. It has also homed in on specific contentious issues: the failure of Western governments to fulfil their climate financing obligations under the 2015 Paris agreement; and the shortcomings of the Bretton Woods institutions in organizing debt relief, which is now a prime concern for more than fifty low and middle-income countries.[36]

All that said, Russian engagement with the Global South remains thin, and its thrust almost entirely negative. As Samuel Charap and Kaspar Pucek have pointed out, Russia has "neither a powerful, transnational ideology nor a developmental model that could attract elites outside its borders".[37] It cannot compete with Chinese and EU investments, and it is generally unable or unwilling to offer large-scale lending, let alone development assistance. Even before the Ukraine war, its economic footprint in Africa was shrinking.[38] Moscow talks a big game on international institutions—UN reform, expansion of the BRICS and the G-20—but is very light on detail.[39] Old habits also die hard. Russia has struggled to reconcile conflicting aims: on the one hand, promoting itself as a champion of the Global South; on the other hand, manipulating grain supply and prices by means of its Black Sea blockade.

Moscow's approach to the Global South is essentially opportunistic. It is exemplified by the paramilitary activity of the

35. "The Western minority's obsessive attempts to 'Ukrainize' the agenda of every international discussion while pushing onto the backburner a number of unresolved regional crises, of which many have been in place for years and decades now, have become a blatant manifestation of its self-centred policy". See S. Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly", *op. cit.*

36. V. Putin, "Address to the Plenary Session of the 20th Anniversary Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", *op. cit.*

37. S. Charap and K. Pucek, "Rightsizing the Russia Threat: Whatever Putin's Intentions Are, He Is Hemmed in by Limited Capabilities", *Foreign Affairs*, October 3, 2023, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

38. The exception to this general retreat is a major civil nuclear project with Egypt, which is scheduled for completion in 2029, although there is some doubt about its financing. See T. Vircoulon, "La RussAfrique à l'épreuve de la guerre", *Briefings de l'IFRI*, Ifri, July 25, 2023, pp. 3-5, available at : www.ifri.org.

39. Putin has admitted, for the example, that the development of a BRICS currency "is a very distant perspective," as is an alternative financial settlements system. See V. Putin, "Adress to the Plenary Session of the 20th Anniversary Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", *op. cit.*

Wagner Group in a number of African nations. In Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the Sahel (Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso), Moscow has exploited political dysfunctionality and anti-colonial sentiment, and embarrassed the West.[40] But Russia is well short of being a "continent-wide great power" with a coherent strategic agenda.[41]

In the Middle East, Russia is a more significant presence because it has major interests in play—co-management of energy prices with Saudi Arabia via OPEC+ (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries "plus"), security ties with Iran and Syria, and geopolitical power projection. Rather than target narrow military elites, as in Africa, Moscow has sought to maintain stable and positive relations with governments across the region. Yet it remains a secondary player, with an influence dwarfed not only by the United States, but also by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran. The latest conflict in Gaza has highlighted just how marginal Russia is to regional decision-making. Understandably, it has chosen to emphasize the destructive consequences of US policy rather than articulate a plan of its own.

This highlights a larger issue with Putin's approach to international relations: the inability to offer a practicable alternative to the US-led international order. Indeed, it is debatable whether he even wishes to. For all the rhetoric about a multipolar or polycentric order, Moscow appears happy sniping from the sidelines, causing disruption when and where it can. Indeed, the more disorderly the world, the greater the opportunities for Russia to exert influence, without having to take responsibility for problem-solving.

The Primacy of the Personal

Few leaders are so identified with the image and substance of their country's foreign policy as Vladimir Putin. This is not to suggest that he manages every aspect of Russia's international relations. But he is simultaneously the prime decision-maker, ideologue-in-chief, and spiritual animator. As the extraordinary decision to invade Ukraine testifies, Putin *is* Russian foreign policy.

This has been the case over his more than two decades in power. In the aftermath of 9/11, Putin decided to support the US-led military

40. "The 'export of security' to Africa has already become Russia's *carte-de-visite*. Much has been done for the training of peacekeepers, law enforcement and military personnel". See N. Panin, "When Africa Is Just Around the Corner", *Russian International Affairs Council*, February 2, 2023, https://russiancouncil.ru.
41. Sam Ramani, cited in D. Pilling and A. Schipani, "How Moscow Bought a New Sphere of Influence on the Cheap", *Financial Times*, February 7, 2023, available at: www.ft.com.

intervention in Afghanistan, against the opposition of most of the Russian political elite. At the beginning of his presidency, he committed himself to closer engagement with Europe, declaring that Russia was part of Western European culture, and that Russians, wherever they lived, were Europeans.[42] Throughout the subsequent vicissitudes of Russian foreign policy, Putin, the man as well as the president, has been the overriding constant.

To be sure, he reflects long-standing attitudes within the ruling elite: a sense of great power entitlement; an imperial mindset; an authoritarian vision for Russian society; and deep suspicion of the West. But he brings a rare intensity to these feelings as well as the will and capacity to act on them. Contemporary Russian foreign policy is what it is because Putin makes it so. He combines historical sentimentalism, civilizational mysticism, profoundly conservative values, a personal sense of grievance (*obida*) and predatory instincts. He is confined by no rules other than the constraints of power. It is not only the US-led and Western-dominated "rules-based international order" that he abhors; it is anything that limits his ability to act as he sees fit. In this connection, allegiance to the "multipolar order" or "polycentric system" is a fig-leaf. For Putin, the question has never been about order, but about power—who wields it, and who must suffer it. Everything else is subordinate to this reality.

The primacy of the personal in Russian foreign policy is reflected across the board. Thus, Putin's personal humiliation at the time of the 2004 Orange Revolution has fuelled much of his animus towards Ukraine and the West. His antagonism towards the United States is driven by resentment at a perceived lack of respect not just towards Russia but to him personally. And the expansion of Sino-Russian partnership owes much to his individual investment in it.

42. V. Putin, N. Gevorkân, A. Kolesnikov, and N. Timakova *Ot pervogo lica: razgovory s Vladimirom Putinym* [From the first person: conversations with Vladimir Putin], Moscow, Vagrius, 2000, p. 156, available at: https://imwerden.de.

The Way Ahead

There are two key questions surrounding Russia's prospects in an increasingly disorderly world. The first is whether Putin's vision of a resurgent global power is achievable. Or does Russia face a bleak future, marked by diminishing international influence and status? The second question concerns the evolution of Russian foreign policy post-Putin. Are we likely to see major changes and, if so, in what direction? Some commentators have warned of a more aggressive and unstable Russia.[43] Alternatively, we might see, if not exactly liberalization, then a partial relaxation of attitudes towards the West.

Russia's Prospects

Western observers are often inclined to underestimate Russia, as if operating on the implicit assumption that Putin's rules-breaking will be righteously punished. Yet time and again he has emerged relatively unscathed, and Russia has found itself, if not always in a stronger position, then not much weakened either.

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine could yet prove a game-changer. It was not only an egregious breach of international order, but it also initiated the bloodiest conflict in Europe since the end of World War Two. Russia's reverses on the ground have exposed the weaknesses of its much-vaunted military might. Economic ties with Europe have suffered enormous damage. Russia's strategic dependence on China has grown substantially. And Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet space has been eroded, most obviously in Ukraine itself.

Nevertheless, it is premature to write Russia off. For one thing, the war in Ukraine is still going on, and there is no sign either of a decisive Russian defeat or that Putin is willing to compromise. Indeed, Moscow's position may be improving, as it learns lessons from its military setbacks and as the West's "Ukraine-fatigue" kicks in. Russia's position in Europe is weaker than it was, and its actions have given new purpose to NATO and boosted Transatlantic unity. But it is unclear how lasting these outcomes will be. For example, will

43. T. Stanovaya, "Putin's Age of Chaos", *Foreign Affairs*, August 8, 2023, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

they survive a Trump victory in the 2024 US presidential election? The war has made the Sino-Russian partnership more unequal, yet fears that Russia might become a satrapy of China are overstated. Russia continues to be the leading player in post-Soviet Eurasia, notwithstanding the impact of the war and China's rising economic influence. This could change over time, but perhaps not as quickly as one might imagine.

The Ukraine war was a colossal miscalculation by Putin. And the longer the war goes on, the weaker Russia may become. But much will depend on how Western governments, and especially Washington, act and react over the next few years. Any dilution in support for Ukraine would significantly boost Russia's prospects. Putin would then be vindicated in his judgement that the West had neither the stomach nor the patience to sustain the struggle. Russia will have won, albeit with much greater difficulty than he originally anticipated.

Russia's fortunes are not only contingent on developments in and around Ukraine. In the past two decades, American and European policy-makers have made a string of bad decisions that have cumulatively discredited the post-Cold War international order in many parts of the world. The Iraq invasion, the mismanaged counter-insurgency in Afghanistan (culminating in shambolic withdrawal), the global financial crisis, the flawed Libyan intervention, the Trump presidency, the failure to address Global South concerns on climate financing, COVID-19 vaccine distribution, and debt relief—all these have provided fertile ground for Moscow to exploit.

As long as Western policies continue to excite the resentment of others, particularly in the Global South, Russia will never be isolated, however inept its own decision-making. It is a diminished power, but this condition is hardly irrevocable. The shortcomings of others—not only the West, but also of other non-Western powers such as China—will open up opportunities to restore its position and influence. Longer-term, Russia faces major challenges to its international standing, not least from the global transition away from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy. But this process could take decades. In the meantime, as Thomas Graham has remarked, an apparently weak Russia retains "an uncanny ability to make its presence felt on the global stage".[44]

44. T. Graham, "Russia Will Survive a Defeat in Ukraine. It's Time to Prepare for What Comes Next", *Politico*, October 15, 2023, available at: www.politico.com.

A Post-Putin Russia?

Russia's prospects would be improved if a post-Putin regime manages to rid itself of the worst excesses of his rule. Such a Russia would most likely be "authoritarian in domestic structure" and "expansionist in impulse".[45] It would continue to assert Russia's "rights" as a great power, including a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. Relations with the United States and leading European nations would remain problematic. Nevertheless, a more functional foreign policy might emerge, including the return to some level of pragmatic engagement with the West. Much would depend on how, and on whose terms, the Ukraine war was resolved.

Conversely, things could get a lot worse. Tatyana Stanovaya has identified a "new generation of hawks", and foreshadowed a "more dangerous and unpredictable Russia".[46] Growing geopolitical and economic dependence on China could lead to strategic frustration, as Russia finds itself steadily displaced from Eurasia, and unable to make significant inroads with the Global South.

One scenario that cannot be excluded is the emergence of a hyper-nationalist, populist leader in the Kremlin. Prigozhin's short-lived mutiny hinted at what could happen. Although the mutiny did not seriously threaten the regime, it nevertheless pointed to weaknesses in the Putin system and the fragility of the Kremlin's confidence. A more capable figure than Prigozhin might be able to harness such vulnerabilities to political advantage, and to the detriment of international order.

45. *Ibid.*
46. T. Stanovaya, "Putin's Age of Chaos: the dangers of Russian disorder", *Foreign Affairs*, August 8, 2023, *op. cit.*

Implications for Western Policy

The propensity of Western decision-makers to underestimate Russia has led them sometimes to base policy on false premises. Thus, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the prevailing view in many capitals was that it would eventually become a "normal" country—broadly democratic, economically liberal, and post-imperialist in its foreign policy outlook.[47] These illusions were steadily dismantled from the mid-2000s. Putin's excoriating criticism of the United States at the 2007 Munich Security Conference signalled a new militancy in Moscow, but his interference in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election was already a sign of things to come.[48]

Another big failing of Western, especially European, policy towards Russia has been an eagerness to rationalize and excuse its behaviour. Putin's *de facto* annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the wake of the 2008 war with Georgia was effectively endorsed by French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Despite mounting Russian aggression in the years following, Germany adhered doggedly to its *Wandel durch handel* ("Change through trade") policy. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 did not stop Berlin from pressing ahead with the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project. Chancellor Angela Merkel remained publicly critical of Putin, but Germany's—and Europe's—energy dependence on Russia grew steadily during her 15 years in power.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Putin thought there would be few consequences to embarking on a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. US President Joe Biden was preoccupied with implementing his domestic agenda and confronting China, and was consequently looking to "park" Russia. The leading European countries were focused on post-pandemic economic recovery, and undergoing significant political changes—the end of the Merkel era in

47. Author's conversations with Western policy-makers over the course of three decades.
48. "We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law [...] One state [...] first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way". See V. Putin "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy", Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, February 10, 2007, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru.

Germany, presidential and parliamentary elections in France, Brexit in Britain, a new government in Italy. The EU continued to roll-over sanctions, but Russia had long since adapted to them. The Sino-Russian partnership appeared to be going from strength to strength. As events were to prove, Putin overestimated his chances. But poor signalling by Western governments contributed to his misjudgement. Given their feeble responses in the past, Putin had little reason to expect them to be as united and resolute as they turned out to be.

Learning the Right Lessons

The challenge facing Western policy on Russia is essentially twofold: to correctly assess the nature of the threat Russia poses; and to react appropriately. This means shedding the illusions of the past, and the timorousness that has often constrained Western decision-making.

There is a school of thought, especially popular in Washington, that China poses a greater threat than Russia. More than that, it has been suggested that Western governments, led by the United States, should enlist Russia as a strategic counterweight to a rising China.[49] This would entail some sort of accommodation with Moscow over Ukraine, one that would allow Russia to hold on to some of its territorial gains. The underlying premise is that Russia, notwithstanding its egregious actions, remains fundamentally weak, whereas China represents a truly formidable rival and danger.[50] The latter must therefore be countered or contained by all means available, however unpalatable.

This assessment is deeply flawed. First, it misreads the nature of the China challenge. Beijing is committed to undermining US global primacy and aspires to a leading role in the global order. It also aims to displace American influence from the Indo-Pacific region, and to reunify Taiwan with the mainland. However, China does not pose an existential threat to the United States or Europe. It is wedded to the principle and practice of a stable international order. It is a revisionist not a revolutionary or anarchic power.[51]

49. T. Graham, "What Russia Really Wants: How Moscow's Desire for Autonomy Could Give America an Edge Over Russia", *Foreign Affairs*, October 9, 2023, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.
50. "The PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it". *National Security Strategy*, Washington D. C., The White House, 2022, p. 23, available at: www.whitehouse.gov.
51. B. Lo, "Turning Point? Putin, Xi and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine", *Lowy Analysis*, May 25, 2022, available at: www.lowyinstitute.org.

Second, recent American assessments underrate Russia's disruptive power and assume wrongly that this can be somehow quarantined or neutralized. True, Russia cannot compete with the United States or China. Judged by many XXIst century metrics, such as level of technology, it is a third-rate power. Its economy is excessively reliant on natural resource exports, while its polity and society are thoroughly dysfunctional. Yet despite these limitations, it retains the capacity, and crucially the will, to wreak havoc. Moreover, Putin has demonstrated a growing appetite for risk, one nourished by Western equivocation and hesitancy. That said, it is important not to overestimate the level of threat Russia poses. Suggestions that Putin may be willing to use nuclear weapons to achieve his foreign policy objectives are not only overwrought, but encourage his attempts at nuclear blackmail.

Third, hopes that Putin, or a successor, can be persuaded to dilute the Sino-Russian partnership are deluded. While Moscow is keen to avoid excessive dependence on Beijing, it is not tempted to achieve this through better engagement with Washington, much less Europe. Seen from the Kremlin, the United States cannot be trusted to deliver its side of any notional "grand bargain". Nothing Washington says or does will alter this perception. Even if Trump were to win the 2024 US presidential election, there is no chance that Moscow would distance itself from Beijing. As noted earlier, Putin values the relationship with China as a force multiplier, particularly in relation to the United States and the international system. The strategic partnership has delivered concrete gains, and proved itself highly resilient and stable.

If Western leaders deceive themselves into thinking that some kind of accommodation with Putin is possible, they will be grievously disappointed. Indeed, the more importunate they are in seeking this, the more leverage they will surrender to him. Putin has shown on numerous occasions that he will interpret any "compromises"—concessions by another name—as a sure sign of the weakness of others and a vindication of his own approach.

In the face of such a protagonist, seriousness of intent and strength of resolve are indispensable. In the specific context of Ukraine, the only practical (as well as ethical) course is to support the government in Kyiv with no less commitment than Moscow has shown in trying to defeat it. That means lifting all remaining restrictions—and delays—on the transfer of advanced military equipment to Ukraine. It means offering proper security guarantees, including Ukrainian membership of NATO, rather than meaningless "security assurances" as per the discredited 1994 Budapest

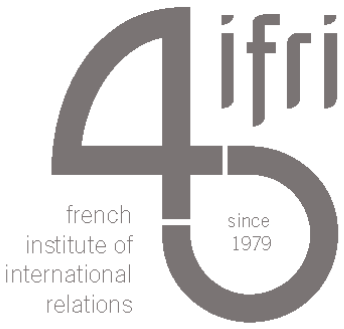
Memorandum.[52] And it entails expedited Ukrainian membership of the European Union. All these steps are vital not just for Ukraine, but for the future of European and Transatlantic security. It would be naïve in the extreme to imagine that Putin, if he were to prevail over Ukraine, would be content. His record over the past 15 years—Georgia 2008, Crimea 2014, Donbass 2015, Syria after 2015, and now the latest invasion—has shown that he will seize on any sign of weakness to push for further territorial and political gains.

Ultimately, Russia's international relations are only a small part of a much bigger picture. Putin, for all that he has managed to command our attention, is but one among many decision-makers. The world is undergoing a massive, multi-dimensional transformation, in response to a "perfect storm" of threats and challenges. Russian foreign policy, and the West's relations with it, need to be understood against this backdrop. As a former British Ambassador to Moscow has emphasized, "this is not only about Russia—it is about how we keep the peace in a rapidly changing world".[53]

It is wrong to imagine that a *soi-disant* "pragmatism" towards Russia can be the basis for a viable international order. If we are ready to sacrifice our principles so easily, we can hardly expect others to take us seriously. Give in to Putin's brinkmanship, and the rest of the world will treat our structures about international order and the rule of law with the contempt they deserve.

52. Under the terms of the Budapest Memorandum, Russia, along with the United States and the United Kingdom, gave "security assurances" in return for Ukraine becoming a non-nuclear weapons state. These assurances included a "commitment [...] to respect the independence and sovereignty of the borders of Ukraine" and "an obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity and political independence of Ukraine". See "Memorandum on security assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons", Vol. 3007, I-52241, December 5, 1994, available at : https://treaties.un.org.

53. L. Bristow, "The Fear From Within", *Prospect*, October 4, 2023, available at: www.prospectmagazine.co.uk.



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