



Russia's world

Facing a century of instability

by Andrew Monaghan

The Euro-Atlantic community and Russia seem to live in different worlds. It is increasingly obvious that the two sides have drawn different conclusions from the same evidence about the situation in Moldova, the Russo-Georgia war in 2008, the energy disputes between NaftogazUkraini and Gazprom in 2006 and 2009, and the causes and evolution of the crisis in Ukraine – to name just some of the most prominent examples.

Senior officials on both sides have even questioned the rationality of their opponents, with a German government spokesman stating in March 2014 that it was “undisputed” that President Putin has a “completely different view of the situation and the events in Crimea than the German government and our Western allies.”

This underpins the divergent trajectories of development as Moscow defines a more conservative (and at the same time revisionist) agenda distinct from the EU's more liberal one. They are also developing contradictory, even competing views of international questions.

If a decade ago there was a debate whether Russia was a ‘part of Europe’, and there were still attempts to create a ‘strategic partnership’ between the EU and Russia, it is now more apt to talk of Russia as

‘a Europe apart’, separate from and rival to the EU. Indeed, Russia is widely considered to be part of an ‘arc of crisis’ around the Union, a neo-imperialistic, even militaristic state aggressively challenging the post-Cold War security order.

Western observers and policymakers have struggled to understand how and why the Russian leadership acts as it does. Bridging the gap requires empathy – seeing Russia as it is rather than as the West would like it to be, and grasping the numerous doubts and the difficulties the Russian leadership faces.

The view from Moscow: Russia's arc of crisis

Doing so reveals a very different picture, since it suggests that Moscow is both operating according to a different chronology and sees an arc of crisis around Russia, a wider international instability characterised by conflict, actual or potential.

Equally, the Russian leadership is aware of the domestic systemic weaknesses which mean that Russia is not prepared to cope with the threats which emanate from such international instability. Moscow's responses must therefore be understood as emergency measures tantamount to putting the country onto a war footing.



There is much discussion in Russia about increasing international instability. Some of this relates to the tension between the West and Russia since 2014, and is reflected in a debate about a 'new Cold War'. But there are important differences. While Russia reappeared on the Western political map in 2014 with the emergence of the crisis in Ukraine, Moscow's concerns long predate this, stemming from much earlier, even from the 1990s.

The narrative trajectory of international instability can be traced through the NATO air campaign in Kosovo in 1999, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and then the air campaign in Libya in 2011 and the civil wars in Libya and Syria. Today, therefore, if the Euro-Atlantic community thinks of Russian aggression, even expansionism in post-Ukraine terms, Moscow sees international instability in a longer-term and wider post-Arab Spring context.

This was illustrated by President Putin, who in late 2014 pointed to a "deficit of security in Europe, the Middle East, South East Asia, the Asia Pacific region and in Africa", and an increasing intensity of conflict and competition throughout the world. He stated that "changes in the world order, and what we're seeing today are events on this scale, have usually been accompanied if not by global war and conflict, then by chains of intensive low level conflicts", and "today we see a sharp increase in the likelihood of a whole set of violent conflicts with either direct or indirect participation by the world's major powers."

Such views have been codified in Russia's strategic documentation: if the Military Doctrine and National Security Strategy suggest that the prospect of a major war involving Russia is small, they also are clear that the security environment has deteriorated and points to NATO as a powerful competitor and as the source of most military risks and threats.

Russian Chief of the General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov has also suggested that Russia may become drawn into military conflicts as powers vie for resources, many of which are in Russia or in its immediate neighbourhood. By 2030, he suggested, the levels of existing and potential threats will considerably increase, as powers compete for fuel and energy resources.

Taken together, this suggests that Moscow sees a compound of international instability that poses both an immediate threat to Russia and its interests,

and the looming prospect of possible strikes on Russia over the longer term. This is emphasised by four points.

First, Moscow sees shifts in global power, with Western (and particularly Anglo-Saxon) influence in decline, and other power centres in the world rising and vying for influence and resources. Second, Moscow sees an arms race underway as the major powers are investing in modernising their armed forces. Third, the traditional strategic balance of power no longer works, and arms control agreements are considered to be ineffective.

The fourth point is Moscow's view of the destabilising role of the West (particularly the US, but also NATO and the EU) in international affairs more broadly, and more directly regarding Russia. The West is seen to be causing an imbalance of power through the enlargement of exclusive organisations such as NATO (and the EU), a process that creates divisions in European security while failing to resolve old problems, as well as bringing NATO closer to Russia's borders. Indeed, some depict Russia's encirclement, emphasised by NATO expansion and by US deployments around the world.

Western powers, and the US in particular, are also seen to exacerbate instability by engendering regime change in states that resist US hegemony and indiscriminately supplying weapons to rebel groups. Moscow points to the disruption of regional stability caused by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the perceived role of the US in the 'colour revolutions', especially the orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Arab Spring, the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, and Western support for rebels in Syria.

Blaming soft power

Indeed, the Russian leadership has often pointed to the threat posed by colour revolutions. The Foreign Policy Concept, published in 2013 in the wake of the Arab Spring, pointed to the 'illegal use' of 'soft power' and human rights concepts to put pressure on sovereign states, intervene in their internal affairs and destabilise them by manipulating public opinion.

Seen from Moscow, therefore, Ukraine is just one feature of a wider arc of crisis, one that has been

'Moscow's responses must be understood as emergency measures tantamount to putting the country onto a war footing.'

evolving even since the late 1990s. But at the same time, it has served to confirm and accelerate concerns about wider negative international trends. While Western observers might suggest that Moscow overlooks its own role in international instability, three important points stand out.

First, concerns about international instability are justified. Tensions and conflicts abound, from civil wars in Libya and Syria to the conflict in Yemen, from Ukraine to Afghanistan and the South China Sea. These form concentric circles around Russia's borders while having the potential to be imported back home (this is the case, for example, with returning 'foreign fighters' who have fought in Iraq and Syria). Given its geography, Russia is unlikely to be able to avoid the ramifications of one of these erupting into a major war.

Second, the range of possible conflicts has evolved substantially, and Moscow sees the need to meet a variety of challenges, from major interstate war, to the outbreak of low-level conflict in its neighbourhood, to unrest in Russia. Gerasimov has also suggested that combat is evolving away from 'traditional battlegrounds' and 'towards aerospace and information', and the roles of non-state international organisations and non-military instruments are increasing.

Third, the Russian leadership recognises that Russia is not ready to meet these challenges. The economy, after a prolonged period of stagnation, has significantly contracted. The administrative system in Russia – or the chain of command, often known as the 'vertical of power' – also does not work effectively, with apparent problems between federal, regional and local levels, and passive opposition in the bureaucracy. Orders, even from the most senior leadership, are often carried out tardily, if at all, to the extent that politicians have sought to enact legislation against the 'sabotage' of instructions from above. This significantly limits Moscow's ability to implement its plans and instructions, as well as its responses even to crises and security threats.

Finally, until 2011, the military endured many years of very limited investment and incomplete reforms.

Towards mobilisation

The Russian leadership is responding to this combination of an arc of crisis and lack of readiness by implementing emergency measures, effectively moving towards state mobilisation. For some, this is framed in terms of the leadership's exploitation of a 'besieged fortress' or 'foreign threat' narrative to mobilise popular opinion to maintain longer-term support for Putin in view of presidential elections scheduled for 2018.

There are also economic and financial aspects to this mobilisation: *Vedomosti*, a business newspaper, reported in September 2014 that the ministry of finance had prepared a 'mobilisation' budget for 2015-2017, drafted in view of falling oil prices and budget shortfalls. Though there is recognition in Moscow of the impact of the economic slowdown, there also appears to be an emphasis on maintaining the prioritisation of defence expenditure and investment in the military-industrial complex, even to the extent that it becomes an engine for the economy. Economic security has increasingly become a matter of overall security, including efforts to sanction-proof Russia, implement import substitution, and restructure the economy to cope with a time of conflict.

At the same time, there are measures being conducted by the president and his inner circle to strengthen and consolidate the leadership team and the political system. Since 2012, the leadership has sought to improve the chain of command. Government ministers have been fired for failing to implement plans satisfactorily, and appointments have been made to align authority in terms of presidential plenipotentiaries, ministers and regional governors in strategically important regions.

Though there has been a long-term continuity in the Russian leadership team, it has undergone some recent evolution as a result of the search for effective managers. While there are likely to be more firings (and retirements) in the short to medium term, appointments will reflect the ongoing search for effectiveness and political consolidation, rather than any substantive change in political direction.



This is emphasised by the activities of ‘para-institutional’ bodies such as the All-Russian Popular Front (ONF), which have been established to create a direct link between the authorities and society. Created in May 2011 as a civil volunteer organisation, the ONF enjoys Putin’s personal support, is directed from the Kremlin, and stretches across the country with members occupying important roles. It now contributes to the formulation of plans and monitors their implementation, and is conducting an anti-corruption campaign with oversight of municipal and state property divestment. It has also played a noteworthy role in the ‘patriotic mobilisation’ since 2014 and will play an important role in the parliamentary elections scheduled for September this year.

Building hard power

Mobilisation measures are also being implemented in the military and security spheres. Security and defence expenditure have substantially increased since 2011. An ambitious programme published in 2012 envisaged that by 2020 70% of military equipment should be modern, and conditions of military service and the modernisation of the defence industry significantly improved. Despite problems caused by sanctions, economic stagnation, corruption and limited capacity in the defence industry, at the end of 2014 official statements suggested that 30% of the armed forces inventory had been modernised.

An extensive series of exercises have also been conducted to address potential threats. Measures to prepare the interior ministry to deal with internal threats have been implemented, and in April 2015, a strategic-level exercise (known as Zaslou-2015) of police, interior ministry troops and other paramilitary forces, was conducted in six federal districts to address civil disobedience and an attempted colour revolution.

Indeed, the ministry of interior stated that the exercises were ‘based on events that took place in the recent past in a neighbouring country’, and included ‘all the attributes of those events’. The exercise consisted of operations to seal borders, ensure law and order, participate in territorial defence, counter terrorism and protect strategic sites.

In the military sphere, the focus has been on co-ordination, monitoring and control. According to Gerasimov, in January 2014 the Russian General Staff received additional powers for the coordination of federal organs and, “just in case”, a range of measures have been developed to “prepare the

country for the transition to conditions of war”. Opened in December 2014, a new National Defence Centre monitors threats to national security in peacetime, and assumes control of Russia’s military and economy in case of war.

The military has also undergone thousands of non-notice exercises, from the tactical to the strategic levels, to test readiness and responsiveness. The Russian leadership has been renewing its strategic nuclear deterrent, as well as the country’s conventional forces. In the course of Russia’s intervention in the Syrian civil war, its armed forces have demonstrated their significantly improved conventional warfighting capacities, including large strategic bomber raids, as well as strategic naval capacity, launching cruise missile attacks on distant targets both from surface vessels in the Caspian and from submarines.

Behind and beyond Putin

Grasping this Russian world view highlights how Moscow frames questions differently from Western capitals, and that it operates according to a different historical chronology. It also emphasises that Euro-Atlantic audiences should not expect substantial changes in Moscow’s policy which is focused on ensuring that Russia is a sovereign, independent state.

At the same time, it illuminates some of the ambiguities of Russian power, the doubts and difficulties that the Russian leadership team faces, and reveals the nature of the policies that Moscow is trying to implement in order to remedy its problems. These policies are focused on state consolidation and resilience. And are practically emergency measures which put Russia onto a war footing.

Andrew Monaghan is a Senior Research Fellow at Chatham House and a Visiting Fellow at the Changing Character of War Programme, Pembroke College, University of Oxford.

