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Russia and the West: On the Brink – Part 3



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This is the third and final Part of a comprehensive paper on Russia’s relations with the West. The aim of the paper is to pick out which parts of our traditional picture of Russia and its relations are right, and which wrong, and to look at where our relationship with Russia is going.

The first Part, which appeared on 3 May, introduced the issues and dealt with Putin; the second Part, which appeared on 31 May, with Foreign Policy and the Economy; this Part deals with relations with China and prognoses for the future.

The Eastern temptation

As relations have deteriorated, the West has taken to referring to Russia’s “isolation”. This is dangerous solipsism. Russia’s growing confrontation with the West has led her to look actively for partners elsewhere. In the Middle East for example the consistency of Putin’s support for Assad, by contrast with the vagaries of Western policy, has made him a key interlocutor.

But by far the most important of these other relationships is with China. This has not been an easy or particularly natural course for Russia to take. She has a long history of mutual suspicion and regular clashes with China, sees China as a threat to her own Far East, and fears China’s fast-growing power and influence. For most Russians their country’s natural links lie

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West rather than East. Nevertheless, in recent years the Russia/China relationship has flourished on every front. The two countries see eye to eye on most international issues, including aversion to US "hegemony". They vote together in the UN. Their militaries exercise together. Economically China will overtake the EU as Russia's largest trade partner in 2020. Vast pipeline projects across Siberia are set to turn China into a major consumer of Russian hydrocarbons, and the pricing is increasingly done without using the dollar. Shanghai and Hong Kong are natural competitors to London and New York as sources of Russian capital. In a world whose chief geopolitical fault line in 20 years' time is likely to be between China and the US it is odd that the West does not take more seriously what looks like the steady slide of Russia into the Chinese camp.

One hundred years of solitude?

The dangers of the present situation have been made abundantly clear by the developments of the past few weeks, and in particular by the US/British/French bombing of Syria on April 14th. If Russian personnel had been hit Putin would have been under intense pressure to retaliate - with every possibility of serious escalation. Prudent preparation on the part of the Pentagon avoided that danger this time. But with US/Russian tension at current levels and (as both sides attest) mutual communications at an all-time low the threat of accident or miscalculation leading to damaging confrontation in any one of half a dozen neuralgic spots (Syria, Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltics....) stand worryingly high.

As a result, following the bombing both sides seem ready to get the temperature down at least a little. The Russians were visibly relieved that the bombing was a highly contained operation. Putin has instructed his media to cut the shrillness of its anti-Americanism and has put off, at least for a while, Russia's response to the latest sanctions. Meanwhile Trump has suspended a planned further round of sanctions. Talk of an eventual Trump/Putin summit continues, though there is little sign that any serious preparatory work for such an event is under way.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to believe that the current estrangement will not end quickly. Neither side is really in a mood to back down. There is no percentage in today's Washington in arguing for anything other than a tougher policy towards Putin, not least because of the intense domestic political partisanship which now infects the issue. The UK, already pretty hardline, has become even harder as a result of the Skripal affair. And even France and Germany, normally moderate on the issue of Russia, have been tipped into a tougher position by Russian interference in their domestic political processes.

On the Russian side, Putin, even if he were tempted to look for compromises is sharply constrained. It is politically impossible for him to abandon the insurrectionists in the Donbass, and still more so to give Crimea back. Syria in principle is easier for him (most Russians don't understand why they are there) but he is winning there. He could no doubt dial back on the hacking, cyberattacks and online propaganda, but these are seen in Moscow as a legitimate response to the West's deployment of its much larger economic clout, and often as no more than what Western agencies are themselves engaged in. If the West could apply enough pressure to bring the Russian economy down this calculus would no doubt change, but there

is no sign that can be done - and as Russia's economic links move East it will become harder and harder. Meanwhile as the West continues to turn the screws, Russia has its own troublesome possibilities for escalation such as supplying arms to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

So, in the short term the odds look stacked in favour of continuing coldness, quite probably accompanied by escalating sanctions, regular sabre rattling (some of it nuclear) and hostile cyber activity. The not unambitious aim of both sides will be to prevent this noxious brew escalating into a real military confrontation with entirely unpredictable consequences. Beyond that one can only hope that sooner or later the circumstances will come right for some relaxation (the Cold War expression of course was détente). The change when it comes may be the result of some near catastrophe (as following the 1962 Cuba missile crisis) or simply a change of politics in one of the key capitals. There are currently dormant, but not dead, forces for moderation in particular in Paris and Berlin. And when the time comes there is a substantial quantity of urgent international business that the two sides need to tackle together - ranging from Islamic extremism through strategic weapons control to the sensible management of cyberspace.

Vladislav Surkov, Putin's Machiavellian political fixer, recently wrote that Russia has now abandoned its centuries old aspiration of integrating with the West and faces "100 years.... of political solitude". Let's hope that is an overestimate.

Insightful Reading

Sir Rodric Braithwaite, *Armageddon and Paranoia: The Nuclear Confrontation*. London, Profile Books Ltd, 2017.

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