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[Putin's Foreign Policy Impasse ... Until the Elections](#)



At this year's Valdai Discussion Club - a key meeting point for Russia's foreign policy establishment - there were a number of analysts and journalists [expecting something significant from President Vladimir Putin's keynote speech](#). Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, had set the tone, [promising](#) a "very important" message from the president.

In the end, no such message materialised. With Russia's 2018 presidential election already fast approaching, it was always unlikely that Putin would announce any substantive change of Russia's foreign policy; [revising Russia's position](#) vis-à-vis the West was never really on the cards at this point in time. As a result, his Valdai speech this year implied that the Kremlin's foreign policy will remain on ice until after the elections: tense relations with the West, a reality since the annexation of Crimea back in 2014, will continue by default.

What about after the elections? To understand what to expect from Russian foreign policy after March, 2018, it is worth reflecting on the various strands of thinking that have been doing the rounds in Russia's foreign policy establishment over the last decade or so: strands which could easily circle back into prominence during Putin's fourth term (if, of course, we assume he wins one.)

Back in the mid-2000s, Russian foreign policy thinking was largely dominated by the conservative wing of its

expert community and a number of high-ranking officials. Much discussion focused on how “to end” a unipolar world where the United States interprets and enforces the rules. A transition from a unipolar world to a multipolar one would be propelled by the growing economic clout of non-Western countries, which in turn might equate to increased political power. It was also explained in terms of a perceived injustice and strife that they saw as endemic within the global order the US was building. For a long time, Moscow hoped to “persuade” Europe to join the process of forming a fresh world order, and to do so as an independent actor; but Europe lost its chance, these thinkers eventually concluded: Europe had turned inwards at the expense of its ability to influence.

The Arab Spring then became a rubicon moment for these same foreign policy specialists. Russia, the thinking went, could no longer stand aside. It had to stand against the “lawlessness” that the United States had created in the Middle East with the assistance of Europe. When Russia intervened in the Syrian uprising, this was seen among its foreign policy top brass as an attempt to slow down the region’s descent into chaos. Any attempts by the United States to democratize the region, on the other hand, were seen as having undermined the natural course of events, creating an escalation of tensions.

Throughout policy discussions over the last decade or so, most global problems were blamed either on Washington's weakness, or Washington’s excessive meddling. Much instability in Central and Eastern Europe has been blamed on America’s inability to take responsibility after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This, to some extent, gave Russia its pretext, the narrative goes, which “forced” Russia to become more actively involved in world politics.

The Kremlin sees the foreseeable future as extremely unstable, risky and requiring the constant use of the lion's share of Russian external and internal resources for "risk management".

Risk managers and new Cold warriors

It's no secret that Moscow does not see Ukraine as a full-fledged sovereign country. Putin constantly [reminds](#) audiences that in 1991 Russia voluntarily allowed Ukraine and other countries of the former USSR to gain independence, but this independence has a number of limitations. After all, Ukraine is of central importance for Moscow. In 2014, policy analysts in the Kremlin often claimed that Russia prevented a larger conflict, one that could have arisen from Ukraine's uncontrolled movement towards the EU and NATO. Having annexed Crimea, and after guaranteeing a long-term instability in the east of Ukraine, Moscow has effectively closed off the possibility of Ukraine's entry into Western alliances, at least for now. This, according to Moscow's logic, [prevented a large-scale, potentially armed conflict](#) between Russia and the West.

Nevertheless, the conflict with the West (the so-called Cold War 2.0, which cuts far wider than Ukraine) requires some form of settlement. Moscow believes the rhetoric of Washington, like other Western capitals, is always conditional: Slogans are just slogans; only actions have value. Even tense relations can be “normal,” just as they were for example between the USSR and the USA after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The main thing to allow for is the presence of clear rules. Moscow is still waiting for Washington to determine its position and get ready to discuss new rules of the game for the region and for the world as a whole. Putin constantly declares his willingness to conduct a dialogue, to negotiate a deal and consequently expend less energy on a highly costly standoff. What surprises Moscow the most is Washington’s unwillingness to budge. Washington does not want to admit, foreign policy thinkers in Moscow often lament, that the old rules of behavior are breaking down. As soon as (and if) such an understanding comes and Washington negotiates, Moscow will stop much of the behavior that so strongly irritates the United States today.

The seriousness of Russian intentions should not be questioned. For many years Putin did not touch the issue of strategic nuclear weapons, but during his Valdai speech, he declared his readiness to [withdraw from the INF Treaty](#). By raising the stakes, the Kremlin expects that Washington will finally agree to speak to him in the same language.

Otherwise, if the US continues to be “stubborn”, ignoring Moscow's call for an agreement, Putin is ready to stand on his own as much as necessary. That seems to be the posture, at least.

Western Decadence

No matter how cliché it may seem, Moscow believes that the West is in a state of decline. Citing the example of the former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya, Moscow has long been convinced that the US is not capable of being a global leader. Disappointed in George W. Bush, unimpressed by Barack Obama, and still waiting for anything good from Donald Trump, the Kremlin nevertheless still sees America as the dominant force in the world. However, in the long term, according to Moscow, Washington simply cannot continue to spend so much energy on attempts at global dominance. Having failed to enlist the support of Europe, Moscow has consciously turned to China, which in the end will allegedly become the "second USSR", a full counterweight to the United States. Russia, in a harmonious future of "soft bipolarity," will become, [according to one Russian strategist](#), China's junior partner. Such a status seems to them more pleasant and convenient than the status of a junior partner of the West, which Russia turned away from in the 2000s.

The geopolitical and economic shift toward China should not be reduced to a simple deepening of bilateral relations. The Kremlin hopes for a more intense and wide ranging interaction with the whole region, one which will [lead to a Greater Eurasia](#), where Russia will be a leading player within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union. Russia already today is the most convenient partner for China - with all other neighbors, Beijing has a complex relationship. This already guarantees and will continue to give the Kremlin a free hand in the north of Eurasia.

Being "friends with China" is what the Kremlin sees as its most reliable long-term investment, which is designed to ensure a stable partnership with the future leading power.

"Program 2018"

So what does this mean for the future of Russia's foreign policy in Putin's fourth term? The foreign policy election "program 2018" by definition cannot include large compromises and deviations from the logic of foreign policy developments of recent years. Hypothetical compromise was only possible with an emergence of a "friendly Trump". That is looking like an ever less likely scenario. Still, the Kremlin has been acting quite carefully with regards to the USA in the past 6-7 months, trying to respond more rationally to US actions, without purposefully exacerbating the situation.

In its policy planning for the near future, the Kremlin, on the one hand, is trying to adequately calculate its resources it can bring to bear in a time of low global oil prices, sanctions and strategic tensions. On the other hand, Russia is still eager to play down any emotional reactions from Washington. There is no need in all this to wait for any seismic shifts from Russia's post-Crimean policy any time soon.

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