

## Russia's Foreign Policy—Current Trajectory and Future Prospects

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### Abstract

A central theme in debates about Russia's foreign and security policy in 2017 has been the role it has played within ongoing international crises, with analysts seeking to discern whether Russia's foreign policy is predominantly a product of ad hoc pragmatism and opportunism or a more systematic and long-term anti-Western perspective. As argued in the article the answer is that it is a mixture of both. The Putin regime is on the one hand seeking to continue playing a pivotal role in individual security crises whilst on the other hand endeavouring to sustain its international position and further broader global alliances, often from a position of weakness.

### Introduction

A central theme in debates about Russia's foreign and security policy in 2017 has been the role it has played within ongoing international crises, notably Syria, North Korea and Ukraine. This has been accompanied by continued focus on Russian interference in the 2016 US election. In both contexts, analysts have often been concerned with adjudicating whether or not Russia is a victor or a loser. Against this background, an important question has become assessing the extent to which Russia's foreign policy is a product of ad hoc pragmatism and opportunism or a more systematic and long-term anti-Western perspective. The answer suggested by this article, it that it is a mixture of both. In spite of the prevalence of concerns about the relative decline of the West and its global influence, Russia—unlike China—does not have the capabilities to set itself up as an effective counter-weight to the US. Instead, echoing Lukyanov, this article suggests that Russia is now focused on creating 'fuzzy alliances and flexible relations', in which it can continue to play a pivotal role within individual issues or crises. However, this selectivity does not represent a substantial long-term challenge to the influence of major powers, such as the US or China. This article will survey Russia's foreign policy across the increasingly diverse relations that the Putin regime is seeking to establish.

### Russia's Relations with the West

The context in which Russia has been most frequently mentioned this year has been the ongoing fallout from the unexpected election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016, and Russia's purported role in this coming to pass. Whilst the Putin regime may have hoped for a renewal in its relations with Washington with Trump in the White House, 2017 has turned into one of the most problematic years in the US–Russia relationship since the end of the Cold War.

Whilst some in the Trump administration, such as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, have continued to argue

that it is the Ukraine factor that is ultimately preventing a normalization of relations between the two sides. In practice, it is virtually impossible to envisage a significant change in relations now that "the Russia factor" has become so central to US domestic political debate about the nature of the Trump administration and the extent to which it was willing to collude with a foreign power to interfere in the American domestic electoral process. As a result, the Russia factor has become poisonous among the domestic political milieu in Washington DC. Indeed, regardless of what the Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russia's meddling in the election uncovers, the scope for a rapprochement in the short term is extremely unlikely. Added to this, as Alexander Gabuev suggests, there's less and less knowledge and expertise in Moscow and Washington DC about one another. This is serving to consolidate the trend of painting one another in simple and antagonistic terms.

Until there is some resolution in the machinations about the election, the Trump administration has its hands tied when it comes to its policy towards Russia. Hence, 2017 has seen the passing of the Russian Sanctions Review Act into law in August and the prospect of a new round of sanctions targeting Russian elites in early 2018, the tit-for-that clampdowns on embassies and expulsions of embassy staff, the US agreement to supply lethal weapons to Ukraine and the labelling of Russia alongside China as the main security threats to the US, over and above terrorism. All in all, the impact of Trump's election to the Presidency thus far has been a further souring of relations, rather than a new start.

Beyond the domestic US context, the wider relationship between Russia and West also remained at an all-time low across 2017. Indeed, as Kortunov suggests, the Russian official position continues to characterize the current choice in world affairs as one between order and chaos, with the West representing chaos, and Russia representing the path towards 'developmental pluralism'. In Europe, whilst the predicted wave of (Russian-backed) populist parties sweeping to power across the

continent did not materialize, concerns remain regarding the ongoing links between populist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe and the Putin regime. Against this background, Russia continues to be seen through the lens of representing a geopolitical threat, with fears mounting about cyber security and information/hybrid warfare challenges emanating from Russia. While the Kremlin views the continued sanctions regime and the build-up of NATO capabilities and forward resilience in Eastern Europe as undermining any amelioration in relations.

### Relations with the Middle East

Russia's role in Syria also remained a prime focus of 2017. In spite of commentators' suggestions at the start of its campaign in 2015 that Russia will inevitably become bogged down in a quagmire, akin to its disastrous campaign in Afghanistan in the 1980s, this has not transpired. From the perspective of the Putin regime, not only has it demonstrated Russia's willingness to use force abroad. It has also demonstrated its ability to take advantage of the West's reluctance to become directly involved in conflicts in recent years, to the end of successfully propping up a regime of its choosing. Indeed, with the Assad regime now on a much surer footing, the Putin regime has hailed its operation on the ground as a success and announced, in November, a drawdown of its military campaign.

Although the intervention has shown Russia's continued ability to play a significant role in a specific security crisis, questions remain as to what lies ahead for the Assad regime. Moscow has sought to promote the Sochi and Astana meetings in parallel to the Geneva talks, in order to position itself as a key broker in any future peace settlement. However, these alternative formats have only served to highlight the difficulties that Russia has in presenting itself as a neutral arbiter, in light of its military intervention on the side of the Assad regime. It has, therefore, struggled to bring all the various parties active in the Syrian crisis to the negotiating table, particularly opposition and rebel groups. Indeed, as Trenin notes, winning the peace in Syria is turning out to be much more problematic than winning the war for Russia.

In addition, Russia does not have the capacity to single-handedly fund a reconstruction and rebuilding plan for Syria, and is thus reliant on Western and regional actors coming on board. This means that in order to capitalize on the short term successes of its military intervention, Russia remains beholden to others in order to establish a stable post-conflict situation. Thus, although having acted militarily to have a big impact on the course of the conflict, Russia is both unwilling and unable to become the predominant power in the wider Middle

East, preferring instead to share the burden for ensuring stability and orders with others.

Alongside its apparent successes in Syria, Russia's policy towards the wider Middle East also garnered significant attention in 2017. Whilst it seeks advantage out of the West's ongoing reluctance to become more actively engaged in the region, Russia, as Kozhanov notes, has adopted a pragmatic and transactional Middle Eastern policy. In this way, it has sought to balance a very diverse and seemingly incompatible set of relations with actors, including Iran, Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, this approach is a product of the Putin regime's recognition that Russia has neither the long-term interests, nor the influence of the US in the region, or even that of the ever growing economic power of China. In this context, Russia follows a policy aimed at drawing short-term benefits through a pragmatic juggling act, but without a concerted, long-term and strategic dimension. Russia is, therefore, unlikely to become a fully engaged power in the Middle East, irrespective of its occasional interventions in individual crises and policy issues.

### Russia's Asia Pivot

During 2017, Russia sought to ensure that it does not become completely marginalized from another major security crisis, namely North Korea. Unlike in Syria, Russia is clearly a second-order player, as compared with the US, China, South Korea or Japan. Nonetheless, Moscow has tried to position itself as a moderating and pacifying influence, at the same time as most closely aligning its position with China. For example, at a news conference after the September BRICS Summit in Xiamen and in the wake of North Korea's sixth missile test, Putin adopted a moderating tone noting that "ramping up military hysteria in such conditions is senseless; it's a dead end [...]". Before posing and answering a question: "What can restore their security? The restoration of international law."

Similarly in response to the North Korean missile test on 14<sup>th</sup> of September, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described their leaders as "hotheads", who needed to "calm down". Lavrov also outlined that: "together with China we'll continue to strive for a reasonable approach and not an emotional one like when children in a kindergarten start fighting and no-one can stop them". This alignment with China, for example by issuing joint statements on North Korea's nuclear testing, is intended to bolster Russia's position within the political negotiation on the crisis.

Russia's attempts to further diversify its relations and reduce its overreliance on the West continued apace in 2017, with much of the focus on what Lukonin calls its 'Eastern policy'. In the main, this has centered on bol-

stering bilateral relations with China. In political, economic and military terms, both Moscow and Beijing have sought to emphasize their ongoing good relations. Xi was treated to a state visit to Russia in July, in which he emphasized that China and Russia are “good neighbors, good friends, and good partners”. In addition, the two sides signed a joint plan in June for military cooperation in 2017–2020, and conducted joint Naval Exercises in the Baltic sea in July and in the sea of Japan in September, together with military exercises in December. Russia is also set to deliver S-400 surface-to-air missile defense systems to China in 2018.

Undoubtedly, Russia is increasingly the junior partner in the relationship, particularly when it comes to trade and economics. Yet, for now at least, the Russian leadership seems to accept this state of affairs. Nonetheless, analysts continue to raise concerns about the increasing asymmetry, divergence and sustainability of this alliance in the long-term. As Niklas Swanström suggests, even if current relations are stable in the short-term, longer-term prospects are ‘for storms’, notably with regard to the growing sinicization of Central Asia. Crucially, it also remains to be seen how far the dialogue about coordinating the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and the China’s Belt & Road Initiative will lead to an understanding that is satisfactory to all parties concerned.

More broadly, Russia’s wider Eastern policy bore mixed results in 2017, with short-term gains masking potential longer-term problems. Whilst on the one hand the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to include Pakistan and India marked a new departure for the organization, this expansion has left the focus, priorities and relevance of this now pan-Asian multilateral framework much less clear. Similarly, there was ongoing cooperation between Russia and India on defense and joint military exercises, but analysts have noted an ever more competitive dynamic within the relationship. This has been fueled by the increasing economic disparity between the two powers. Uncertainty also characterizes Russia’s relationship with Japan, due to ongoing intransigence over the Kuril islands. Although Japan adopted a ‘new approach’ to the dispute, until now it has not borne any fruit, except for bilateral meetings on the sidelines of G20 and Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Russia in September. The talks of a potential rapprochement between the two sides have been complicated by Russia’s decision to designate the islands as a priority development zone, undermining any prospects of joint cooperation on this issue or Japanese firms being allowed to operate on the islands. In addition, Russia has also continued to raise its concerns about the

deployment of American missile-defense systems in South Korea and Japan.

Overall, Russia’s Eastern policy continues to be a very mixed bag of short term gains, but with continued question marks hanging over the future direction of key relationships. This is of significance not only for these respective relationships, but it is also potentially problematic for the associated goal of diversifying Russian foreign policy away from a fractious relationship with the West and towards Asia.

### Regional Dynamics

2017 saw no breakthroughs in the Ukraine crisis. The relationship between Moscow and Kiev remain in a perilous state. The Minsk process remains stalled and military confrontation in Eastern Donbass continues, amid repeated breakdowns in ceasefire talks. While the wider political negotiations have not progressed. The Ukraine crisis remains a major source of tension between Russia and its Western counterparts. This could be seen in the EU’s decision to continue its sanctions regime against Russia and the passing of an agreement in the US to provide Ukraine with lethal weapons.

Although the idea of placing UN peacekeepers along the conflict lines was floated in September and a major prisoner exchange took place in December, nothing has changed in practice. There is little sense the Kremlin has a strategy to extricate itself from the now intractable crisis, particularly now that Ukraine has passed a reintegration bill that labels Russia as an aggressor state. Despite denouncing the bill as undermining the Minsk II accord, the stalemate is becoming a liability for Russia. Indeed, the Ukraine crisis suggests that whilst the Putin regime may be adept at tactical and short term pragmatic victories, it often lacks suitable strategic solutions for crisis resolution in the long-term. Although time will tell if it is successful, Moscow does seem to have a strategy to extricate Russia from the Syrian conflict. However, in Ukraine, the Putin regime seems to have no such strategy, exposing its lack of longer-term strategic thinking.

Undoubtedly, Ukraine remains the key issue for Russian policy in the post-Soviet space. Among the other priorities, Trenin has noted that most focus is currently on Belarus and Kazakhstan, Moscow’s closest regional partners. The ZAPAD 2017 military exercises in September were indicative of this focus. The Putin regime continued to emphasize the development of the Eurasian Economic Union, and continued to discuss the future prospects of creating a common energy market, a single Eurasian sky program, and ongoing talks regarding the signing of free trade agreements with actors such as ASEAN and Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Singapore, and

Serbia and the potential of an economic-trade agreement with China. However, with little change in Russian economy's performance, the decline in the momentum of the project continued in 2017.

### **Conclusion**

In summarizing all of the above, Russia's foreign policy during 2017 can be characterized by a focus on acquiring short-term gains from its role in ongoing international crises, whilst remaining open to new opportunities for increasing its influence in regions further afield. Russia has continued to work to increase its relevance across a divergent set of relations regions (Europe, Middle East,

East Asia, South Asia), at the same time as seeking to turn individual security crises to its advantage. Nonetheless, despite its symbolic image as a major threat to the West, Russia remains a second tier player on the world stage. In recognition of this, the Putin regime adopts a pragmatic and flexible approach. Indeed, when it comes to crisis-politics, Russia can still play a major role on the world stage and impact on how these crises unfold. However, the extent to which Russia will be able to implement a robust and concerted policy across such a diverse set of relationships over the long-term remains unclear.

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