

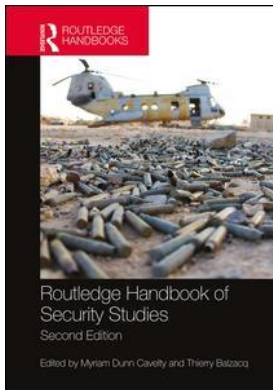
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RUSSIA'S REVIVAL

Jeffrey Mankoff

Russia's February 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and subsequent intervention in support of eastern Ukrainian separatists marked a watershed for Russian foreign policy. This forceful revision of borders confirmed Russia's mounting tendency to view the West as a strategic rival, while highlighting the wide range of diplomatic, economic, and military tools Moscow was willing to employ to secure its interests in its immediate neighbourhood. The crisis over Ukraine was also symptomatic of an estrangement between Moscow and the West that had been mounting for several years. Indeed, Russia has constructed an ideological and historical narrative emphasizing its non-Western identity and supporting the Kremlin's aspiration to become an independent pole in an increasingly multipolar global order. In so doing, Vladimir Putin's Russia has precipitated what is likely to be a long-running stand-off with the West that deepens Russian dependence on China and creates increased political uncertainty within Russia itself.

When the Cold War ended, elites in both Russia and the West largely assumed that Russia, like its post-Communist neighbours, would follow a natural progression to democracy and inclusion in Western liberal institutions (Carothers 2002; Stent 2015: 35–48). Rather than converging with the West though, by the mid-1990s Russia increasingly began portraying the West as an 'other', despite cooperation in the context of the war in Afghanistan and the West's broader efforts to combat Islamic extremism, not to mention the old standby of strategic arms control.

At the same time, Moscow increasingly objected to its exclusion from the NATO-centric European security order, as well as to Washington's willingness to use force in pursuit of its own interests – whether in Yugoslavia, Iraq, or elsewhere – without regard for international law or the concerns of other major powers. The inability to constrain US military action reflected Russia's diminished stature, and would become an important theme in subsequent discussions about the need to restore Russian greatness.

These twin challenges converged in the post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and (to a lesser degree) Central Asia, a region Moscow continues to view as a zone of Russian special interest. Political transitions in these states have tended to correlate with efforts to move closer to the West through institutional ties, or even membership, in the European Union (EU) and NATO. The post-Soviet region has consequently been the site of the most serious crises in relations between Russia and the West, including the 2008 war in Georgia as well as the more recent Ukraine conflict.

Accelerating Russia's estrangement from the West has been the failure of Russia's own democratic experiment, which has left Moscow wary of the West as a values-driven collective intent on spreading its own norms abroad, often at the expense of stability. Meanwhile, high oil prices and Russia's recovery from the economic and political chaos of the 1990s fed a renewed sense of confidence. Economic and political difficulties within the West, most notably following the 2008 financial crisis, reinforced Russian elites' belief about the limitations of the Western liberal democratic model, while increasing the attractiveness of Chinese-style authoritarian capitalism.

The emergence of an increasingly dissatisfied middle class within Russia, which took to the streets in large numbers to protest against rigged parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011–12, accelerated the Kremlin's embrace of nationalist, anti-Western ideology as a means of reinforcing its own legitimacy. Putin now faces a dilemma largely of his own making: his domestic legitimacy increasingly requires a confrontational approach to Western influence in the post-Soviet region, but escalating confrontation risks an expansion of Western economic, political, and military countermeasures that Russia has limited capacity to endure.

This chapter starts with an overview of Russia's stark political and economic decline after the end of the Cold War. It continues with an analysis of the restoration of political stability in the following decade under Putin, which led to an increasingly assertive, self-confident Russian foreign policy, and goes on to describe the unfolding confrontation between Russia and the West, centred on Ukraine. It argues that the main challenges for the West in dealing with Moscow lie in halting Russian efforts to upend the post-Cold War liberal international order while keeping the door open to re-engagement once the immediate crisis has passed.

Decline: the 1990s

Russia's political and economic decline after the fall of the Soviet Union was stark. The Soviet command economy was dismantled almost immediately. Former officials, especially from the security services, manoeuvred to seize control of many of the most lucrative assets for themselves, creating a new class of oligarchs whose reach extended from business into politics (Dawisha 2015: 13–36). Oligarchic capitalism entailed corruption on a massive scale, which, along with mounting unemployment, high inflation, and pervasive gangland violence, led many Russians to look back nostalgically to the stability of the Soviet Union. This chaos and corruption undermined the legitimacy of President Boris Yeltsin's government, as well as for many Russians the very concept of liberal democracy.

During the early 1990s, inflation reached over 2,400 per cent per year. Another bout of high inflation following the 1998 financial crisis then crippled the nascent middle class that had begun to emerge from the wreckage. According to the State Statistics Committee (*Goskomstat*), unemployment during Yeltsin's final year in power was 13.3 per cent, though the real figure may have been nearly twice as high (Rosenfelde 2000: 1437–8). Meanwhile, the incomplete privatization of many large firms (which remained a drain on the state budget), coupled with the drying up of markets for Russia's uncompetitive exports, left the country badly indebted to foreign creditors (O'Donnell 2006).

The impression of decline that such economic difficulties conveyed was exacerbated by Russia's geopolitical retreat. With the end of the Cold War, Russia lost the empire it had controlled within the Soviet Union, as well as the extended empire of the Warsaw Pact and the international Communist bloc. The Soviet Union itself fragmented into fifteen independent states. Russia was reduced to its smallest territorial extent since the early modern period. The Warsaw Pact states, which had served the USSR as a strategic glacis against the West, threw off

their Communist leadership and clamoured, many successfully, for admission to NATO and the European Union. Moscow's most important satellite – East Germany – vanished from the map entirely, swallowed up by capitalist West Germany. Soviet proxies around the globe either vanished (South Yemen) or made their peace with the triumph of capitalism (Vietnam).

Even the integrity of the Russian Federation was threatened during the 1990s. The two wars in Chechnya (1994–6 and 1999–2006) exposed not only the Russian military's decline, but also the strong centrifugal tendencies at work in a country with a weak central government and a wide range of ethnic groups inhabiting its territory. While Chechnya represented the most extreme manifestation of Russia's fragmentation, other regional governments also asserted extensive autonomy from the Kremlin (Erlanger 1992; Teague 1994).

Powerful economic actors, including state-owned companies like gas monopoly Gazprom, also operated largely independently of Kremlin control. Gazprom placed its own people in important positions in the upper reaches of the Russian government and controlled access to Russia's network of gas export pipelines, while blocking Kremlin attempts to impose restructuring on the company, despite the fact that the state remained its largest shareholder (Stulberg 2007: 68–9). Other oligarchs, including the notorious Boris Berezovsky, who served as deputy head of the Russian Security Council, used their connections to Yeltsin and their domination of the media to promote their own economic interests.

Revival: the 2000s

The beginning of Russia's global resurgence largely coincided with the start of Vladimir Putin's first term in the Kremlin. If the 1990s in Russia were a time of upheaval and decline, the subsequent decade saw the restoration of political stability and an increasingly assertive, self-confident foreign policy. Aided by rising oil prices, Putin presented a stark contrast to the erratic and often seriously ill Yeltsin. By re-establishing Kremlin control over the bureaucracy, the Duma, the media, local elites, and big business, Putin reversed much of Russia's Yeltsin-era fragmentation. This consolidation of power allowed the Kremlin to pursue a more ambitious role on the world stage.

One of Putin's major initiatives was to reassert Kremlin authority over both regional elites and powerful economic actors. This process, which Putin termed 'restoring the power vertical', led to the appointment of powerful presidential envoys to seven newly created 'super-regions' as early as 2000. Agreements between Moscow and the regions were renegotiated, limiting the ability of local officials to conduct their own foreign policy (*Izvestiya*, 2005). Apart from the centralization of power, Russia's revival in the first decade of the twenty-first century had much to do with events beyond the Kremlin's control. The most obvious reason was the dramatic increase in world energy prices in the years up to 2008. When Putin came to power at the beginning of 2000, oil prices hovered around US\$10 per barrel. Eight years later, when Dmitry Medvedev became president, oil was trading at over US\$120 per barrel. Thanks to the resulting influx of wealth, Moscow had paid off its foreign debts by 2003, and amassed the third-largest foreign currency reserves in the world (a total of US\$476 billion) by 2008.

Not only do oil and gas help to fill the Russian treasury, but Moscow's control of the infrastructure to move energy from Russia and Central Asia to Europe and, in the future, East Asia gives it significant leverage over both producers and consumers through its ability to manipulate prices and supplies. Control of energy transit has been a key piece of Russian influence in Ukraine. In both 2006 and 2009, payment disputes, underpinned by Ukraine's efforts to move closer to the West, led Moscow to cut deliveries through gas pipelines across Ukrainian territory, prompting shortages both within Ukraine and in Europe. Following Ukraine's 2013 Maidan revolution, Moscow sought to end gas transit through Ukraine entirely by constructing

a new bypass pipeline, dubbed South Stream, and when that project collapsed, Turkish Stream, beneath the Black Sea to Turkey (Farchy and Dombey 2015; Gazprom 2015).

Unfortunately for Russia, the limits of this growth model were already becoming clear even before the onset of the crisis in Ukraine and the resulting Western sanctions. Russia's economic performance is more dependent on fluctuations in the oil price than even most other petro-states (Hanson 2015: 17), and the decline of oil prices from more than \$110 per barrel in mid-2014 to around \$60 per barrel a year later badly dented Russian growth projections (Central Bank of Russia 2015).

Higher oil prices allowed Russia to avoid addressing the deeper systemic problems that have long handicapped its economic performance. These include contingent property rights, weak rule of law, corruption, and the overweening role of the state (and well-connected oligarchs) across the leading sectors of the Russian economy. Despite still-significant foreign currency reserves, under-investment, capital flight, and high levels of corporate debt continue to weigh down prospects for sustainable growth. The sanctions imposed following Moscow's annexation of Crimea have added to the difficulties and provided the Kremlin a scapegoat for the downturn, but also serve to obscure the deeper structural problems Russia faces.

The 2010s: Russia in a multipolar world

The Soviet collapse had left the US as the world's sole superpower. Over the course of the ensuing two decades, the emergence of new power centres, particularly in East Asia, coupled with the US' own economic and political difficulties, contributed to the replacement of unipolarity by a more complex international system. Despite the diffusion of power in the twenty-first century and the alleged passing of Western hegemony, Putin accuses Washington of still 'trying to establish a unipolar world' that leaves no space for other great powers (Putin 2015). Carving out space for Russia to act as an independent great power, especially in its own neighbourhood, has been the primary goal of Russian foreign policy under Putin.

The belief that the West's era of global dominance is over facilitates the more independent foreign policy course Putin's Russia has pursued. This course mixes bandwagoning with balancing, emphasizes non-Western multilateral blocs like the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) forum and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and often treats Asia as at least a potential counterweight to the liberal powers of the US and Europe. Russian elites have long sought such an autonomous foreign policy for their country, but the West's difficulties in the years since the financial crisis, coupled with the Kremlin's comparative success in ensuring political and economic stability while bolstering its hard and soft power tools have allowed it increasingly to act on those preferences.

Russia's vision of the global order emphasizes the interaction of sovereign states as the basis for international relations. Yet, as its interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere demonstrate, it does not regard all states as equally sovereign. Rather, Moscow's approach to foreign policy focuses on the role of a handful of great powers, particularly Russia, the United States, and China, which collectively shape the international system. While Russian strategy documents give passing reference to transnational challenges such as stateless terrorist groups, criminal networks, and global economic imbalances, their focus remains heavily state-centric (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014).

Moscow points to the UN Security Council, where it continues to hold a veto, as the principal arbiter of international law, and frequently criticizes the US for actions affecting international peace and security taken without Security Council approval, such as the bombing of Yugoslavia or the invasion of Iraq. Putin and other Russian officials charge that Washington's unwillingness to respect the interests of other powers is among the major sources of global instability

(Putin 2007). At the same time, Moscow points to Western actions as justifications for its own violations of international law: the West used military force to secure Kosovo's independence, ergo Russia is justified in using force to secure the 'independence' of South Ossetia and Abkhazia or the annexation of Crimea (Putin 2014).

During the early post-Soviet period, Russian and foreign elites largely assumed Russia would follow the same path of liberalization and democratization pursued by its onetime Eastern European satellites, with Moscow ultimately assimilating into the liberal-democratic West. Always a questionable proposition given Russia's vastly different historical experience and failure to fully reckon with its Soviet past, the notion of Russia 'joining' the West has become increasingly improbable during the Putin years. Rather, the emphasis on Russia's role as an independent great power, at the head of a distinct Eurasian bloc, has gained traction. The conflict in Ukraine, which began over Kyiv's efforts to deepen political and economic ties with the European Union, at once reflected this view of the West and Russia/Eurasia as separate, incompatible blocs, and reinforced the division between them by unleashing the most serious European security crisis since the end of the Cold War.

To give this emphasis on Russia as an independent pole in a multipolar global order an intellectual foundation, the Kremlin has actively appropriated the ideas and rhetoric of Eurasianism, a doctrine originating among the White Russian émigrés who fled the early Soviet Union. According to Eurasianist ideologues like Moscow State University professor Aleksandr Dugin, Russia is destined by its historical, cultural, and possibly even biological legacy to remain apart from the liberal West (Barbashin and Thoburn 2014; Laruelle 2012). The implication of Eurasianism is that Russia constitutes the centre of a separate Eurasian civilization that encompasses, at a minimum, the rest of the former Soviet Union, and should behave as an equal analogue to the US-dominated West and what is likely to be an increasingly Sino-centric Asia. Putin and other Russian officials emphasize a growing ideological and cultural rift with the West (with LGBT rights as an important proxy) to provide legitimacy for this project of establishing a separate Eurasian political-economic bloc (Putin 2013).

The most visible embodiment of this Eurasian ideal is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a centrepiece of Putin's campaign to return to the Kremlin in 2012. According to Putin's pre-election essay on the subject, the EEU would be 'a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and serving as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region' (Putin 2011). Starting with a customs union among Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, the EEU was designed to gradually take on additional supranational powers, which were to be vested in a Eurasian Economic Commission that Moscow dominated. In addition to deepening the EEU, Moscow also sought to broaden it by bringing in new members from the former Soviet Union.

With Brussels strengthening its own engagement with Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus through its European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership (EaP) Programme, Moscow used its political and economic leverage to press these states to eschew Europe in favour of this new Eurasia. Such strong-arming compelled Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan to abruptly revoke his commitment to sign an association agreement with the EU in favour of joining the EEU in late 2013. Similar efforts with Ukraine backfired spectacularly, as then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to back out of an already negotiated EU association agreement spawned the protests that eventually led to his being ousted and Russian military intervention. Moscow had marginally more success in Central Asia, convincing Kyrgyzstan to join the EEU in mid-2015 and getting Tajikistan to indicate that it would likely join in the future (Michel 2015; Schottenfeld 2015).

Whatever the EEU's ultimate impact on trade and investment, Moscow's support for Eurasian integration owes more to geopolitics than to economic efficiency. As Putin noted in his pre-election essay, Moscow sees the Union as both a pole and a bridge. Russian elites are largely

united in their conviction that the unipolar moment in modern history is over, its demise accelerated by the global financial crisis that struck Europe and the United States in 2008–09. In the ensuing multipolar world, Russia must take steps to ensure that it remains a pillar of the new global order. Integration in this sense is about establishing Eurasia, with Russia at its centre, as one pole of an international system dominated by a concert of major powers, while ensuring that former Russian dependencies in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia do not enter the orbit of competing powers.

Between West and East

Even before the creation of the EEU, the post-Soviet region had become the biggest flash-point in relations between Russia and the West. Moscow continues to assert that it maintains 'privileged interests' across the former Soviet Union (Medvedev 2008). While Moscow never fully renounced its claim to supremacy in the 'Near Abroad', Russian attention to the region increased dramatically as a result of political upheaval in several post-Soviet states, above all the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine. The Orange Revolution, along with similar 'coloured revolutions' in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, and serious unrest that shook the government in Uzbekistan, demonstrated that the rule of post-Soviet strongmen faced a crisis of legitimacy, and Russian elites feared that similar discontent could threaten their own rule.

They also saw Russia's influence over its former empire slipping away, since the new regimes in Tbilisi and Kyiv were strongly pro-Western and supported membership in NATO (Trenin 2005). The Kremlin thus came to see pro-democracy movements as a kind of stalking horse for the expansion of Western influence. Consequently, Russian foreign policy in the former Soviet bloc increasingly came to focus on preserving the post-Soviet status quo, where corrupt, secular, largely Russian-speaking elites continue to dominate business and politics – as well as stopping or slowing the drift of former Soviet republics into Western-dominated institutions like NATO.

In part, this strategy has entailed supporting pro-Russian politicians, as well as separatist movements in places like Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Crimea – regardless of the fact that doing so violates the principle of state sovereignty that the Kremlin defends elsewhere. The push for Eurasian integration is another element in this strategy for consolidating Russian influence across the post-Soviet region. Of course, Russia has also turned to direct military intervention, both in Georgia and Ukraine, as a means of maintaining Russian influence and limiting the drift of these post-Soviet states into the West (Mankoff 2014).

In resisting the West's perceived attempts to dictate the functioning of the post-Cold War world unilaterally, Russia has also increasingly sought backing from China, both bilaterally and through institutions like the SCO. China is in many ways a natural economic partner for Russia given its large, rapidly growing, and resource-hungry economy. During Putin's time in power, China has emerged as Russia's largest individual trading partner. An authoritarian state increasingly hostile to both Western-style liberalism and US power, China has also come to back Russia on a range of contentious international issues, from the war in Iraq to opposing US democracy promotion efforts.

China's salience has further increased as Russia's relations with the West have deteriorated over the past few years. Moscow promotes its 'comprehensive strategic partnership' with Beijing in part as a means of demonstrating to Western audiences that it has other alternatives, especially in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis and the West's active efforts to isolate Russia through sanctions. Fearing the impact of sanctions, Moscow has turned to Beijing as an outlet for its energy. Moscow and Beijing have also increased their military cooperation in the form of Russian weapons sales, as well as joint exercises. Russia has also worked with China to establish new

international institutions like the BRICS forum (and its in-house development bank) that can act as a counterweight to Western-dominated bodies such as the World Bank and IMF.

Yet using China as a counterweight to the West remains problematic. China's economy is much more dynamic than Russia's, and many Russians fear being relegated to the status of junior partner. More immediately, Russia's isolation from the West has raised the cost of Chinese cooperation. A major Sino-Russian gas deal, which had been under negotiation for more than a decade, was finally signed in May 2014 after the West had imposed sanctions on the Russian energy industry. Yet the agreement was reported to tilt heavily in China's favour, as Russia found itself with little choice other than to accept Chinese terms (Johnson 2015). Similarly, Russia appears to have swallowed its longstanding concerns about China's growing military power and resumed large-scale arms sales (Schwartz 2015).

Nor can partnership with China aid Russia's quest to be accepted as a responsible global player or member in key international organizations. At best, Russia and China can work to set up alternative international institutions, such as the BRICS forum or the SCO, which are defined primarily by their aspirations to rebalance the international system for the benefit of their members, rather than their ability to solve major international challenges.

The challenge for the West: conclusion and outlook

Russia's leaders have long seen the world order forged at the end of the Cold War as one that excludes them from any meaningful role (Simes 2007; Trenin 2006). Western policy for most of the twenty-first century has focused on seeking Russia's ultimate reconciliation with that order. With Moscow's offensive in Ukraine, coupled with the Eurasianist challenge to Western liberal values, and growing authoritarianism within Russia itself, the project of reconciliation may have to take a back seat to efforts aimed at checking Russian efforts to overturn the status quo by force.

It remains tempting to invoke the containment strategy that facilitated the West's Cold War victory, but the effort needed this time will be different, on a smaller scale and only one priority among many in an increasingly complex world. While checking Russia's revisionist ambitions is a necessary step in the short run, it should not preclude longer-term efforts to anchor a more liberal, modernized Russia into the existing global order (Brzezinski 2012), nor prevent the West from focusing on other pressing challenges.

Notwithstanding economic weakness at home and increasing isolation abroad, Russia remains a revisionist power, at least in Europe and the post-Soviet region. Ukraine lies on the front line of the confrontation, but Russian ambitions are not confined to keeping Ukraine out of the hand of the West. Other post-Soviet states including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova also face varying amounts of Russian pressure to limit their drift towards the West.

Even the Baltic States, which have been members of the European Union and NATO for over a decade now, face increased political and economic pressure from Moscow, including efforts to leverage Russian minorities and to call into question the efficacy of NATO security guarantees (Kara-Murza 2015). Russian-style soft power, which encompasses support for political parties and quasi-NGOs promoting Kremlin-friendly policies as well as manipulation of the media (including social media) extends into the heart of Europe as well. Motivating the deployment of these tools are a set of objectives that harken back to the Soviet past: undermining Western cohesion and transatlantic unity, obtaining recognition of a sphere of influence along Russian borders, and weakening US global leadership (Pomerantsev 2015; Snyder 2014).

In contrast to the Cold War, the West's confrontation with Russia is regional more than global. Indeed, Russia remains open to some degree of collaboration with Washington and Brussels, mainly on issues outside the European and Eurasian space. The Obama Administration's push for

a nuclear deal with Iran, as well as its attempts to manage the fallout of the conflict in Syria, have involved efforts to cultivate Russian assistance. Not only does Russia have at least some interests in common with the West in places like Iran and Syria; this openness to collaboration is a useful bargaining chip: the value of Russian assistance elsewhere helps limit the Western appetite for confrontation in Ukraine or elsewhere in the region. The challenge for Western policy is thus to check Russian efforts at overturning the post-1991 status quo in Europe and Eurasia, but in a way that minimizes the spillover effects on other priorities, and that leaves open the door to reconciliation with a post-Putin Russia that embraces its role as a responsible global stakeholder.

Ukraine, of course, is the immediate priority. Helping Ukraine succeed – in the sense of avoiding economic and political collapse, supporting its territorial integrity (likely without Crimea at least for now) while preserving its ability to choose its own international engagements – should be the top priority for US and European policy in the short term. The challenge, of course, is enormous given the scale of Ukraine's debts and the governance failures of the past two-plus decades, not to mention Russia's active campaign to undermine Ukrainian statehood.

Unfortunately, having Ukraine as a festering sore on the edge of Europe is a recipe for not only continued suffering, but also for continuing confrontation between Russia and the West. Russian success on the Ukrainian front will only encourage an increasingly isolated, paranoid Kremlin to seek other victories, not just out of a sense of grievance at the West, but also as a means of mobilizing domestic support as the Russian economy faces long-term stagnation (Rogov 2015). Limiting prospects for the confrontation with Russia to spread requires greater Western efforts, and greater Western resources, in Ukraine.

At the same time, the West needs to do more to insulate itself politically, economically, militarily, and ideologically, from Russian efforts to manipulate information and sow dissension. After a decade-plus of focusing on out-of-area operations in places like Afghanistan, NATO is again starting to take its mission of European security seriously. The West has been slow however to target Russian corruption in a systematic way, despite the role that corruption plays both in sustaining Putin's rule at home and as a transmission belt for Russian influence abroad. Despite much discussion about the Kremlin's weaponization of information, Europe and the US have taken few steps to push back against Russian-sponsored disinformation campaigns. One area where progress has been made is energy. European efforts to weaken Gazprom's monopoly power through legal and regulatory manoeuvres is bearing fruit, though the now suspended push to build the Turkish Stream pipeline and cut out Ukraine as a transit state show that Moscow continues looking for ways to maximize its energy leverage.

While seeking to reinforce Ukraine and deter Russian revisionism elsewhere, the West needs to be careful not to fall too far into a Cold War-style mindset. Quarantining Russia behind a new Iron Curtain will not work in the long run; nor does the West have the resources to carry out a full-bore containment policy without sacrificing other, higher priorities, such as stabilizing the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring and carrying out the United States' 'pivot' to Asia. It also risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, reinforcing the Kremlin's autarkic tendencies and reducing its incentive to search for a *modus vivendi* with the West. Already, many Russian officials view the West's sanctions as a means of promoting regime change, and believe the West will not stop until Putin is ousted (TASS 2015).

Putin's intervention in Ukraine and the growing confrontation with the West has exacerbated uncertainty within Russia itself as well. Without durable institutions or alternative centres of power, Russia's near-term future depends more and more on a single individual. Facing mounting economic challenges and a confrontation that, over the longer term, it lacks the resources to pursue, Putin's Russia is trapped. Without political change, it appears condemned to decline both economically and geopolitically despite Russia's increasing active foreign policy in Ukraine as well as Syria.

In this Russia, political change is unlikely to come smoothly, but it will come – and perhaps sooner than is commonly recognized. When it does, many Russians from outside the current elite, including those who seek a more hopeful, more democratic future for their country, will have a new opportunity to shape Russian politics and foreign policy. The West needs to be careful not to alienate them, and to continue reaching out to Russian society even as it seeks to isolate the Kremlin and its cronies.

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