

Cold War 2.0

Foreword

In October 2016 John Sawers, a former MI6 chief, told BBC that the world was entering an era possibly “more dangerous” than the Cold War, as “we do not have that focus on a strategic relationship between Moscow and Washington”.

Lt. Gen. Eugeny Buzhinsky, head of PIR Centre, a Moscow Think Tank, did maintain: “If we talk about the last Cold War, we are currently somewhere between the erection of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis but without the mechanisms to manage the confrontation”.

The West quite too often forgets that the reunification of Germany was achieved thanks to the “gentlemen agreement” between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. Such agreement envisaged that NATO and the European Union (EU) would never be bordering Russia's territory.

After losing the Cold War, Putin has seen NATO and the EU incorporate all of Eastern Europe that Russia had vacated, and three former republics of the USSR itself. Russia is now witnessing a further attempt to bring three more former Soviet republics – Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine – into NATO and, consequently, into the EU.

The US quite too often forget that they did not enter World War I in 1915 after the sinking of Lusitania but only in 1917, following the German proposal to Mexico to ally itself with Germany. And what if Russia were to propose today a similar agreement to Mexico, Cuba, and most of South America? So, why Putin should see NATO's inexorable eastward march as an extended “hand of partnership”?

Current situation

4,000 NATO troops, including two US battalions, are being moved into Poland and the Baltic States, right on Russia's border. That should constitute the answer to the Russia's "extraordinary provocative behaviour" in conducting exercises right along its own borders. But how are Russians troops deploying inside Russia "provocative", while US troops on Russia's borders are not?

From the Baltic to the Black Sea, we are already witnessing a worrying increase in the number of close military encounters between warships and jets belonging to the Russian Federation and NATO Allies. Such encounters increase the risk of miscalculation or unintended incidents that could lead to escalation of tension and even direct confrontation.

While the public opinion in Germany, Italy and France oppose military action against Russia, we should try to see the world from Russia' point of view. The Soviet Union, once a global superpower at strategic parity with the US, after losing 1/3 of its territory and half its population is now divided into 15 nations. The Black Sea, once a Soviet lake, has now on its shore a pro-western Ukraine, a hostile Georgia, and 2 former Warsaw Pact allies, Bulgaria and Romania, now NATO members.

Many experts and officials are now of the opinion that US and Russia are a step closer to war, while others say they are already engaged in a war thanks to the Syrian conflict. The war in Syria (where both are trying to destroy Islamic State via different approaches) may be considered a proxy war where proxy allies are, for Russia, the Syrian regime led by President Assad and for the US, rebels fighting against Assad.

The problem is that any open military conflict between Russia and US could escalate to a nightmare scenario: an open nuclear confrontation where there are no winners. The Russian aircraft carrier "Admiral Kuznetsov" and a fleet of Russian warship are now in the Mediterranean ready to reinforce Aleppo. A further potential flashpoint, beside Syria and the Baltic, is Eastern Ukraine where Russia continues to supply the separatists republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. So, through this show of force and determination, what could be Moscow asking for? Probably a bargain overturning an unfair post-Cold War settlement. But the roll back of US and NATO, unlikely under the Obama administration, could now take place with the next US President, Donald Trump.

Russia, US, NATO and China

The Russian Foreign Ministry accused the US of operating a “scorched earth” policy in its approach to Russia and of blocking the release of money from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to projects in Russia. On the opposite side, in addition to Hilary Clinton accusations that Russia hacked America elections systems to influence the vote, Washington accused Moscow of abruptly leaving a nuclear security pact and of moving nuclear-capable missiles to the edge of NATO territory in Europe. The friction between Moscow and Washington led Mikhail Gorbachev to make a plea for dialogue and de-escalation and to renew dialogue. The risk is the possibility of a building tit-for-tat dynamic developing at a time when channels of communication between the two capitals are frozen.

Putin wants a new Russia's global role by limiting America's world leadership role, by curbing the US attempt for a regime change in Russia, and by showing that Russia too can use military force to achieve foreign policy goals. In order to demonstrate this Moscow is ready to escalate on other fronts if on one front is not getting what it wants. Moscow could also reignite frozen conflicts in Europe, taking on other regional interventions or even aligning with China to support Beijing's aspirations for dominance in the South China Sea and in the Pacific Ocean at the expense of the US.

In the event Hillary Clinton had won the presidential election and before taking office (20th January), Russia would have had available a couple of months (where nothing much is going to happen in the US) to take advantage of that. Now the relationship USA – Russia, with President-elect Donald Trump, is likely to improve.

Russia and the US

Russia recently held its largest civil defense drills since the collapse of the USSR, with what officials said were 40 millions people rehearsing a response to chemical and nuclear threat.

In the event of a nuclear confrontation, the US reserve for themselves a “first-strike” nuclear capability, which Hillary Clinton fully supported, while Donald Trump doesn't. The problem is that the US have probably already lost the arms race, having indulged in trillions of dollars of wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya. It appears that now the US cannot adequately defend themselves with their obsolete missiles against the ICBMs of Russia which, instead, appears to have sealed its airspace. So, why is the US threatening Russia almost on a daily basis? If it is a real bluff, the European US allies will have nowhere to go if that bluff is called. In fact the Russians appear to have secretly heavily resorted to their federal budget, lulling the West into thinking that Russia could not afford a massive military build-up, while the CIA was awaiting the “inevitable” Russia collapse.

The West needs a new approach

Putin warned that Russia would no longer tolerate NATO saying: “If you press the spring it will release at some point. That is something you should remember”.

The post-cold war era is over but a new era began: Cold War 2.0, different in character, but potentially as menacing and founded not just on competing interests but competing values. And the West is now paying the price for an error of assessment that gave Westerners a feeling of comfort for two decades: the belief that the fall of the Berlin Wall meant the world had come to a moment of ideological resolution after seven decades of communist rule.

It is time to acknowledge that the West must take its share of the blame for the collapse of relations. The mistakes are real, notably: the scale of NATO expansion to the East and in the Baltic; duping Russia into accepting the 2011 UN Security Council Resolution on Libya, by using it to cover for regime change; the combination in 2013 of a deep free trade agreement with Ukraine with the internal unrest facing President Putin on his return to office, and the perception of greater reticence in western foreign policy.

Putin could now make the most of a moment of peculiar western vulnerability, with the US absorbed by the aftermath of a surreal presidential election, France and Germany (may be also Italy) facing elections next year, Secretary of State Kerry soon to leave office and a change of leadership at the UN (Ban Ki Moon replaced by Guterres). In fact Putin has sympathisers on the French right, including Front National leader Marine Le Pen and former President Nicolas Sarkozy. In Germany, where the contest over Russia and sanctions has been most intense, Putin can also exploit divisions, with the SPD manoeuvring as the party of détente and knowing this will be electorally popular, particularly in the old East Germany. In the UK Tony Brenton, former ambassador to Moscow, maintains that the post-war international system no longer works, having the West failed with Russia and failing currently with China, with the chance of a new cold war between the US and China with increased military activity in the South China Sea and with the US deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea.

The West has to moderate its own ambitions by defending and protecting its own interests but avoiding telling other countries (Russia in particular) how they should behave. On Syria there is not a lot the West can achieve. Putin's goal is to gain a clear military victory in Aleppo so he can negotiate with the US and its allies from a position of strength.

Considerations

Throughout his presidency, Barack Obama has viewed Russia largely through the prism of its ailing economy, considering Moscow a weak adversary trying to compensate for its impotence with shows of military bravado. According to Obama “Putin was pursuing 19th century policies with 20th century weapons in the 21st century”. Only more recently he has adjusted his rhetoric to claim Putin was over-stretching Moscow's capacity and would ultimately become trapped in Syria's “quagmire” as the US were trapped in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, Russia is likely to remain a US strategic rival at least as long as Putin is in power while the US cannot rebalance to Asia away from Europe or the Middle East,

being only able to play a weak hand in Syria trying to limit and contain Russian influence.

In such scenario Europe, a bit player sheepishly following the US, is absent due to the structural weakness of its depoliticized and acephalous integration thus marking the end of its moral exceptionalism. The EU is just tasked by the US to identify new sanctions possibly targeting the Russian individuals responsible for the policies designed to destabilise the EU's eastern neighbours, by going after Putin's wealth and the wealth of his country. As a consequence, whereas in the past the Russians considered themselves European, they now realize that they are a distinct civilization subject to concerted western efforts to destroy it, notwithstanding Moscow being the "Third Rome" after Rome and Constantinople.

If separatists divide Eastern Ukraine the West will have to resign itself to that development. If that happens, then Russia will have succeeded with its strategy for the third time since the end of the Soviet Union. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, breakaway republics of Georgia, are under Russia control as is the Transnistria region of Moldova. The consequences being that neither country is able to join NATO because any candidate must have previously resolved all border disputes with its neighbours prior to accession.

Russians are tired to see US, its media (sometimes referred to as presstitutes), and European vassal states using the same propagandistic lies/accusations against Russia and Putin as were used against Iraq and Saddam Hussein, Libya and Qaddafi, Syria and Assad, and Iran. Washington is fearful of the rise of Russia and China, of the leadership demonstrated by Putin, of the formation of new organizations independent of Washington such as the BRICS. Washington knows that Russia cannot be turned into a vassal state as long as Putin is in office. Therefore, the demonization of Putin and plots against him has continued. Hopefully, as already declared, Donald Trump will stop such dangerous game.

Conclusions

It is self-evident that Russia experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet bloc as a downgrade. A new balance, based on less confrontation and more on cooperation, unfortunately has not spontaneously emerged from the rubble of the cold war. Russia has no illusion that Europe is capable of an independent foreign policy. Putin has publicly stated that diplomacy with Europe is pointless because European politicians represent US interests, not Europe's.

The Russian and Chinese governments both understand that their existence is threatened by US hegemonic ambitions. In order to defeat US plans to marginalize them, Russia and China, the Bear and the Dragon, could decide to unify their economies into one and possibly join their military commands, moving together on the economic and military fronts. Should that happen, the starting point could be the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), comprehensive of Russia and China and, from 2017, also of India and Pakistan (with Iran likely to follow up soon). SCO, emerged as an anti-US bulwark in Central Asia, is already achieving economic cooperation, intelligence sharing, military and counter-terrorism cooperation.

It is also possible that the US Dollar along with the Yen and the Euro could experience a serious drop in exchange value if Russia, China and other countries move away from the use of the dollar to settle the international accounts, if Russia develops an alternative to the SWIFT financial network (the international banking payment system), if the BRICS develop alternatives to IMF and World Bank. Russia could also refuse to sell natural gas to NATO members (causing much damage to European industry and bank failures) while China, holding a very large amount of dollar-denominated financial assets, can dump the equivalent of Quantitative Easing (QE) in a few minutes thus causing the dollar to collapse. Russian natural resources are essential in the West for keeping lights on and houses heated, for flying airliners and a lot of other things: ¼ of the light bulbs in the US light thanks to Russian nuclear fuel, whereas a cut-off of Russian gas to Europe would be a catastrophe (freezing out the Europeans similarly to the Armies of Napoleon and Hitler which had to withdraw defeated and frozen).

Moscow wants respect and border security. The US has no reason to deny the first or challenge the second. Yet from expansion of NATO to

dismemberment of Serbia to treatment of Georgia and Ukraine as allies, the US and Europe have increased Russia insecurity.

Bottom line is: the US desperately need foreign-policy leadership willing to set priorities, able to distinguish between vital and minor interests, willing to acknowledge US failures and limitations.

As for the EU, it appears at once impotent, alarmed and perplexed. Europe needs Russia more than vice versa. The question is whether the other side has not already long since bolted the door.

As for Putin, he could just consolidate his gains and wait for US initiatives (or mistakes) to exploit. He does not need to push harder: if successful he could go down as Russia's Bismarck.

The last mention is for President Obama: although ready to leave, he has to realize that, at this stage, he cannot be considered the smartest man in the room while Putin, having a real smart and long term program, is not playing checkers but chess. President Obama may have achieved limited success in domestic politics but he has to score only failures in foreign policy: it is now up to Donald Trump to remedy this dramatic situation and avoid a possible and dangerous military confrontation.