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RUSSIA CHALLENGES THE WEST: 2014–2018

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Russia Challenges the West: 2014–2018

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Introduction

Since the annexation of Crimea and the instigation of the Russia-backed conflict in Ukraine in 2014, the relationship between Russia and the West has been spiralling downwards. The regional implications of the dramatic 2014/ 2015 events seem clear: With a Russia-sponsored conflict on its territory, Ukraine is still struggling to consolidate the state and the nation. It has irrevocably drifted out of the proclaimed “Russian world” (*russskii mir*), however, and established a stronger sense of Ukrainian identity.² Russia has – by holding on to the Black Sea fleet in Crimea – regained influence in the Middle East and the Black Sea regions and has backed the Assad-regime in Syria by engaging in a protracted military support mission from 2015 and onwards. In the period from Putin’s belligerent speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2015 to March 2016, Russian military forces engaged in more than 9,000 air missions over Syrian territory. In fighting ISIL forces in Syria, the Russian military machine fired cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea into targets in Syria.³

The emergence of confrontational great power politics around Syria and Ukraine has engendered a proliferation of distrust in the efficacy of liberal and global security institutions, and also extensive apprehensions over Russia’s influence in the domestic policies of EU countries and the USA.⁴ Russia’s military posture has been confronted in numerous extraordinary meetings in the UN Security Council addressing both the conflict in Ukraine and in Syria, but the fog of war has not settled. Western powers have presented draft resolutions on Ukraine and Syria, most of which have been vetoed by Russia – many of these also supported by Chinese veto or abstention. Western powers have also vetoed resolutions drafted by Russia and targeted sanctions have also been adopted, both by the EU and by the USA. The most widely publicised of these have been directed against Russian domestic elites and government officials, but more significant are the constraints on access to international capital markets as well as the Tier-3 sectoral sanctions, targeting the defence and energy sectors. They are beginning to bite: the sanctions imposed on 6

April 2018 led to a crash in the stock market for Russia's magnate, Oleg Deripaska. Sanctions also struck Aleksei Miller, head of the Gazprom giant.⁵

Western resolve and sanctions notwithstanding, the Russian regime seems entrenched and uncompromising, and sustained by a vision of greatness that is inevitably linked to the person and mission of former FSB officer Vladimir Putin, who was re-elected as president of the Russian Federation in the highly non-competitive election held on 18 March 2018, the date of the 4th anniversary for the annexation of Crimea. The lavish expenditures at the World Championship in Soccer held in Russia in June and July of 2018 notwithstanding – Russia will remain a challenge to Western coherence, and seek to create new inroads to regions in what Moscow sees as a counterbalance to its perceived isolation by the West. Russia will also remain buoyant with hydrocarbon resources and insist upon recognition of its status as a great power in a multipolar world.

This brief focuses on three pillars of Russia's strategic policies: the evolution of the Sino-Russian relationship, Russia's use of its P5 membership in 2014–2015, and the continued involvement of Russian forces in the conflict in Ukraine and Syria. All of these are trademarks of late Putinism, and directly intertwined with regime survival.⁶ Hence, they will most likely sustain in the years to come, and perhaps to some degree also be intensified.

The Sino-Russian Relationship – a Status Partnership

The Sino-Russian relationship has to an increasing degree been referred to as a status-seeking relationship. By engaging with one another bilaterally and in the multilateral setting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) set up in 2001, the two powers seek to preserve their vision of the international system as increasingly multipolar and to boost each other's economic and international capacities. China and Russia seek to appear as *resurrected* (Russia) and *emerging* (China) great powers capable of taking a more central role in international affairs.⁷ At first, this role was limited to regional affairs. Agreements on confidence-building measures and mutual military reductions along the Sino-Russian border were signed already in 1996, and the 1998 and 1999 summits developed rudimentary frameworks for economic cooperation and the fight against “terrorism“, “extremism“ and “separatism“.⁸ The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) allowed for a broader and more global focus, however. It was set up at a stage when Russia and China were both developing a

keen interest in state-crafted “soft power”.⁹ Initially dedicated to fighting terrorism and separatism, the SCO has served primarily as an arena to proclaim the state-based sovereignty of its members as an absolute norm in regional and global politics.

While there might be different motivations for seeking a status-sharing relationship, it cannot be ruled out that the powers have set up diplomatic scaffolding for sustainable common interests. The rejection of US power and global hegemony has been a mantle piece for the SCO since the very beginning, but as the bilateral relationship has evolved, so has also a more grounded and shared outlook on how to combat US interests globally. On 8 June 2018, Putin, received the Chinese Friendship Medal – a new diplomatic instrument created by Xi Jinping – and stated that relations with China had reached “an unprecedented level”. Putin’s advisors leaked to the press that he had met the Chinese head of state 25 times, and 5 times face to face in 2017.¹⁰ For Russia, China is undoubtedly a key economic actor to Putin’s grand revivalist plans. Chinese economic assistance was instrumental in building a gas pipeline, *Sila Sibiri* (the Power of Siberia) to Asia. The agreement was made in the emerging of Russian involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine (May 2014), and the pipeline will expectedly deliver 38 billion cubic metres (bcm) gas annually over 30 years, when operative.¹¹ A recent estimate suggests that the first gas will be exported in December 2019, starting at an export rate of 16 bcm annually.

China and Russia use the bilateral relationship to initiate what could be called a “reverse shaming” of the West. At the 8 June 2018 summit, both leaders again used the catchphrase of “double standards”, indicating that the West does not abide by the rules in international relations, but pursue an interventionist course in the support of universal human rights. In June 2018, Putin was particularly offensive in suggesting that the exacerbation of the relationship with the West had driven Russia into a closer strategic relationship with the rising power China. The fact that Russia had intervened in a sovereign country – Ukraine – was not seen as problematic at this summit, and was not mentioned with a single word. This is peculiar, considering that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s Charter explicitly holds that states in the SCO should abide to the principle of:

[...] mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of States and inviolability of state borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations, seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas.¹²

On the other hand, the SCO charter seems to empower a concept of “civilization” that favors China and Russia more than any of the other members. China and Russia are cultivating reciprocal understandings of the importance of civilizational markers,¹³ and being the heavyweights in the SCO, their bilateral relationship is anchored in the long-term viability of current regimes in both powers. In February 2018, the Chinese Communist Party lifted the limits on Xi Jinping’s presidency, allowing him effectively to stay in rule as long as he may desire. More than abolishing institutional constraints, the move effectively secures the party’s control over a modernizing and resource-craving China.¹⁴ Formally, Russia’s patronal political system still has a clause that prevents Putin from running for a 5th term. While some scholars consider this as the primary cornerstone of legitimacy in the Russian system, and one that secures a minimal social and economic equilibrium in Russia, Putin has in practice violated the terms in an unbroken rule from 2000 and onwards.¹⁵ Assuming, however, that Putin will play a dominant role in Russian politics akin to that of Jinping, and that any successor to Putin will be a defender of his heritage, Chinese-Russian relations seem to be a bulwark that will endure.¹⁶

Summing up, the Sino-Russian relationship is important to both, but for different reasons. Russia’s sense of significance in world affairs is closely linked to its profound loss of status and the struggle to regain a foothold in territories it formerly controlled in Eurasia. Compared to China, Russia’s “financial resources are considerably more constrained and have been targeted largely for the post-Soviet region”.¹⁷ By contrast, China’s peaceful rise is less connected to the loss of status, and more to its gradual emergence as a nation of global significance. This vision is supported by deep cultural-historical underpinnings, and has contributed to China’s smooth transition into world affairs, at least until its recent construction and militarization of “new islands” in the South-China Sea.¹⁸

True, China and Russia may have united perspectives on the challenge to US power. For Russia, being weaker than the USA militarily and economically, piggy-backing on China’s rise may prove a means to re-negotiate a more lucrative post-Cold War settlement than the one Russia feels it has been granted. More so, using the tools available to it to charge against, subvert, and undermine Western coherence the Kremlin may try to manoeuvre itself into gains that Russia have been pushing “on the cheap” – that is, with the investment of established positions (member of the P5 in the UNSC), military resources (Ukraine and Syria) and

informational capacities (trolling and electoral subversion).¹⁹ Recognizing China's inevitable rise may thus have served Russia well in its pursuit of throwing the West off balance. China, on the other hand, is careful not to let the Russia-axis spill over into the US relationship, and is not convinced as to the alleged power of Putin's Russia.²⁰

Russia as a P-5 Veto Power: UN Resolutions in the Ukrainian Conflict

The second strand in Russia's foreign policy beyond 2018 is the status granted Russia in the UN Security Council. While the annexation of Crimea resulted in the ousting of Russia from the G-8 in March 2014,²¹ Russia has remained firmly seated in the Security Council, actively using its veto power to halt resolutions on countries where its military forces have been involved in sharp military interventions. Starting from February 2014, the UN Security Council met feverishly on the evolving situation in Ukraine. From February to end of May 2014, the Council held 15 meetings and briefings, but attempts to adopt a resolution on the evolving situation in Ukraine came to naught.²²

This was not due to UNSC inactivity. Ukraine quickly summoned the Security Council at the outset of the intervention, but Russia's deliberate blocking of all early attempts to regulate the conflict contributed to tension in the UNSC and the flaring up of a hotter conflict in East Ukraine. Table 1 (see page 8) gives an oversight of draft resolutions on Ukraine in the UNSC/ General Assembly (GA) in the period from 2014-2018.

Russia has supported two UNSC resolutions — the 21 July 2014 deploring the shooting down of the MH-17 over Eastern Ukraine, which took the lives of 296 civilians, and the 17 February 2015 resolution establishing the framework for progress within the Minsk agreement. Russia has, however, blocked any attempt to set up an independent tribunal for the incident, and also, stalled investigations on the downing of the MH-17. The Dutch report delivered again in 2018 leaves little doubt that the downing was performed by Russian weaponry, operated by identified Russian officers. The governments of the Netherlands and Australia both hold Russia accountable.²⁴

Russia has not only stalled the implementation of the Minsk Agreement,²⁵ but also the stationing of UN monitors with a wide mandate. Ukraine has since 2015 proposed that the UN deploy UN observers to monitor the Minsk agreement ceasefires in Donbas, but Poroshenko charged Russia in 2017 with deliberately

Table 1: UNSC/GA Resolutions and Vetoed Draft Resolutions on Ukraine²²

Date	Resolution number	Initiators	Purpose	Vetoing countries	Abstaining countries
15 March 2014	S/2014/189	43 countries	UNSC declares Crimea popular vote invalid	Russia	China
27 March 2014	GA/68/262	100 countries supported the resolution	General Assembly votes to endorse Ukraine's territorial integrity	Armenia, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, North Korea, Russia, Sudan, Syria, Venezuela, Zimbabwe.	China + 57 countries
21 July 2014	S/2166/2014		UNSC deplors the downing of MH-17 on 17 July 2014	Adopted	Adopted
17 February 2015	S/2202/2015		UNSC endorses the Minsk package	Adopted	Adopted
29 July 2015	S/2015/562	19 countries	UNSC tribunal on the MH-17 downing.	Russia	Angola, China, Venezuela
5 September 2017	S/2017/754	Russia	UNSC resolution (draft) stipulates a UN Support Mission to guard OSCE observers along the line of conflict	Not voted	Not voted

undermining the security of OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) deployed in March 2014 upon Ukrainian request to the OSCE; he stated explicitly that a UN mission should exclude the presence of Russian forces.²⁶ Russia's draft resolution of 5 September 2017 calls for UN observers, but does not meet Ukrainian concerns that a) all military personnel and equipment be withdrawn from Eastern Ukraine, b) the guarding of external borders be handed over to Ukraine; c) the presence of UN observers not only along the conflict line, but all over the territories of Donbas.

At the meeting in the Minsk Contact Group in June 2018, disagreements concerning the mandate of UN peacekeepers and also, their mission and purpose, resurfaced. Russia repeated that UN peacekeepers could not be stationed all over the region of Donbas, and that the local "heads of the regions", as Russia calls them, should agree to the scheme of deployment. Ukraine categorically rejected this, and maintains that the UN mission

must have an unrestricted mandate in guarding the border with Russia, disarming militants, and controlling military arms depots.²⁷



President Vladimir Putin speaking to the UN General Assembly in 2015

Photo: United Nations Photo (Flickr CC BY).

Throughout the conflict, restrictions have been imposed on the movements of the OSCE SMM.²⁸ Militants in eastern Ukraine have targeted observers directly, and in May 2018, the number of violations of the ceasefire agreement rose dramatically. The OSCE monitoring mission has been observing the conflict since March 2014, and in the period from 28 May to 10 June 2018 observed 14,000 violations of the ceasefire agreement.²⁹ The period before was characterized by a similar deterioration of security for civilians, with 13,700 ceasefire violations, or a 20 percent increase since the preceding report.³⁰ Since 2014 until mid-2017, the UN estimates that the conflict in Donbas has led to some 10,000 civilian casualties, and 23,500 wounded.³¹ As for Russian military casualties, President Putin on 28 May 2015 amended the Law on State Secrets from 1995, introducing a clause that prohibits any public announcement of casualties of military personnel in peacetime.³² This notwithstanding, the newspaper *Vedomosti.ru* published in 2017 an investigative article, showing that the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation had sent numbers of casualties to an insurance company in a tender. Numbers showed casualties in the range of 630 (2012), 596 (2013), 790 (2014), and 626 (2015).³³ *Novayagazeta.ru* reported that same day that there were "anomalies" in the number of casualties over years suggesting that more than 200 military casualties were directly caused by the Donbas conflict.³⁴

The standoff over Ukraine continues, and will most likely be a pervasive trend in the time to come. In spite of Trump's wayward call to let Russia into the G7, US representatives uphold the sanctions against Russia in the UNSC. On 29 May 2018, Nicky Hayley, US UNSC representative, issued a scalding condemnation of Russia's continuous support to militants in Ukraine, and addressed what she termed the "serial violations of Russia of all UNSC resolutions" by calling for Russia to unilaterally end the conflict. Sanctions would not be lifted, she stated, until Russia had returned Crimea to Ukraine, and until Russia's military forces and equipment were out of eastern Ukraine.³⁵ Putin, on the other hand, performed a widely publicized, grand-scale crossing of the bridge connecting Crimea to the mainland in Russia, driving a Kamaz truck over the Kerch strait on 16 May 2018. The Kerch Bridge had a price tag of about 4 billion USD, and has been constructed by a company owned by Putin's protégée and former Judo-partner, Arkady Rotenberg.³⁶ Arkady Rotenberg and his brother, Boris Rotenberg, both childhood friends of Putin, have been on the US and EU sanction lists since 2014, and their companies have benefitted massively from Putin's grand-scale sport projects, such as the Sochi Olympics in 2014, in the preparations to which his company alone received contracts for more than 7 billion USD.³⁷ The bridge's design does not allow clearance for larger vessels, thereby greatly constraining access to the ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol, each of which play an important role in Ukraine's export trade.

Russia as a P-5 Veto Power: UN Resolutions in the Syrian Conflict

Russia's rapid transition from the military action in Ukraine to the campaign in Syria caught the West off guard. And the Kremlin engaged in globalized double talk: In his speech to the General Assembly on 28 September 2015, Putin stated that undermining UN authority was "extremely dangerous," but only days after, Russia initiated a six month long air campaign against ISIL positions in Syria on the basis of a bilateral memorandum with Syria from August 2015.³⁸

In spite of Russia's multiple allegations and outspokenness against the upsetting of the UN order, Russia's positioning in the UNSC had made it possible for Russia to intervene in the Syrian conflict without a UN mandate. Table 2 below indicates voting patterns/ vetoes in the UNSC process of adopting resolutions to prevent an escalation of violence and hold Syrian authorities to account.

Table 2: UNSC Resolutions and Vetoed Draft Resolutions on Syria ³⁹

Date	Resolution number	Initiators	Purpose	Vetoing countries	Abstaining countries
4 October 2011	S/2011/612	France, UK, Germany, and Portugal	Halting the Syrian government's offensive and independent investigation of HR violations.	China, Russia	
4 February 2012	S/2012/77	17 countries plus UK and USA	Deploring extensive violence in Syria; empowering the League of Arab States' observer mission, and noting Russia's willingness to host a meeting.	China, Russia	
19 July 2012	S/2012/538	France, Germany, Portugal, UK and USA	Deploring extensive violence in Syria; empowering the League of Arab States' observer mission, and recognizing the work of special envoy Annan.	China, Russia	
22 May 2014	S/2014/348	63 countries plus UK and USA.	Deploring extensive violence in Syria; empowering the observer commission's work in Syria to establish facts on the ground; endorsing Syrian territorial integrity	China, Russia	
8 October 2016	S/2016/846	44 countries plus UK and USA	Expressing grave distress over humanitarian situation; 6,1 million IDPs and 13,5 million in need of humanitarian assistance; deploring ISIL terrorist attacks; expressing outrage over aerial bombings of Aleppo	Russia, Venezuela	China, Angola

5 December 2016	S/2016/1026	Egypt, New Zealand, and Spain	Expressing grave distress over humanitarian situation; imposing ceasefire regime	Russia, China	
28 February 2017	S/2017/172	40 countries plus UK and USA	Condemnation of use of chemical weapons against civilians in Syrian conflict.	Russia, China	
12 April 2017	S/2017/315	France, UK and USA	Condemnation of the use of chemical weapons against civilians in the Khan Shaykhun region;	Russia	
24 October 2017	S/2017/884	39 countries plus UK and USA	Renewing the mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) to investigate possible use of chemical weapons in Syria.	Russia	
16 November 2017	S/2017/962	France, Italy, Japan, Sweden; Ukraine, UK and the USA	Condemnation of the use of toxic chemical substances against the civilian population; decides to renew the JIM with 12 months	Russia	

In the same period of time, 15 UNSC resolutions on Syria have been adopted, among these UNSCR 2118 on the framework for the destruction of Syrian Chemical Weapons. Among these were resolutions regulating access for humanitarian aid and ceasefire agreements.⁴⁰ Russian resistance to the draft resolutions listed above is mostly explained by Russia's effective blocking of resolutions assigning responsibility for atrocities and civilian casualties to Syrian authorities and the Assad regime.⁴¹ Assad has had regular meetings with Putin since October 2015, thus marking the ties between the Kremlin and Syrian authorities, and Assad has also met with the Russian parliament's lower chamber, the State Duma.

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria in 2013, civilian casualties have been mounting. By October 2016, the UN estimated that the casualties in the Syria conflict had reached 200,000 and that the number of refugees from the conflict was more than 4,8 million people.⁴² Statistics from Human Rights Watch (HRW) from February 2016 add depth to the picture. HRW.org estimated that

the death toll in 2016 was more than 470,000 civilians, with 4,8 million refugees from Syria to other countries, and 6,1 million internally displaced refugees.⁴³ Numbers indicating civilian privation in separate regions within Syria are similarly alarming. In early 2018, UN sources estimated that 390,000 civilians had been living in isolation in East Ghouta for more than 4 years, enduring severe deprivation and suffering.⁴⁴

HRW.org has identified numerous violations of international agreements, both by Syrian government forces, and also, the Russian-Syrian military campaign from September 2015. Syrian government forces have been using illegal cluster munitions in more than 400 attacks from 2012 to 2016, and Russian forces have in 18 identifiable actions used incendiary weapons (napalm and phosphorous munitions designed to start fires). Russia has signed international treaties and protocols banning the use of these weapons, and denies culpability. The Syrian government has not, however, joined the protocol prohibiting the use of such weapons.

As Russia is a permanent member of the UNSC, however, there are few ways that the UN can sanction Russia for its involvement in the Syria crisis, and for its support to the Assad regime. True, in October 2016, Russia lost a re-nomination vote to the UN Human Rights Council held by the 193 members of the UN General Assembly. The Russian Ambassador at that time, Vitaly Churkin, dismissed the vote as a loss for Russia, claiming that “Russia is more exposed to the winds of international diplomacy” than other countries in the Council.⁴⁵ This loss of face for Russia has probably not had an effect on the UNHRC’s observer activity in the Syrian conflict. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic was established at the UNHRC in 2011, and access to the situation on the ground remains a problem. On the other hand, without membership in the UNHRC, Russia cannot influence on the processes of establishing panels to investigate human rights abuses in conflicts. Hence, more vetoes may arise in the UNSC.

Russia’s Challenge to the West – Trends and Implications

In a recent article, Russia’s challenge to the west has been coined as “raiding and international brigandry” – Russia is no longer simply a spoiler in international relations, but a state pursuing relative gains in what it conceives as a great power competition in Europe and beyond.⁴⁶ This involves not only a revisionist policy regarding the status quo gained after the Cold War, but active use

of military and other types of power to upset, disrupt and break apart Western unity and constrain US power. Subsequently, “brigandry” involves active use of regular and irregular forces to achieve sharp disruptions of the security order, and long-term gains, resulting in the diminution of faith in the pillars of post-Cold War security.

This strategy also involves the use of conventional and non-conventional military forces that Russia, with the exception of the 2008 war with Georgia, had relied upon to a far lesser extent before 2014. In sum, a substantial departure from the practices of the Yeltsin period (when the use of armed force was strictly limited) has taken place. In Putin’s political order, the institutions entitled to authorise military operations do so only after the operations have begun. In the Ukraine conflict, for example, President Putin asked for permission from the Federation Council to use forces abroad only on 1 March 2014. The military operation had been underway since 20 February 2014, even before Yanukovych fled Kyiv. The Kremlin pursued a policy of vigilant denial throughout 2014, admitting only in 2016 that special units had been deployed in Crimea. Effectively, all use of forces in special operations and abroad are under direct presidential control. There are no visible institutional obstacles to putting forces into rapid use. Russia’s political institutions serve only ceremonial purposes.

Whereas units of the Special Forces were put to use on Crimea, these as well as a mixture of conventional forces and semi-privatized security companies were deployed in eastern Ukraine and in Syria. In the domestic jungle of Russian politics, such companies have mushroomed to cloud the involvement of the regime in military operations, and they are embedded in the regime through the web of informal relations that is dominant in Russia’s patrimonial system. For instance, mercenaries belonging to the Wagner group, a unit with ties to security companies owned by Yevgeniy Prigozhin (on the US sanctions list as the owner of a troll-factory that spread fake news prior to the US elections), were involved in a clash with US forces in Syria in February 2018.⁴⁷ The incident was widely reported in liberal-oppositional Russian domestic media, but did not resonate deeply in the Russian public.⁴⁸ However, investigative media have continued to surface evidence of the involvement of Putin cronies in resource-driven conflicts. *The Bell* recently published an article suggesting that the Kremlin had held talks with Omar Bashir of Sudan on the creation of a Russian military base on the Red Sea, and suggestions were

made that the Wagner group had been dispatched to the region as military “advisors”.

Although the ties between the regime and the Wagner group are solid, the Kremlin will maintain its policy of denial whenever it perceives an advantage to doing so. In an interview, given to an Austrian news agency upon Putin’s visit to Austria, Putin recently referred to Prigozhin as a domesticated version of George Soros, thus reflecting his own views on Western democracy support as some kind of military operation. Rebuking the questions about Prigozhin’s involvement in the tampering with US elections, Putin expressed “doubts” that Prigozhin – referred to as a Russian “restaurant-keeper” – could have the capacity to intervene,⁴⁹ all while the Mueller report had indicted him and 12 other Russian officials for interventions in the US presidential elections.⁵⁰ Again, the Kremlin shuns no means to blatantly disrupt and confuse European public opinion – also by means of building political ties to European right- and left-wing parties. Indeed, Putin’s *tour de force* in Austrian domestic debates seemed supported by a bilateral agreement between Russia’s dominant party, United Russia, and the right-wing party Freedom Party of Austria (FPO), which was signed in 2016.⁵¹

Conclusion: Great Power Politics Beyond 2018

Where will the emerging power play go from here? The former Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Børge Brende, called the year 2014 for the *annus horribilis* in international politics.⁵² Since then, developments have not improved – rather on the contrary. Russia’s challenge to the West remains targeted, sustained and relentless. It is deeply ingrained in the structure and ideological orientation of the Putin regime, and underpinned by a strategic outlook that is directed at reducing US involvement in Europe.

The short intermezzo provided by the 2018 World Cup Championship in Soccer does not change this. If it could qualify as “soft power”, one should note Joseph Nye’s observation when coining the phrase in the 2004 book *Soft Power*:

The information revolution and globalization of the economy are transforming and shrinking the world. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, these two forces have enhanced American power. But with time, technology will spread to other countries and peoples, and America’s relative power will diminish.⁵³

In lieu of a conclusion, I will suggest that IR theories are still struggling to come to grips with this: what drives the reverse waves following the third wave of democratization, and how should the core concepts of state sovereignty, alliances and international politics be conceptualized in a time of authoritarian influence? As James Sherr stated in his influential book *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion – Russia’s Influence Abroad* (2013):

The end of the Cold War has brought an intensely ideological century to a close. But the notion that “realism” can now keep values behind state frontiers is profoundly unhistorical [...] The mobility of capital and ideas has diminished the force of sovereignty.⁵⁴

This brief cannot answer this question, but simply illustrate that Russia has put this to use in a *quid pro quo* game of informational deceit and institutional obstruction, backed with the use of military force. The events of 2014/2015 have also led to a deeper involvement of private security forces that are linked to the core of the regime, and this without proper legislation that regulates the activities of these forces. The Russian challenge to the West may be based on the principle of Russian state sovereignty, but this principle is belied in practice, and Russia’s ability to couple infowar with covert and conventional war poses a profound threat to the foundations of the security institutions that have preserved European peace since the end of the Cold War.

Notes

1 This brief is based partly on the series of lectures I held in 2017 for the Norwegian Atlantic Committee's (DNAK) annual course in international politics. Although the main points are recognizable, the brief moves beyond the presentation by adding some trends in Russian domestic politics, and also, the implications of this for the West. I remain grateful to the committee for organizing these lectures and for the opportunity to take part in the 2017 IP tour.

2 Volodymyr Kulyk, "Identity in Transformation: Russian-speakers in Post-Soviet Ukraine", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 14 December 2017, at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2017.1379054>

3 The number of air missions is based on estimates from the FFI. Kristian Åtland, Tor Bukkvoll, Johannes Due Enstad og Truls Tønnessen, "Ruslands militære intervensjon i Syria: Gjennomføring og konsekvenser" [Russia's military intervention in Syria: Implementation and consequences], FFI Rapport 16/00500, 15 March 2016, at: <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/16-00500.pdf>

4 See Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right, Routledge: London, 2017.

5 Bbc.com, "Russia sanctions: Shares in Deripaska-controlled firms crash", 9 April 2018, at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-43696738>

6 For an account in the implications of "late Putinism", see M. Steven Fish, "What has Russia Become?", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 327–346.

7 Academicians doubt the degree of their transformation. As Jeanne L. Wilson states, their infatuation with "soft power" is highly instrumental, and bears all the characteristics of their national versions of Soviet and Communist heritages. Jeanne L. Wilson, "Russia and China Respond to Soft Power: Interpretation and Re-adaptation of a Western Construct", *Politics*, vol. 35, no. 3–4, 2015, pp. 287–300.

8 Julie Wilhelmsen and Geir Flikke, "Chinese–Russian Convergence and Central Asia", *Journal of Geopolitics*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 865–901.

9 Jeanne L. Wilson, "Russia and China Respond to Soft Power: Interpretation and Re-adaptation of a Western Construct", and Jeanne L. Wilson, "Soft Power: A Comparison of Discourse and Practice in Russia and China", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 67, no. 8: 1171–1202.

10 Vladimir Isachenkov and Christopher Bodeen, "Putin: Cooperation with China at an 'unprecedented level'", *Washington Post*, 8 June, 2018, at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/putin-xi-beijing-meeting-underscores-close-relationship/2018/06/08/d635dfa6-6af0-11e8-a335-c4503d041eaf_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6352393c4dfb

11 Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia–China Relations in the Post–Crisis International Order*, BASEEES/ Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies, Routledge: London, 2015, p. 64

12 Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, available at eng.sectsc.org/load/203013/

13 Jeanne L. Wilson, “Russia and China Respond to Soft Power: Interpretation and Re-adaptation of a Western Construct”.

14 Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, “China Moves to Let Xi Stay in Power by Abolishing Term Limit”, *New York Times*, 25 February 2018, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/25/world/asia/china-xi-jinping.html>.

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