
What Will Replace Russia's Dwindling Trump-Euphoria? RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY VIEWPOINTS TODAY

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One year into Donald Trump's presidency is a good time to scrutinize the views held by the mainstream parts of the Russian foreign policy establishment. In a nutshell, they are highly skeptical about the immediate future of relations between Russia and the West, optimistic about Russia's turn to Asia despite the impediments, and are not satisfied about the Russia-centered reintegration of the post-Soviet space. Displaying a considerable degree of realism, they have identified the limitations underlying Russia's foreign policy actions, with the foremost factor being the weakness of the Russian economy. However, the Putin administration appears to have settled on an almost no-compromise agenda and it is not possible to know to what extent the opinions of Russia's leading analysts are shared by high-level Russian decision-makers. What we do know is that the prospects for settling the Russia-West strife on Russia's terms have disappeared. After a time of sanguinity, Russian foreign policy experts have now found themselves back at the drawing board. In many ways, this must speak to the indeterminate policy course of Vladimir Putin's next presidential term.

A New U.S. President, a New Hope

Donald Trump's election as U.S. president boosted Moscow's foreign policy self-confidence. In January 2017, Sergei Karaganov, a prominent Russian political observer and currently the Dean of Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, [concluded](#) that Russia had "persevered" and was "winning practically in all directions, qualitatively strengthening its international positions." He credited this result to "will, unity between the majority of the people and the elites, strategic foresight and skillful diplomacy." According to Karaganov, the forces that wanted to defeat Russia, to destroy its economy and to bring about regime change

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were in retreat, the U.S. globalist and “ideology-driven” elites had lost power and its “European branches” were losing in “one European country after another.”

Expectations quickly rose in Russia and in certain quarters of Europe that some kind of “deal” would soon be made between Moscow and Washington. There was anticipation that the “Ukrainian page” would be turned, Western sanctions on Russia would be eased, and relations between Russia and the West would normalize.

Reality proved these expectations illusory. Within the first months of Trump’s inauguration, it became clear that Washington’s position on Ukraine was hardly any more compromising than that of the Obama administration. A U.S. missile strike on Syria’s governmental forces in April 2017 demonstrated that the new U.S. administration was not inclined to negotiate its policies and actions in the Middle East with Moscow. It took an embarrassing half year after Trump’s inauguration before he held his first meeting with Putin, which took place on the margins of the G20 summit in Hamburg. Their meeting (and whatever they discussed) was quickly overshadowed by new U.S. Congressional sanctions on Russia and then a scandalous situation with the Russian demand to cut U.S. embassy staff and the ensuing reciprocal closure of diplomatic facilities. Although various official Russian spokespersons continuously blame the bilateral relationship crisis on the Obama administration and/or Trump’s domestic opponents (thus keeping the option of normalization open for the U.S. president personally), and despite the fact that Putin [publicly denies](#) that Trump has been a disappointment to him, it stands to reason beyond any doubt that a year ago Moscow was hoping for a far better outcome. Adding to the mix, the election victories of Emmanuel Macron in France and Angela Merkel in Germany suggested continuity rather than change in Europe’s approach toward Russia.

“The Western Front” – A Frontline Forever?

In Russia, there is a consensus now that the potential to create a comprehensive Russian-Western partnership has been exhausted, if it has ever truly existed. Russia claims the failure is due to the United States trying to establish global hegemony (with a Brussels-centered sub-model in Europe) while concurrently denying Russia any privileged role in contributing rules for the Western-centric international game.

We have seen these lines of reasoning before. The assessment that the West views Russia “doctrinally” as one of its main security challenges and a primary source of problems has been present in Russian analytical discourses for some time. What is fairly new is the assumption that the Russian factor will be exploited by the West to solve the West’s own “internal crisis.” Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of *Russian in Global Affairs*, and Alexei Miller, professor at the European University at St. Petersburg, both well-established authors of several major reports dealing with Russian-Western relations, [formulate](#) this very clearly when they say that “having an external enemy is very useful for ... internal

consolidation, and so far, this role has been undoubtedly allocated to Russia.” They go on to say that, “demonization of Putin and Russia to a relatively little extent depends on specific disagreements on international relations. Those have become an ideological factor of the domestic political struggle [in the West].”

Consequently, in line with the perception of the West as not being interested in partnering with Russia, Russian analysts expect that the former will continue putting pressure on the latter. The response to this is very straightforward. As Dmitry Trenin from the Moscow Carnegie Center [indicates](#), “the Kremlin has no intention of stepping back or reconciling itself with the West through concessions and promises of improved behavior.” In practice, above of all, this implies that: the Crimean question should not even be discussed; the conflict in Donbas should be resolved on terms that would guarantee long-term Russian control over Ukraine’s foreign policy (or that the situation should be frozen); the whole Ukraine issue should not be treated as a central stumbling block between Russia and the West; and EU and NATO enlargement should be ruled out.

These analyses do not even raise a question of whether Russia can withstand the Western pressure it is facing at the present time. Its resources are implicitly or explicitly viewed as sufficient for that. However, there is a clear recognition that in the long run a confrontation with the West would take a heavy toll on Russia’s future. Furthermore, trade with Europe will remain very important for Russia and so will its cultural proximity. A preferred outcome would therefore be a transactional relationship involving ad hoc cooperation—example areas include the Arctic, Middle East, terrorism, energy, and stabilizing various situations in Eurasia. Once again, however, to move forward in cooperation, Russia would like to be recognized by the West as a global player with certain exclusive rights.

In the current mutually hostile circumstances, it is actually seen as positive that Russia and the West are managing (or muddling through) sticky issues rather than engaging in open confrontation. At the same time, it is clear that for the mainstream part of the Russian foreign policy community, the goal of bringing Russia closer to the West in general or integrating it with Europe is irretrievably withdrawn at the present time. One implication of this is that any pleas from Europe along the lines of “we need Russia” will have no analogous responses from Moscow.

Greater Eurasia: Are Things Really so Great?

The logic of Russia’s ongoing efforts to “pivot to Asia” is not new. During his election campaign in 2011, Putin [urged](#) Russian policymakers to catch “China’s winds” in the “sails” of the Russian economy. In 2012, Russia hosted an APEC summit in Vladivostok. The Russian-Chinese rapprochement started long before these years but it accelerated as a consequence of the Ukraine crisis. But now the Asian vision is becoming more

ambitious, placing Russia at the center of Greater Eurasia and as a key actor in the space between Tokyo/Shanghai and Lisbon. This vision foresees a well-functioning relationship between Moscow and Beijing, with Russia not as a junior partner. It sees not only the successful harmonization between Russian and Chinese initiatives – such as on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) – but Russia being a key player on the continent above and beyond just being a territory that connects Asia and Europe. In accordance with this approach, Moscow should be able to play a role in managing tensions between China and India, India and Pakistan, and Pakistan and Afghanistan. At the same time, it should achieve a breakthrough in relations with Japan and South Korea and solidify economic cooperation with ASEAN countries.

Russian experts have also discussed the realistic constraints on Russia's reorientation toward Asia. Trenin [writes](#), "for myriad reasons, China was not interested in a close alliance with Russia, even one it would clearly dominate." First, enjoying the current state of relations and receiving much of what it wants from Moscow in terms of energy and military cooperation, Beijing, as Trenin observes, is not interested in Russia obtaining great power status. Second, there is a realization that China will not take Russia's side in its conflict with Washington. Lukyanov and Miller [admit](#) that China "will not take any risks in its relations with the United States, linked with Russian-American tensions, and will not support Russian actions on putting pressure on America." Third, when it comes to economics, Russian experts acknowledge that Beijing is rather cautious about further involvement with Russia. The "low-hanging fruit" of politically-driven rapprochement has been reaped, while Russia, facing global competition for Chinese investment, should [not expect](#) any "easy money" coming from China. Finding promising projects to implement with the same harmonization between the BRI and EEU may be quite problematic under the circumstances. There is no way of denying that the state of the Russian economy hardly provides a solid underpinning for it playing a key role in the region-at-large, particularly in the context of Asia's ongoing economic and technological development.

Post-Soviet Space: No longer a Key Priority?

Analysis of the post-Soviet space is an area where expert opinion openly differs from official positions. Russian officials are full of hopes and plans about a Russia-centered reintegration process, but analysts feel that there are lost prospects and that only some bilateral relationships remain important. Furthermore, a [joint report](#) by the Russian International Affairs Council and Moscow-based Center for Strategic Research explicitly suggests abandoning the secluded post-Soviet paradigm and acquiring a new momentum by means of cooperation with non-regional partners. Potentially, the idea of "opening up" the post-Soviet space may become an important novelty in Russian foreign policy thinking. Although this would primarily mean simply coming to terms with reality (all post-Soviet countries have been trying for a long time to balance and

hedge against Russian dominance), acceptance of this approach would challenge views about isolationism and/or spheres of privileged interest.

All in all, Russian foreign policy experts appear to have reached three major conclusions. First, and this is where Ukraine's centrality inadvertently returns, there is a clear realization that Russia has lost Ukraine as a partner and this will be the case for the foreseeable future. Without prospects for some kind of reintegration with Ukraine, quite a few projects in the post-Soviet space lack critical mass and would therefore yield only minor economic effects. Second, there is an acknowledgment that the EEU cannot be a vehicle of political reintegration and that its supranational governing mechanisms are and will remain limited. Partly, this is a result of growing concerns among Russia's partners in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. However, it would be fair to observe that the resolve to protect national sovereignty was strongly present in the behavior of these states before 2014. Third, the need to go beyond exclusive post-Soviet formats logically follows the decision to harmonize regional policies with China, which, in turn, is the result of the understanding that Russia simply cannot resist or even slow down Chinese penetration into Central Asia.

Conclusions

The on-going debate among Russian experts is a serious attempt to take stock of what happened in the country's relations with the outside world in recent years. Many conclusions are quite sober. Whether the stated goals are realistic and sufficiently resourced could be debated further, but a consolidated vision of a non-compromising, even if largely non-confrontational, stance toward the West, alongside pursuing openings with Asia, has been messaged to the world. The problem is that this view will not necessarily become a conceptual basis of Russian state policy. Putin may well continue positioning himself as the commandant of a besieged fortress, which has served him well in domestic politics. The militarization and securitization of Russian economic policy is at full swing and would be difficult to stop, and the inertia of previous approaches is strong, especially toward the post-Soviet neighborhood. If we accept these notions, the West should have little hope that Putin's next presidential term will bring about easier cooperation with Russia. The euphoria about a quick fix to Russian-Western relations on Russian terms may have faded away, but the Kremlin is still playing a "zero-sum game" and any opportunity to exploit Western weaknesses will not be missed.