

Russia's "energetic" policy in the struggle for a new international order: a Ukrainian perspective

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Against the current backdrop of a struggle for a new international order whilst making concerted efforts to revive its national potential, the Russian Federation attempts to legitimize the results of its military incursion in Ukraine and a military operation in Syria, as well as inspiring disturbances throughout Eastern Europe and far beyond. In so doing, the meaning of Russia's aggressive policy is actively cloaked by the ambiguous nature of modern Russian hybrid warfare.

There are numerous formal conceptual approaches with which to analyse Moscow's "energetic" policy and identify the main drivers of the Kremlin's foreign policy strategy, namely:

- Dissatisfaction with the place allocated to the Russian Federation on the global political scene due to a weakened Russian position after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Moscow, pretending to be a world leading power, was openly neglected and ignored, being "unfairly" displaced at the periphery of global politics;
- Invocation of the new global tendencies as a reason to reorient attention towards the Middle East and other regions, where Russia considers itself to have predominant influence and is eager to implement its so-called "energetic" policy on an equal footing with the West;
- Implementation of "revisionist" approaches aimed at reconsidering the current international system based on the post-Cold War order, enshrining as it does the predominant role of Washington's interests within the framework of unipolarity;
- Confidence in the necessity of changing the main normative provisions and principles of the existing international security order, with emphasis given to specific conditions for the recognition of state sovereignty.

Russia's foreign policy can be also conceptualized as an integral part of the internal policy process, basic provisions of which are considered as a main motivator of Moscow's external "energetic" behaviour oriented towards supporting the maintenance of the ruling political regime. However, Russian officials intentionally dismiss this concept.

The former Yalta-Potsdam system of international relations, which existed after the Second World War and was based on the division of spheres of influence between world leading powers, has been identified by Moscow as a rather useful one that needs to be reinstated. One of the so-called "advantages" of this international system that could be of great interest for Moscow is a shortage of strong legal foundations of the established security order.

At the same time, the Kremlin emphasizes the importance of maintaining and promoting international cooperation at both bilateral and multilateral levels, including with the use of existing international organizations, primarily the UN, which was founded as a crucial international element of the Yalta-Potsdam system.

Coming back to the Yalta conference of 1945, the importance of this historic event has been steadily emphasized by the Kremlin amid the illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula. It is being presented, among other things, as a symbolic outset for re-establishing a new European and world order with active Russian participation.

The very perception of war has been changed to be considered by the Kremlin as a part of everyday life and as a main vehicle for establishing a new post-cold war international order. Moreover, war is also recognized as a normal state of international relations. Moscow has made an attempt to make a case for the inevitability of use of force in contemporary international relations. Against the backdrop of hostile political rhetoric, the approach to the use of force has been drastically modified so as to have a multidimensional application not limited only to the military sphere, but also covering economic, political, religious, and ideological areas.

Non-intervention in internal affairs of other states, safeguarding equal rights and self-determination of peoples as well as co-operation among states (first of all, in the maintenance of international peace and security) could be declared among the most important formal principles for Russia when it comes to specific conditions for recognition of state sovereignty. Customary international law and the use of international precedents are those instruments comprising modern Russia's toolkit, being broadly used to reinforce and compliment implementation of international law, as interpreted by Moscow. At the same time, Moscow's reference to international precedents (especially in the case of Kosovo) undergoes constant changes depending on developments on the ground.

The principle of the inviolability of frontiers, which served as a core element for establishing the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1975, is the most neglected one within the framework of Moscow's current "energetic" policy. This principle closely relates to the principle of territorial integrity of States. The latter is exclusively dedicated to maintaining the stability of the international order because nothing is more destabilizing than encroachment on the territorial integrity of States.

Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is also brought into question by Moscow amid its attempts to diminish the role of the U.S. in settling protracted conflicts, especially in the Middle East.

Russia is obviously not so supportive of those principles that promote equality and do not contribute to the reestablishment of the bipolar system. This might be also the reason for the ongoing crisis in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, as it faces a deep divide amid failure to implement the Helsinki+40 process.

Russia's strategic approach over a short-term perspective could be evaluated against a possible multipolar scenario of international developments. According to common perceptions, the above-mentioned multipolarity does not necessarily mean the reestablishment of the Westphalian international system within the framework of realpolitik that the Kremlin is keen on implementing. U.S. domination of global policy would most probably provide some background for a certain kind of limited bipolarity, being more relevant to Washington's relationship with Beijing. Such a situation would be also characterized by strengthening unified resistance of the peripheral states with homogenizing social-economic structures amid a shrinking Russian economy under the continuing pressure of Western sanctions.

The West is concentrating now on getting a dialogue with Russia back on track to reduce tensions while engaging in a pragmatic effort to find ways that would enable an agreement based on shared interests and obligations without having common values. There was a suggestion to start with issues where it would be easy to reach an agreement with Russia that would help to build mutual confidence and trust, and then build on these to tackle more complex challenges. International terrorism and illegal migration have been identified among the most urgent transnational threats requiring a unified approach.

Yet, in order to curb Russia's expansion, the West would most probably need to remain concentrated on gradually applying "soft power" measures while formally supporting old principles and norms of the post-Cold War international order, and promoting its values based on sustainable governance, anti-corruption activities, human rights protection, strengthening democracy and supporting unified moral norms.

Moscow would be more liable to use "hard power" methods in protecting its far-reaching ambitions for gaining a foothold among the world's major powers, not caring so much about agreed principles and norms as such, but interpreting them on a case-by-case basis, unless facing adequate countermeasures. Therefore, the Kremlin's strategy would go in line with the Yalta-type bipolar security order characterised by the absence of clearly declared norms and principles. The first manifest example proving this conclusion and a "dress rehearsal" to start the process was the neglect of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994 that resulted in the illegal annexation of Crimea.

According to Russia's president, military power is and will remain a vital instrument of Russian international politics. Nuclear weapons play a crucial role here, especially when we are speaking about nuclear sabre-rattling aimed, inter alia, at legitimizing the results of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and in particular the illegal annexation of Crimea. Another example of Moscow's use of the nuclear weapons issue is an attempt to remain on a par with the U.S. while proposing to re-establish the strategic offensive arms controls that used to be a main pillar of the bipolar balance of power.

According to the Russian perception, periods of peace should be dedicated to securing and maintaining the existing balance of forces. From Moscow's point of view, this balance now comprises the Russian Federation opposing Ukraine on one side, and Ukraine with its Western allies on the other. Thus, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has been recognized by Moscow as both regional and global, and as directly related to the Russia-West confrontation. At the same time, Ukraine is presented by Russia as a "main obstacle" in re-establishing dialogue with Western countries.

Therefore, the current objective of re-establishing West-Russia dialogue without Ukraine-Russia rapprochement could hardly be completed successfully. Thus, it should be of paramount importance for both Russia and the West to find compromise first of all with Ukraine, although not on the premise of Ukraine as a country "in-between". While maintaining political dialogue, both sides should take due account of possible implications regarding Ukraine to prevent further escalation and avoiding obscure reactions to possible arrangements that could impede their implementation on the ground.

Generally, there is no reason to expect in the near future changes for the better in the Kremlin's policy towards Ukraine, as it is currently focused on the destruction of Ukrainian statehood. As a result of Russian aggression, Ukraine has suffered huge territorial, human and economic losses. These losses created a background for a new political-ideological reality in the relationship between Ukraine and Russia that needs to be reviewed and newly evaluated.

There are a number of basic questions regarding bilateral relations between Ukraine and Russia that currently make reaching a modus vivendi impossible, starting with the illegal annexation of Crimea and the issue of European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine.

As a way to facilitate Ukraine-Russia rapprochement I propose the following:

- Further developing of informal contacts between representatives of Ukrainian and Russian civil societies, including academic and think tank institutions, aimed at restoring trust and mutual interest for peaceful coexistence of both states with respect to the choice of the political system and the vector of civilizational development, while keeping in mind current differences on systematic and normative levels;

- Elaborating and adopting a format of so-called “**restricted coexistence**” based on the hard defending of Ukrainian national interests with a reasonable compromise not exceeding the above-identified margins.

In the near future, the frozen conflict in illegally annexed Crimea and the conservation of the situation in Eastern Ukraine will together define the atmosphere and character of bilateral relations between Kyiv and Moscow. These circumstances represent a possible model of Ukraine’s “restricted coexistence” with a totalitarian Russia. It would duly take into account the current realities on the ground triggered by Russia’s “energetic” policy, as well as the prospects of future development of bilateral relations, including the position of Western partners and all international organizations involved.