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# *The complex and evolving NATO-Russia relationship*

By Graeme Herd

**S**ince February 2014, Russia, a country with 1,900 usable nuclear weapons, has annexed Crimea, destabilized eastern Ukraine, aggressively penetrated NATO airspace in the Baltics, undertaken submarine operations near vital undersea cables that carry internet communications in the Atlantic, launched Kalibr missiles from the Caspian flotilla against targets in Syria and almost come to blows with Turkey.

President Vladimir Putin has boasted of Russian troops reaching not just Kyiv, but Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw or Bucharest in two days. Senior NATO military officers, diplomats and politicians have warned of a paradigm shift in Russia's relations with the West, one that is laden with risk as Russia uses conventional forces and Soviet-era brinkmanship for intimidation and coercion, with escalation dominance threatening land grabs. Even before the attempted assassination in England of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in March 2018, it was evident that there are no clear rules of the road and accepted vocabulary, reflecting a blurring of the lines between domestic and foreign policy and war and peace, as well as ongoing debates over Russia's strategic motivation and intent.

At best, it appears that Moscow's strategy is to compel the West to recognize Russia's security interests and its status as a global "Great Power" and regional hegemon. At worst, Russia is in a long-term structural decline but determined to take part in asymmetric Great Power competition, consciously integrating conventional and subconventional proxy tools to destabilize neighbors. In this context, cross-domain coercion and compellence, raiding and brigandage constitute a rational Russian strategy.

Among NATO members, the understanding of solidarity is differentiated, and United States commitments for the first time appear to be conditional. European NATO members could face the threat of dual revisionism: squeezed between the Scylla of U.S. retrenchment and withdrawal from Europe — driven by trade protectionism, a narrower definition of national interest (which questions commitments to commercial competitors), an aversion to costs and mixed signaling — and the Charybdis of increasing Russian threats, particularly sub-Article 5 and Helsinki

Final Act breaches. Direct dialogue with Russia can reduce and mitigate risk and miscalculation.

From the foundations of NATO to the present day, NATO and Russia have remained in structural conflict. Two dimensions are particularly pertinent. First, the structural differences between two leading members of the Alliance — the U.S. and Germany — help explain differences in these allies' emphasis and implementation of the defense, deterrence and dialogue policy mix toward Russia. While strong defense and deterrence are not substitutes for a negotiated political solution, they may be the twin preconditions for it. Second, when we look at ideational structures within Russia, its constant projection of Great Power status, fear of internal weakness that leads to chaos and disorder, and the need for respect, these factors all negatively shape the attitudes of Russian decision-makers (Putin and his inner circle) toward NATO. Structural factors will continue to influence NATO, not least the outcome of capitalist democratic and capitalist authoritarian state (Russia and China) contests that are waged through political warfare.

## **Structure and international relations**

Realist theory explains the outcomes of international relations at the systemic level. International structures influence, shape and even determine the behavior of states that make up the international system. States have different amounts of power and how this power is distributed gives shape to the international system, be it bipolar, multipolar or unipolar, stable or unstable, with structural realists agreeing that the risk of miscalculation is greater in multipolar systems. Structural defensive realists argue that states seek balance and equilibrium

because this best meets their security needs. Structural offensive realists suggest that hegemony and dominance (power maximization) is the more rational strategy. Power itself is a contested issue (the balance between quality and quantity, inputs and outputs debated), as is the notion of power shifts. Power is shifting from the Euro-Atlantic space to East and South Asia, from military to economic dimensions and from state to nonstate actors, as transnationalism and globalization processes abound. The risks of violent rear-end collisions in hegemonic power transition (the so-called Thucydides Trap) is apparent as China builds decision-making tables to change the rules of the game and the world order, and the U.S. is determined to maintain its hegemonic position.

After World War II, the Truman administration successfully created and led a rules-based liberal international order based on the values of freedom, the rule of law, human dignity, tolerance, pluralist institutions, and open and free trade. All subsequent U.S. presidents, whether Republican or Democrat, have followed this broadly bipartisan liberal internationalist tradition. *Pax Americana* was underpinned by U.S. global engagement through the exchange of ideas, peoples, trade and alliances. This Western-centered system was based on Wilsonian liberalism and multilateral institutions. It was

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supposed that in a predictable, interdependent, one-world system, shared strategic threats would create interest-based incentives and functional benefits that would drive global cooperation, with the U.S. as a European power (institutionalized through NATO) and indispensable partner.

The end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union lifted structural restraints on the U.S., which proceeded to push for the expansion of the U.S. liberal international order. President Bill Clinton embraced an enlargement and engagement doctrine, enlarging market-democratic states through NATO expansion and attempting to engage former adversaries (Russia and China), while maintaining a position of dominance to deter potential rivals and peer competitors. The Bush “freedom agenda” and Obama’s “global leadership” both sought to promote the expanding liberal world order in their own ways. Donald J. Trump’s electoral victory constituted the biggest surprise in two or three generations (perhaps since President Harry S. Truman’s victory in 1948). The Trump administration propounds anti-globalization and anti-immigration, questions the

efficacy of multilateral institutions (European Union, NATO, World Trade Organization), and advances pro-economic nationalism and protectionism rather than liberal internationalist impulses, drawing a distinction between U.S. values and policies.

The role that structure plays within the political West must also be considered. Apocryphally, Henry Kissinger was said to ask, when U.S. national security advisor: “Who do I call if I want to speak to Europe?” Following the global financial crisis, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, and then Brexit, and in the context of a rising economic and more militarily assertive China, any contemporary U.S. national security advisor has a clear answer: “Berlin, the chancellor’s office.” If the political West’s strategic center of gravity is the belief of elites and societies in democratic ideals (checks and balances, transparency, free and independent media, vibrant civil societies), functioning law-based institutions, diverse identities, and shared norms and values, then its operational center of gravity is the trans-Atlantic partnership between the U.S. and Germany — the Berlin-Washington axis.

President Trump has variously stated: “Germany is captive to Russia”; “NATO is obsolete”; “NATO is worse than NAFTA”; “the European Union is a foe”; and, “I called him [Putin] a competitor. And a good competitor he is. And I think the word ‘competitor’ is a compliment.” This rhetoric bolsters pre-existing beliefs held by Putin and his inner circle of strategic decision-makers and shapers that the West is naïve, riven with exploitable tensions and on the brink of implosion. From this perspective, a drift toward a post-Alliance and post-West era provides Russia the opportunity to exploit what it considers a process of U.S. burden-shedding and retrenchment. This understanding is, at best, partial. It fails to recognize why, how and to what ends the U.S. renovates its strategic posture. Under Trump, the U.S. is not isolationist. It seeks to re-engage globally through bilateral relationships rather than through multilateral institutions. As such, it relies on allies to uphold the balance of power in the Middle East and Europe, while seeking to lead a balancing coalition in the Asia-Pacific. According to Harvard University Professor Stephen M. Walt, “offshore balancing” is a rational choice for the U.S. Its regional allies become the first line of defense, the U.S. “passes the buck” and the allies pull their weight. President Trump is quoted in *The Atlantic* magazine as commenting to German Chancellor Angela Merkel: “And I said, ‘You know, Angela, I can’t guarantee it, but we’re protecting you, and it means a lot more to you than protecting us. Because I don’t know how much protection we get by protecting you.’”



Some observers state the issue of defense spending even more starkly. Historian and columnist Victor Davis Hanson writes in the *National Review* that “Germany’s combination of affluence and military stinginess is surreal. Germany has piled up the largest trade surplus in the world at around \$300 billion, including a trade surplus of some \$64 billion with its military benefactor, the United States, yet it is poorly equipped in terms of tanks and fighter aircraft.” While Germany’s defense spending was 1.1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2013 and will be 1.5 percent in 2024 (moving from \$34 billion to \$62 billion), structural imbalances mitigate against the potential prospect of Russian hegemony in Europe. First, the EU has 560 million people and a \$17 trillion economy, while Russia has only 146 million people and an economy that is less than \$2 trillion. Second, combined European-NATO defense budgets are currently four times greater than Russia’s. Third, if by 2024 Germany does spend 2 percent of its GDP on defense, then its defense budget alone will surpass that of Russia.

In a commentary on The Strategist website, former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt argues that the U.S. overstates the notion of free riders and unequitable burden sharing by overstating its own leadership role and commitments within NATO and toward Europe. The U.S. military budget approximates to 72 percent of combined defense spending by all NATO member

A Russian intercontinental ballistic missile system rolls through Red Square in Moscow during a Victory Day military parade to celebrate the end of World War II. Fear is a tool Russia uses to control its neighbors. GETTY IMAGES

states, but half of that is directed toward maintaining the “U.S. presence in the Pacific, and another quarter is spent on operations in the Middle East, strategic nuclear command and control, and other areas,” Bildt writes. With regard to U.S. forces and facilities in Europe, most “are actually focused on the geostrategic arc from India to South Africa. With facilities such as Ramstein, Fairford, Rota, Vicenza and Sigonella, the U.S. has long used Europe as a staging ground for deploying forces elsewhere. And the early-warning and surveillance facilities that the U.S. maintains in the United Kingdom and Norway are there to defend the continental U.S., not Europe.” As a result, combined European defense spending on European security is twice that of the U.S.

Just as Russia and the West are in structural conflict, structural differences between Germany and the U.S. affect how these allies manage the confrontation with Russia. Looking at German and U.S. approaches toward Russia, we can see that Russia matters to both, though in different ways. U.S.-Russia relations are characterized as “thin” and globally focused. Unlike Germany, the U.S. is capable of strategic autocracy, is energy independent



and its trade with Russia is one-tenth that of Europe's. Though Ukraine and Russia constitute one of the few issues that garner bipartisan support, the North Korean nuclear crisis, the future of Iran in the Middle East following the U.S.' withdrawal from the nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan announced in May 2018), and coping with China's rise are higher priorities than Russia for the Trump administration. In essence, the structural constraint at the heart of the U.S.-Russia relationship is a simply stated reality: Russia is too weak for the U.S. to recognize it as an equal; Russia is too strong to be willing or able to accept unequal tactical ally status.

By contrast, Germany-Russia relations are "thick" and regionally focused. Beyond the deep historical and cultural ties, Germany imports 30-35 percent of its oil and gas from Russia and has a strong and extensive business relationship. Germany does not have the luxury of foregoing cooperative relations with Moscow, given its geopolitical proximity. In Germany, Russia is perceived as a threat to the European order but not to Germany per se (German plans exist for the defense of Europe, but not Germany itself). In the U.S., Russia is considered an irritant, a great regional power relevant to U.S. policymaking in the Asia-Pacific, the Middle East and North Africa, but not one of its top five global priorities, nor a central organizing principle. NATO, meanwhile, assumes a 360-degree perspective regarding Russia.

The U.S. is much more insulated than Germany from problems Russia can initiate and exploit. Moreover, the

perception in Germany that the current U.S. administration constitutes a greater challenge to the liberal order than Russia is recognition that the U.S. is the guardian and backbone of the system.

While there are limits to how far any German policy can go in terms of punishing or isolating Russia, President Trump is constrained in forging a more cooperative Russian policy by Congressional sanctions, a national security team that views Russia as a short-term threat, and adversarial and ongoing

investigations of campaign collusion with Russian security services. Thus, because of — rather than despite — some differences in their approaches to foreign and security policy, national interests and priorities, a strong U.S.-German political-military relationship is the critical building bloc of Western cohesion. In other words, where Germany and the U.S. agree, NATO follows, the EU adapts, and the "political West" is sustained and strengthened; where they diverge, transatlantic relations are strained, and dissonance has the potential to become a divorce.

## Structural factors and Russia's strategic intent

As it takes two to tango, let us turn from NATO to Russia and examine the role of structural ideational factors in shaping Russian attitudes toward NATO. Structuralists view outcomes as products of a range of macro-level, long-term factors that are difficult for individuals to change. These factors include dominant ideas and cultural traits, economic development and resource endowment, and legacies of the past, such as, in the case of Russian patronal politics, *sistema*, a sense of exceptionalism, mission and even messianic beliefs. These structural factors influence the "bandwidths," parameters and operating environment within which individuals in leadership positions make decisions. Legacies of the past shape the experiences and background of Russia's leaders, the institutions they work within and the strategies they formulate. While Russia's leadership can instrumentalize Russia's "glorious past" to justify policy choices and preferences, consciously or not these same leaders are shaped by phobias, foundational myths, perceived vulnerabilities, and other elements of a strategic psychology and strategic culture. Structural factors are thus critical to explaining Russian antipathy to NATO.

When examining the ideational context, three interlocking interenabling discourses that draw on the lessons of Russian history grow stronger through time: a return to Great Power status; a well-founded fear of instability; and an understanding that respect is generated, ultimately, through fear. These lessons have been attributed to a number of factors, not least the role of geography, the development of the Russian economy, the role of the elite, the emergence and consolidation of a service state, and a strong leader defending a besieged fortress against external adversaries intent on the destruction of the Russian people and their sacred beliefs and inalienable values.

The first lesson of Russian history is that Russia was, is and shall always be a Great Power. Contemporary national security decision-makers argue a rules-based balance of power system — exemplified by the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945 — brought stability because Russia saved Europe from itself. From the very beginning, the Russian elites and population considered Great Power status and equality with other Great Powers to be a source of stability, pride and dignity. A belief that respect is derived, ultimately, from the fear of Russian military might and an understanding that Russia's ability to enter into zero- and negative-sum games and win was profound. Russia's higher pain threshold was predicated on the ability of its people to suffer and endure, and this acted as a deterrence against encroachment on its statehood. It followed then that no one and nothing would constrain Moscow within its borders and across its external sphere of influence.

The second lesson of Russian history is that Russia can transition from stability to collapse, disorder and

Russian President Vladimir Putin walks across a bridge in Dresden while in Germany to meet with Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2006. While stationed in Dresden as a young Soviet intelligence agent in the 1980s, Putin witnessed the end of the Cold War.

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anarchy extremely quickly, that the sources of instability are multiple and that when Russia is weak, external actors take advantage. Following the October 1917 Russian Revolution, the Russian Civil War witnessed “Whites” versus “Reds,” with an Anglo-American expeditionary force landing in Archangel while Japanese, Chinese and U.S. military contingents occupied the Maritime Provinces in the Russian Far East. The lesson was clear: internal weakness encouraged external intervention. During the Cold War, Soviet leadership firmly understood that the U.S. sought to destroy the Soviet

Union and that the Dulles’ Plan would achieve this end (Allen Dulles was head of the CIA). According to this conspiracy theory, the U.S. would subvert and influence a “fifth column” within the Soviet Union to undermine Soviet values and morals, and ultimately betray the majority.

At the end of the Cold War, while serving in Dresden between 1985 and 1990 as a counterintelligence officer in the KGB’s Chief Second Directorate, Putin witnessed the speed at which order in the German Democratic Republic descended into chaos, as the seemingly most stable and Stalinist of the Soviet satellites crumbled and fell in 1989. In the Putinite mindset, encroachment upon Russia has taken many forms, including an ideational contest in which the West would instrumentalize its political system to undermine, weaken and ultimately control Russia.

According to this perspective, democracy, the rule of law and human rights are contemporary tools of Western power that Russia should resist. NATO is the hard-power backstop of soft-power tools designed to enable a post-modern color revolution-type coup d’état. Thus, if Russia accepts Western constraints, limits and control, then Russia becomes, in Putin’s words, a “colonial democracy.”

The third lesson in Russian history is that respect for Russian Great Power status ensures stability and

respect is ultimately generated through a healthy regard, even fear, of Russian power. In the late imperial period, Russia’s only two allies may have been its “army and its fleet,” in the words of Czar Alexander III. Today, Russian power is ultimately predicated on maintaining an independent nuclear triad and modernized conventional forces. If we condense or distill the essence of Putin’s key speeches in which he articulates a world view — Munich (February 2007), Bucharest NATO summit (April 2008), Federal Assembly Address (March 2014) and U.N. General Assembly Address (September 2015) — into one key message, then we find a plaintive Putin repeatedly asking the same classical Russian question: “Do you respect me?” Putin’s passionate *crie de coeur* (“Listen to us now!”) at his address to the Federal Assembly on March 1, 2018, when he unveiled five new hypersonic weapons systems which purportedly could destroy the U.S., in effect advanced the proposition: “Love me or I will punch you in the face.” Indeed, Russia’s most successful export commodity is not hydrocarbon energy, but fear. Russia’s weeklong Vostok exercise in September 2018, combining 300,000 soldiers, 36,000 tanks and other vehicles, and 1,000 aircraft, appeared to be a vast, elaborate psychological operation, laden with theater, symbolism, deception, coercion and compellence, with Russia messaging China as much as the U.S. Russia is not afraid that neighbors are afraid of Russia, but rather Russia fears that its neighbors do not fear Russia’s abstract collective military might.

Russia views the world in terms of realpolitik, balance of power and zero-sum thinking, exhibiting a military-first approach (based on a clear cost/benefit calculation around cost effectiveness and loss prevention) and opposing the more cost effective, legitimate and sustainable rules-based liberal order. NATO is the emblem of the order Russia wishes to replace and this helps explain Russian antipathy to the Alliance, though its response to managing the perceived threat NATO poses has evolved. Russian offensive realist thinking helps explain the annexation of Crimea and active support for subversion in Donbas. Russian Novorossiia and Russkiy Mir discourse has faded as defensive realism appears now to hold sway over strategic decision-makers in Moscow. This shift in strategic calculus and posture is itself in reaction to pushback from erstwhile friends and allies in the region (not least, elites in Belarus and Kazakhstan), the failure of these concepts to find receptive audiences among societies in the region, and steadily increasing sanctions that suggest Western unity is stronger than Moscow expected.

## Conclusions

The evolution of Russia-NATO relations will provide an indirect test for the sustainability and appeal of political-military systems over the next decade. In



1990, capitalist authoritarian systems accounted for 12 percent of all regime types; by 2018, it was 33 percent. Can liberal values and institutions, civil rights and political freedoms continue to provide for economic development, high standards of living, security and national prestige? Might capitalist authoritarian systems provide an alternative path to economic modernity, national interest and prestige? In the past 20 years, 15 of the 20 fastest-growing countries have been autocratic regimes. Two-thirds of the fastest-growing economies by per capita income are nondemocracies, Roberto Stefan Foa, a political science lecturer at the University of Melbourne, writes in a 2018 article in the *Journal of Democracy*. Are capitalist authoritarian states strong and capable of delivering political stability and order? Can they manage investments in public goods and infrastructure? Or are such regimes felled by authoritarian decay and caught in a “modernization trap”? The answers to these fundamental questions will determine the structure of the international system and shape the relevance and role of NATO in the future.

An enduring and effective trans-Atlantic security relationship delivers over time net benefits to all members. Clearly, if states share common economic and security interests — this can include a shared threat perception, assessment and approach against an adversary, and the political will to finance, build and use the tools to that

Members of a Russian history club in St. Petersburg move a World War II gun during a military show in 2018 dedicated to the deadly Nazi siege of Leningrad, the Soviet-era name of St. Petersburg. Russia projects its willingness to suffer great losses as a deterrent against encroachment on its statehood. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

end — and elites and societies share values, such as the rule of law and respect for democratic procedures, then it follows that there is greater political will to think and act strategically. Shared values and interests have a trust-building and mediation role, allowing for negotiated give-and-take solutions or management of differences, and for costs and benefits to even out over time. Do the NATO allies share a strategic vision about the common future of the political West and the role of NATO as the leading transatlantic institution? NATO needs to create a narrative — tell a rational story to our publics — as to what NATO is and why the Alliance has utility. Given the sharpest tool in NATO’s defense-security toolbox is a credible public commitment to its values, opinion leaders must make the case that market-democratic states deliver peace, stability, prosperity, liberty, and the rule of law, and can protect societies under attack. Part of the narrative should stress that Germany is the U.S.’ most important bilateral relationship, each state protects the other, and that the 70-year relationship has a long-term and enduring future. □