# RUSSIA'S "POST-WEST WORLD ORDER": WHY TURKEY MATTERS

*The majority of the 26-year contemporary Russia-West relationship has been a mixed bag of mutual accusations, occasional crises, and rocky cooperation. What Russian President Vladimir Putin called the "Crimea Spring" of 2014 dramatically shifted Russia's political thinking regarding its relations with the West, and set the course of the country's foreign policy toward ensuring a "post-West world order." The contours of the "new world" are merely being outlined, but it in any case implies greater interaction with "non-Western" states for Russia. Turkey has been a core player in this regard and historically one of Russia's best "frenemies." Engaging with Ankara has not proven easy, but Moscow seems to be positive that it is an inevitable must for any future security arrangement.*

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T he end of the bipolar world opened a new chapter in the discussion of security institutions' role in and around Europe. One of the approaches suggested was that given that the Cold War was over, two of its major military blocs – NATO and the Warsaw Pact – were anachronisms and thus needed to be disbanded. Instead, a new pan-European security organization should be established based on the Council on the Security and Cooperation in Europe (which later became the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe – OSCE). This approach was strongly advocated by Russia in particular, which after the break-up of the Soviet Union, felt it had an equal say in what the security structure of the new Europe should look like. Another approach, which was promoted by the French – was that although NATO was still an important element in the European security architecture, the dominant role should belong to the European Council and the Western European Union. The third approach – sponsored primarily by the US and the UK – insisted on maintaining an American military presence in Europe as a security guarantor. The only question to be debated under these circumstances was in what form and under what conditions such a presence should be kept, hence NATO was an obvious solution.

Both the opponents and proponents of keeping NATO as a leading Euro-Atlantic security framework largely shared the view that the organization could not continue in the form it existed during the Cold War, as the post-bipolar world demanded structural and substantive amendments. For the opponents however, this meant a "self-dissolution" of NATO while for the proponents, it entailed a "reset" of the organization through an ideological rebranding of its imperatives. The new realities that shaped the European security system following the breakup of the USSR similarly dictated the need for NATO to be active outside the borders of the 16 member states. In other words, the policy of "enlargement" that NATO came to pursue was in some sense an issue of the Alliance's resiliency.

The problem with this approach – as was and continues to be seen by Russia – was that NATO came to be perceived not so much as a prime European security guarantor, but rather as a leading politico-military institution with the aim of legitimatizing American military presence and servicing US interests in the region – all at a time when Moscow genuinely believed it was part of "the decision-makers club." This was the first impediment – and a serious one – for any future security dealings between Russia and the West. But above all, it was a factor that embedded Moscow's disillusions over the role Americans and Europeans envisaged for Russia in this process.

Each new step in NATO's development as such were realizing Russia's worst fears – that the virtual outsourcing by Europeans of their security to the Americans had more

advantages for the US than for Europe. Each new member state joining NATO meant new logistical capabilities and infrastructural resources for the Alliance which would essentially be used by the American military – with or without NATO's mandate should the occasion arise – argued many in the Russian establishment at the time. Today, few among Russian decision-makers and in

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the expert community doubt that the true irritant for Moscow was – and I would argue still is – not so much NATO, but what some Russian political scientists called the American "imposed consensus" strategy. The term is used to describe situations when European nations, according to the Russian viewpoint, are forced to adopt the American vision for their own security, even if it does not necessarily reflect Europeans' own interests.[1] This, along with the basic inability to adequately formulate principles and character of a strategic coexistence – let alone partnership – would generate many future problems between Russia and the West.

Finally, all of the above-listed problems merged together to shape the basics of the perception that dominates Russian political and military discourse to date. While for the West, NATO's expansion is percieved as the "enlargement of the security community," Russians see it as an assertive movement of the Western – primarily American – military infrastructure closer to Russian borders.

### Sources of Russia's Defiance of a Western-driven Security Order

It is important to understand that the sources of this vision vis-à-vis a Western-driven security architecture were being shaped in the 1990s, and thus set the scene for how the issue would evolve in the future. Russian President Vladimir Putin documented this vision when he came to power in the new National Security Concept of 10 January 2000, which interpreted NATO's enlargement to the East as "one of the factors defining threats to Russia in the international sphere."[2] Russia's military doctrine which was published three months later did not mention NATO directly, but alluded to it in the form of a "trend of some military blocs … to enlarge to the detriment of Russian military security."[3] Finally, Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 7 October 2000 noted that "NATO's current political and military imperatives are

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[1] For more on the concept see: Alexei Bogaturov and Alexei Fenenko, "The crisis of the 'imposed consensus' strategy," [Кризис стратегии «навязанного консенсуса»], *Free Thought Magazine,* [Свободная мысль], No. 11, 2008, pp. 5–18.

[2] National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, 10 January 2000, http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/1.html

[3] Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 21 April 2000, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2000-04-22/5_doktrina.html

not consistent with security interests of Russia" and that "Russia maintains a negative attitude toward NATO enlargement."[4]

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The language – still rather mild compared to how it would be several years later – reflects the concern the Russians had regarding NATO. However, Putin still had a lot of hope in the NATO-Russia Council at the time, and the idea of Russia joining NATO was discussed in Moscow at the top level. The Kremlin thought that this new alliance could center around the "terrorist threat," rather than a "Russia threat." In this regard, Putin was the first to call former US president George W. Bush to express his condolences after the 9/11 atrocity. These ideas and hopes would soon get crushed with the US-led invasion of Iraq and a chain of what came to be portrayed in Russia as "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space. That the alliance he hoped to forge was wishful thinking and was not ever seriously considered by the West was a wake-up call for Putin. Russia's illusion on being included in the new post-Cold War security architecture collided with the harsh realities of US-led and NATO-operated military campaigns first in Yugoslavia, then in Iraq, and later Libya. All of these cases are consistently raised by Russian leadership, which demonstrates another vital element of Russian thinking on Western-driven security projects: They do not work. Speaking at one of the public forums some time ago, President Putin asked a Western expert with ill-concealed sarcasm: "Can you name a single case when the US-led campaign ended in success for this or that country's future?"

Putin went on from "documenting" a more skeptical and alert attitude toward Western policies – including the NATO enlargement – to "institutionalizing" this vision in the form of Russia's own foreign policies and domestic discourse. The symbolic beginning of this course was Putin's infamous Munich Security Conference speech of 2007; Putin thought he was exposing the hypocrisy of Western policies, but leaders in the West felt the Russian president was increasingly spiraling out of control. The subsequent crises – be it the war in Georgia in 2008 or the ongoing war in Ukraine – conceptually meant Russia and the West ended up in the vicious circle where escalation triggers further confrontation – and the other way round – with each party being positive they were dragged into the confrontation by the other.

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[4] Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 7 October 2000, http://archive.mid.ru//Bl.nsf/arh/19DCF61BEFED61134325699C003B5FA3

### *A Post-West World Order?*

For the Europeans and Americans, the seizure of Crimea also marked a key milestone. NATO supporters on both sides of the Atlantic were reassured that their initial position proved accurate: "If NATO had not accepted Central and East European countries, Putin's "zone of instability" would have now spread all the way to the German borders." Although exploited both by hardliners in the US and the "new Europeans," this

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discourse is not necessarily shared by all of the European players. Some politicians, and mostly business people, feel the "Russian threat" narrative is heavily politicized and hurts both national and pan-European security and economic interests. This view is echoed in Moscow; the absence of a "monolithic opponent" as was the Soviet Union gradually eroded the NATO "bloc discipline," Russian diplomats and officials argue. Military campaigns outside Europe are not a strong enough incentive to motivate Euro-American solidarity. Hence, creating and maintaining the image of "the enemy at the gate" has proven more practical in mobilizing resources to strengthen the Alliance. In fairness, Putin is exploiting a similar narrative to galvanize the domestic constituency against the West.

Russia's takeover of Crimea in 2014 however, was not merely a decisive act of Moscow's defiance of the post-World War European security order. For Russia, it was a dramatic divorce from the Western-architected world order and an important psychological shift in foreign policy for President Putin. The West was no longer a role-model. Although Europe is still ranked high – in fact second to the post-Soviet space – on a map of Russian foreign policy priority regions, Europeans are no longer a go-to on matters of international importance.

Speaking on 18 February of this year at the Munich Security Conference, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted: "The post-Cold War order has ended. The world did not become either West-centric or more secure. Results of the (failed) democratization of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region show it clearly."[5] Moscow's view of the "post-West world order" is, according to Lavrov, "when every country on account of its sovereignty and within international law will be seeking to balance its own interests and the interests of its partners respecting their

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[5] Sergey Lavrov, remarks at the Munich Security Conference on 18 February 2017, Munich, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBBK_sOJSI4

cultural, historical, and civilizational uniqueness." He added that "new centers of global influence" will now assume greater international responsibility.

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It is this concept that drives Russia to engage more with key stakeholders in different regions. If projected to the Middle East, where Moscow has exercised a lot of its foreign policy ideas, it means a more robust cooperation will be pursued by Russia with Iran, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and others. From Russia's point of view, this move should be coupled with greater empowerment of these countries in dealing with regional security and other challenges.

### Russia's Turkey Dilemma: Empowering a Disappointed Frenemy?

When you get to the practical promotion of the idea of a post-Western security order – no matter how well-reasoned you think it is – it is more tricky. The multipolar world that seems to be considered at the core for this new world order will not necessarily be any safer or more secure. The question of how the relations between major power centers will be organized has real practical value. The key challenge however, is likely to be the fact that the power centers will be too independent and, again, not necessarily expose predictable policies.

Regardless of how you answer these questions, Turkey will remain one of the critical partner-states in Russia's foreign policy. Needless to say, the history of the relations between the two countries have seen countless ups and downs. Today, whenever the two are faced with a crisis, these historic references are frequently brought up to demonstrate that the nature of Russia-Turkey relations is adversarial. In many ways it is hard to argue against this. Yet at the same time, Moscow and Ankara have occasionally demonstrated successful crisis-management, as was the case with the assassination of the Russian Ambassador Karlov in late 2016, for example. This might reflect the fundamental understanding in both Russian and Turkish leadership that the two states, which share a large and turbulent neighborhood, need a *modus vivendi* based on a pragmatic and reasonable approach vis-à-vis one another.

Russia's military operations in Syria are an example of Moscow situating itself in a new post-West order – as interpreted by Moscow. Aside from the aims proclaimed by Russian officials, the military campaign had two Western-oriented objectives. First,

as an attribute of a great power, one must be able to set its own rules. Second, as a great power you need to be able to project force – including military force – far beyond your borders. Today, both of the objectives have been by and large achieved. Virtually everyone is taking about Russia as a new game changer in the Middle East; many are seeking Moscow's help in dealing with their own rivals, others are looking up to Russia to help solve region-

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al crises. Even if Russia has neither ambition nor the resources to do so, the perception of the country as a new "sheriff in town" exists and is likely to dominate regional discourse for some time. Similarly, the exposure of force expressed in the most dramatic ways – through cruise missile strikes from the Caspian and the Mediterranean – was meant to impress emotive audiences in Europe, the US, and the Middle East.

In getting carried away with these tasks, it is likely Russia did not realize it was stepping on Turkey's "turf" – something Ankara considers its own "near abroad." The downing of the Russian jet by Turkey in late 2015 was a result of reckless maneuvers of the former, and an emotional response by the latter. Both sought to send strong messages to one another, to be perceived decisive in the eyes of their own populations, but following the crisis both ended up looking for a face-saving strategy.

As the initial emotional heat dissipated, it turned out Russia had a limited retaliatory toolbox. A military response was almost immediately ruled out – to the delight of some and the disappointment of others. The Kremlin understood that even though NATO members were not particularly excited with either what happened or how the aftermath was managed, a potential Russian military response would not have gone unanswered. So, eventually Putin was presented with three options.

The first option suggested Russia launch a massive information campaign painting Erdoğan and his close associates as "accomplices of terrorists." This strategy would be designed to diminish Western support for the Turkish government and force Turkey to physically demonstrate that its struggle against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is tangible. If Turkey's leadership had failed to do so, Erdoğan's profile would have deteriorated further internationally. It would not necessarily make him more cooperative – in fact, it might have been quite the opposite – but that kind of reaction would then back up Russia's argument that Erdoğan's behavior is irresponsible and dangerous.

The second option on the table for Putin had to do with raising the stakes regarding Turkish domestic security. This might have implied that the Kurdish issue could have been put on a more serious debate in the Russian public discourse with further implementation of Kurdish-friendly activities in Russia's foreign policy.[6] However, such a response would have been a lengthy and resource-demanding process requiring a lot of detailed work. Besides, it would not have provided the fast "feedback" the public wanted to see; by the time it would have been implemented, the impetus for retaliation might have lost its steam. Most importantly, the approach would have had plenty of drawbacks for Russia itself. Russia's own domestic structure had vulnerabilities Turkey could have exploited through its channels – primarily in the North Caucasus and in Crimea. In fact, these groups seem most concerned over the future of Russia-Turkey bilateral relations.

Finally, the third option – which was eventually adopted – entailed an economic response: imposing sanctions. Some of the sanctions are still in place, but there is a genuine commitment by President Putin to lift them. This response turned out to be the most suitable measure in dealing with a country that happened to be an adversary at the time but was nonetheless seen as a partner in the long-term. It was mutually painful as it also hurt the Russian economy but it was damage that could be fixed – unlike the other options discussed. The conflict also exposed a useful though small paradoxical lesson. Russia-Turkey crises cannot only spoil the bilateral relationship, but could also serve to boost it by recalibrating mutual expectations, amending approaches, and looking to safeguard the relationship from third parties seeking to derail it.

It took about six months for the leaders to start talking to one another again,[7] and nine months before their meeting in St. Petersburg.[8] So when the assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Turkey Andrei Karlov in Ankara happened in late 2016, the crisis-management between Putin and Erdoğan was at a much better level, which essentially saved the relationship from sinking into new depths. Russia and Turkey's differences on Syria or the economy have not gone away, but they seem to know how to better manage them now – at least that is what the hope is.

Contrary to statements by the two leaders, the normalization process is not complete.[9] The overall situation in Russia-Turkey relations is indicative of what it might

[6] Maxim A. Suchkov, "How Russia sees Kurdish quest for autonomy," *Al-Monitor*, 6 May 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2016/05/russia-syria-iraq-kurds-quest-autonomy.html

[7] Maxim A. Suchkov, "Has Turkey finally made nice with Russia?" *Al-Monitor*, 30 June 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2016/06/turkey-russia-relations-erdogan-apology.html

[8] Maxim A. Suchkov, "Have Putin and Erdogan found common ground?" *Al-Monitor*, 11 August 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2016/08/putin-erdogan-meeting.html

[9] Maxim A. Suchkov, "How 'complete' is normalization betwee Russia, Turkey?" *Al-Monitor*, 13 March 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2017/03/russia-turkey-normalization-process-erdogan-putin-syria.html

be like to deal with emboldened political actors who cherish independence in their decision-making in the new security order. If tomorrow, Russia and Turkey again find each other on opposing sides it should not be surprising – they are both seeking their own place in the formation of this new order. However if both seek to succeed in this paradigm – and evidence does not suggest the opposite – then it makes sense for them to reinforce one another.

For Russia as much as Turkey, the idea of being rejected by the West is a uniting factor – at least for the time being. The more Russia and Turkey are being alienated in the traditional European/transatlantic security framework, the more the two will seek opportunities for a mutual engagement. The question of how to better navigate through the difficulties of that engagement and settle bilateral differences is crucial, but it is where the discussion in both countries will likely develop towards now.

## *Conclusion*

American "atlantists" believe that even if the crisis within the transatlantic community exists, it is mostly about the deficit of the US' own leadership on the one hand, and the "security negligence" of Europeans on the other. Hence, the issue of a strong NATO is key in ensuring there is a global call for American leadership. Otherwise, big regional actors such as Russia and Turkey may feel tempted to challenge the US' intentions and its global status.

Russia-centric motives were among the drivers of the last wave of NATO enlargement. Concerned over Russia's capabilities for hybrid warfare and the military performance in Syria, NATO feels Russia is able to conduct a more assertive policy beyond the post-Soviet space. In this sense, the latent instability in the Balkans coupled with Moscow's inclination to defend "the Russian world" makes NATO leadership included to jump to accept new members, even if they are far from the formal standards of the membership. The accession of Montenegro in this regard is also seen by Moscow as a preventive measure for Russian gas exports via the South European route. This too was a factor in the Russian decision to invest more in the Turkish Stream, and is another indication that the two have found ways to work around the obstacles the current system mounts for them.

Since the end of the Cold War, the truly inclusive pan-European security system that in Moscow's view could fully embrace Russia, failed to be created. The prospects for such a system also look fairly bleak until "Russia-West confrontation" remains the dominant paradigm, with Russia being perceived as a threat to the European security rather than one of its guarantors.

NATO is still history's largest politico-military alliance and continues to set the tone in the security dynamics of Europe and beyond. To date, there is no real or even hypothetical counter-balance to this community to commensurate with its political, military, or economic potential. Yet more than twenty years since its end, the Cold War demonstrated that the strategic and doctrinal transformation that NATO had to undergo had mixed results for its political and operational integrity. Equally, inter-action with Russia on a wide range of issues has proven more effective in solving regional crises (Bosnia, Karabakh) when it was in a cooperation mode than when it was in a confrontational one. Today, Russia and the West have found themselves on opposite sides of almost every security issue. Nevertheless, the nature of contempo-rary threats exposing true security interests of the parties are not always reflected in the positions that the sides take regarding one another.