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1. UK Ministry of Defence

HOW FAR CAN THE WEST AFFORD TO IGNORE RUSSIA?

Russian conventional military power has declined to such an extent over the last decade and more that it is now of limited utility against even minor opponents. The country's military decrepitude is matched, and caused, by economic, political and moral malaise. There is no sign at present of any recovery. Russia is likely to muddle downwards for the foreseeable future. Even if, as is possible, there is a national revival comparable to, say, that in the USSR after the Civil War or Germany in the thirties, it will still take well over a decade, more probably several, to rebuild the economy and recreate a formidable military machine.

This period of Russian impotence could be used by the west to refashion Europe in its desired image, extending its hegemony into the Baltic states, the Balkans and the Transcaucasus by, for instance, expanding NATO and/or the EU. Any eastward spread of western military power would confirm Russian suspicions, never far below the surface, that the west is Russia's enemy, determined to encircle the country and keep it down or even provoke its disintegration or reduction to the status of an economic colony. It would destroy those political and moral forces in the country, already weak, which see its future in terms of liberal political and economic development. Co-operation would give way to antagonism and confrontation. But would this matter, given Russia's current weakness?

Russia is weak now, but it would be wrong to think that it will always be so. Historically, the country has repeatedly demonstrated remarkable recuperative powers, hauling itself up by its own bootstraps. Notably, in defiance of western expectations, it recovered within little more than a decade from military defeat, revolution and civil war in the period 1915-24 and then again from German invasion in 1941-42, going on to conquer eastern Europe. However hard it is to imagine how it will escape from its current plight, the possibility cannot be discounted.

History also warns against treating other powers' interests as expendable just because they are not yet strong enough to defend them, especially if, in doing so, enemy images are created and nourished. When held by a morally humiliated state, such images are likely to eclipse sober, reasonable behaviour with exaggerated threat perceptions and distorted views of what is in the national interest. Consider, for instance, the case of Japan. A very pro-western country in 1919, Japan was gradually alienated when its interests repeatedly treated as of no account by the USA and Britain. By 1931, when it invaded Manchuria, it no longer felt it necessary to take western reactions into account; by 1941 it had become so divorced from reality that it attacked the USA in the belief that the Americans lacked the political will to use their vastly superior military strength to challenge its imperial ambitions.

Dangerous misperceptions produce dangerous responses, especially when an atmosphere of fear and suspicion and perceived pressure is accompanied by tight decision-making cycles. Russia was once derided as "Upper Volta with rockets", but it does still have the rockets. Even a weak Russia may feel pressured into using them in a way that would appear bizarrely irrational to westerners but which would make sense to Russian leaders applying different logic. In this context, it is worth noting that the National Security Concept adopted in 1997 assigned primacy to the use of nuclear weapons (including first use and pre-emption) in the task of preventing both nuclear and conventional large scale and regional wars directed against Russia or its allies. In any but the most low-key armed

conflict involving Russia, nuclear weapons may be used. The Soviets always regarded them as a means of warfighting (if not necessarily as the weapons of first resort) and not merely as instruments of deterrence. With the decline of the conventional forces, operational-tactical nuclear weapons are once again assuming a prominent role in Russian military thinking. Western concepts about the logic of nuclear use must not be ascribed to Russians, especially angry and embittered Russians whose ideas about what is at stake may differ radically from western assessments.

An adversarial Russia could adopt several policies that would disturb the west.

- As a power increasingly disinclined to accept an adverse shift in the world correlation of forces and opposed in principle to the existence of a unipolar, US/NATO dominated world, Russia could make common cause with other revisionist states. On the principle that “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”, some unlikely alliances could be formed, for instance with Islamic-fundamentalist regimes and groups (compare with the Rapallo and Molotov-Ribbentrop Pacts). Russian political support, especially in the UN, could be of considerable aid and comfort to anti-western countries. A Moscow-Beijing axis, a strategic partnership in which interest is already being shown, could be particularly destabilizing. The US foresees the next super-power confrontation as being between themselves and China (around 2015). It would be in the interests of the west to have Russia, possibly resurgent by then, on our side rather than drive it towards China through real or imagined hostility and slights. Generally, as in the recent efforts to persuade Milosevic to give in over Kosovo, it is better to have Russia as part of the solution than part of the problem in time of international crisis.
- Constraints could be lifted on the export to so-called rogue states of high-tech weaponry and the expertise to use it. Many in Russia today argue that this is the best way to restore income and investment to the sickly military-industrial complex. It is even possible that weapons of mass destruction and long-range delivery systems could be included in such sales. This would end the era of no/low cost military intervention for the west and thus constrain western foreign policy options.
- Even an ailing Russia, let alone a recovering, successful one, has resources to weaken enemies using instruments other than war. The potential for mischief making is admittedly less than it was in the days when the USSR was the champion of an ideology which had a wide, universalist appeal, but it is still there. The same, covert and deniable methods that were used in the days of the ideological struggle can still be used by Russian intelligence to exploit weaknesses and exacerbate divisions and so undermine countries where state structures are new, weak or deficient. The stability of areas like the Transcaucasus, Central Asia, the Balkans and even Ukraine can be threatened by other means than military power. For that matter, the conditional alliances with organized crime and terrorist movements that are so useful in such struggles can also be used as a low-cost means of inflicting distracting pain on even basically stable opponents like Britain.
- A real sense of threat, at present absent in the minds of most Russians, would likely give rise to a nationalist and/or pan-Slavic revival. A resurgent Russia that sees the west as an enemy might well feel it has both the need to recoup post-Cold War losses and undermine perceived efforts at containment. This would lead both to a serious effort at rearmament, even at the expense of longer term economic

progress and therefore economic and political stability, and a commitment to a *de facto* recreation of at least part of the USSR. Belarus would quickly fall into line. Ukraine, Kazakhstan and probably other states would be subject to a combination of pressures and inducements to join a confederation that could well be successful. Russophone minorities could be stirred up for political purposes and struggles over spheres of influence intensified. The prospects of intra- and inter-state conflict in the fSU would be significantly enhanced. At best, such developments would lead to a new Cold War, and at worst to a hot one.

Russia should not be allowed to exercise a veto over western pursuit of fundamental interests, which certainly include the development of friendly relationships with the states of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact. However, there is no point in needlessly making an enemy in Russia just because it is politically easier to do so in the short term and the Russians lack the military power to resist humiliation. It is surely possible to manage relationships with imagination, sensitivity and restraint so that politics does not develop as a zero-sum game? To ignore Russian sensitivities through hubris may often be tactically expedient but it would be to make a longer-term strategic error.

The west should seek to influence Russia, and you do not influence people by ignoring them. Of course, some people who have wearied of trying to encourage Russia along the road towards liberal economic and political systems and cooperation with the west will counter that the west has been trying to do just that for the last decade but with little determinable success. There is some truth in this argument. However, those that advance it should look at the flawed nature of the help given before becoming too self-righteous. Advice has been proffered in plenty, but much of it has been in the form of nostrums which are of limited value because they ignore the political, economic and psychological baggage from the past which help to shape the future. Money has been thrown more or less indiscriminately at Russia's problems; lacking proper targeting and controls, it is not surprising that it ends up in the bank accounts of the criminal and corrupt. Westerners, concerned for the most part with making a fast buck themselves, have done little to disabuse ordinary Russians of the notion that the "wild capitalism" they endure today is the normal nature of a market economy.

Russia does need help, but more of a long term, unspectacular nature than some of the grandiose, quick fix solutions that have sometimes been proposed in the past. Tasks such as the creation of sound, respected commercial law, a properly regulated banking system and an honest, efficient and impartial police and criminal justice system are the sort of areas where the west could usefully proffer advice and expertise. It would be greatly in our interest to do so, given the fact that organized crime is one of Russia's few successful exports. If, as a result of these being taken up, a benign legal environment could be established in which collaborative projects could be undertaken to mutual advantage and, if Russians are prepared to learn commercial lessons that will enable them to produce goods of merchantable quality and competitiveness, trade can flourish. The more ties that bind can be created at non-government level, the more Russia is given a stake in the democratic-capitalist world, the safer that world will be. It may well be, of course, that Russia is indeed incorrigible, or that the window of opportunity for helping it through a successful transition is now past. That gloomy thought does not absolve the west from the responsibility of trying. To take the easy way out, wash our hands of Russia and proceed to reorder Europe without regard to its interests, or to the internal impact of our actions, is to abandon any chance at all of a more cooperative relationship in favour of a new, possibly less stable Cold War or worse.

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