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commentary

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Russia plays on the unpredictability of the New Cold War

Pavel K. Baev

*Research Professor,
Peace Research
Institute Oslo
(PRIO);
Senior Non-Resident
Fellow, Brookings
Institution,
Washington DC*

The point of departure for this short analysis of Russia's aggressive/defensive foreign policy behavior is that it is too late for the Western policy-makers and opinion-shapers in the West to worry about a probability of a New Cold War. This confrontation is already upon us, and it may deserve a better name, since it is certainly not a replay of the protracted struggle that ended 25 years ago with the collapse of the USSR. We can perhaps call it "Hybrid Hostility" or perhaps "Flexible Fight", but the key point is that this irreconcilable zero-sum militarized confrontation can hopefully be managed – but cannot be wished or talked away. It was not the choice of the United States or NATO to engage in this confrontation, and it is rather senseless to look for the Western "guilt" in setting the stage for it, because it is Russia that drives this confrontation, and its choice for launching it is determined by the maturing of the anti-democratic and profoundly corrupt regime fostered and led by President Vladimir Putin.

One striking feature of the fast-evolving confrontation is that while it is happening primarily in the post-Soviet space, Russia has no allies among the post-Soviet states. Even such core members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as Armenia, Belarus or Kazakhstan are distancing themselves from Russia's brinkmanship and refuse to recognize its annexation of Crimea. Standing alone against the West, Russia cannot afford to play by the rules that would reduce risks of sudden escalation, because greater predictability shapes a very predictable outcome of the confrontation – Russia's defeat. This lesson from the old Cold War is not lost on the Kremlin, so the often expressed intentions in various Western political quarters to engage Moscow in various dialogues aimed at bringing it to "the same page" amounts only to wishful strategic thinking.

**Center for International
and European Studies**

Tel: +90 212 533 65 32,
ext. 4608/09
Fax: +90 212 631 91 50
Email: cies@khas.edu.tr

<http://cies.khas.edu.tr>



Facing a heavily unbalanced power competition, Russia has to use its every advantage and to exploit every vulnerability in the Western position. It has indeed shown dexterity in applying the tools of vicious propaganda and more recently, cyber-attacks, but what is striking in this development of “hybrid” methods is the absence of an energy dimension. As the global oil market has shifted to the cycle of over-supply, Moscow has lost the opportunity to “weaponize” its gas export to Europe. Indeed, in the market where alternative supply sources are aggressively expanding, President Putin has to expend a lot of political capital in order to ensure that Gazprom retains its share. He still engages in pipeline geopolitics but its aim is to circumvent Ukraine, which means that Russia has essentially given upon the designs to pull this “brotherly” state into its sphere of influence.

Another striking feature is the lack of any connection between Russia’s oil-and-gas interests and its military intervention in the Syrian civil war. The impact of this intervention on the course of the war is too complex to be examined here, but it may be useful to point out that the character of this experiment in power projection has changed more than once since its high-resonance beginning in September 2015. Moscow has persistently tried to turn this intervention into a major driver in its relations with the United States and NATO, but the goals of making itself an “indispensable” partner in the anti-Daesh coalition and securing the survival of the al-Assad regime were poorly compatible from the start and have become impossible to reconcile in autumn 2016. Russia has been sincerely unconcerned about the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria and tended to see Western concerns as an exploitable weakness, so that the application of extra pressure on the Aleppo “hot spot” would compel US State Secretary John Kerry to offer yet another compromise. In October 2016, however, Moscow pushed this game too far, and instead of acknowledgement of its key role, it now has to deal with accusations of “barbaric behavior” and “war crimes”.

The breakdown of the Kerry-Lavrov negotiation format has left Russia in a vulnerable position in Syria, where its rather limited forces are exposed to a wide range of risks, and also in a new low of its fluid confrontation with NATO. The Alliance managed to produce a strong show of unity at the Warsaw summit in July 2016, and Moscow had to acknowledge (while certainly not to admit) that its efforts at eroding this cohesion, including by demonstrating an uncharacteristic self-restraint in responding to various NATO exercises in the run-up to the summit, paid poor dividends. Reconfiguring these efforts, the Kremlin assumed that the internal disarray made Turkey a “weak link” in the Western front, and so Putin went an extra mile in rebuilding the partnership badly damaged by the November 2015 air fight. The Turkish Stream pipeline deal announced with great fanfare during Putin’s visit to Istanbul in October 2016, cannot provide a solid foundation for this reinvigorated partnership, simply because the economic foundation of this hugely expensive project is rather dubious. Even if both Russia and Turkey are presently eager to play down their disagreements on Syria, another twist in this complex conflict is certain to bring them back to the front, and Ankara will then rediscover that its real security guarantees and allegiance are with NATO.

Russia's only hope for sustaining the unequal (in power-political terms) confrontation with NATO is to keep the initiative in escalating and de-escalating its particular directions and to use the readiness to take higher risks as a political advantage. NATO by its very nature cannot respond as fast as a rigidly centralized regime can maneuver, but it doesn't mean that the Alliance cannot effectively manage the confrontation. On the Baltic front, for that matter, NATO (in partnership with Finland and Sweden) has shown firm resolution to counter the Russian demonstration of force, so the range of military options available for Moscow has become limited and unattractive. In the wider Black Sea area (from Baku to Damascus), to the contrary, Russia still has much freedom for power maneuvering, and Turkey holds the key to enforcing greater stability.

It is essential to keep in mind that Russian aggressive moves are not driven by some "inherent expansionism" but come from the deep feelings of insecurity in the Kremlin. These feelings cannot be alleviated by compromise offers, for instance about the "Finlandization" of Ukraine, which are typically perceived as signs of Western weakness. No lifting of sanctions and no amount of talks could dissuade Putin and his courtiers that the hostile West aims at regime change in Russia, and this fear is not entirely irrational, because the corrupt regimes of this type are always in danger of sudden public uprising of the kind that destroyed Putin's "dream job" in Dresden back in 1989. The new "hybrid" confrontation is set to end much the same way as the old Cold War – with an implosion of the political system that has become incompatible with and a barrier for modernization.

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