

THE TURNING POINT FOR RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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This Letort Paper examines the background to Russia's use of military force in Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015, and investigates the roots of Russia's new assertiveness and willingness to resort to direct military action to resolve foreign policy challenges.

This Letort Paper identifies two long-standing trends that led to this increased willingness: first, a greater and more urgent perception of threat, whether real or imagined, to Russia's own security; and second, a recognition that Russia itself had regained sufficient strength, military and otherwise, to assert itself and counter this threat.

Viewed through the prism of Russian threat assessment, events of the previous 15 years, including the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Arab Spring, Western intervention in Libya, and election protests at home in 2011, had all represented a single trajectory: they gave rise to the perception that the West's habit of fostering and facilitating regime change by means of "color revolutions," indiscriminately and with little regard for the consequences, might have Moscow as its eventual target.

The Munich Security Conference of February 2007 was the first point at which the West, in general, took notice of the mounting dissatisfaction and alarm emanating from Russia at the state of the international order, and with what Russia perceived as unilateral and irresponsible actions by the West led by the United States. However, the themes that Russian President Vladimir Putin elaborated at the conference were familiar from Russian state discourse over previous years, as Russian concern over the new international order had already been growing rapidly. Instances of foreign intervention from Kosovo onwards had projected to Moscow a clear pattern of the erosion of the notion of state sovereignty as an absolute. This alarming prospect was accentuated by—as

Moscow sees it—an increasing tempo of unrestrained and irresponsible interventions by the West with the intention of regime change, leaving chaos and disorder in their wake. The Orange Revolution cemented Russian perceptions that Western-encouraged regime change carried intent hostile to Russia.

Given the role and significance of Ukraine to Russia, Moscow perceived this as a strategic defeat. However, importantly, this perception was insufficiently appreciated in the West—just as 10 years later in 2014, the strength of Russian reaction was not considered as a factor in what were ostensibly internal developments in Ukraine. The key difference in 2014 was that Russia felt empowered to act instead of merely protesting. There is a parallel here with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enlargement—2004 was also the year when the Baltic States achieved NATO accession. This too provoked a vociferous and strongly negative reaction from Russia; however, with Russia still protesting from a position of relative weakness, this reaction was taken much less seriously than similar sentiments expressed a decade later after clear demonstrations of Russian readiness to intervene to protect its perceived interests.

The fear of instability and chaos in world affairs is consistently expressed in Russian leadership statements. In this context, many Russian statements are redolent of nostalgia for the stability of a bipolar world, where U.S. and Soviet interests were in balance. Russian overtures to the United States, and the evident desire to be treated as an equal partner, can be seen as attempts to restore this balance.

At the beginning of the current decade, the new challenges arising from the Arab Spring confirmed for the Russian security leadership that they had correctly assessed the international situation as one

of impending direct threat, based on the view that political instability in North Africa and the Middle East results from the plotting of the West led by the United States. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has commented repeatedly that the negative outcomes of the Arab Spring were a direct result of U.S. policy, and at the height of the Arab Spring, former Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev echoed the view that Russia was vulnerable to the same kind of interference. This view that political change in North Africa after the Arab Spring came about as a result of Western information warfare and cyber-conspiracy, which could now be implemented against Russia, fed into suspicion of foreign orchestration at the time of Russia's election protests in late 2011 and early 2012 – based on the assumption that any alarming social phenomena in Russia must be inspired from overseas.

Thus the prospect of destabilization close to home, once again in Ukraine at the beginning of 2014, would have been of acute and direct concern in Moscow. Even without the accompanying disorder, the threat of the “loss” of Ukraine to the West posed an immediate military problem: it appears to have been considered plausible in Moscow that this constituted an immediate danger of losing the defense industry in the Donbass and the Black Sea Fleet's base in Sevastopol, together with the often-overlooked supporting infrastructure scattered across the Crimean peninsula, to NATO. According to Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolay Patrushev, the consequences could have gone even further: Events in Ukraine were the result of the United States attempting to draw Russia into interstate military conflict as a way of effecting regime change in Moscow and breaking up the country.

Debate continues as to whether this belief in a Western agenda to destroy Russia is genuinely held or not. However, while important, the question is in a way by this stage purely academic. The conviction of threat from the West is expressed so persistently, at all levels of Russian government and society, that perception equates to reality. This is particularly the case following the isolation of Russian media space after the beginning of the crisis around Ukraine, which means that large sections of the Russian population no longer have access to outside sources of information to counterbalance the Russian state narratives of a nation under siege and an impending hour of national crisis.

Nevertheless, while Russian threat perceptions remain consistent, Russia's capability to address them has changed drastically.

A key difference between Syria and Ukraine, and previous confrontations where Russia did not play

such an active role, is that Russia now feels sufficiently powerful by comparison to the West – in military, political, and diplomatic terms – to mount active countermeasures. Adroit manipulation by Russia of the West's confrontation with Syria over the use of chemical weapons in 2013 averted the possibility of imminent military action, and represented a successful Russian gamble in testing its power and influence by standing up to the West. Western intervention in Syria, after strenuous opposition from Moscow, would have destroyed all Russian political credibility. Instead, by facing down and containing the West, Russia has gained legitimacy in some quarters as the protector of the status quo, sovereignty, and stability and was emboldened by the confirmation that out-manoeuvring the West is now possible. This contributed to the confidence with which, a year later, initial actions against Ukraine were undertaken – and subsequently, the seizure of Crimea validated the post-Georgia view that Russian direct military action can also be successful and lead to long-term strategic gain through presenting the world with a *fait accompli*.

Russia continues to present itself as being challenged by an approaching threat and that it must mobilize to confront that threat. Actions taken in response, even if viewed by Moscow as defensive measures, are likely to have severe consequences not only for Russia's neighbors but also for their allies in both Europe and North America. Understanding the Russian perspective of recent history, regardless of whether that perspective is accurate or flawed, is essential for minimizing the risk of conflict that this entails.

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