

European Issues

n°336

9<sup>th</sup> December 2014

# Don't let Russia be Russia : neither provoke nor indulge

Simon Serfaty

**Abstract:**

Twenty years ago Russia was a mess – no longer an enemy but not even an adversary and certainly not a partner. What was feared most was a collapse that might turn Russia into something resembling the former Yugoslavia, *en pire*. “I don’t like it when the U.S. flaunts its superiority,” complained then-Russian president Boris Yeltsin. And to insist, “Russia isn’t Haiti... Russia will rise again.” [1] Events now confirm it. Russia is back: a bully to former Soviet holdings in Europe, a challenge to the United States, and one of the self-proclaimed leaders of the alleged post-Western world [2].

This is not just a burst of imperial nostalgia akin to that of some European states a few decades ago. Nor is it a moment of post-bipolarity funk – a rebellion against an all-powerful America that did not make time for Russia when it was time to do so, and against a uniting Europe that did not make room for its larger neighbor when it was hoping for an invitation. As always, ghosts linger. Seven decades of Soviet governance failed to bury centuries of Russian imperial history. *La grande Russie* does not stay silent or passive for long: her vocation is to be heard and expand, not to withdraw and shrink. The “soul” attributed by George W. Bush to Vladimir Putin after their first meeting in June 2001 mourned two decades of disrespect. Shorn of nearly one-fourth of the Soviet Union’s post-1945 territory, Russia still remained too big, too near, and too nuclear for such treatment – not yet a true European power but still a leading power in Europe. As Russia thus longs for its imperial past, the vexing question is how to impress upon its government the limits of a self-image which the Russian state can no longer sustain and which the West need not tolerate any more.

“When Russia was weak in the 1990s,” remembers former defense Secretary Robert Gates, a self-described hardliner, “we did a poor job ... managing the relationship for the long-term.” [3] The mistake, then, was to give insufficient attention to its legitimate interests and concerns. Now that it looks stronger, the mistake would be to exaggerate their significance and relevance. America’s unfinished business with Russia is part of Europe’s own unfinished business, one half of which is done as an ever closer Union while the

other half is being undone by national identities that challenge the state’s territorial sovereignty.

**DEAD FOREVER?**

The end of the Cold War was abrupt. There was no cease-fire, no peace conference, no formal treaty, and no specific settlement. As the Soviet Union held an unprecedented estate sale, the West helped itself – Europe in the East, Germany in Europe, and America in the world. Left behind was a Russian state that had been forgotten since 1917 but which lost no time to question its condition. “*Mort à jamais?*” asked Marcel Proust. Dead, to be sure, but not forever or even for long: clearly, it was not wise to dismiss centuries of a Russian history that had expanded one Belgium a year for 300 years, brutally imposed the Russification of ethnic minorities, and relied on authoritarian and totalitarian rule to subjugate its own people. Now, it is Putin’s turn to dismiss his country’s most recent defeat and ride an anti-Western posse against the world’s “one center of authority, one center of force, and one center of decision-making.” But that moment, too, will pass. As Russia’s economy runs out of gas, so to speak, it also finds itself short of energy – meaning, people and even security space. Over time, an under-developed, de-populated, and encircled Russia has no credible alternative to closer cooperation with the West: too much history and too little geography separate Moscow from a dangerously ascending China, the reported alternative of choice.

Early on, Yeltsin whimpered that absent any winner

1. Strobe Talbott, *The Russian Hand, A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 197.

2. This text was originally published in *Europe’s World*, Summer 2014

3. Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary of War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 158.

the Cold War had produced no loser either. "We're not talking about a relationship between superiors and inferiors but between equals," he wanted his "friend" Bill Clinton to know. Echoes of Talleyrand at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 who insisted on having defeated France treated as a co-equal? "If there are still allied powers," Talleyrand told his victorious interlocutors, "then, I do not belong here." [4] Admittedly, the legendary French diplomat was one of a kind; but in October 1991, on the eve of its final collapse the Soviet Union was also invited by the triumphant state to co-chair the Madrid Conference which then-Secretary of State James Baker viewed as "the end game for peace" in the Middle East [5]. A decade later, Putin attacked his country's implicit surrender and its dismemberment as a geopolitical catastrophe, "impossible to imagine" even while it was taking place, he claimed when confirming his willingness to annex Crimea in March 2014.

In the fall 2008, the violence and intensity of the war in Georgia were, according to Robert Gates, "eye openers" that demanded "a different set of lenses." "Russia's behavior," he announced early on, "has called into question the entire premise of our [strategic] dialogue and has profound implications for our security relationship going forward – both bilaterally and with NATO." [6] On the whole, though, he ignored his own warnings which were not heeded either by the two presidents he served as Secretary of Defense. On the contrary, a newly-elected Barack Obama soon sought a reappraisal, or reset, of U.S.-Russian relations, as if to make amends. Now however, Putin's will to re-adjudicate the verdict of History restores a sense of conflict that can no longer be ignored by those he charges with having "not simply robbed" but altogether "plundered" his country.

#### A CERTAIN IDEA ABOUT RUSSIA

The growing confrontation between the West and Russia in 2014 is no more about Ukraine than the war in Georgia in the fall of 2008 was just about Georgia. Considered on its own, neither of these two countries is a core American interest, and the states of Europe have hardly been eager to absorb either in their Union any time soon. In the end, Ukraine, and Georgia earlier, has been a crisis for Russia more than for the West,

and what has made of "their" crisis "our" problem is a Russian behavior that in each case has threatened the European institutional and territorial order built over the past 60 years [7]. From the start, though, Putin was not discreet about his intentions – how he viewed Russia and what he thought of the West. "A proud man who loves his country," nevertheless felt George W. Bush, deceptively moved by a "sense of Putin's soul." [8] In his first major speech after Putin returned to the presidency which he had momentarily loaned to Dmitry Medvedev, Putin urged the Russians "not to lose themselves as a nation" and to reject the "standards imposed on us from outside" at the expense of "our traditions." [9] In a dubious replica of Ronald Reagan 20 years earlier, the Russian president unveiled an "evil empire" – a U.S.-led, post-Christian Western world said to be exporting godlessness, permissiveness, and moral depravity. Unlike Mikhail Gorbachev, Putin does not want to enter a common home in Europe but hopes instead to build one of his own: no longer Russia in Europe or even Europe with Russia, but Europe to Russia and even, at least for the post-Soviet space, Europe in Russia.

Why Nikita Khrushchev chose to return Crimea to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine in 1954 is even more puzzling than Putin's decision to take it back and return it to Russia ten years later. A proletarian intellectual who goes to the geopolitical barricades to fight for what he believes more than for what he knows, Putin echoes Nikolai Danilovsky, whose brand of Russian nationalism nurtured Fyodor Dostoyevsky's belief in a "Great Russian hegemony" dedicated to "a great renewal ... for the whole world" which, wrote Dostoyevsky, was endangered by a Western civilization whose invasion "begins with luxury, fashions, scholarship, and art – and inevitably ends in sodomy and universal corruption." [10] That same conviction makes of Putin a "gambler" prepared to bet heavily on a doctrine of imposed self-determination for, he claims, "the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders."

Nor is the renewed confrontation between Russia and the West about some more recent but no less spurious analogies. Comparing Putin to Hitler, and interpreting his discourse as a translated rendition of *Mein Kampf*, is no more constructive than comparing Nazi Germany and post-Soviet Russia. Tantamount to assimilating

4. Jean Orioux, Talleyrand: *The Art of Survival* (translated from the French by Rebecca Wolf, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 458.

5. James A. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War & Peace, 1989-1992* (with Thomas B. DeFrank, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 488.

6. Gates, *op. cit.*, 170.

7. See Lawrence Freedman, "Ukraine and the art of Crisis Management," *Survival*, Vol. 56, no. 3 (May 2014): 7-42.

8. George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 158, 433.

9. Quoted in Ellen Barry, "Russia's History Should Guide Its Future, Putin Says," *New York Times*.

10. Geir Kjetsaa, *Fyodor Dostoyevsky, A Writer's Life* (New York: Viking, 1982), 239.

the spring of 2014 to the fall of 1938, the analogy is not relevant as the Western democracies show little interest in waging now the war against Russia which they should have favored in the 1930s over appeasement. History does not grant time outs for the replay of bad calls. Similarly, evoking a new Cold War with Russia is to return to March 1948, and call for the rollback that the United States might have favored over containment, which Walter Lippmann initially dismissed as a "strategic monstrosity." Get real: conditions with Ukraine are not comparable to those that prevailed in Munich, or on the eve of the coup in Czechoslovakia; Putin is no more a menacing reminder of Hitler (or Stalin) than Obama is a reincarnation of Neville Chamberlain (or, for that matter, Franklin D. Roosevelt).

"There will be costs for any military intervention," warned the U.S. president in February 2014, on the eve of the Russian annexation of Crimea. But pray tell: what was there for Putin to fear after he had witnessed, one year earlier, Obama's reluctance to enforce his own "red lines" in Syria with the "unbelievably small" strike threatened by his Secretary of State? Realistically, there is little Obama can do relative to how much Putin can take, in Ukraine and even some of the non-NATO territorial space in Europe. After the military option has been taken off the table, what is left is a bit of pontification – about being on the wrong side of history, dixit Obama – to deter an adversary whose sense history goes the opposite way.

"Not to rush to judgment," advised George Kennan after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, and "not to write off the Russians and their leaders. *Patience, patience* – that's what we need." [11] That may well be sound advice, but for how long and how far? There is a long game to be played: don't provoke Russia and its leaders with empty threats, to be sure, but don't indulge Russia and its people with too much "understanding" either. Let it be stated once and for all: History does not owe Russia the apologies it owes Ukraine and other territorial pieces of Europe's tragic geography of pain. That is the area where can still be heard the silenced sounds of war, and where can best be smelt the worst odors of dying: as noted by historian Timothy Snyder, more Ukrainians were killed fighting Nazi Germany than American, British, and

French soldiers combined – not to mention the millions starved by Stalin prior to the war [12]. And as a whole, the history of Russia has been written by what it did to its people and in the lands of its neighbors rather than the other way around.

In short, the Russian government does what it does because Russia is what it is: unable to imagine life without empire, and unprepared to populate its new democracy with truly democratic leaders. In March 2014, the annexation of Crimea was not just Putin's way to show Obama his manhood. Rather, it is a renewed bid to fulfill the idea which the Russians have of themselves and of Europe. Russians may not like all that their president does but over 80% of them seem to approve his defiant action. Meantime, Obama satisfies the broad preference of Americans who wish to do less in the world, even while his foreign policy approval rating is less than one out of three (and as if there was public embarrassment and even some shame relative to the way in which the nation likes to think of itself).

You know where to begin, noted Kennan on more than one occasion, but often ignore where you're going to end. So it was after Versailles in 1919, and with the division of Germany in 1949, and since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. In Georgia first, and with Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine next, Putin started "something" – but what? Does he know where he is going, and will he know where to take the proverbial ramp off? In the same vein, Obama has shown he knows how to stand up to the so-called swaggerers – but will he also know where to stand up and for what? This is Kennan turned inside out: knowing how it will end because of the limits of Russian power may actually be easier than knowing where to begin because of the fact of Putin's current disposition. War is no longer the way of History but how do you bring along those whose own history takes them another way?

Over 40 years ago, President Richard M. Nixon hoped to put in place a strategy that would calibrate interests and capabilities – with some lip service to purpose as well. Knowing "when it makes a real difference and is considered in our interest" was not easy then, with a surge of Soviet power and the rise of "new influentials" which Nixon viewed as the introduction of

11. Quoted in Talbott, *op. cit.*, p. 401.

12. Timothy Snyder, "Ukrainian Extremists Will Only Triumph if Russia Invades," *The New Republic*, April 17, 2014.

a new multipolar order. America, he pledged, "cannot – and will not – conceive all the plans, design all the programs, execute all the decisions and undertake all the defense of the free nations of the world." Now like then, Obama's foreign policy reticence is shared by a majority of Americans who want "to come home." But, like then too, it is also a source of concerns for a large number of the U.S. closest allies in need of strategic reassurances. The irony is for everyone to see. Ten years after the fiasco in Iraq, the global demand for American power has never been higher but its credibility rarely lower and its reliability more in doubt.

Patience, patience

To convince its friends a preponderant power must be right; to tame its enemies it must be strong; to do both, it must inspire trust. All too often Obama appears to do the reverse: he is at best right for what he says but weak for what he does and not effective in the way he does it. By his own account comfortable with complexity – "the big things," as former President Bill Clinton has noted – Obama can easily win an argument but a lack of attention to what follows often leaves his exchanges with adversaries not heard, his reassurances not implemented, and his likable personality not trusted. In any case, this, too, is not just about Obama but, more broadly, about a post-American world. Long past the Cold War, and possibly past America's prime too, this is not a world an emerging post-Western America understands well: every power a potential ally but every partner a possible adversary, depending on needs and urgency; every judge a penitent and every penitent a judge, depending on the case and the moment – Kosovo and Crimea, Iraq and Syria, Moscow's Afghanistan and Washington's Afghanistan, and so forth.

Obama did not originate this world – one in which the dwindling U.S. supply of security for a growing world demand since the Cold War, comes together with a reduced world supply of security for the rising American demand since the events of September 11. Nor did Obama "lose" Putin or "betrayed" Crimea and Ukraine any more than Roosevelt betrayed Eastern Europe at Yalta and Truman lost Stalin at Potsdam. Still, there has been, and still remains, too much loose talk in the United States about rebalancing, to Asia or elsewhere; too much ill-timed talk of a reset, with Russia or others;

too much vacuous talk, about leadership from behind or wherever; too much dismissive talk about the EU and its leaders or about Putin and his leadership. Words can impress momentarily for their elegance but they do matter more durably for their substance. Admittedly, the former KGB operator Putin is not in Professor Obama's one-man intellectual league but, however more plainly, he can nonetheless hammer his points the old fashioned way – with the domineering Slavic idea of a strong and united Russia embittered over two decades of perceived marginalization by its triumphant adversary.

After World War II, the strategy of containment was embraced as a third way between appeasement and war, the two options pursued by the Western democracies during the interwar years – the former to avoid the latter until the latter grew irresistibly out of the former. Fears that containment was too passive and could not rollback Soviet advances were wrong, and whether a different strategy would have achieved rollback faster is unlikely. What is known now is that after some initial geopolitical confusion, the Soviets were stopped until they ran out of time and even as the United States carefully looked elsewhere whenever Soviet force was used to control their half of Europe, in Hungary and elsewhere. With war for the sake of any non-NATO, non-EU country now largely ruled out in the West, Russia's renewed passion for empire must be denied with a similarly firm narrative à la Truman in March 1947, and addressed with the same prudence as was shown during the subsequent period – "intelligently calibrated," Kennan would say [13].

#### **DON'T LET RUSSIA BE RUSSIA**

How best to assist Ukraine begins with the plaintive recognition that little can be done to keep it entirely whole and even free. Twenty years of Western neglect combined with Kiev's inept governance stand in the way of the former goal, and centuries of Ukrainian territorial and cultural intimacy with Russia constrain the latter. The echoes of past calls for the early "liberation" of Eastern Europe during the Cold War still resonate. "What are you proposing to do," John Foster Dulles was asked. President Eisenhower answered at the start of the crisis in Hungary when he announced that

13. George F. Kennan, *The Clouds of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little Brown, 1977), 146. Paula J. Dobriansky, "Expose the Putin Doctrine," *Washington Post*, May 2014.

"the day of liberation may be postponed where armed forces for a time make protest suicidal." [14] What followed – a "holocaust," wrote Eisenhower – should not be forgotten. Face the fact: Russia's annexation of Crimea will not be reversed any time soon, if ever, and preventing further amputation is the best that can be expected. History still shapes Ukraine's destiny – two people in one country that urgently needs a new constitutional formula to maintain its unity. But geography, which opens the country to seven neighbors, also gives Ukraine pivotal significance for Russia and the West. Attempts by either to build Ukraine up as an outpost against the other will not go unanswered and would deepen a dangerous geopolitical fracture in the heart of Europe.

The 1955 neutralization of Austria, concluded at a time when Moscow could have imposed partition, is an adaptable precedent: for 40 years after that, Austria was left out of the Western institutions but the West was not kept far away from Austria. That time-out was well used as Austria gradually became a non-member member of the European Community, thereby easing its transition to full EU membership shortly the end of the Cold War. By comparison, a quarter of a century of bad governments has made of Ukraine a failed state which the EU is unwilling to adopt and which Russia is unable to rehabilitate any time soon. Just consider Russia's own condition – the state of its economy, the health of its society, and the efficacy of its own governance. Russia is back, admittedly, but not as Yeltsin had hoped: however influential it wants to be, this is a *demandeur* state whose staying power suffers from a lack of capabilities, including people; dwindling market power, including oil; and shrinking security space, with an expanding NATO in the West, while China grows ever stronger and more intrusive in the East and Islam more unsettled and even threatening in the South. These are the facts of geographic and economic vulnerability which Gorbachev already understood when trade, mostly with Eastern Europe, amounted to less than 4% of the total Soviet economy. Now, Russian trade represents 30% of GDP, with more than half of its exports going to the West, mostly to Europe and mainly oil and gas sales that remain the major share of Moscow's revenues even as market prices are entirely beyond its control. Add to this

Russia's need for Western capital for the purchase of technology and you have it: who needs whom? This means that even as the West lacks the military will to *deter* Putin in the short term it has the economic power to *alter* Russia's behavior before long.

*Let America be America*

When asked what he thought of Western civilization, Gandhi reportedly answered that "it would be a good idea." At 65 years of age, the transatlantic alliance, too, still looks like a would-be good idea. The obstacle to putting the idea in practice is not, mind you, a matter of capabilities or even commitment. Rather, what is lacking is the confidence that the capabilities will be used effectively and the commitment assumed evenly; absent such confidence, the will to act is lacking. For the European allies who have gotten used to relying on the United States for waging, winning, and ending their wars throughout the past century, the recent display of inefficacy in Iraq and Afghanistan – not to mention Syria and other parts of the Middle East – is squarely un-American: if not the United States, who? But for Americans who have repeatedly urged Europe to do more, the institutional stall confirmed since the 2008 financial crisis is increasingly exasperating: if not Europe rendered capable as a Union, how?

These questions, and the expectations they raise, have surfaced many times before, like an old Bogart movie on the Turner channel – be it *The Long Goodbye* or *To Have or Have Not*. Now, however, their resonance is heightened not only by Russia's resurgence in the East but also by Germany's influence in the EU and America's drift to Asia and the other new influentials. In other words, the Western alliance is once again troubled by a Russian problem which the United States can no longer ignore, a German problem which the EU can no longer hide, and an American problem which NATO can no longer dilute. Because of Putin's apparent disposition, the balance of military forces appears to favor Russia more than ever before; rarely, too, has the balance of economic influence been as favorable to Germany as it is now; and never has America sounded less European than it does now. In all cases, the dilemma is daunting. This is a surprising end to a century of total wars that were fought mostly around these two European superpowers and with decisive American leadership. Yet, as the United States "pivots"

14. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), 62-63. Townsend Hoopes, *The Devil & John Foster Dulles* (London: André Deutsch, 1974), 128

## Don't let Russia be Russia : neither provoke nor indulge

---

to Asia, which it knows to be inevitable, it hopes for a Russia that is strong enough to not be tempted by China, but weak enough to not concern the EU; and it expects a Europe that is united enough to bury the past century with a fully completed union, but divided enough to depend on an American leadership that is still learning how to consult with, rather than merely inform its allies. Meantime, as Europe struggles with its institutional finality, which it still understands to be indispensable, it awaits a Germany assertive enough to lead in any EU language except English, but compliant enough to be overruled in every other EU language, especially French; and it calls for an America that remains so dominant as to do it all, the way it used to be, but so docile as to overrule none.

Back to Kennan, then: patience, patience – what else? This is how the Cold War was won and half of Europe redone; this is the way the remaining half of Europe

will make the continent whole after it has been kept free. Au fond, the postwar recipe has not changed much: America is “in” for sure, and Germany no longer needs to be kept “down” now that the EU is up; what is now left to do is to keep Russia “out” until the time when it is prepared to come in.

---

### Simon Serfaty,

Simon Serfaty is Professor of U.S. foreign policy and Eminent Scholar at Old Dominion University, and the Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair (Emeritus) in Global Security and Geostrategy at the Center for Strategic & International Studies. His most recent books are *A World Recast: An American Moment in a Post-Western World* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012) and *Un monde nouveau en manque d'Amérique* (Odile Jacob, 2014).

You can read all of our publications on our site:  
[www.robert-schuman.eu](http://www.robert-schuman.eu)

Publishing Director : Pascale JOANNIN

---

**THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN**, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.