

Russia: peacemaker with a difference

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Introduction

Even as a challenger of a world order dominated by other powers, Russia has seen itself as a country that promotes and follows general principles of ‘good international community-living’. These include: international law, which should apply equally to all or not at all; non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, especially through support for pro-democracy movements; and collective, UN Security-Council-based decision-making on key international issues. Clearly, Moscow’s understanding of those principles differs from that of Washington or Brussels; but, from Russia’s perspective, these principles have meaning only if the world’s strongest power abides by them. Otherwise other countries, such as Russia, feel that they have a right to defend their own interests as they see fit.

Russia’s self-image is that of a country in search of what is just in international affairs. It is not averse to using force, in defence of what it regards as its vital national interest, particularly in its own neighbourhood. But it does not see itself as a global, or even regional, police force. In global affairs, Russia is not strictly neutral on principle, but in any case even-handedness is rare among great powers. However, most Russians believe that their country is currently on the right side of morality and history: hardly a unique national attitude. Domestic support for the Kremlin’s current foreign policy stems from the widespread rejection of global dominance by the United States (seen as a threat to Russia’s independent international posture), and the view that the US is already past its prime.

Ever since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the Russian public has grown significantly more patriotic or nationalistic, enhancing the trend which had been visible for some time. President Putin is widely regarded as a national champion under US-led attack. The ‘rallying around the flag’ effect has seen his support grow by 20–25% since early 2014, to stabilise in the mid-80s – the economic recession, Western sanctions, and the dramatic fall of oil prices notwithstanding. The Kremlin’s information policy, too, has been a resounding success. According to a VTsIOM May 2015 poll, 75% of respondents trust Russian state TV, and 50% (up from 7% in 2007) do not trust Western media and consider it biased.

Moscow’s approach to peacemaking differs from that of Western countries in important ways. Russian diplomacy usually eschews high moral grounds for intervention such as support for human rights or democracy, which it considers hypocritical. Rather, Russians highlight the need to stop conflicts and then engage all parties in peace negotiations. In a number of instances, such as in Iran, Mali, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Russia and the West have shown that they can work together more or less successfully; in other cases, from Kosovo to Iraq to Libya, the differences are stark. To ordinary Russians, active efforts to restore and keep peace abroad are an attribute of a strong and self-confident country, which they want Russia to be; however, there is little public appetite for global or even regional interventionism, which is usually seen as costly and unrewarding.

This overview will sketch Russian approaches to some of the key issues of international peacemaking: nuclear non-proliferation; international conflict resolution; and mediating in domestic conflicts and civil

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wars, including in Russia's own neighbourhood. The paper will aim to analyse Russia's approach to peacemaking through the lens of Moscow's worldview and its overall foreign policy agenda. As such, it should be useful to those engaging with Russia and its representatives in various situations requiring outside mediation.

Nuclear non-proliferation

As a major nuclear power, Russia has felt both an interest and a responsibility to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. Having shared some nuclear technology with China before falling out with it, the Soviet Union learned the hard way the need to be circumspect in such matters. The USSR was one of the founders of the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty. During 1991–1994, Russia, with the support of the United States, negotiated with its fellow former Soviet republics Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine the non-nuclear status of those new states and the withdrawal of Soviet nuclear assets deployed in their territory.

More recently, Russia has been involved in the international negotiations on the North Korea nuclear issue, and on the Iranian nuclear programme. In both cases, Moscow formed a common front with other world powers: China, Japan, South Korea and the United States in Northeast Asia ('the Six-Power talks'), and Britain, China, France, Germany, and the US in the Middle East ('the P5+1 format'). It sought to contribute to the success of both endeavours, generating initiatives and engaging the countries in question on its own, for the common good. Tellingly, in the case of Iran even the recent confrontation with Washington has not impaired Moscow's cooperation with its partners in the P5+1.

One reason for this continued 'cooperation-inside-confrontation' is the mutual interest of Russia and the West in ensuring that Iran's nuclear programme does not result in a nuclear weapon. Another reason is Russia's hope that the lifting of sanctions against Iran would allow Russia to expand economic relations with Iran and bring it closer politically to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Also, standing between Washington and Tehran, when both clearly want an accord, would serve no purpose. All this, however, does not guarantee that Russia and the West will always stick together on Iran. Should the tentative accord fail, Moscow will not support imposing fresh UN sanctions on Tehran.

International conflict resolution

Russian diplomacy has a propensity for advocating diplomatic solutions to international issues. Faced with a problem where it does not have a direct interest, Moscow routinely calls for dialogue, and suggests settling the dispute through negotiations. This, for example, has been Russia's approach to Yemen from 2011 to the present day. The idea behind this approach is to refer matters to the UN Security Council, which is Moscow's favourite tool of global security governance. In other cases, Russia defers to other countries with greater interests at stake, in the name of good relations with those countries. This happened in 2004 in Haiti and in 2010 in Côte d'Ivoire, when Moscow deferred to Washington and Paris respectively. This has also been the approach to the conflicts in the South China Sea, where the Russians are walking a fine line between China and Vietnam, both described as Moscow's 'strategic partners'.

In other cases, Russia has been more active or reactive. Particularly after the end of the Cold War, Russia served as a mediator between the Western-led international community and its perceived adversaries. Thus, Moscow emissaries sought to promote negotiated solutions to the crises over Kuwait in 1990–1991 and Kosovo in 1998–1999. Senior Russian officials were dispatched by the Kremlin to Baghdad and Belgrade to gain concessions from Saddam Hussein (withdrawal from Kuwait) and from Slobodan Milosevic (autonomy for the Kosovars), which could then be exchanged for peace in their regions.

On both occasions, Russia failed: Saddam and Milosevic did not take its efforts seriously enough. Throughout the 1990s, Russia was simply too weak to be a major player in conflict resolution processes outside the former Soviet Union. Moscow was too dependent on Washington, politically as well as economically, and shied away from a diplomatic showdown with its ex-adversary-turned-senior partner-cum-mentor. For Saddam and Milosevic alike, dealing with the Russians was largely a means of bargaining with the Americans, who were the only real players in their eyes. Also, the United States was suspicious of then senior Kremlin aide Evgeny Primakov's many missions to Baghdad, which it believed were aimed at undermining Washington's policies, by prolonging diplomatic talks and seeking to avert US military operations against Iraq's forces in Kuwait.

Similarly, the United States had little time for Moscow's diplomatic intervention in the Yugoslav crises, which it saw as seeking to exonerate the Serbs as the main culprits of the Balkan wars. In 1995, Russia – along with the Europeans – was a mere observer at Dayton, all done in and by the US. Russia did not have its own plan for an alternative solution, and its efforts were only grudgingly appreciated in 1999, when Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin extracted a surrender acceptance from President Milosevic, whose country had just been battered by NATO's 78-day bombing campaign. In 2003, Russia's effort, this time together with France and Germany, to avert another US war against Iraq also failed (like the previous one, a dozen years earlier): the United States, followed by Britain, went in regardless.

By contrast, Russia's participation has been much quieter in the Middle East Peace Process. Moscow was content to allow the United States to lead the process, and to play a supporting role in the so-called Quartet, alongside the European Union and the United Nations. Russia's own diplomatic activity in the Middle East Peace Process has been intermittent. Moscow concluded some time ago that chances for a settlement were slim in the foreseeable future, and calmly watched periodic US initiatives emerge and fail. Still, Moscow felt that as a great power, it needed to be part of the process. Russia appointed a special Kremlin representative to the region, and occasionally reached out to both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Mediating domestic conflicts and civil wars

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's involvement in global peacemaking has been uneven. In 2011, in a landmark decision not to block NATO's use of force against another country, Moscow abstained during the UN Security Council (UNSC) vote establishing a no-fly zone in Libya. It also sent envoys to Qaddafi in Tripoli and the revolutionary leaders in Benghazi, seeking a negotiated political settlement. The Russians, however, saw the UNSC no-fly zone resolution as a test case for the West's adherence to the terms of the UNSC mandate.

Russia was not particularly tied to Qaddafi, whom it viewed as tilting toward the West after the US invasion of Iraq. However, Moscow was not supportive of the Arab Spring, which it viewed from the beginning as a series of uprisings that were carelessly supported by the democracy promoters in the West, and that would inevitably turn into an Islamic winter. Separately, Russia was interested in reaching a security arrangement with the West – through a joint missile defence with the US in Europe and a strategic partnership, even a security community, with NATO in the Euro-Atlantic region. Therefore, Moscow let the West handle Libya – within the framework of the UNSC-mandated humanitarian operation.

Incensed that its position had been exploited as a 'green light' for NATO's military action, which led to regime change in Libya, Russia then hardened its stance. Soon, Libya joined Yugoslavia and Iraq as prime examples of what it saw as Western disregard for international law and the authority of the UNSC. The mess and misery which have reigned in Libya ever since Qaddafi's ousting contrast in the Russian narrative with the relative prosperity and modicum of order under the previous authoritarian regime. Moscow itself has stayed out of Libya.

In the Syrian conflict, which began in 2011 and soon morphed into a full-blown civil war, Moscow supported the sitting friendly government, which it considered an element of stability in a region engulfed by the mess of the Arab Spring. However, it also supported an inter-Syrian dialogue aimed to lead to national reconciliation without requiring the toppling of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Essentially, Moscow advocated giving the Syrians themselves a chance to reach a settlement, on the basis of a compromise between the government and the opposition.

In June 2012 in Geneva, Russia drafted an agreement with the United States and other countries on installing a transitional government in Syria. Moscow saw this agreement as a means to end the civil war and to initiate a political process leading to a power-sharing formula. Russia did not rule out the possibility that, at the end of the process, President Assad would step down. However, it resolutely opposed the demand of the US-backed Syrian opposition that Assad resign immediately. This disagreement resulted in the failure of the 'Geneva I' accord.

Subsequently, Russian support for Assad solidified, but Moscow continued its effort to bring the Syrian government and opposition to the negotiating table. With Russia's diplomacy heavily engaged, 'Geneva I' was followed in 2013 by 'Geneva II', which was equally inconsequential. In January and again in April 2015, Russia managed to host intra-Syrian consultations bringing together representatives of the Damascus government and a range of non-Islamist (i.e. minus al-Nusra Front and Islamic State (IS)) opposition and civil society figures. The National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, however, stayed away from the Moscow talks. The April 2015 meeting produced the so-called 'Moscow Platform', a first document setting out the general principles of a possible settlement, adopted by the Syrian participants by consensus. These principles include: a peaceful solution to the crisis based on the 2012 Geneva communique; upholding Syria's independence, territorial integrity, and state institutions; rejection of ethnic discrimination, confessionalism and foreign intervention; and fighting terrorism.

Perhaps what mattered most to Russia was that Syria, unlike Libya, should not succumb to revolutionary chaos and anarchy. Even though large parts of the country had fallen under the control of Islamist terrorist forces, Damascus was resisting. De facto, Damascus had become a key part of the anti-IS coalition. For Russia, the main problem with US airstrikes against IS in Syria is that, unlike in Iraq, they are undertaken without the formal permission of the country's government. But broadly speaking, Russia supports a common front of all forces opposed to IS, and this includes the Syrian government.

In geopolitical terms, Russia's stake in Assad's continued leadership has paid off. This is not to say that Moscow has been supporting Assad's repressive measures: in fact, it has backed a political dialogue in Syria. The obstacles to a settlement, in Moscow's view, were the Syrian opposition's refusal to talk to Assad, and the perceived Western obsession with deposing him and thus removing an ally of Iran. Assad, on the other hand, has proven his stamina by standing up to the West, and later by fighting against IS. Over time, Damascus has become Moscow's geopolitical ally in a key region – something it was not in 2011.

Much of this was due to Russia's successful bid to prevent US military intervention in Syria. Moscow made it clear at the UN Security Council that it would oppose foreign military intervention and any outside attempt to overthrow the government in Damascus. When such intervention, without a UNSC mandate, looked imminent following the use of chemical weapons in Syria in August 2013, Moscow negotiated a deal to rid Syria of chemical weapons. The unprecedented feat was accomplished – under the conditions of a civil war – by 2014. The Obama administration, never overly enthusiastic about using force against Syria, played along, making this a rare case of US–Russian co-equal security collaboration in a third country.

Neighbourhood watch

In its own post-Soviet neighbourhood, a sphere of its key interests, Russia initially sought to be the sole peacemaker. In 1993, it tried but failed to obtain a United Nations mandate for this; the international community did not formally recognise Russia's 'special responsibility' for the security of the post-Soviet space. Even without a mandate, which it decided not to seek formally, Moscow acted in 1992–1993 to stop ethnic conflicts in various former Soviet republics, particularly in Transdniestria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Tajikistan, using force to end fighting and diplomacy to reach satisfactory deals, even if temporary. Of all the conflicts thus handled, only one, in Tajikistan, was brought to an eventual solution. Russia first intervened there in a brutal civil war in 1992–1993, in which it militarily supported secular clans against local Islamists, and then, with Iran's support, brokered efforts to achieve national reconciliation (1997).

The conflict in Transdniestria was close to solution in 2003, but the deal was scuttled at the last moment through Western intervention, lest Russia receive basing rights in Moldova. In Nagorno-Karabakh in 1994, Russia brokered a truce between the Azeris and the Armenians, which is largely holding to this day, despite constant tension and periodic violent flare-ups. Except for Tajikistan, however, these conflicts have remained frozen, and some erupted again.

A string of frozen conflicts along its borders is a matter of concern to Russia. However, it is either unable to produce a stable solution, even in cooperation with other major powers such as the United States and France (in Nagorno-Karabakh), or is deeply involved itself on behalf of one of the parties and therefore is unwilling to yield to the side supported by the West (in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdniestria).

In its neighbourhood, Russia has been anything but disinterested and never pretended otherwise. It saw its former borderlands as a buffer zone, a sphere of interest, or an area for future integration projects, and was determined to react to any attempt to expand NATO into the post-Soviet territory (except in the Baltics, which were regarded as 'semi-foreign' even in Soviet times, and whose incorporation into NATO in 2004 occurred when Moscow was seeking better relations with Europe). In 2008, Russia went to war against the NATO-aspirant Georgia when Tbilisi sought to solve the South Ossetian conflict by force. After that war, Moscow recognised South Ossetia and the other former Georgian rebel enclave which it protected, Abkhazia, as independent entities. It continued to assist in peace talks between Moldova and Transdniestria, but clearly supported the latter. In Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow acts as a formal ally of Armenia, even as it maintains normal relations with Azerbaijan – and even sells weapons to Baku. Thus, Moscow's peacemaking efforts in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia – through which it essentially holds ground through its own proxies against presumed Western ones – are consonant with Russia's national interests.

Russia's role in the Minsk talks on eastern Ukraine deserves special study. The reaction of Russia to the February 2014 Maidan revolution in Kiev and the ousting of the Yanukovich regime became a watershed in Moscow's foreign policy. In Crimea and Donbass, Russia overtly challenged the US-dominated security system that had emerged after the end of the Cold War. Russia's confrontation with the United States is very real, and potentially highly dangerous. Its alienation from Europe is deep and for the long haul. The Ukraine crisis is ongoing, and its resolution is years, and maybe decades, away. The stakes for Russia are very high, and the outcome is uncertain.

In Donbass, Russia has acted as a peacemaker both in the Minsk format which includes France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine, and in an adjunct working group involving the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), Russia, Ukraine and the 'people's republics' of Donetsk and Lugansk. These efforts have produced two accords signed in Minsk, in September 2014 and February 2015. While Moscow takes the role of a broker in the peace process, albeit one sympathising with Donbass, Kiev regards it as an aggressor and the West accuses it of direct military involvement in Ukraine. From Moscow's perspective, the West and particularly the United States are also heavily involved, on Kiev's behalf. There is no doubt that Russia's peacemaking activities vis-a-vis Ukraine flow directly from the Kremlin's perception of Russia's national interests in the region and globally.

Conclusion

Russia and the West have differing perceptions of international issues, particularly conflicts and ways of dealing with them. The core reason for this is not so much misunderstanding – although this is common and often strong on both sides – but because of the differences in basic outlook and core interests. Thus, even though many Russians believe, wrongly, that the United States is scheming to bring down the Russian regime and destroy their country, and most Westerners think, equally mistakenly, that Moscow's policies are aimed at destabilising Russia's neighbourhood, this is not the main issue. What is more important is that the Russians live in a world where history has not ended, and sovereignty is sacred; geopolitics, at the end of the day, beats geo-economics, and wars are not fought by remote control.

Whereas the West celebrated the collapse of the Soviet Union as a victory over an ideological and military adversary, and the new members of NATO and the EU saw it as an act of liberation from the oppressive empire, for many Russians this was an abrupt end of their country, alongside its economic system and, perhaps most important, its welfare state. It also meant new borders and divided peoples, and new nationalisms in the formerly quiescent borderlands-turned-independent states. Rather than victory and liberation, many Russians now see the end of the Cold War as bitter-sweet. Few mourn the demise of Soviet communism, or want to restore the empire; and most Russians have never been as free and as affluent as now. However, Russians have also seen their industry degrade, the once-powerful scientific and technological complex unravel, and the country's ranking in the world plunge.

In the post-Cold War period, the United States established its own world order, where the US-led West was clearly dominant. Russia found it impossible to join that order on the terms its leaders found appropriate – basically, co-equality with the United States in the Western institutions – and refused to join on the terms which were available, i.e. on those which Moscow's former Warsaw Pact allies accepted. After that became clear, it was only a matter of time before Washington's drive to enlarge NATO all the way up to the Russian border would clash with Moscow's desire to erect buffers between itself and the Atlantic alliance. Georgia, in 2008, was a warning shot which was ignored. Ukraine, in 2014, produced a crisis leading to confrontation.

This confrontation has fundamental roots. It can be managed, but can hardly be resolved without either Russia accepting defeat and surrendering to the United States, possibly spelling the end for the present regime in Moscow, or the United States acquiescing to Russia's desire for a security buffer, thus accepting that its dominance has limits, with clear implications for the entire world. Neither outcome appears likely in the foreseeable future. The best that can be done, realistically, is to ensure that the conflict in Ukraine does not lead to a US–Russian war.

One way to this goal is consolidating the ceasefire in Donbass and focusing on reform and transformation in Ukraine. Technical measures such as OSCE monitoring are necessary, but far from sufficient. Successful management of the conflict requires Russia's political and economic engagement in Donbass to help with post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction and the European Union's heavy lifting in Kiev and elsewhere in Ukraine to support economic and socio-political transformation. Rather than focusing on defence of the Baltic states and Poland against an unlikely Russian invasion, Washington should be best advised to steer and support the EU in these endeavours.