

PEACE AND SECURITY

MOSCOW'S TURN TO THE EAST

What are the Consequences
for Russia and the West?

André W.M. Gerrits, Reinhard Krumm
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How unprecedented is Russia's eastward turn?



What are the characteristics of this geopolitical alternative?



Can Russia do without the West?



Can the West do without Russia?

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Abstract

Russia is turning eastwards and is presenting this pivot as an alternative to its traditional focus on the West. The West has also shifted to a strategy of disengagement with Russia. This article discusses these current processes of disconnection between Russia and Europe. How unprecedented is Russia's eastward turn? What are the characteristics of this geopolitical alternative? And how can one imagine a European security order in which Russia takes no part?

Russia's withdrawal from Europe is exceptional. Never before did Russia break with *all* aspects of its relationship with Europe, and never was it confident of having such a powerful alternative. Russia's current international position defies easy generalizations, however: is it one of increasing strength (Russia's viewpoint) or of growing weakness (the West's perspective)? Support for Russia among the "Global Majority" reflects the West's lack of credibility more than any sympathy for Russia. And the Russia-China relationship, the core of Russia's eastward turn, remains problematic, defined by a high degree of inequality and ongoing profound strategic differences.

Russia's turn to the east presents Europe with unique challenges. The EU needs to develop a strategy in a situation in which Russia presents a security threat and most ties between Europe and Russia have been cut. For now, Russia and Europe are engaged in a strategy of mutual disengagement and deterrence. Eventually, this needs to be combined with initiatives to rebuild a more stable relationship. To think about the post-war order in Europe is not an act of political defeatism, but of political responsibility. It is in the interests of Ukraine, of Europe and, we believe, of Russia.

1

INTRODUCTION

Russia is turning away from the West. Not in a geographical sense – countries cannot change their postal address – but in terms of politics, economic relations, culture, and identity. States can set different priorities, sever or reduce ties with former partners to a minimum, and strengthen relationships with new friends in other parts of the world. And this is precisely what the Russian leadership has done over the last decade. Having turned its back on the West, Russia is now facing eastwards. And nothing suggests that this will change any time soon. Rather, recent developments in Russia – the death of Aleksey Navalny and the elections, neither free nor fair, that reconfirmed Putin’s presidency – indicate that its leadership will persist in its authoritarian course and in total disregard for the views expressed in the West.

Russia’s geopolitical reorientation preceded the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. But the war, and especially the response by the West, greatly accelerated the trend. Characterizing the invasion as a war was long considered taboo in Russia, but the Kremlin used precisely this term to describe the West’s reaction, from the very beginning. As Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov put it, the West is waging a war against Russia that it “has been preparing for a long time”, (Shinkman 2023). Vladimir Putin has used even more alarming terms. In March 2023, while visiting an aviation factory in Ulan-Ude in the republic of Buryatia, he argued that the Ukraine war is “a fight for the existence of Russian statehood” and he accused the West of “shaking Russia and tearing it into pieces” (Kalesnikov 2023).

Could Russia’s turn to the East initially have been seen as a plausible diversification of its foreign orientation?¹ Even if so, today it is regarded, or at least it is being presented, as a *replacement* for Russia’s traditional focus on the West. Russia has closed the window on Europe before, but seldom with such force. This is due not only to the depth of the conflict between Russia and the West, but also to Russia’s claim to have an ideological, economic, and strategic alternative: cooperation with Asia, China, and the Global South. Today, we are witnessing not only another key chapter in the global transition of power away from the West, but also one of the

most dramatic paradoxes in the Russia-Europe relationship to date: even as Russia is turning away *from* Europe, it is waging a war for influence *in* Europe, through hegemony over Ukraine. The war in Ukraine is many things at the same time, including a war over Russia’s future in Europe (Kimmage and Paikin, 2022).

And the “decoupling” between Russia and Europe is taking place on both sides. After decades of a deliberate policy of engagement and interdependence, aimed to promote positive change in Russia and a solid foundation for security in Europe, the West has shifted to a strategy of the widest possible disengagement with Russia. To measure the weight of these geopolitical changes, we aim to place the disconnect between Russia and Europe in a larger historical and geopolitical perspective. Until now, the dominant idea in the West has been that for Russia there is no alternative to the West. “In the normal course,” as the American historian Martin Malia (1999, 411–412) put it, “[Russia] hardly has anywhere else to go.” The only other option is “some nativist *Sonderweg*”. Has Russia embarked on this special path? What exactly does it mean that Russia is turning away from the West? Our analysis is driven by three sub-questions: 1. What has been the “normal course” in relations between Europe and Russia, and how unprecedented is the current strategy of mutual disengagement? 2. Can Russia actually do without the West, and what are the characteristics of this geopolitical alternative 3. And finally, can the West do without Russia? Can there be a resilient security order in Europe in which Russia plays no part at all?

¹ See Leksyutina (2023) for an excellent analysis of the earlier phase of Russia’s “turn to the East”.

2

EUROPE, RUSSIA, AND THE STRATEGY OF MUTUAL DISENGAGEMENT

“Europe”² has always played a crucial role in the history of Russia and how it perceives itself. What role exactly, and how crucial it has been, is the subject of permanent debate. The Russia-Europe nexus is deeply dependent on historical circumstances.

The “West”, more specifically Europe, has mostly been considered by Western experts and politicians as a key component of Russia’s identity formation. “Russia,” writes Vera Tolz (2010, 210–211), “was among the first societies whose elites had to deal with the question of how ‘the non-West’ could become part of the modern world other than by simply emulating Western patterns of development.” It is “the fundamental ambivalence at the heart of Russia’s struggle to define its place in the world,” as Robert Legvold (2007, 112) argues. If he is right and we take the current Russian discourse seriously, the issue seems finally resolved. Russia has at long last found its place in the world. Russia is no longer *with* the West, and certainly not part of the West; Russia will continue *without* and most probably *against* the West.

Most Western observers emphasize the one-dimensional nature of relations between Europe and Russia. Russia needs Europe. “As has ever been the case since Peter,” writes Malia (1991, 412) about early post-communist Russia, “if Russia wants to be strong, she will have to Westernize... she has little choice but to become, as before 1917, just another ‘normal’ European power...” Europe is generally seen as the “norm” (Morozov 2012, 35), as the “key” to Russia’s potential, to “...[its] democratic future and its ability to become a productive and prosperous modern state and a net contributor to Europe’s security” (Stent 2007, 396). And translated to the present situation, a “...Russia that has turned its back on the West is a Russia that has turned its back on itself,” as Michael Kimmage and Maria Lipman (2023) opine.

These interpretations may sound pleasant to European ears, if only because they emphasize Russia’s dependence on

Europe, but they are vehemently rejected by the current Russian leadership, and indeed they seriously underestimate the complexity and ambiguity of Russia’s relationship with Europe. Russia believes it no longer needs Europe; Russia has turned to other partners. This nuances the traditional Western belief, which has not changed since the days of Peter the Great, that if Russia wants to be strong and secure, she will have to Westernize. Russia’s engagement with “Europe” is as old as the early history of state formation in the region, around the first millennium, even if extensive political, military, economic, and cultural relations between Russia and Europe began only with Peter the Great, from the late 17th century.³ Russia’s relationship with Europe has never been one-dimensionally adaptive, however.

Modern Russian history shows a volatile pattern of rapprochement and rejection of Europe, of adaptation to and dismissal of distinct European ideas and practices.⁴ Emphasizing differences with Europe is as much a feature of Russia’s self-perception as is the ambition to become more European. Practically all variants of Russian nationalism since the mid-nineteenth century find their expression in ideas with an anti-Western bias, from Sergei Uvarov’s nineteenth century trinity “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality” to pan-Slavism, Bolshevism, and presently Putin’s civilizational discourse. There has always been a strong emphasis on Russia’s uniqueness, if not on its superiority vis-à-vis the West, larded with a good dose of messianism, which goes back to the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome.

In this sense, Putin has resolved the traditional issue of whether or not Russia is part of Europe. Russia, as he perceives it, is the “better” Europe. With the currently dominant Europe (supposedly neoliberal, neo-colonial, and cosmopolitan) Russia will never reconcile, Putin emphasizes, but with the “true” Europe (traditional, Christian, freedom-loving,

2 As usual in thinking about the relationship between Russia and Europe, we struggle with the right terminology. Even the most banal, though historically pertinent, question – “Is Russia part of Europe?” (politically, culturally) – is being reconsidered in the current discourse. When referring to “Europe”, we are talking about the non-Russian part of the continent, which today is largely synonymous with the European Union.

3 Interestingly, Putin told the *Financial Times* in 2019 that the historical leader he felt closest to was Peter I. This seems odd, since it was Peter the Great who opened Russia’s window to the West in the late 17th century. 300 years later it was President Putin who decided to close it.

4 For most of Russia’s history “Europe” stood for the “West”. During the interwar years the concepts of Europe and the West diverged, due to the growing significance of the United States as an economic model, military opponent, and diplomatic, Great Power counterpart.

and patriotic), Russia feels a strong affinity.⁵ The current discourse about Russia turning its back on the West and building its own unique civilization can be considered as the most recent variant of the traditional belief in Russian distinctiveness and superiority.

Russia's engagement with Europe has taken different forms, relating to different aspects of European reality. To better explain this complex historical relationship, Angela Stent (2007) distinguishes between Europe as an "Idea", a "Model", and a "Geopolitical Reality" for Russia. While these dimensions have always been present in Russia's relationship with Europe, their individual weight has varied over time.

Europe as an Idea basically refers to the Russian leadership's engagement with post-Enlightenment political beliefs, norms, and values from Europe. Most Russian leaders who identified with political ideas considered progressive or democratic (Catherine the Great is the prime example) generally did so half-heartedly or selectively.

Unlike with Europe as an Idea, modern Russia has only rarely distanced itself from Europe as a Model, a model for modernization. This concerns the implementation of specific social, administrative, military, and economic institutions and practices from Europe, which has often been interpreted as attempts by Russia to make up for its lagging behind Europe (and the West). This is related to the notion of Russia as a "backward power" (Hildermeier 2022). That the current Putin leadership explicitly rejects the European "model" is significant, although it reflects a sentiment that is more widely shared globally namely that the liberal, democratic order has become inferior to the dynamic, state-dominated alternatives exemplified by China and Russia. Russian politicians and talking heads have long stressed how irrelevant Europe has become to Russia: how Europe has long since ceased to be a source of inspiration for Russia.

In fact, the EU seems to have all but disappeared in Russia from serious consideration as a model. Fyodor Lukyanov, Editor-in-Chief of *Global Affairs*, Russia's version of the journal *Foreign Affairs*, leaves no doubt: "the EU is clearly of no value to Russia [...] there is no reason to believe that Moscow will do something to strengthen ties with the European Union anytime soon."⁶ And Sergey Karaganov (2023), Honorary Chair of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, former presidential advisor, and one of the most radical and eloquent among Russia's foreign policy advisors, expresses this view in his characteristic blend of romanticism and revenge: "We have taken everything useful from this

wonderful European journey Peter the Great commenced in the past. Now we need to return to ourselves, to the origins of Russia's greatness."

Until a few years ago a pivot to the East and how it related to relations with the West was a subject of lively debate among Russia's foreign policy thinkers. This is no longer the case. Under the impact of the deterioration of relations with the West, vastly accelerated by the invasion of Ukraine, the discourse has been dramatically politicized and stripped of its open-mindedness. There is little room for nuance in today's Russia. Moderate voices are increasingly marginalized. Take what happened with Valery Garbuzov, director of the Institute of the USA and Canada, a Russian think tank. In a critical piece in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (29 August 2023) he tried to convince his compatriots that Russia needs "knowledge", not "myths" – myths about the crisis of the "Anglo-Saxon world", about the "new anti-colonial revolution", about the "loss of American dominance", and about the attempts to put together "a new anti-American coalition on a global scale". (Garbuzov 2023) Garbuzov was sharply criticized for his article and removed as director of the institute. The institute's faculty took sides with Garbuzov and published an open letter in his defence, but to no avail.⁷

Europe as a Geopolitical Reality essentially refers to Russia's long-lasting military and diplomatic encounters with Europe. These military engagements took different forms, and they defy easy generalization. First, there is a long history of military conflict between Russia and (other) European countries, initially caused mainly by Russia's territorial ambitions, later mostly by the aggression of European powers. Russia fought wars against individual European states, mostly over contested neighbouring regions (Peter the Great with Sweden; Catherine the Great with Turkey; Stalin with the Baltic states and Poland; Putin with Georgia and Ukraine). Russia also took part in conflicts among European powers, from the Seven Year's War (1756–1763) to the war against Napoleonic France in the early nineteenth century, to the two World Wars during the first half of the twentieth century. Russia's territorial growth has been a major cause of conflict.

However, from the seventeenth century onward Russian expansionism mostly took an east- and southward direction, while its expansion of borders or spheres of influence in Europe was mostly the result of its participation in pan-European conflicts and their subsequent settlements. Expansion was made possible by Russia's military power, but it often took shape in diplomatic consultation and agreements with Western governments. The Polish Partitions (1772, 1783, 1795) and much of (post-) World War II territorial and political expansion under Stalin are prime examples.

These three dimensions of Europe for Russia almost never operated at the same time to the same extent. Russia's lead-

⁵ Vladimir Putin at the Valdai meeting in 2022. <https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-meets-with-members-of-the-valdai-club/> (last accessed 15.3.2024).

⁶ Ukraine, Russia, and the New World Order, Interview with Fyodor Lukyanov, Russia in Global Affairs, Moscow, 14.10.2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/ukraine-russia-world-order/> (last accessed 15.3.2024)

⁷ <https://running-n-stopping.uk/valery-garbuzov/>.

ers frequently one aspect of Europe and reject another. There are two recent exceptions. Mikhail Gorbachev was probably the only Russian ruler who was actively engaged in all three dimensions of the Russia-Europe question simultaneously: Idea, Model, and Geopolitical Reality. Given the disruptive and destructive outcome of Gorbachev's reforms for the majority of the Russian population, his commitment to Europe (to the West) hardly counts as a recommendation among Russians. The other exception is Vladimir Putin – the only recent Russian ruler who *rejects* all three aspects of Russia's engagement with Europe.

3

CAN RUSSIA DO WITHOUT THE WEST?

Two years into the war that Russia chose to fight in Ukraine, and after an already prolonged period of international reorientation, the question seems justified: What have the war and its consequences, including the turn away from the West, brought Russia? Can Russia compensate for its losses on Western markets and from the sanction regime? Is the pivot towards the East and away from Europe a realistic policy for Russia in terms of its international status and security as well as its hegemonic role in its neighbourhood? Russian observers are overall positive. Western analysts much less so.

For Russia, the war against Ukraine is part of the struggle to emancipate Russia from what it perceives as a centuries-long domination by the West, and ultimately to create a new and fairer world order. The stakes are global: in Putin's words, "the transformation from a liberal global American egocentrism to a real multipolar world" (Ankinshin 2022). The latest foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation (MFA 2023) ticks all the boxes: the "longstanding anti-Russian policy" of the West, with its "new type of hybrid war... aimed at weakening Russia" is considered more as evidence of the West's increasing weakness than of its strength. For most of its history, Russia sought international validation from the West, initially from Europe, later mainly from the United States. Russia now seeks confirmation of its global status elsewhere. It presents itself as the leader of the Global Majority, working together with China and the countries of the Global South to build a just and stable multipolar order.

3.1 RUSSIA IN THE EYES OF THE GLOBAL MAJORITY

How successful has Russia been? Underlying the country's actions is the desire to cement its international status, taking its rightful place as the superpower it once was. This is by no means only a new issue. Over a decade ago, US-based Russia specialist Andrei Tsygankov (2012) wrote a lengthy historical analysis on the relevance of Russia's penchant for international recognition (or honour, as he phrases it) – recognition of Russia's basic values and interests, of how Russia sees itself and wishes to be seen by others. Orlando Figes (2022, 283) concurs: "Russia wanted to be part of Europe, to be treated with respect. But if it was rejected by the West's leaders, or if they humiliated it, Russia would rebuild itself and arm against the West." In other words, when Russia claims today

that it leads the Global Majority in its struggle for a more just world order, it is essentially fighting for its own global position, for its rightful place in world politics. Sergey Karaganov again:

The military operation we are conducting in Ukraine is aimed, among other things, at preparing the country for existence in a future dangerous world. We are purging our elite of *compradore* and pro-Western elements. We are revitalizing our economy. We are rebuilding our military strength. We are reviving the spirit of Russia. We live in a country that is being reborn and looking into the future with confidence. The special military operation helps us rid ourselves of Westerners and Westernism, find our new place in history...(M)aybe it is Russia's mission to free the world from the "Western yoke". (Karaganov 2023)

The question remains: To what extent are Russia's global aspirations supported by the rest of the non-Western world? The answer is mostly negative (cf. Scepanovic 2023).

Compared to previous years (excluding the Covid period), there has been a serious decline in political meetings at the highest international level. Putin's room for manoeuvre has been significantly restricted – literally – since the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for him. Putin hardly leaves Russia anymore. Few prominent leaders visit Russia. In the meantime, Russia's application to the OECD has been shelved; Russia quit the Council of Europe at the same time as it was expelled; Russia has withdrawn from the Conference of European Constitutional Courts, and it left the Human Rights Council of the UN. And what is perhaps the most significant blemish on Russia's international standing: the flawed, often chaotic way its armed forces have conducted the war in Ukraine.

On the other hand, Moscow has not been as diplomatically isolated as the West intended and long believed it to be. Russia remains a global power, a member of the G-20, of the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE), of BRICS, and still holds a permanent seat of the UN Security Council. On a regional level it continues to work within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Globally, Russia has effectively exploited the deep feelings of discontent and mistrust among many countries in the South about the policies of the West and of the US in particular. It probably did not take Russia much effort to convince these countries that the war in Ukraine, and the war in Gaza, are mainly due to the double standards and machinations of the West. Whether this can be translated into a strategic victory for Russia remains to be seen, however. It came as no surprise that the “overwhelming majority of states, the World Majority”, as Lavrov put it confidently,⁸ did not support the Western sanctions against Russia. It was not in their self-interest. To expect anything else would have been naive, if not arrogant. These countries did not support Western sanctions, but neither did many of them vote against the undiplomatically critical UN General Assembly’s resolutions (on 2 and 24 March 2022) against the invasion. And this included the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus. They either abstained (Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan on March 24) or avoided voting (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan on March 2). Only Belarus opposed both resolutions, while Georgia and Moldova voted in favour. None of the former Soviet states, except for Belarus, recognized the annexation by Russia in 2022 of four Ukrainian regions.

Beyond Russia’s newly defined global role, its turn eastwards consists of three dimensions: the development of the country’s Far East, the consolidation of its position among the former Soviet republics, and, obviously, the strengthening of its position in the Asia-Pacific and its alliance with China.

3.2 CLOSER TO HOME

We can be brief about Moscow’s ambition to develop the country’s Far East: not much has come of it. The attempts in recent decades to improve the (inter)national position of the region have been half-hearted, overly Moscow-centred, and strictly institutional. Any actual achievements have been marginal (Blakkisrud, 2018).

The situation is not substantially different with Russia’s own neighbourhood, in the so-called “Near Abroad”, a notion still frequently used in Moscow. While the Russian leadership is convinced that influence and control over most of its immediate neighbours is vital for its ambition to create a Eurasian civilizational space⁹ and achieve Great Power status, Russia’s actual authority over this part of the world has not benefitted from its strategic turn eastwards. The CIS still leads a dormant existence, except for states that have withdrawn their membership (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia). Russia has pushed forward with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), its alternative to the EU, but with limited results, even though the sanctions by the West offer the organization’s smaller members unique opportunities to access the Russian market.

⁸ Lavrov interview with RIA Novosti and Rossiya 24 TV, Moscow, 28.12.2023, <https://mid.ru/print/?id=1923676&lang=en> (last accessed 15.3.2024).

⁹ For the ideological roots of Eurasianism see Bluhm (2023).

In 2023 Armenia’s exports to Russia increased by 463 per cent to 328 million euros and Kazakhstan almost doubled its exports to Russia from 490 million to 800 million euros (Gavin 2023), mostly due to the transit of Western goods through these countries. These EEU member states are circumventing the sanction regime mostly for reasons of their own interests, not out of support for Russia’s international objectives or the future of the Eurasian Union.

Russia’s war against Ukraine has been received with reservation in Russia’s neighbourhood, to say the least. For most neighbouring states it reinforced the perception of Russia as a regional power with hegemonic aspirations. It undermined Moscow’s regional cooperation and integration plans, and it has inspired most countries in the region to further diversify their international relationships. This applies to the Central Asian states, where China already seems to have surpassed Russia as the most important external partner, as well as for Moldova and Armenia, the latter being the only state among Russia’s allies which until recently managed to combine an orientation towards Russia and towards the West.

Despite Armenia’s membership in the CSTO, the Moscow-led military alliance in the region, Russia did little to prevent Azerbaijan from taking back Nagorno-Karabakh, which seriously tarnished the role of Russia as Armenia’s security provider. Yerevan swiftly drew its own conclusions, declining to participate in the next meetings of the region’s international organizations and ratifying the statutes of the International Criminal Court.

3.3 RELATIONS WITH CHINA

The most widely discussed aspect of Russia’s retreat from the West is the resolve by the Russian leadership to move closer to China. The expansion of relations with China serves both geo-political and economic purposes for Russia.

Although the two countries still have their differences, they have agreed not to interfere in each other’s domestic policies and to work together for their mutual benefit. Moreover, the international position of the two powers is not without important similarities. Russia and China are brothers-in-arms when it comes to being under the EU’s regime of global human rights sanctions. Both countries oppose US leadership in global financial and security policies, both see Washington as the main reason for instability in the world, and both countries are strong proponents of a multipolar world to reduce that instability. Russia and China share a vision of a post-Western World order. In practice, it is merely an interesting footnote that the Chinese-Russian partnership, which according to China is based on the principles of the UN Charter, forbids the use of force in international relations except for self-defence.

During a state visit to Moscow in March 2023 China’s president Xi Jinping put the relationship in the proper perspective: “Change is coming that hasn’t happened in 100 years and we are driving this change together” (Williams 2023). This statement, which was broadly reported and warmly re-

ceived in Russia, was seen by the Kremlin as the decisive proof that there were indeed alternatives to cooperation with the West. There is little doubt that China appreciates Russia as a geopolitical partner. But there is no less doubt that China does not consider Russia as an equal. The world is big enough for two major powers, Xi Jinping asserted before he met Joe Biden at their summit in San Francisco in November 2023 (Madhani 2023). And this time, Xi did not have Russia in mind.

Both China and Russia participate in the framework of BRICS,¹⁰ an informal multilateral group. BRICS is not necessarily anti-Western, but most member states are at least critical and united in their desire to challenge the global liberal order by offering an alternative. Their ultimate goal is to create a multipolar world in which the weight of the Global South is better represented and in which the West is just one voice and no longer the most important one. Currently, BRICS, of which Russia has rotating leadership in 2024, consists of ten states, including energy-rich countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Its combined share of the world's GDP is 34 percent, and its share of the world's population is more than 45 percent. Russia has always shown the ambition to steer BRICS politically.

For Russia's foreign policy, the most important challenge regarding its turn from the West is to attain a reliable balance between its security and its modernization interests. This raises some important questions: Will Russia be able to cope with Western sanctions, the loss of the highly profitable European market, and most importantly perhaps, the prospect of being deprived of Western technology for a long time to come? Is China a viable alternative?

In 2019, Russia's relations with China were upgraded to the highest level of the Chinese diplomatic hierarchy, the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era". The first European state to be included in this ranking was Germany, which is ranked two levels below. Since then, Russia's trade with China has increased further (although not with other Asian states on that scale).

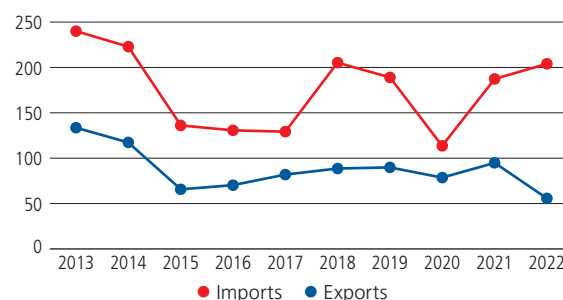
Bilateral trade between the two countries in 2023 amounted to 240 billion US dollars, even as trade with the EU declined.¹¹ According to Eurostat, "the value of EU exports to Russia fell by 61% between February 2022 and September 2023, while imports from Russia fell by 82% in this period".¹²

¹⁰ The acronym BRIC was originally coined two decades previously by the chief economist of the investment bank Goldman Sachs, by simply combining the initials of four emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, and China; South Africa joined later.

¹¹ Data according to Reuters: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/china-russia-2023-trade-value-hits-record-high-240-bln-chinese-customs-2024-01-12/> (last accessed 15.3.2024).

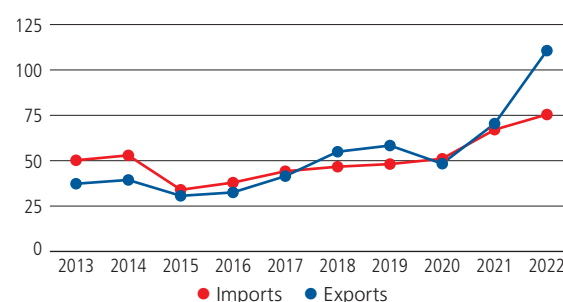
¹² Data from Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU_trade_with_Russia_-_latest_developments&stable=0&redirect=no#Latest_developments (last accessed 15.3.2024).

Figure 1
EU trade with Russian Federation (in billion US-\$)



Source: Statista.

Figure 2
Russian Federation trade with China (in billion US-\$)



Source: OEC.

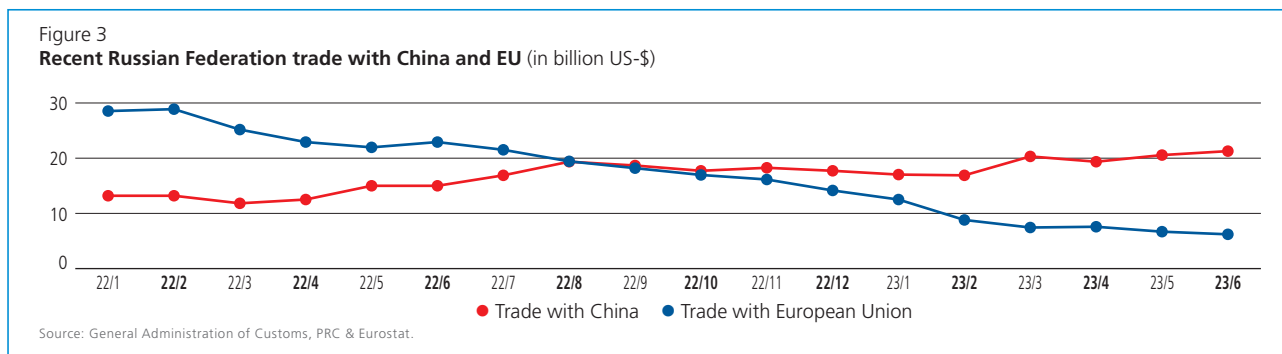
But it is not only China that has increased trade with Russia in recent years, especially since the war and the sanctions regime of the EU and the US. India, in particular, has intensified trade links with Russia. According to CNN, which quotes an exclusive report of the Centre for Research and Energy and Clean Air (CRA), India has purchased 13 times more Russian crude oil than it did before the war in Ukraine.¹³ Several Middle Eastern countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, have also increased their trade with Russia. The same can be seen within the Eurasian Economic Union, partly as a way for Russia to circumvent EU sanctions, as with the transit of goods via, as mentioned above.¹⁴

As serious as the sanctions are¹⁵ (especially since high-tech Western products have not been substituted by China or any

¹³ According to CNN report 19.2.2024: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/19/europe/russia-oil-india-shadow-fleet-cmd-intl/index.html> (last accessed 15.3.2024).

¹⁴ For Turkey: According to Reuters, Turkey profited from trade with Russia in 2022, but has now decreased trade because of possible US sanctions: <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkeys-feb-exports-russia-down-34-year-earlier-2024-03-02/> (last accessed 15.3.2024); for the Middle East: Nikita Smagin, Middle Eastern Influence is Growing fast in Russia, Carnegie, 16.11.2023: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91028> (last accessed 15.3.2024); and for Armenia and Kazakhstan: Politico, 19.6.2023: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-ukraine-war-vladimir-putin-trade-partners-sanctions-loopholes-in-face-of-eu-pressure/> (last accessed 15.3.2024).

¹⁵ Russia is the most sanctioned country in the world, facing more than 13,000 restrictions, "more than Iran, Cuba and North Korea combined". See Alexandra Prokopenko, How Sanctions Have Changed Russian Economic Policy, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C., 9.5.2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89708> (last accessed 15.3.2024).



other industrial country), according to international estimates, Russia’s economy in 2022 possibly contracted only by 2.1%.¹⁶ Gas exports from Russia to the West have been largely re-directed to China (via pipelines and at a cheaper price) or to the international market (as LNG), and oil exports have gone to India. These figures seem to have reassured Russia, enabling the country to further ramp up its war effort. In 2024 Russian spending on defence is estimated at 39% of all federal spending, an increase of 70% compared to the budget in 2023. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, military spending (6% of GDP) has overtaken social spending (5% of GDP) (Prokopenko 2024).

The conclusion that Moscow’s pivot to the East “has so far really been a pivot to China” (Connolly 2021, page 14) does not make it less relevant. Moscow has strategic choices that it did not have for a long time, and its close relationship with the world’s major emerging power is only the most important one. “The combination of antagonistic U.S.-China relations and close Russia-China relations will decrease Russian willingness to make concessions in negotiations with the United States,” a recent report argues. “The current arrangement of the U.S.-Russia-China triangle is roughly the opposite of the situation during détente, and it has likely only been hardened by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.” Moscow has no reason to fear, at least for now, that China will change its position on Russia in exchange for U.S. or EU favours RAND (2023, page 10).

Russia-China relations are based on mutual benefit, although one might argue that Russia needs China more than vice versa. China’s energy needs fulfil one of Russia’s most important short-term needs: financial means to conduct the war and maintain living standards. But energy relations with China do little to change Russia’s subordinate role as a supplier of raw materials and minerals, and for less revenue. Mutual geopolitical interests are at least as important, but here, too, Russia draws the short straw. The ambition to create a less Western-dominated world order is a common aspiration, but Russia’s “Greater Eurasian partnership”, the initiative to integrate Eurasia in cooperation with China and other countries in the region, has hardly

taken off. Russia has not been very successful in its efforts to further politicize or securitize relevant international organizations. China does not have much use for Moscow’s strategic ambitions in Eurasia.¹⁷

3.4 DOING IT ALONE?

A final dimension of Russia’s strategic move to the East, one that has mostly escaped Western attention but that may ultimately have the most impact on Russia itself, is its turn *inwards*. Russia’s shift to the East is strongly inspired by the ambition for strategic sovereignty, for independence – “Island Russia”, or under the current tense international relations “Fortress Russia”. Vladislav Surkov, a former presidential adviser, noted some time ago that Russia faces a hundred years of “strategic solitude”, or perhaps two hundred or three hundred years (Surkov 2018). It is a controversial but attractive notion, one that since the war in Ukraine has become increasingly popular among Russian politicians and pundits. Even moderate foreign policy thinkers (Mezhuev 2022) use it to advocate a strategy of cultural distancing, of indifference towards Europe. Typically, Karaganov (2023) takes it a few steps further. What Russia now needs first of all, he argues, is “to develop a new concept of deterrence”, one that is “not only military, but also psychological, political and moral...”.

In current Russian-European relations it is not only Europeans that talk about containment and deterrence, but Russians as well. Strategic independence or autonomy is an attractive idea for Russia. It would not only protect Russia against Western influences; it could also limit risky dependence on China. But the issue for Moscow is not so much whether strategic independence is worth striving for, but whether it is realistic, feasible. And so far, the answer is negative. Russia’s turn to the East and its discourse of Eurasian civilization support disengagement from the West, but they still fail to provide a “clear strategic answer to the challenge of a rising China” (Lewis 2019).

¹⁶ Bank of Finland Institute for Emerging Economies, Forecast for Russia 2023-2024; An unprecedented fog of uncertainty, Helsinki, 13.3.2023, <https://publications.bof.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/53102/bru0223.pdf> (last accessed 15.3.2024).

¹⁷ A Japanese opinion poll in 2023 in ten major Chinese cities showed remarkable results. A majority of respondents did not support Russia’s war against Ukraine. Almost half felt that “Russia’s actions are mistaken, but its own situation should be considered”, while 16% thought that “it violates the UN charter and international law and should be opposed” (Genron NPO, Japan-China Joint Public Opinion Survey 2023). Neither the Russian nor the Chinese media reported on this survey. https://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion_polls/docs/Japan-China%20Joint%20Public%20Opinion%20Survey%202023.pdf (last accessed 15.3.2024).

4

CAN THE WEST DO WITHOUT RUSSIA?

4.1 THE DETERIORATION OF RUSSIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WEST

Thirty-five years ago, after the end of the Cold War, few could envision the current level of confrontation in Europe: Russia's war against Ukraine and its decisive turn away from the West. The end of the Cold War left an economically and politically weak Russia vis-à-vis a strong, confident, and rapidly expanding "West". Russia was so preoccupied with its internal problems that, in the words of Gleb Pavlovsky (2014), an influential former Kremlin spin doctor turned critic, Russia until the end of the 1990s "had no understanding and no interests in the outside world".

This certainly changed when Vladimir Putin became president of the Russian Federation in 2000. In a telephone call on New Year's Day, 2000, he told his American counterpart, Bill Clinton, that "on the core themes we will always be together" (Short 2022). A year later, after the terror attack on the World Trade Center, the Russian leader was the first to call US President George W. Bush and said later in a televised address: "Russia knows directly what terrorism means, and because of this we, more than anyone, understand the feelings of the American people. In the name of Russia, I want to say to the American people – we are with you." Moscow supported the US "War on Terror" by allowing flights over Russian territory to US military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Putin gave a speech at the German parliament in 2001, in which he stressed that Russia was open for cooperation and partnership with Germany. Putin's early years, the period between 2000 to 2002, was the peak of Russia's pro-Western stance (Shevtsova 2010).

But from the Russian point of view this pro-Western position did not pay off. On the contrary, Russia barely strengthened its global status and was at risk of losing its geopolitical neighbourhood. Whereas the West saw the so-called colour revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) as examples of the advance of democracy in the former Soviet Union, Russia, in contrast, considered them as the dissolution of its foreign policy goals, not to mention the subversion of its domestic priorities. Twice the United States and (some of) its allies went to war, against Serbia (1999) and against Iraq (2003), twice without a legitimate UN resolution, and twice

against the objections of Russia. In 2004, the newly independent Baltic states joined NATO.

Moscow felt betrayed. In 2007 President Putin put all his anger into a powerful speech at the Munich security conference. He repeated Russia's goals with greater emphasis, knowing that by now his country was generally in much better shape, much more politically confident, and financially more independent than at any time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2006 Moscow had paid off, ahead of time, its last Soviet debt to the Paris club, a group of 17 creditor states. In the same year Surkov coined the expression "sovereign democracy", explaining that from now on Russia was a democracy on its own and that any intervention from abroad would be seen as an unfriendly act. In retrospect, the brief period of rapprochement with the West under the presidency of Dmitri Medvedev (2008–2012) was not much more than an intermezzo, although it delivered START III, a new disarmament treaty between Russia and the United States (signed in 2009) and the EU's modernization partnership with Russia (2010).

This was the last hurrah of Russia's willingness to find common ground with the West. With Putin's rotation back to the presidency, Russia decided to play hardball again. Russia now considered itself, in Sergei Lavrov's words, as "one of the centres of the new polycentric world".¹⁸ The dramatic reorientation of Russian foreign policy was accompanied by a domestic turn towards more repressive policies, legitimized by a surge of nationalism. Geopolitics meets identitarian conservatism, as the historian Mikhail Suslov (2024) put it. It has become commonplace in Russia to directly link these foreign policy and cultural reversals. "Russia is not a project – it is a destiny," Putin told his audience at the 2013 Valdai meeting.¹⁹ Russia will choose its partners and instruments according to its own needs, goals, and capabilities, and is ready to use all possible means to follow its interests. Russia's security and political interests can no longer be rec-

¹⁸ Sergey Lavrov, Russia in the 21st-Century World of Power, in *Russia in Global Affairs*, Moscow, 27.12.2012.

¹⁹ Speech of Vladimir Putin at the 13th Valdai Forum: https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_meets_with_members_the_valdai_international_discussion_club_transcript_of_the_speech/ (last accessed 16.3.2024).

onciled with those of the West. Igor Yurgens, the former head of the liberally inclined INSOR think tank, then close to Medvedev, called the reorientation of Russia’s foreign policy the shutdown of “the liberal Westernizing project” (quoted in Lipman 2015).

4.2 OPTIONS FOR DEALING WITH RUSSIA

It is one thing to try to understand what Russia thinks and how it behaves, but more important for us is how the West, in this case especially Europe or the EU, should react to it. We are faced with a conundrum of historic proportions.

It is almost a platitude to say that no matter how the war between Ukraine and Russia develops, it will certainly result in an essentially new reality of international relations in Europe (Kimmage and Lipman, 2023). And, as noted, Russia’s withdrawal from Europe is only the mirror image of Europe’s strategy to disengage from and to isolate Russia. Whereas only two decades ago cooperation and interdependence were considered prerequisites for security and stability on the continent, Europe now considers full disengagement from Russia as the only realistic and desirable strategy. What are the long-term security policy challenges of this decoupling strategy?

It might make us feel better to believe that the invasion of Ukraine was a “massive strategic blunder” (Kendall-Taylor and Kofman 2023, 22), or that Russia is a power in decline,²⁰ but it does not help us to cope with the challenges that Russia presents to Europe: its geographical location, its security interests, its nuclear arsenal, its propensity to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries,²¹ its global geopolitical ambition, and its population, which largely holds that the country does not have the international status it deserves (Security Radar 2022). These issues will not go away now that Russia is turning to the East. And there is no reason to assume that a post-Putin regime will advocate a less confrontational course towards the West if the international situation does not change dramatically.

Part of the Western response to the war in Ukraine is the isolation of Russia. This strategy has largely failed. To win the war against Ukraine and to limit the impact of sanctions, Moscow can simply turn elsewhere, for example to Iran and North Korea to purchase much-needed weaponry. Moreover, as an unintended consequence, the situation has even helped Russia to portray itself to other parts of the world as fundamentally different from the West and as the champion of a new, more stable and just global order.

²⁰ Russia as a power in decline is a remarkably persistent aspect of the West’s opinion of Russia. It exists somewhat uncomfortably alongside the equally persistent idea of Russia as a threat. Russia is a threat, despite or because of its weakness. See Kendall-Taylor (2022); Meister (2022); Negrea (2023); Stanovaya (2023); Stent (2023).

²¹ For an in-depth report on political interference, see Charap and Krumm (2023).

If the West aims to delegitimize Russia’s self-proclaimed leading role among the Global Majority, it needs to take a much more convincing approach in its relations with the Global South. Not only is the moral imperative to oppose Russian aggression largely unconvincing for many non-Western countries, but also the argument that we are dealing with a global struggle between democracy and dictatorship. Even if both arguments are not per se inaccurate, they have little traction among the countries of the Global South. An effective strategy would reason not from our own moral or political righteousness, but from the interests of the countries in the south – from the argument that Russia has flouted important international agreements, trampled on the national sovereignty of a smaller neighbouring state, and threatens the economic interests of developing countries.

If the Cambridge-based Russia historian Mark Smith (2019, 272) is right that “(w)hen Russia is out of synch with the international system, Europe as a whole is vulnerable”, how can we best serve European security now that Russia is waging war in Europe, while it aims to disengage itself *from* Europe?

Russia has invaded Ukraine and considers itself at war with the West. In the current situation, there are few other options but to strengthen European security against Russia. Furthermore, this must be done in a situation, where Russia wants no part in European politics. This will make any change in Russia’s behaviour – and, at some future point, negotiation about a stable security architecture in Europe – considerably more difficult than before the invasion of Ukraine.

Mutual deterrence may be the current modus between Europe and Russia, but sooner or later we will have to look beyond today’s armed hostility – and in circumstances that will probably have lost little complexity. To think no further than a future European security order *against* Russia seems rather myopic, given the potential for lasting instability on the continent, the uncertain security commitment of the United States, and the challenges posed by the bipolar rivalry between America and China. Russia will remain integral to the security of Europe. What we need is a thinking that engages with Russia as it is, not with Russia as we want it to be. The current challenge is how to have a meaningful conversation about European security with a Russia that is no longer linked with the West by common trade, common interests, or common security threats.

In a recent study by the ECFR, Marie Dumoulin suggests developing a “modernized containment strategy” for Russia. Such a strategy would take Russia seriously as a factor in European security, but it would not unnecessarily compromise Western interests and values, while still allowing for possible internal developments in Russia itself. Dumoulin refers to it as a strategy “fit for the current reality and open to a different future” (Dumoulin, 2023). This up-to-date containment variant, one we agree with, does not exclude the possibility for Eastern European countries to apply for accession to EU and NATO. During the Cold War, countries of the communist bloc, such as Poland or Hungary, could not have voiced such

aspirations without severe sanctions from Moscow. Today countries like Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and also Armenia all have relevant agreements with the EU, which Russian intervention does not change.

To examine the challenges from a Russia that is not willing to engage with the West, we make a distinction between the internal, the regional, and the global dimensions of a European Russia strategy. All aspects are important, and none should be seen as less relevant than another.

4.3 EU INTERNAL CHALLENGES: GUNS OR BUTTER?

Looking at macro-economic figures, one might argue that the long-term consequences of the mutual de-coupling between the EU and Russia are less dramatic than anticipated. A recent article about the possible effects of East-West disengagement (Felbermayr, Mahlkow, Sandkamp, 2022) argues that even during a trade war the United States and its allies would remain “relatively unharmed on average”. The authors argue that already in 2020 Russia’s trade with the EU accounted for only 4.8 per cent, less than a quarter of the EU’s trade with China (22 percent). Today, Russia’s share of EU trade is below 2 per cent. But there is a caveat: the effects are not shared equally among the member states of the EU and its citizens. And the consequences in terms of welfare have also been significant. Energy prices went up after much of the Russian oil and gas supply was cut off in 2022, as did inflation – and again, the burdens were hardly shared fairly.

The increase in military expenditures by EU member states will be massive. Even under today’s most favourable conditions, the necessary spending goes well beyond the 100 billion euros announced in the German Chancellor’s *Zeitenwende* speech. According to SIPRI (2023), “Europe saw its steepest year-on-year increase in the last 30 years” – the first time that military spending in Western and Central Europe exceeded that of 1989, at the tail end of the Cold War. And in Europe an increase in military expenditures implies an increase in arms imports. In 2023, “arms imports by states in Europe were 94 per cent higher in 2019-2023 than in 2014-2018”, with countries in Western and Central Europe having “a total of 791 combat aircraft and combat helicopters on order for import” (SIPRI 2024).

The Russia threat brings back the old “guns or butter” discussion: how to find a balance between expenditures for military needs and those for social policies? The need to increase deterrence requires higher military spending. According to NATO policy, at least two per cent of GDP should go towards defence in all NATO countries; the Eastern flank has to be fortified; and in addition to the battle groups in the framework of the enhanced Forward Presence of NATO in the Baltic states, each of these lead states plans to station or build up an additional brigade in the Baltics.

We can already see that this has implications for government budgets, including serious cuts in social spending, which will

undoubtedly hit the underprivileged part of the population hardest. This is occurring at a time when populist parties are on the rise in EU countries. Among the varying positions voiced by various parties on the Ukraine war since its beginning, key aspects of the populist discourse remain fairly consistent: sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine only lengthen the war and have unacceptable consequences for European populations.²²

The peace dividend following the Cold War has long been taken for granted in Western European capitals. Redistributions “from soldier to civilian” may have made sense for each individual country, and producing guns may in some cases also provide money for butter, but usually the relationship is oppositional. Most political parties recognize the need to increase the defence budget, but doing so is an entirely different matter (Ganesh 2023).

4.4 EU REGIONAL CHALLENGES: ACTING IN SOLIDARITY?

Russia’s military aggression brought the countries of the EU closer together than they have been for a long time. Sanctions against Russia were agreed upon; the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine) was established; and in December 2023 the EU agreed to open accession negotiations with Ukraine. But European unity is fragile. One can raise serious doubts about the durability of the “collective West”, to use Putin’s favourite expression, against Russia in the long run. Military aid to Ukraine is meeting with increasing criticism in some European capitals and in Washington, and the EU shows signs of division about future security cooperation and its relationship with Russia.

The fault lines are not dramatically different from those before the war in Ukraine. Central Eastern European countries are greater champions for “national sovereignty and ethnic homogeneity”, as Ivan Krastev (2023) recently put it, whereas Brussels favours “cultural diversity and condemning nationalism”. And, for obvious reasons, national identity in the countries of central and eastern Europe is at least partly defined in opposition to Russia. Living in the direct neighbourhood of Russia carries a feeling of permanent threat for a significant part of the population. For most Poles and Balts, the defence of Ukraine against Russia is “their” war, while for most Germans, French, Italians, and Spaniards it is a serious conflict, which requires all the solidarity possible, but not necessarily *their* war.

The East-Central European governments persistently warned of Russian aggression for years. The war against Ukraine proved them right, and thus they now claim a stronger voice in shaping EU’s policy towards the East, and towards Russia in particular. A point in case is the tenth anniversary publication of the influential Warsaw Security Forum, titled “Central

²² See Ivaldi (2023) for an extensive report on how populist parties in Europe responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

and Eastern Europe as a new centre of gravity” (Warsaw Security Forum Annual Report, 2023). Among the “Bucharest nine” of NATO’s Eastern flank (the three Baltic states, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia), quite a few aims to be in the lead when it comes to redefining security and foreign policy as well as bringing Ukraine into NATO. For them a possible future for European security *without* Russia would be a very desirable option. For other EU member states, such a situation may seem necessary for the moment, but it is not considered realistic for the longer term.

This inevitably brings up the question of mutual understanding and solidarity. Again, for countries like Poland and the Baltic states, a Ukrainian victory against Russia is viewed almost as a necessary condition for their own survival. If Russia wins, according to their logic, Moscow will continue its aggression against its other neighbours, and will test the resilience of NATO. Other countries, like France, Germany, or Italy, are more willing to consider options to decrease the chances of further escalation and to end the war through negotiation and compromise. A cease-fire is the primary goal, not victory. There seems to be very little middle ground. This will become a major issue for the EU, in addition to the financial challenges described above and the practically inevitable US strategic reorientation towards China that we will now discuss.

4.5 EU GLOBAL CHALLENGE: THE EU IN BETWEEN CHINA, RUSSIA, AND THE US?

The EU and its member states have never considered themselves to be between other countries or alliances. They have always been part of a strong West, together with the United States, and with NATO the primary instrument of military deterrence and the Union’s security. President Donald Trump shattered this confidence, however. The probability of a gradual US retreat from Europe and the global competition and conflict between the US and China, with Russia as China’s closest strategic partner, leaves Europe in a highly vulnerable position, while for Brussels, China is simultaneously a competitor, a strategic rival, *and* a partner.²³ Under these circumstances any cooperative security with Russia, once the backbone of the OSCE and even confirmed in the Astana declaration²⁴ in 2010 from all member states, including Russia, will be practically impossible for the foreseeable future.

The United States in the meantime has ceased to be the constant, comfortable, and stable guarantee of EU’s security that it once was, whoever the next president or next ruling party

in Washington will be. EU citizens still seem to cling to the traditional certainties, however. That at least is our reading from the headline of a recent ECFR poll in eleven EU countries about Europe’s main global ambition: “Keeping America close, Russia down, and China far away” (Puglierin 2023).²⁵ Nonetheless, with global relations becoming increasingly complex and multipolar, it is up to Europe to find its own way of dealing with its difficult, antagonistic, but unignorable neighbour.

²³ EU-China Strategic Outlook: Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council, 21–22 March 2019, https://commission.europa.eu/publications/eu-china-strategic-outlook-commission-and-hrvp-contribution-european-council-21-22-march-2019_en (last accessed 16.3.2024).

²⁴ Astana Commemorative Declaration: Towards a Security Community: <https://www.osce.org/mc/74985> (last accessed 22.3.2024).

²⁵ <https://ecfr.eu/publication/keeping-america-close-russia-down-and-china-far-away-how-europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world/> (last visited 5.4.2024)

5

CONCLUSION

Russia's turn away from Europe has serious geopolitical consequences. These consequences mainly impact Russia and Europe, but they also affect the transatlantic community and geopolitical developments beyond it. We are currently witnessing a global process of changing power relations, of which Russia's turn eastwards is only one aspect, but an important and generally underestimated one.

To explore the importance of what it means for Russia to turn away from Europe, we posed three questions: 1. What has been the "normal course" in relations between Europe and Russia, and how unprecedented is the current strategy of mutual disengagement? 2. Can Russia actually do without the West, and what are the characteristics of this geopolitical alternative? 3. And finally, can the West do without Russia? Can there be a resilient security order in Europe in which Russia plays no part at all?

Russia's current withdrawal from Europe stands in a long tradition of engagement and disengagement. This started with Peter the Great's opening to the West in the late 17th century and followed a complex trajectory of rapprochement and rejection. Although Russia's historical engagement with Europe took different forms and has been related to different aspects of European reality, the current situation is unique. Not only is Russia attempting to break with all the traditional aspects of its relationship with Europe/the West – in its ideas, its practices, and its international position – but Russia also believes it has found viable ideological, political, and strategic alternatives. Russia's geopolitical strategy is a combination of turning inwards and of expansionism, oscillating between building a power centre of its own and strengthening its power together with those who share its ambition to counter the dominance of the West.

Russia's current global position is ambiguous, and it defies easy generalizations of growing weakness (the West's perspective) or increasing strength (Russia's viewpoint). Western countries have heavily sanctioned Russia, yet the consequences for the country's economic future and development goals remain uncertain. Assessing the mood in the country is difficult. Cracks in the imposed consensus are visible, but opinion polls, mostly conducted by the independent Russian polling organization Levada, tell us that the majority still sup-

ports the war and the president.²⁶ Both the presidential elections, although neither free nor fair, and the public's response to the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall on 22 March 2024 seem to confirm this.

The West's interpretation of Russia's engagement with Europe has remained relatively constant throughout the centuries. It considers Russia to be driven by its own backwardness. Russia needs Europe. In this respect too, the current situation is exceptional. If we are to believe Russia's leaders and most of its pundits, Europe has long ceased to be a source of inspiration for Russia. Europe has become irrelevant to Russia, which now has geopolitical and economic alternatives.

Russia presents the war against Ukraine as part of a struggle to emancipate itself from what it perceives as a centuries-long dominance by the West. The stakes are global. Russia no longer seeks confirmation of its global status from the West, but presents itself as the leader of the Global Majority, one working jointly with China and the countries of the Global South for a more stable and just multipolar order. Russia's global ambitions seem to belie the effectiveness of the Western sanctions regime, meant to isolate and stigmatize the country. But only to a certain extent. The global reaction to Western sanctions has been lukewarm, to put it mildly, but not out of sympathy with Russia but rather because of a widely felt scepticism regarding the credibility of the West. Russia's most powerful friend, China, may fully agree with Russia's ambition to challenge the US and the EU and to reshape the global security order. But the relationship remains problematic, not only because of the high degree of inequality between the two countries but also because of ongoing profound strategic differences.

Russia's disengagement with the West presents Europe with unique challenges. The EU needs to find a strategy vis-à-vis Russia in a situation in which Russia presents a security threat, even as most ties between Europe and Russia have been cut. For now, Russia's turn away from Europe has been accompanied by the West's policy of decoupling from Russia. Yet even

²⁶ See the latest Levada poll from February 2024: <https://www.levada.ru/2024/03/05/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-massovye-otsenki-fevralya-2024-goda/> (last accessed 16.3.2024).

if Russia is no longer part of political and economic Europe, the issues that affect both Europe and Russia will not go away. Nor will Russia itself.

Russia and Europe have engaged in a strategy of mutual disengagement and deterrence. The question, however, is whether this approach still serves Europe's interests in the longer term. Having two fundamentally different concepts of security in Europe – with a Russia that is out of synch with the international system (Smith 2019) – does not make Europe stronger; it makes it weaker. We need to combine them with initiatives to rebuild a more stable relationship with Russia. We should be realistic and open-minded about the future of our relationship with Russia. It cannot be determined solely by the parameters of the current situation. A modernized containment strategy would allow the possibility for flexibility as conditions both outside and within Russia might change.

Deterrence and disengagement cannot be the whole answer, just as they were not during the Cold War. Back then, the West combined military deterrence with political vigilance against subversion from Soviet propaganda and attempts to weaken democracy and the rule of law. For most of the time, there was neither the hope nor the ambition to change Russia from the outside. This idea developed only gradually, especially towards some of Moscow's allied states, through the CSCE process, resulting in the Helsinki Final Act (1975). This political process was a deeply paradoxical phenomenon. It revealed Russia's interest in establishing deeper and long-lasting contacts with the West, but only if there was no challenge to the international status quo in Europe. The Western countries accepted the status quo enshrined in the Final Act, but only because the deal also presented the opportunity to challenge communist rule from within.

The current situation is different from the Cold War. At the time, as part of the status quo, Russia was a superpower; now it is not. Russia aims to revise the security situation in Europe, back to where it was in the early 1990s. That at least was the essence of Russian demands delivered to the Washington shortly before it started the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – proposals to prevent the war, but entirely on Russia's own terms.²⁷ Russia's intent, however, was familiar: to enforce its own concept of security on its neighbours. The days of Russia and the United States negotiating stability and security in Europe ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, however. Now the fates of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe can no longer be discussed over their heads but only with their cooperation. This is the key to a different future of Europe.

A realignment of interests with Russia seems impossible today. Russia shows no interest, and neither do most European countries. The current situation comes close to what the

2024 report of the Munich Security conference interpreted as a "lose-lose" dynamic,²⁸ where governments no longer focus on the benefits of cooperating with others, but on avoiding losing more than others. But this does not have to be the case. It is time to look ahead, to the post-war order in Europe, whatever it may be, and to prepare for what will certainly be uncomfortable conversations, negotiations, and, ultimately, compromises. This is not an act of political defeatism, but of political responsibility.

In this article, we have limited ourselves to analysing the current separation between Russia and Europe. Exactly what our future Russia policy should look like is difficult to determine, in the current situation of war. But this is no reason not to look forward, and to discuss our future relations with Russia openly and critically. That would be in the interest of Europe, of Ukraine, and ultimately, so we trust, of Russia. A winner-takes-all approach will not suffice. Not only would it be impossible, but it is also not even desirable, because it would be unsustainable. Therefore, even though the current strategy – of Russia pulling away from the West and the West convincing itself that it can do without Russia – might feel comfortable now, it cannot endure. To understand this would already be a major step forward.

²⁷ Reuters on the proposal of the Russian Federation 17.12.2022: <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unveils-security-guarantees-says-western-response-not-encouraging-2021-12-17/> (last accessed 16.3.2024).

²⁸ Munich Security Report 2024: Lose-Lose?, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report-2024/> (last accessed 16.3.2024).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

André W.M. Gerrits is Professor of International Studies at Leiden University. Previously, he held chairs in Russian History and Politics at Leiden University and in European Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He was also a Senior Research Fellow at the Netherlands Institute of International Studies Clingendael. He holds administrative positions in various non-governmental organizations.

Reinhard Krumm heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office for the Baltic States (Riga) since 2021. From 1991 to 1998 he worked as a journalist in Eastern Europe, being the Baltic correspondent for Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) in Riga and later serving as the Moscow correspondent of Der Spiegel magazine. For the FES he directed the offices in the Russian Federation (Moscow), the Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (Vienna) and the Department of Central and Eastern Europe (Berlin).

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Riga office
Dzirnavu iela 37-64 | LV-1010 | Latvia

Responsible:
Dr. Reinhard Krumm | Director of the FES in the Baltic States
Phone: +371 27 330 765
<https://baltic.fes.de>
<https://www.facebook.com/FES.BalticStates>

Orders/Contact:
kristis.sukevics@fes.de

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MOSCOW'S TURN TO THE EAST:

What are the Consequences for Russia and the West?



Russia's turn away from Europe has serious geopolitical consequences. These consequences mainly impact Russia and Europe, but they also affect the transatlantic community and geopolitical developments beyond it. It is a global process of changing power relations.



Not only is Russia attempting to break with all the traditional aspects of its relationship with Europe/the West – in its ideas, its practices, and its international position – but Russia also believes it has found viable ideological, political, and strategic alternatives.



Even though the current strategy – of Russia pulling away from the West and the West convincing itself that it can do without Russia – might feel comfortable now, it cannot endure. To understand this would already be a major step forward.

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