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# Kremlinology 2.0: Deconstructing Russian Grand Strategy

How has Russia's grand strategy evolved during Vladimir Putin's second term as President? Samir Tata thinks the evolution is a partial one. Moscow now accepts the realities of an increasingly multipolar world, but it's also hell bent on preserving what it sees as its vital spheres of influence.

By Samir Tata for ISN

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Since the end of September, and just six months after the re-annexation of Crimea, Moscow has started to [signal](#) that it thinks the time is right for a reset in NATO-Russia relations. But are such overtures merely a rhetorical smokescreen to hide Russian revanchism or a serious call for a return to realism and pragmatism? It's an important question, bearing in mind that NATO will need to decipher Russia's grand strategy before crafting its response. What also hangs in the balance is whether Russia and the West become embroiled in Cold War 2.0 or embark upon a new era of détente.

## Neither Tsarist nor Soviet

So what key points should NATO and the West revisit when trying to understand Russia's contemporary grand strategy? The first point to make is that Vladimir Putin now accepts the realities of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Russia lost the Cold War and, as a result, lost virtually all of the gains it made in the aftermath of World War II. Moscow also recognizes that it has no chance of resurrecting the Tsarist Russian Empire. In a remarkably candid [speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007](#), Putin signaled that Russia would craft a new grand strategy that reflects the new circumstances of the emerging multipolar world. However, this new grand strategy would continue to reflect the 'constant' of Russian nationalism.

Under Putin, Russia continues to carve out a strategically coherent sphere of influence to safeguard its vital national security and energy interests. This sphere of influence takes in at least part of the former Soviet space and, in a carefully calibrated manner, extends beyond Russia's national boundaries. In its near east, for example, Moscow considers the security of the three energy-rich Caspian Sea littoral states – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – to be a vital national interest. According to the US Energy Information Administration, these three Caspian states have combined oil reserves of approximately 37.6 billion barrels of oil and almost 385 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) of natural gas. By comparison, Russia has approximately 80 billion barrels of oil and 1,688 Tcf of natural gas reserves.

Accordingly, ultimate control over access to the energy resources of these three Caspian littoral

states is a critical component of Russia's power (just as control over access to Persian Gulf energy resources is a key element of US power). Moscow is unlikely to tolerate any government in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan or Kazakhstan that is considered hostile to its interests (or any foreign intervention, either overt or covert, in support of such a hostile government). Simply put, NATO member countries as well as China can access the energy resources of these three Caspian littoral states (including energy resources transiting through them), but only with Russia's implicit agreement.

In this respect, the adjacent Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are also geo-strategically important because they help Moscow to consolidate its control over access to Caspian energy resources. As China seeks to reduce its dependence on maritime trade routes - which are controlled by the US Navy - it will have to increasingly rely on Russian cooperation as part of its bid to establish alternative land routes through Central Asia. For example, the [Central Asia Gas Pipeline network \(CAGP\)](#), which transports gas from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to China, is currently being expanded to include a fourth line from Turkmenistan traversing through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan before reaching its final destination in western China. Ultimately, these three Central Asian states serve as buffers against Chinese encroachment. It is not surprising that currently [Moscow's only foreign military bases](#) are in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Moscow's bid to keep China's regional influence in check also extends to Russia's far-east. Russia's main priority in this region is to develop its Eastern Siberian oil and gas fields in order to significantly increase its energy exports to China, Japan and South Korea. To support this, Putin has reaffirmed Russia's long standing offer to settle its dispute with Japan over the disputed Kuril Islands and its willingness to sign a [peace agreement](#) that formally ends World War II. In return, Moscow would expect Japan to become a major purchaser of Russian energy and make significant investments in its oil and gas fields.

## **Keeping NATO in Check**

The major challenges to Moscow's grand strategy are to be found on Russia's western, northern and southern borders. In the west, Russia's national boundary abuts several NATO member-states that were either former Warsaw Pact allies or part of the Soviet Union. These include Poland and Lithuania, whose northern and southern borders surround the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, thereby depriving it of direct land and air access to the rest of the country. Russia also finds itself confronting several NATO members in the Arctic Ocean region, most notably the United States. In response, Moscow recently announced an expansion of its military presence in the high north. This includes the establishment of a new [Arctic Military Command](#) that is responsible for securing a border that stretches from the Barents Sea to the Bering Strait.

Russia clearly sees the safeguarding of its highly vulnerable southern flank against NATO encroachment as the central feature of its grand strategy. Accordingly, Moscow has attempted to carve a sphere of influence that includes Belarus to the southwest, Ukraine to the south, and Georgia and Armenia to the southeast. In this respect, Russia's recent re-annexation of Crimea and support for rebels in Eastern Ukraine can also be viewed as part of Moscow's bid to preserve strategic depth where it is arguably needed most. By reincorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation, Moscow has ensured that its naval base at Sevastopol, home of the Russian Black Sea fleet, remains beyond the reach of NATO. Russia's thinly disguised military assistance for ethnic Russian insurgents in Eastern Ukraine is clearly aimed at securing sufficient political autonomy for the region to preempt any possibility of a united Ukraine becoming a member of NATO. Devolution short of independence along the lines of Scotland (or Catalonia) seems to be Russia's endgame for

Eastern Ukraine. Russia's brief war against Georgia in 2008 has, as a practical matter, removed Georgia from NATO's orbit.

## **Cold War 2.0 or Détente 2.0?**

Over the course of a week in early April 2008, President Putin drew a bright red line against further NATO expansion specifically into Ukraine and Georgia, and implicitly into Belarus and Armenia. Speaking at a [press conference following the NATO Bucharest summit](#), Putin declared that Russia viewed the appearance of a powerful military bloc on its borders as a direct threat to the security of the country. Since then, Moscow's actions in Georgia, Crimea and Eastern Ukraine demonstrate that it is determined to enforce its red line.

NATO's response has been more bark than bite, reflecting the Alliance's desire to extend social democratic norms to as many of Russia's neighbors as possible while avoiding any action of a military nature. Economic sanctions imposed by NATO members have been largely symbolic so far (with the coincidental fall in oil and gas prices having a far greater impact). At the recent [NATO Wales Summit](#), the Alliance reconfirmed its intention to eventually add Ukraine and Georgia to its membership. As well as demanding Russia's withdrawal from Crimea, NATO also used the summit to signal that it regards Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova as within its sphere of influence. However, NATO has failed to articulate any strategic rationale for ignoring Russia's red line.

In addition to this, NATO continues to face a number of problems that will test the resolve of the Alliance for the foreseeable future. These include defeating the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, and declining defense expenditure within most member-states. Which begs the question: does NATO really need to add confrontation with Russia to its already extensive list of challenges?

From the perspective of some of the key architects of détente - at least in the context of Russian-German détente - the answer would seem to be 'no'. Mikhail Gorbachev, who agreed to German reunification within NATO and presided over the dissolution of the Soviet Union, [recently warned](#) against moves by the West to isolate Russia. Three former German chancellors - Helmut Kohl, Helmut Schmidt and Gerhard Schroeder - have also [publicly criticized](#) the imposition of sanctions against Russia and further NATO expansion into Ukraine and Georgia. In addition, Angela Merkel, the current German chancellor, [recently signaled](#) that she is unwilling to consider additional sanctions against Russia and would instead prefer to focus on engaging Moscow and stabilizing the situation in Ukraine. So, without German support for further NATO expansion, the United States and others may find themselves out on limb when it comes to confronting Russia over its actions in Ukraine.

Consequently, Washington and its NATO allies should seriously consider cooperation over confrontation and accept Moscow's invitation to reset relations. There's no guarantee that this reset will succeed: but if Moscow is bluffing why not call its bluff? After all, there is no downside to pursuing this option given that the current trajectory of East-West relations points to a new Cold War. Engagement might eventually lead to a neutral Ukraine (minus Crimea) that's free to do business with the West. If this scenario ever comes to pass, then the upside of a reset with Moscow would ultimately be the renewal of a Cold War-style détente.

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