

Chapter 2

Fuzzy Alliances, Flexible Relations

Fyodor Lukyanov

Relations between Russia and the West have reached their lowest point since the Cold War. Unfortunately we cannot be sure that they won't deteriorate even further. It is time to start to mend ties, but the only consensus view shared by both sides is that business as usual is not an option. The relationship cannot be restored; it should be rebuilt. To do this, we first need to reassess the entire international atmosphere, what happened to the relationship, and how it can be transformed based on new realities.

End of an Era

The year 2016 marked the end of a 70-year period in international relations that consisted of two phases: the Cold War from the 1940s to the 1980s, and the transition time after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Cold War was characterized by unprecedentedly strong strategic stability, based on a military-political balance between the super-powers. The end of confrontation was accompanied by an unusual urge to spread to the whole world the ideas and values of one group of countries, as if they were universal. Whatever we choose to call the period we may now be entering, it is more likely that we will witness the reappearance of more classical patterns of international relations: an increased role of states; a renaissance of national-interest-based approaches; and interstate competition.

The past quarter of a century was not a time of building a new world order, it was an attempt to adapt existing institutions that had survived ideological confrontation (mainly those that catered to the needs of the Western world) to a completely different international context. These attempts failed.

President Donald Trump, who won the November 2016 election in sensational fashion, is a vivid personification of the end of the previous era. In fact, the United States has never had such a leader before. Regardless of what he may achieve as president and how long he may stay in office,

American—and therefore global—policy will no longer be the same. Trump is a symptom that the previous political and economic model of international development has been exhausted.

For twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia strived to restore (or in some instances even take revenge) its statehood, economy, political system, and international positions. With some simplification, one can say that throughout that period Russian society and the state developed in the wake of what happened in 1991 and the 1990s (and the preceding triggering events). This period combined both historically inevitable and transitory but unnecessary episodes, forced and imagined actions, heroic efforts, and fatal miscalculations. In any event, that era came to an end in Russia, mainly because it came to an end globally.

During this period, not only Russia, but also the West, and consequently world affairs in general, existed in a post-Cold War mode. Russia felt defeated and wanted to make up for its losses. The West was engulfed by euphoria and self-admiration. Between 2008 and 2016 (from the world financial crisis to Brexit and Trump's election), Western delight gradually gave way to anxiety. Eventually, it became clear that things had not gone the way they were intended to go at the end of the last century, and that many, if not all, efforts would have to be started over again, taking into account a new and different situation.

For all the risks and costs generated by the confrontation between the two systems and their mutual reliance on nuclear deterrence, the Cold War kept the world in measurably sustainable order. The superpowers competed constantly with each other in all spheres, but they were well aware (especially after the Cuban missile crisis of 1962) of the red line that could not be overstepped.

A dramatic change in rhetoric after the Cold War ended was essentially followed by an attempt to preserve the existing model of global control. However, it was no longer based on two counterbalancing superpowers, but rather on one hyperpower aspiring to act as a global regulator, due to its enormous superiority in all components of power. In other words, the Cold War and the policies that followed were imbued with the conviction that global processes could be controlled.

The third common feature of that time, which is truly crucial for Russia, was the existence of the West as a single political conception, essentially an institution. The West as an idea appeared much earlier, of course, but

until the middle of the 20th century it was a space where great powers were locked in a fierce rivalry with each other. Beginning in the 1940s, the notion of the West became synonymous with Atlanticism. Walter Lippmann, the author of the term “Atlantic community,” wrote that America’s intervention in two world wars had been necessitated by the need to defend “the enlightened Western civilization,” which he insisted included Germany (against which the two wars were fought) but excluded Russia (America’s ally in both wars). Lippmann wrote about the need to defend “the security of the Atlantic highway.”¹ So the system of coordinates in classical geopolitics (the Eurasian heartland as opposed to oceanic areas) acquired ideological substance.

The results of World War II, primarily the emergence of the Soviet Union as a superpower, for the first time consolidated the West as an ideological, political, military, and economic community. Not only did this community remain after the end of the Cold War, but it became the institutional core of the world system.

While the Soviet Union had clearly positioned itself as a system-wide opponent of the West, Russia faced a double dilemma. One dilemma was between accepting and rejecting Western ideology and values (this issue has been present in Russian discourse for at least 200 years); the other was between agreeing and disagreeing to participate in Western-controlled political institutions, an option never considered before. In other words, Russia had no choice but to determine its position with regard to the West for both purely internal reasons (Europe, as an embodiment of the West at large, has always played a crucial role as a reference point in Russian domestic debate on who we are) and structural ones. The mixing of these two dimensions, hitherto separate, further aggravated painful relations in the 1990s and beyond.

The model of a monocentric world (structured around the United States and its allies), which seemed natural and inevitable a quarter of a century earlier, began to crack in the first several years of the new 21st century. It was seriously shaken by the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, which began not in peripheral states (as was the case during the “Asian” wave in the late 1990s) but in the core—the United States and then the European Union. The mechanism of recovery through nationalization of losses, that is, through rescuing private banks at taxpayers’ expense, which

¹ Walter Lippmann, “The Atlantic and America: The Why and When of Intervention,” *Life*, April 7, 1941.

was adopted at the end of the 2000s, challenged the moral validity of the entire economic model and incited protest against financial and economic globalization.

The world order born out of ideological confrontation in the second half of the 20th century entered the final stage of its crisis in 2014. The European Union and NATO moved to bring Ukraine into their institutional framework and refused to discuss their intentions with Russia. Moscow responded very strongly and became firmly convinced that the West's "geopolitical greed" could only be curbed with "an iron fist," as Sergei Karaganov put it.²

Through its decision on Crimea and its support for anti-Kyiv forces in Donbas, Moscow did not just draw a red line, which it is prepared to defend with all available means, including military ones; it also stated its refusal to obey rules created when it was weak and could not fight for acceptable bargains. From Moscow's point of view, the order established after 1991 was not a natural continuation of the agreements that secured peace and stability in Europe during the last years of the Cold War. So Russia did not view the realities that emerged after the breakup of the Soviet Union as immutable, nor did it consider its actions with regard to neighboring countries (created after the concerted decisions of the 1970s and 1980s) a violation of the earlier accords. In other words, Russia never fully agreed with the new world order, which the West took for granted, even though it put up with it as a given until the middle of the 2000s.

Russia's military intervention in Syria in the fall of 2015 reaffirmed its refusal to accept unwritten rules. Moscow started a military operation beyond the sphere of its immediate interests, which until then had been the exclusive prerogative of the United States.

Russia's strong resistance to further expansion of the EU/NATO-centric project into the territory of the former Soviet Union became a catalyst and largely a symbol for crucial changes in global affairs. It really did, because the West continued to believe that the expansion of its model and institutions was historically irreversible and hence undisputable. But the decay of the world system was not caused only by the position of Russia,

² Sergei Karaganov wrote in December 2008 in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, "After Tbilisi's provocation [five-day Russian-Georgian war – Ed.] there prevailed a view, dangerous in politics, that the only argument the West could understand was 'an iron fist'." See "Россия улыбается и показывает кулаки," *Российской газете*, December 24, 2008, <https://rg.ru/gazeta/rg/2008/12/24.html>.

which failed to fit into the proposed framework, but also by profound problems at the very core of the world order after the Cold War, i.e., European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.

In 2014 NATO officially regained its unity and revived its Cold War goal of containing Moscow—the reason it was created in the 20th century. But the alliance has no answers to the most acute security challenges, such as the spread of conflicts in key regions of the world (Middle East, East and Southeast Asia) or the worldwide rise of Islamic terrorism. The latter is not only an external threat; for most Western countries it is increasingly an internal threat. In addition, Turkey, a key member of NATO, with its second largest army, pursues a policy that is frequently out of sync with that of its allies in Europe and America.

Recipes being proposed to contain Moscow make the remilitarization of politics and even conflict in Europe more probable, even while Cold War mechanisms to manage confrontation and minimize risks are gone. Efforts to recreate them have been slow so far. The West believes that a new dialogue on confidence-building measures would legitimize Russia as an equal military-political partner, which is completely at odds with its philosophy during the 1990s and 2000s.

The Changing Nature of Alliances

Global politics in general has become less and less orderly. After the Cold War, the West made an attempt to Westernize global governance and to expand the competence of organizations that had previously covered only Western countries (WTO, Bretton Woods structures, and at some point NATO) to the rest of the world. But the task appeared to be too multifaceted to solve. Now we see the emergence of other institutions, more formal or less formal, representing the non-Western part of the world: the BRICS, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (initiated by ASEAN and endorsed by China), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and others. None has yet to prove its worth, as not all of them have so far tapped their full potential. But their appearance mirrors the general trend: the global economic space is fragmenting, and the idea of universalism (based on Western principles), which prevailed after the West's victory in the confrontation with the Soviet Union, is losing relevance.

The nature of alliances is changing as well. In a famous phrase, Lord Palmerston described the phenomenon as follows: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual.” This approach was echoed 150 years later by U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in his own famous phrase: “the mission defines the coalition.”³ And then by Donald Trump, who called NATO “obsolete.”⁴

At first glance, the very existence of the North Atlantic Alliance proves this approach wrong. But NATO, which was created under completely different circumstances, remains the only and unique bloc based on rigid commitments and shared values and ideology. New blocs of this kind are nowhere to be seen, and are hardly possible. Even within NATO itself, differences in opinions, assessments and priorities are more noticeable than ever before. They can be seen among European allies, but especially between Europe and Turkey.

Other strategically significant relations, including those involving the United States, tend to be more flexible, and this is quite obvious in Asia. Although many of the countries of the Asia-Pacific rim are concerned about China’s rise, and would like to receive more security guarantees from the United States, they are not so eager to become fully engaged in the new system Washington is creating to contain Beijing.

Another graphic example is offered by Japan and South Korea, which have close military-political ties with the United States (ever closer due to sharpening problems with North Korea), yet still manage to distance themselves from Washington’s anti-Russian policy, and actually to strengthen relations with Russia. Despite Washington’s pressure, Seoul did not impose sanctions against Russia after it had reincorporated Crimea, and Tokyo de facto withdrew from the sanctions after a meeting between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Vladimir Putin in the spring of 2016.

Our current environment, which is extremely unpredictable and changing rather chaotically, pushes states to use different methods to protect their interests, yet at the same time pulls them to avoid long-term alliances that could limit their freedom of maneuver. For example, China strongly

³ http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/rumsfeld_text_101801.html.

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-nato-obsolete/trump-says-nato-is-obsolete-but-still-very-important-to-me-idUSKBN14Z0YO>.

rejects Western models of rigid alliances with formal commitments, because Beijing believes that failure to fulfill such commitments would lead to moral demise and loss of face, devaluing the status of the leader in the East even more than in the West.

New strategic relations, such as those Russia and China are trying to build, do not presuppose strict hierarchy or full political and security coordination. They are based on mutual complementarity, non-participation in third-party coalitions against partners, and mutual political and economic support if one of the partners comes under external pressure. It would be legitimate to assume, however, that both Moscow and Beijing consider such support obligatory, since each understands that if it were to allow the other partner to be attacked, it could also become a target. The two countries are apparently building unwritten but vital mutual guarantees that may be called strategic as they concern their long-term positioning vis-à-vis each other. Neither Russia nor China wants to forge a binding alliance that would require them to show full solidarity on all issues or accept any risks one of them may create. In other words, Beijing will not back Moscow over Crimea and will keep neutrality, and Russia will not endorse Beijing's claims in the South China Sea, but neither will it offer support to its opponents. However, it becomes increasingly clear that China will lend its shoulder if sanctions push Russia to the verge of collapse, and Russia will not allow direct military blackmail against China if relations in the Pacific sharply deteriorate for some reason.

For China, this type of relationship begins to be much more important now, because even though the country is moving to a more central position in world affairs, it clearly is failing to convince its neighbors of its good intentions. Russian-Chinese ties have never been based on the same values. Their strategic interests do not coincide, although they also do not sharply contradict each other either. Yet each understands that cooperation is simply far more useful than rivalry.

Another example of this paradoxical new type of relationship is that between Russia and Turkey. Their rapprochement, following a severe and very dangerous crisis in 2015, when Turkish forces shot down a Russian military plane, came about after both sides realized how much harm they could do to each other—not only in terms of classical military threats, but their mutual ability to destabilize each other internally. This pragmatic reconciliation led to significant advances in Syria, even though there are no serious reasons to believe that either side trusts the other.

The West Vis-à-Vis Russia: Different Models

Russia's relationship with the West, however complicated it may be, has been a centerpiece of Russian foreign policy since the creation of the Russian Federation in 1991. As mentioned before, Russia faced a politically consolidated West at the peak of its influence.

For decades, the United States has loomed large in European-Russian relations. Washington has been the omnipresent third party in dealings between Russia and Europe, serving both as a guarantor of European security and a stakeholder in the transatlantic system. But now that is open to question.

Growing uncertainty surrounding the future of the transatlantic alliance presents new challenges for bilateral and multilateral relations between Russia, the EU, and the United States. On issues such as sanctions, NATO and EU expansion, the unified transatlantic front of the past has begun to show cracks. Yet Europe, which finds itself stuck between an increasingly activist Russia and the United States, is ill-prepared to conduct a policy of "strategic autonomy" (French term) that some are calling for.

Over the past thirty years, the Western political order has gone through several iterations. The Western Europe of the Cold War, part of a divided European continent, embraced its transatlantic identity by having a shared adversary in Moscow. Then, in the post-Soviet period, the strong political and economic body represented by the European Union presumed less patronage from Washington and a subordinate role for Moscow.

In 1997, Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community established a framework for relations through a series of agreements on defense and cooperation. Thus was born a new model of relations between Russia and the West, one of whose core tenets was Moscow's acknowledgement of Brussels as the center of the new Europe; Russia would become an affiliate of the new NATO/EU-centric Europe, while retaining certain privileges relative to its neighbors.

Yet this system did not, in fact, grant Russia special privileges in treating neighboring countries, nor could it do so, due to the whole philosophy of European integration, which was based on the notion of gradual eastward expansion of a single EU regulatory framework through full (for some) or associate membership—neither of which Russia was offered nor sought.

In the early 2000s, while many of its neighbors sought EU and NATO membership or association, Russia struggled to find its place in such a community, while feeling less and less that it belonged to it. By 2007, the notion of a European Russia had receded, as Moscow rejected westward integration.

More recently, since the beginning of the 2010s, we have seen a Europe in crisis—from the euro calamity, to the war in Ukraine, to the migrant crisis. Consumed with domestic problems, the EU has been too busy putting out fires within and along its borders to seriously invest in widening its European sphere. Europe is, for the first time, contracting rather than expanding, both literally with Brexit and conceptually with its dwindling appetite for enlargement.

After the election of Donald Trump, Europe is also much further from the United States. The statements made by German Chancellor Angela Merkel following the G-7 summit in May 2017: “the times in which we could rely fully on others, they are somewhat over” and “we Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands,”⁵ were unprecedented, particularly coming from a deeply Atlanticist leader. While this is not yet a firm intention, it is telling nonetheless.

How did Russia fit into the new Europe? While NATO and the EU took great pains to distinguish between the military and political characteristics of each organization, Moscow’s perception of them as a unified, creeping threat along its borders never quite faded. In both the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the 2014 Ukraine conflict, a catalyst for conflict was the question of Euro-Atlantic expansion—in the former, Georgia’s NATO aspirations, and in the latter, Ukraine’s hopes for EU accession. The Ukrainian revolution and Russia’s subsequent takeover of Crimea upended a framework of relations between Russia and the West that had already grown quite fragile by 2014.

Conflict between Russia and the West is hardly new. But the shaky state of transatlantic unity is new. One of the determining factors in the future of relations between Russia and the EU will be the resilience of the transatlantic alliance, and the foreign policy course charted by the United States.

⁵ Jon Henley, “Angela Merkel: EU cannot completely rely on US and Britain any more,” *The Guardian*, May 28, 2017.

One can say with certainty what Russia should not expect. It should not expect an anti-American Europe that will break with Washington in favor of warmer relations with Moscow. Europe would only attempt a new alliance with Russia in close cooperation with the United States. The EU perceives Russia as a threat and—either consciously or subconsciously—as the “other.” Russia would also be remiss to expect the model for which it has lobbied since the Gorbachev era: a Europe that approaches Russia as a co-founder of a new order rather than a subordinate. This model is seen from Brussels as little more than an attempt to establish a new sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

However, it will become increasingly difficult for the EU and the United States to maintain the same kind of unified front against Russia that has held since 2014, especially when it comes to sanctions. Europeans have begun to see the United States as using political pressure to gain economic advantages, i.e., non-market influence over competitors. Some of them view the recent package of congressional sanctions as an attempt to redraw the European gas market in favor of commercially weak U.S. liquefied natural gas (LNG).⁶ While NATO remains a strong link between Europe and the United States, the dispute over goals and funding will continue to escalate, regardless of who occupies the White House.

Few Europeans seem able to clearly explain what strategic autonomy would look like in practice. Its champions say that it means boosting Europe’s military capabilities to respond to crises in its immediate neighborhood. The French Foreign Legion, which operates on France’s behalf in Africa, has been cited as an example. Nonetheless, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has pointed out rather sharply that NATO is still Europe’s indispensable defense provider. Moreover, the crises on Europe’s periphery, from Ukraine to Syria to Libya, are not local spats that can be tidily handled by the French Foreign Legion. They are conflicts that have ensnared the largest military powers in the region, including Russia and the United States. The Permanent Strategic Cooperation (PESCO) agreement, signed by 23 EU member states in November 2017, looks like an attempt to repackage existing programs and very modest ambitions, and to sell them as a strategic breakthrough.

⁶ See the unusually blunt joint statement by the Austrian chancellor and German foreign minister on June 15, 2017: <https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/-/kern-und-gabriel-zu-einseitiger-verscharfung-der-russland-sanktionen-durch-die-usa>. The Trump Administration’s general energy strategy is summarized here: <https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/28/trump-america-energy-dominant-policy.html>.

With the end of the greater Europe project, the three major players find themselves in a strange position. Neither Russia, Europe, nor the United States are able or want to maintain what it once had. However, a new framework for relations has yet to be established, and the attempt to revive the Cold War paradigm has failed.

This uncertain state of affairs will likely endure until each player achieves a measure of domestic stability. This is especially true for the United States, but also for Russia and the EU on the eve of potentially disruptive elections. China, too, remains an ever-present wild card, given its central role in Russia's new Eurasian policy. Moscow's eastward shift and articulation of a Eurasian identity are perhaps the ultimate signs that the Cold War and post-Cold War eras are over.

In the fall of 2013, *The New York Times* asked experts if, in their opinion, NATO had outlived its usefulness. One of them, Andrew Bacevich, a leading expert in military issues, said it was time the United States left the alliance and let Europeans take care of their own security. He stated that NATO had achieved all of the objectives set when it was founded, while the new functions it was trying to master in the 21st century were no more than a smokescreen for the unilateral and quite imperial policy the United States was pursuing around the world, not in Europe.⁷

Literally six months after that discussion, history sort of reversed itself, and the European issue topped NATO's agenda again. Atlanticism seemed to have gone back to its roots. However even if the conceptual framework for the confrontation between Moscow and NATO is restored for a while (with both sides prepared to play this game for various reasons, including domestic ones), Lippmann's "Atlantic highway" per se will no longer be the core of world politics. The era of Atlanticism, which began with World War II, is coming to end not because the contradictions that engendered it have been resolved, but because the multifaceted world has moved on. The longer the opponents in the previous confrontation try to close that chapter as winners, the more they will fall behind what Americans like to call "the right side of history."

What we can expect from relations between Russia and its Western counterparts in Europe and America? Given the obsession with a Russian menace in Europe and especially in the United States, there is no reason

⁷ Andrew J. Bacevich "Time for the United States to Leave NATO," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2013.

to expect any common project any time soon. The task should be to rebuild basic trust at least to the level of the Cold War, yet this is very difficult due to the nature of current conflict: lack of self-confidence on all sides coupled with the conviction that the counterpart is about to undermine you from within.

Confidence-building measures should not start between states, but from within each state. Heightened levels of mutual mistrust and fear are largely generated by domestic problems and an instinctive wish to find an outside reason for them. A new beginning internationally presumes first and foremost the restoration of trust within societies. It also requires that and sustainable strategies for self-development be implemented that are adapted to the new era, which is a more fragmented and less coherent global system. That means that many former axioms must be reformulated toward more flexible relationships.

Doing our homework at home is now more important than big initiatives abroad, which are unlikely to succeed because of domestic troubles almost everywhere. This does not mean total inaction, which could exacerbate negative dynamics. Minimizing the risks of unintended collisions, whether among militaries (in Syria or places where NATO and Russia operate in immediate proximity, such as the Black or Baltic sea) or in sensitive political and economic areas, should be seen as an ultimate goal.

In part this means restoring such mechanisms of the Cold War as early warning and interaction between militaries to make their activities more transparent to the other side. It should also include new areas, particularly in the cyber sphere, which has become a new and very dangerous space for competition. In the political field, further fragmentation of our common space, by sanctions or other measures, should be avoided.