

Russia's Security Relations with the US:
Futures Planned and Unplanned

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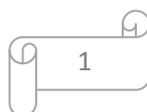
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Introduction

In the last five years, the pattern of security relations between Russia and the West has changed twice: first towards confrontation resembling a new Cold War, and then towards cooperation maturing to strategic partnership. The real amplitude of this swing is significantly less than often presented in the media commentary as the deterioration of relations, which reached its nadir in the second half of 2008 following the Russian-Georgian war, was tempered by mutual desire to minimize damage, while cooperation remains hampered by lack of trust. Even so, the shift from a quasi-Cold War to a partial 'reset' has been remarkably swift; it is essential to point out in this context that Russia-US relations have experienced greater volatility than the more stable relations between Russia and the key European states. It is also useful to establish that the escalation of tensions was primarily of Russia's making, starting with President Vladimir Putin's memorable 'Munich speech' in February 2007, while the rapprochement breakthrough was initiated by the US administration of President Barack Obama, and the Prague Treaty on reducing strategic arsenals signed in April 2010 is the main achievement in resetting the relations on the cooperative track.

The positive shift in relations coincided with the lowest phase of the economic crisis, which originated in the US financial market but has hit Russia with greater force than any of the 20 largest economies in the world. The impact on mainstream political and security thinking has been also the most profound in Moscow, and not only because of the depth of economic contraction but also due to sudden overturning of the prevalent worldview. Indeed, during Putin's second presidential term, the perception of fast strengthening Russia that would reclaim its 'natural' position among several 'great powers' in the world system, which would no longer be shaped by the US domination, became a political axiom for the Russian elites. The extent of Russia's economic vulnerability and political weakness revealed by the crisis is not yet fully understood by the disoriented policy-makers, so the current thinking comes out as an incoherent mix of residual assertive ambitions, more sober assessments of power balances, and growing concerns about the country's further trajectory.

This paper does not try to sort out these puzzles but aims at identifying key inconsistencies in the evolving security perceptions and plans, while seeking also to evaluate the gaps between these perceptions and real shifts in Russia's security posture, offering a few propositions about possible development of the latter. It starts with presenting the general picture of Russia-US relations as painted and imagined by the present leadership in Moscow, and then moves to analyzing the military-security scenarios and options, narrowing down on specific issues of missiles defense and the INF Treaty. The last section attempts to outline possible changes in the nature of Russia's relations with the US, NATO and the EU.

The multi-polar world according to Putin

The vision of 'multi-polar' world constitutes the main mental framework in which Russian-US relations are conceptualized, even if it represents a mix of several ill-compatible ideas rather than a coherent concept. The perception of several global power centers competing for influence is geopolitical in nature and the conviction that their behavior is determined by pursuit of national interests could be characterized as neo-realist, while there is also a distinctly neo-liberal commitment to upholding international law and preference for strengthening the regulatory authority of international institutions, first of all the UN. In rhetoric, much attention is given to 'new-age' security challenges, from nuclear proliferation to terrorism to climate change, but in real terms, it is the traditional inter-state power-play that is seen as the main source of security threats and 'dangers'.¹

The US hegemony in the world system is believed to be temporary and fast declining to be replaced by a more 'natural' arrangement with five-seven 'great powers' interacting free from fixed alliances but forming flexible coalitions in key regions of the world. It is logical in this worldview to expect from the US determined and even desperate efforts

¹ The term is introduced in the Military Doctrine approved after delays in February 2010 and defined as a 'state of international or internal affairs characterized by a combination of factors that under certain conditions could lead to emergence of military threat.' The list of these 'external military dangers' is opened by 'The desire to grant global functions to the military capacity of NATO, which could be executed in violation of norms of international law, to deploy the military infrastructure of NATO member-states closer to the borders of the Russian Federation, including by enlargement of the block.' (Available in Russian at http://news.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/461).

aimed at prolonging its privileged position as dominant 'hyper-power', so the emphasis on multilateralism in the new US National Security Strategy is seen as means to this end, while unilateralism is the prevalent style of behavior. For that matter, the reassurances in this document and in other public statements that the US would want Russia to be strong and self-confident are interpreted in Moscow merely as diplomatic courtesy or transparent deception. The experience of the 1990s, and in particular the Kosovo war, is accepted as proof positive of the US intentions to exploit Russia's weakness, which are not driven by preferences of particular presidents but constitute a fundamental strategic line towards marginalization of Russia as a potential 'rising power'.²

The assessment of NATO aims and perspectives is rather different, despite the extremely hostile attitude in 2007-2008 towards its enlargement to Georgia and Ukraine. The Alliance is generally perceived as a 'relic' of the Cold War, which would inevitably drift to irrelevance with the weakening of US leadership.³ The war in Afghanistan, believed to be unwinnable, is expected to push the allies apart accelerating the fundamental trend of consolidation of the EU as an independent power 'pole'. At the same time, Western Europe is typically portrayed as a declining and incoherent global actor, which is unable to develop sufficient 'hard power' capabilities for projecting its influence.

This somewhat condescending view illustrates an important evolution in Russian security thinking: At the start of the 2000s, it was heavily tilted towards military-strategic matters, but at the start of 2010s, it has become distinctly 'economized'. Vladimir Putin has never had a strong military background but at the start of his presidency, his worldview was shaped by the heavy impact of the Kosovo war and the second Chechen war. During his second term, however, the spectacular growth of oil and gas revenues caused a corresponding shift of political attention, so that Russia was re-conceptualized as an 'energy super-power'.⁴ Dmitri Medvedev has very little understanding of and less interest in traditional 'hard security' agenda, so the emphasis on economic globalization and competition has become even more pronounced during his presidency. His personal impact on shaping the mainstream political perceptions

² These views are extensively analyzed in Stephen F. Cohen, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009; see particularly Chapter 7, 'Who lost the post-Soviet peace?', pp. 162-198.

³ See, for instance, Sergei Karaganov, 'Strategic Havoc', *Russia in Global Affairs*, January-March 2010 (<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/30/1329.html>).

⁴ For my more elaborate analysis of that evolution, see Pavel Baev, *Russian Energy Policy and Military Power*. London: Routledge, 2008.

may be limited but the drastic contraction of the oil and gas revenues in 2009 has added convincing power to his discourse of ‘modernization’, so energy export is now depicted as ‘humiliating dependency’ rather than as a major source of power.

There are several serious problems with this pseudo-pragmatic worldview, but perhaps the central one is Russia’s doubtful ability to establish itself as an independent and influential ‘pole’ in the envisaged multi-polar world.⁵ In this respect, the implications of the rise of China are particularly poorly examined beyond the rather thin official guideline on developing strategic partnership. The very real and historically sound proposition that a multipolar world would bring a more tough and less restrained competition between ‘great powers’, which could put Russia at greater risk of confrontation with revisionist predators, is typically neglected.⁶ There is a pronounced preoccupation with (if not fixation upon) relations with the US that are supposed to deliver evidence of Russia’s status as ‘nearly equal’. The economic dimension in these relations is, nevertheless, quite under-developed, particularly in the energy interactions, which is generally at odds with the main thrust of Russian foreign policy. This weakness of economic foundation determines greater volatility in this key fixed ‘dyad’ comparing with the more stable but highly complex Russia-EU relations. Overall, acting as a main protagonist of the cause for dismantling the ‘unfair’ US-centric world order, Moscow remains poorly prepared for the challenges of Hobbesian futures.

Threats are many but defenses are few

Envisioning the turbulent advent of a multi-polar world, the Russian leadership adopts a very broad interpretation of security, enunciating doctrines not only of ‘information security’ but also of ‘climate security’ and even ‘food security’. Each of these doctrines identifies numerous threats and risks, and the aggregate list is provided in the National Security Strategy to 2020, approved in May 2009. The document establishes that a ‘qualitatively new geopolitical situation’ is emerging, in which ‘inter-state tensions caused by uneven development resulting from globalization’ are growing, but states that

⁵ See on that Fedor Lukyanov, ‘Russian dilemmas in a multipolar world’, *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 2, spring-summer 2010, pp. 19-32.

⁶ This risk is emphasized in Vladislav Inozemtsev, ‘Dreams about a multi-polar world’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 18 September 2008 (in Russian).

in Russia ‘the foundations for guaranteed prevention of external and internal threats to national security are created.’⁷ It would have been logical to expect that in the area of military security, the rather abstract but unmistakably US-focused threats defined in this document (‘policy of some leading states aimed at acquiring decisive military superiority, first of all in strategic nuclear forces...’) would be elaborated in the Military Doctrine, approved in February 2010. In fact, this document defines threats in the most abstract terms (for instance, the first one is ‘sharp aggravation of military-political situation (international relations) and emergence of conditions for the use of military force’), and is no more specific in describing ‘external military dangers’ (for instance, ‘attempts to destabilize situation in some states or regions and to undermine strategic stability’).⁸

This great variety of poorly specified threats and risks that are not prioritized in any meaningful way makes it impossible to figure out the key parameters of real threat assessments on the basis of a bunch of recently adopted official documents. It should also be noted that the Russian strategic tradition does not include such common analytical exercise as scenario-building (or, for that matter, game-type modeling), so planning for crisis situations typically is linear with no alternatives for possible asymmetric responses of an adversary. In real-life crises, such inflexible leadership often results in confusion over unintended consequences, but in strategic forecasting, it makes it very problematic to suggest how Moscow would react if one thing leads to another. The only way to construct a sequence of ‘rational choices’ is to derive intentions from available capabilities, assuming that the ‘deciders’ are not misinformed about the latter. In this respect, the determined execution of reform of conventional Armed Forces could provide some clues about the security challenges and conflict situations that are seen as highly probable by the current Russian leadership.⁹

⁷ It is interesting to note that some threats in this document are described in very definite terms (‘Global informational struggle will increase’), while others are presented in a more circumspect way (‘In competition for resources, attempts at resolving the emerging problems with military force cannot be ruled out...’). Russian text is available at (<http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/99.html>).

⁸ Some threats appear to be invented specifically for making diplomatic protestations, for instance ‘Demonstration of military power in the course of exercises on territory of states bordering the Russian Federation or its allies with provocative aims’. One useful overview is Keir Giles, ‘The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2010’, *Research Review*, NATO Defense College, February 2010 (<http://www.ndc.nato.int/research/series.php?icode=9>).

⁹ One insightful evaluation of this reform is Vitaly Shlykov, ‘The secrets of Serdyukov’s blitzkrieg’, *Russia in Global Affairs*, January-March 2010 (<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/30/1331.html>).

The wisdom of launching such a radical military *perestroika* at the start of devastating and protracted economic crisis is questionable, and the reform is definitely generating greater pain and necessitating higher expenditures than budgeted, while its provisional results are far from the expectations.¹⁰ One of the unannounced but logically deducible guidelines is that Russia is no longer expecting or preparing for a large-scale conventional war against NATO in the Western theatre. Indeed, one of the first targets of the reform was disbandment of hundreds of 'skeleton' units in the Ground Forces and the Air Force, which amounts to scrapping of the old Soviet infrastructure of mass mobilization.¹¹ It is possible to speculate that Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who has never pretended to have a grasp of high strategic matters, opted for this goal as one of the easiest in implementation, since those 'empty shells' of regiments performed no useful role. However, even if abandoning a strategic model (dating back to WWI) was not intentional, the swift implementation of the disbandment order means that under no circumstances Russia would be able to deploy even a dozen of 'cadre' divisions by calling reservists. This also means that no minimally meaningful conventional defense could be built in the Far East in case of a confrontation with China.¹²

One implicit reflection on this shift in the Military Doctrine is the proposition that 'Despite the diminishing probability of launching a large-scale war against the Russian Federation with conventional and nuclear weapons, in several directions military dangers for the Russian Federation are increasing.' This guideline remains open to interpretation but it is possible to suggest that a '22 June'-type conventional offensive from NATO is now perceived as a negligible threat, not least due to unwinnable but inescapable engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq. What is assessed as a real and high-impact threat (demonstrated in the NATO war against Yugoslavia in 1999) is a series of 'surgical' strikes with long-range high-precision weapon systems against which Russia has no effective defense and cannot respond in kind.¹³

¹⁰ My more detailed analysis of this transformation is in Pavel Baev, 'Military reform against heavy odds', in Anders Åslund, Sergei Guriev and Andrew Kuchins (eds), *Russia After the Global Economic Crisis*. Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2010.

¹¹ Expert discussion of this issue is in 'Current problems and logic of the military reform', *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 14 May 2009 (in Russian).

¹² See Aleksandr Hramchihin, 'All in all – 85 permanent readiness brigades', *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 16 October 2009 (in Russian).

¹³ On the dismal state of Russian air defense system, which currently can intercept at best 20% of aircraft or missiles targeting Moscow, see Oleg Vladykin, 'Holes in space defense', *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 21 May 2010 (in Russian).

The only conceivable, even if unthinkable, option for countering such a threat is escalation to the nuclear level, and this option needs to be credible in order to prevent the execution of ‘punishing’ strikes. This credibility cannot be created by declaring readiness to cross the nuclear threshold, which would be politically inappropriate, so the Military Doctrine takes a very cautious stance on the issue of ‘first use’, which is reserved for the situation of ‘threat to the very existence of the state.’ Strategic arsenal is supposed to counter-balance the US nuclear ‘triad’ (as well as the nuclear capabilities of France and the UK), so the main means for upholding this ‘deterrence’ of conventional ‘non-contact’ aggression is the sub-strategic (or tactical) nuclear weapons. Complete lack of information about these weapons is creating a high degree of uncertainty for the potential adversary, and there is practically no guidance for or debate about the character of their instrumentalization.¹⁴ Moscow remains highly reluctant to engage in any talks on possible reduction of these weapons, which should necessarily start with establishing greater transparency.

It is possible to hypothesize that tactical nuclear weapons are seen as the major instrument for securing Russia’s ability to dominate the escalation of several local conflicts around its borders.¹⁵ In principle, the on-going military reform is aimed at creating mobile ‘permanent readiness’ brigades that should be capable of performing interventions of sufficient forcefulness. In reality, however, the cuts in the officer corps and the failure to build a corps of professional (or at least serving on contract) NCOs and sergeants lead to a sustained decline of combat readiness of the ‘new look’ Ground Forces.¹⁶ This creates a high-risk situation for the near future where Russia could find itself so badly trounced in a fast-moving small-to-medium scale hostility that delivering a nuclear strike would become a practical solution.

¹⁴ One useful analysis of this issue is Aleksei Arbatov, ‘Tactical nuclear weapons – problems and prospects’, *Voенно-promyshlennyi kuryer*, 5 May 2010 (in Russian available at <http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=40747>).

¹⁵ Thus, Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of the Security Council, revealed that ‘conditions for use of nuclear weapons for repelling aggression with the use of conventional weapons are corrected not only for a large-scale but also for a regional or even a local war.’ He further clarified that ‘in situations critical for national security, the possibility of a preemptive (preventive) nuclear strike on the aggressor is not ruled out.’ The Military Doctrine does not contain such propositions, but he was in charge of revising several earlier drafts. See Vladimir Mamontov, ‘Russia is changing, and its military doctrine is changing also’, interview with Nikolai Patrushev, *Izvestiya*, 14 October 2009 (in Russian).

¹⁶ See Sergei Zhuravlev, ‘On combat readiness: The 1,000,000-strong army cannot fight’, *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 2 April 2010 (in Russian).

Since the collapse of the USSR, it has been the Caucasus that registered the highest level of instability with great variety of violent conflicts overlapping and resulting in non-sustainable deadlocks. Russia performed a number of interventions of different scale but in 2007-2008, the end of the second Chechen war left it with significant and usable free military capacity, which was put to use against Georgia in August 2008.¹⁷ Despite the spectacular victory, that war has left a highly controversial legacy as Russia on the one hand, is tempted to replay the easy walkover and bring the conflict to a final solution, but on the other hand, has much diminished military capabilities. What might make this conflict prone to nuclear escalation is a possibility of US involvement, which Moscow would be desperate to pre-empt.

Another potential seat of conflict that attracts priority attention of Russian policy-makers is Ukraine, which is seen as deeply divided and even 'artificial' state. With the election of Viktor Yanukovich as the president in February 2010 and his remarkably swift consolidation of control over the unruly Ukrainian political process, Moscow has become more confident in building 'brotherly' relations with the most important of its neighbors.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the prospect of a new political spasm, similar to the 'orange revolution' of late 2004 (which remains a looming specter for the Putin's coterie), is perceived as fairly high, particularly as the devastating economic crisis generates massive discontent. Such a replay of the West-sponsored coup against pro-Russian elites could result in a split, or indeed multiple splits, of the failed Ukraine, that would open a door for NATO intervention. The weakness of Russia's conventional forces would make nuclear capabilities the only way to prevent this politically unacceptable intervention, but this non-strategic deterrence could fail, and the Kremlin could refuse to accept that its bluff is called.

Much ado about missile defense and nothing ado about the INF

The plan for deploying in East-Central Europe some assets of the US anti-missile defense system of attracted intense attention of the Russian leadership, which, in retrospect,

¹⁷ My more detailed evaluation can be found in Pavel Baev, 'Caucasus', in Bo Huldt, Bertil Nygren at el (eds), *Strategic Yearbook 2008-2009*. Stockholm: Swedish Defense College, 2010.

¹⁸ See Aleksandr Karavaev, 'Russian-Ukrainian symbiosis', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 2 June 2010 (in Russian); Gleb Pavlovsky, 'Pax Medvedica', *Russkii zhurnal*, 4 May 2010 (<http://www.russ.ru/Mirovaya-povestka/Pax-Medvedica>).

appears disproportional. The National Security Strategy asserts that ‘The capacity for preserving global and regional stability will significantly decline with the deployment in Europe of global system of anti-missile defense of United States of America’; and the Military Doctrine defines ‘creation and deployment of strategic anti-missile systems undermining global stability and violating the existing balance of forces in nuclear-missile sphere’ as one of ‘external military dangers’. With the signing of the Prague Treaty on reduction of strategic offensive weapons, the campaign against (rather than debates about) the US missile defense system in the Russian media and expert community has sharply subsided, but the issue could make a fast comeback if the ratification of the Prague Treaty is derailed in the US Senate, or if a breakthrough in the US research and development in this area happens.

It appears probable that the Russian leadership did fall in a self-made trap of making a claim too far, and then escalating the rhetoric in order to justify its mistake, while at the same time trying some back-pedaling in order to avoid the need to act on this rhetoric. The underlying reason for that self-defeating over-focusing is the lack of competence on strategic matters in the Kremlin, which was aggravated by the severe purges of the ‘top brass and mistrust in the few available sources of independent expertise. The level of understanding of the problem is illustrated by Putin’s explication:¹⁹

As everyone knows, our American partners are building a global missile-defense system, and we aren't. But missile-defense and strategic offensive weapons are closely interrelated issues. A balance of forces was what kept aggression at bay and preserved peace during the Cold War. The missile and air defense systems and offensive weapons systems contribute equally to this balance. If we do not develop a missile defence system, the risk arises that our partners will feel entirely secure and protected against our offensive weapons systems. If the balance I mentioned is disrupted, they will feel able to act with impunity, increasing the level of aggression in politics and, incidentally, in the economy. In order to maintain the balance without planning to develop a missile defence system, which is very expensive and of unclear effect, we should develop offensive strike systems. But there is a catch. In order for this balance to be maintained, if we want to exchange information, then our partners should give us information about their ballistic missile defence system and in return we would give them information about our offensive weapons.

Fortunately, this demand was dropped without any damage done to the real talks in Geneva, but Moscow is still bound by the self-imposed commitment to withdraw from

¹⁹ The official translation of the conversation with journalists on 29 December 2009 is available at (<http://premier.gov.ru/eng/visits/ru/8759/events/8815/>). One sharp comment is Aleksandr Golts, ‘Putin derails the talks?’, *Ezhednevny zhurnal*, 30 December 2009 (<http://ej.ru/?a=note&id=9772>).

the Treaty if the US strategic defense system becomes moderately effective. It is possible to find two distinct directions in Russia's struggle against this 'destabilizing' system: preventing the US from building a position of strategic invincibility, and separating bilateral strategic matters from multilateral security arrangements in Europe. The main problem with President George W. Bush's plan for deploying ten interceptor-missiles in Poland and a long-range radar in the Czech Republic was exactly that it brought these two directions together. The cancellation of this plan by President Barack Obama has undermined the solid Russian 'Nyet'-position, and now Moscow has to construct its opposition more accurately.

In the big strategic picture, there is hardly much doubt that at some point in mid-term, effective defense against ballistic missiles would become technically possible, and the US would then proceed with determination to building a protective shield.²⁰ This new invulnerability is certain to destroy the traditional balance of offensive capabilities, so Russia has reserved for itself the right to withdraw from the Prague Treaty.²¹ The problem with this logically consistent position is twofold. Firstly, even abandoning the commitment on reducing the strategic arsenal, Russia would hardly be able to increase it as many of its weapon systems are approaching the end of safe service life, while the replacements are coming in small numbers (and the future of the *Bulava* SLBM remains in doubt). Secondly, there has been much upbeat reporting about Russia's own anti-missile systems, in particular S-500, which is supposed to work even on targets on low space orbits. When the US makes the decision for full deployment of the missile defense system, Russia should be able to answer in kind – only in real fact, the technology behind its 'modern' air-space defenses is antiquated beyond any updates.²²

As far as the anti-missile shield for Europe is concerned, Russia remains very reluctant to engage in a meaningful cooperation with NATO, where in principle its new strategic radar in Armavir (as well as very old radar in Gabala, Azerbaijan) and its tactical surface-to-air missiles S-300 could be valuable assets. Its main concern, in the words of Dmitri

²⁰ One good assessment of this prospect is Viktor Mihailov and Vladimir Stepanov, 'Key directions of the new US administration in anti-missile defense', *Security Index*, vol. 16, no. 2, summer 2010, pp. 115-119.

²¹ On the link between strategic offence and defense, see Viktor Litovkin, 'Russia and US have to have a serious talk on the balance of strategic arms', *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 21 May 2010 (in Russian).

²² See Vladykin (note 13); on the problems with research and development of the S-400 *Triumph* surface-to-air missile complexes, see "'Triumph" without a triumph', Information memo, 16 December 2009 (<http://pro-spe-ro.livejournal.com/260.html>). Solid analysis is Aleksei Arbatov, 'Strategic surrealism of dubious concept', *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 5 March 2010 (in Russian).

Rogozin, the ambassador to NATO, is ‘who will give the order on combat use of the system’, and behind the claim to be accepted as an ‘equal partner’ in developing the ‘architecture’ of the anti-missile system, it is not difficult to see the intention to make it unusable against Russia.²³ The key feature of the new plan that gradually takes shape (and its major difference from the plan advanced by the previous US administration) is that the multi-element defense would be aimed not against ICBMs but against missiles of intermediate range, which Russia does not have according to the INF Treaty (1987).

Debates in Moscow about the pros and cons of withdrawing from this treaty reached a peak in 2007, as Putin proceeded with suspending Russia’s participation in the CFE Treaty and hinted that ‘it would be difficult’ to maintain commitment not to deploy two classes of missiles (500-1000 km and 1000-5500 km), while other states keep building their arsenals. A key point in these debates was, however, that Russia could inflict serious damage to its strategic interests by a politically motivated dismantling of this crucial pillar of the much weakened nuclear arms control regime.²⁴

In the near future, with the Prague Treaty in force, Moscow would hardly feel much temptation to abandon the INF Treaty, particularly since the production line at its only missile plant in Votkinsk is busy with the orders from strategic forces. The only possible controversy involves the *Iskander-M* (SS-26 *Stone*) mobile tactical missile currently deployed in replacement of the *Tochka* (SS-21 *Scarab B*); its range is officially reported at 400 km, but may in fact exceed 500 km – so the missile is capable to perform effectively the tasks of the *Oka* (SS-23) missile destroyed in 1988-1990. This controversy could be focused on the Kaliningrad exclave, but its strategic vulnerability cannot be reduced by deploying there the *Iskander-M* missiles (as Medvedev briefly ordered in early 2009), so it is plausible that Moscow could agree on a self-imposed commitment to withdraw all nuclear weapons from this region. Much would depend upon NATO position on the US nuclear assets in Europe, which at present are practically unusable.

²³ See Dmitri Rogozin, ‘NATO faces the choice’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 17 May 2010 (in Russian). See also Vladimir Ivanov, ‘NATO builds an anti-missile shield’, *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 21 May 2010 (in Russian).

²⁴ See Aleksei Arbatov, ‘An unnecessary and dangerous step’, *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 2 March 2007 (in Russian). It should be noted that Rose Gottemoeller, then the Director of Carnegie Moscow Center, made an important contribution to those debates; see ‘Treaties on the brink of failure’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 22 October 2007 (in Russian).

Things that might go wrong

This evaluation of evolving Russian perceptions of strategic relations with the US and Europe cannot lead to an informed conclusion about their further evolution not only because they remain seriously incoherent but primarily because their connection with reality is rather ambivalent. The mix of rising-power ambitions and declining-power fears requires psychological diagnostics rather than 'rational choice' analysis, but there is nevertheless a common denominator in this pragmatic-schizophrenic worldview. The present Russian leadership takes for an absolute imperative the preservation of its monopolistic control over the political system, even if the experimental and somewhat unnatural construct of Putin-Medvedev duumvirate might be modified or abandoned as soon as 2012. This fundamental posit is in fact a rather questionable proposition as the economic foundation of *Putinism* – the steadily expanding petro-revenues – is shaken by the global crisis and cannot support the functioning of bureaucratic pyramid.

The crisis of the political super-structure of petro-state could take various turns determining a wide spectrum of possible shifts in the nature of Russia's security relations with the US and NATO, but before examining the breaks of the current trajectory, it is essential to establish where it leads. The primary goal of preserving the existing political order logically makes Russia a status quo power deeply reluctant to experiment with testing the limits of security arrangements imperfect as they are. It might seem that the August 2008 war with Georgia was exactly this kind of experiment, and indeed in its aftermath, there were plentiful speculations that Russia would behave as a revisionist power.²⁵ It has become clear by now, however, that even in that war Russia settled for a symbolic victory, which makes it easy for the EU and NATO to resume business as usual.

Clinging to status quo in a fast changing environment is a vulnerable position, and Moscow finds itself again and again overtaken by events that do not fit into the 'correct' picture of the multi-polar world. One such fast-moving intrigue focuses on Iran, and

²⁵ An influential work elaborating this idea is Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010. The author has also put forward a challenging thesis about 'Finlandization' of Eastern Europe; see *Transatlantic Take*, 27 May 2010 (<http://blog.gmfus.org/2010/05/27/the-specter-of-finlandization/>). His conclusion that 'we need a new strategy of enlargement' appears positively proactive, but the obvious unfeasibility of this plan makes it necessary to re-examine the point of departure.

Moscow was quite content with the pattern of some cooperation with Washington and some strengthening of the 'good-neighborly' ties with Tehran that has been sustained since the mid-1990s, but is coming to an unavoidable end. Russia takes its privileges as a member of the 'nuclear club' very seriously and would have certainly preferred Iran not to have nuclear weapons. At the same time, a nuclear-armed Iran is not seen as a grave security threat, merely as an undesirable development, which might be preventable (hence the readiness to support some 'smart' sanctions) but falls far short from the category of 'unacceptable'.²⁶ A far greater security challenge from the Russian perspective is the risk of a unilateral US military action against Iran, which could trigger a chain of asymmetrical responses and, no less important, would signify a disregard for Russian disapproval.

A similar unsustainable stance is maintained by Moscow towards the US and NATO operation in Afghanistan, which is seen both as a neutralization of direct threat from the Taliban to the Central Asia and as a massive drain on Western resources. The Russian leadership shares the view propagated by the top brass that the war is unwinnable but it certainly does not want to be seen as a spoiler of international effort, and so is prepared to provide cost-free support like granting transit rights.²⁷ The best option, as far as Moscow is concerned, would be for the US and NATO to remain involved in sorting out the Afghan disaster for years to come, and thus remain unable to engage in any other conflict situations, with the possible exception of the Balkans. This option, however, is expiring, and Russia – as its response to the state failure in Kyrgyzstan shows – is not prepared to take on additional responsibilities for guaranteeing security in the Central Asia and has diminishing military capabilities for such interventions.

Forced Western retreats from Afghanistan and Iraq are seen in Moscow as logically following from the multi-polar dynamics but there is as little planning for such disastrous outcomes as there is in Washington and Brussels where a victory of sorts is still believed to be non-negotiable. Putin believes that a humbled 'hyper-power' would learn a lesson, but he might yet discover that an isolationist post-Obama America would also be determinedly unilateralist and inclined to project its unsurpassable military

²⁶ See Dmitri Trenin, 'Russia, Iran and uranium', *Inosmi.ru*, 11 June 2010 (<http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=40982>).

²⁷ A good sample of Russian attitude is Boris Gromov and Dmitri Rogozin, 'Russian advice on Afghanistan'. *New York Times*, 11 January 2010. A more nuanced analysis is Dmitri Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko, *Afghanistan: a View from Moscow*. Moscow: Carnegie Center, April 2010.

power in the form of ‘punishing’ strikes. Corrupted by the absolute power as he is, Putin still understands perfectly clear that Russia cannot afford any real-terms confrontation with the West or the US because the economic consequences would be too hurtful. In fact, in the situation of protracted recession, Russia needs as much cooperation with the EU and the US as it can get, and this essentially means that the imperative of preserving control over the political system would push Putin towards greater amity with the West whatever are his personal idiosyncrasies.

The issue is not whether the current leadership might decide that it could better advance its goals by turning again to a quasi-Cold War stance (mobilization potential of such maneuver is very limited) but how stable is this leadership. Putin may orchestrate his return to the ‘natural’ position at the top of the pyramid in 2012, but this comeback would not render this issue irrelevant. The system of *Putinism* is deeply rotten and may collapse in a no less spectacular way than the USSR in 1991. Unlike Gorbachev, Putin is a ruthless political animal and any sign of opposition has been meticulously exterminated, but his court is ridden with clan squabbles that are exacerbated by the shrinking of petro-revenues.

It may be a fascinating occupation to monitor the discord between different factions of *siloviki* (a much over-estimated political body) or to uncover the feuds inside *Gazprom* exploited by the rising Timchenko-Kovalchuk business empire, but it is hardly possible to figure out which combination of courtiers might stage a coup against the ‘national leader’.²⁸ It is clear, however, that undiluted mercantilist interests are the main driver of this lively competition, so no alternative to the tight business integration with the EU – and by extension the security policy of rapprochement and de-facto disarmament – is shaping up. Three propositions on the current state of this Byzantine policy-spinning can be advanced on the basis of scant evidence and gut feeling. The first one is that after two years of ill-fated Medvedev’s presidency he is hardly considered by key clans as a possible successor to domineering Putin. The second proposition is that Putin no longer relies upon – or commands loyalty in – the special services, including the FSB. Finally, several rounds of purges have left the top brass disorganized and disheartened, so political ambitions in this traditionally influential caste have all but disappeared.

²⁸ A good source on the petro-politics is the bi-weekly bulleting ‘Political risks in the Russian oil-&-gas complex’, produced by the National Energy Security Fund (<http://www.energystate.ru/eng/>).

What follows from this unsubstantiated reasoning is that a probable attempt to rescue the self-serving predatory regime by replacing Putin would not resolve any of the underlying faults but might trigger a strong and unexpected political reaction not dissimilar to that in the USSR after the August 1991 putsch. The possibility that a more democratic and pro-Western government would emerge out of this turbulence appears rather slim. Leaving aside various catastrophic options (which are by no means improbable) it is possible to suggest that the most probable outcome is a populist 'patriotic' regime that would set forth a program for rescuing Russia from failure by strengthening the state and expropriating the 'stolen' property and capital.

Such a hard-driven Russia might turn out to be a difficult neighbor (except for China), but its behavior would in a decisive measure depend upon the economic and political dynamics in the West. A moderately functional NATO under a reconstituted and sensible US leadership has nothing to worry about this troubled and struggling not-so-great power. European security would look very different if an EU pulled apart by centrifugal forces cannot rely on support from an isolationist US. The Baltic states in particular could be exposed to pressure from Russia but this might not be seen as a serious security challenge in Washington or even in Brussels. Russia cannot achieve any absolute increase in power, and specifically military power, and cannot strongly influence its security environment, which can, nevertheless, change in such a way that Russia would find itself with a significant relative gain in power – and would be tempted to use it.