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Russia and the West in the European Security Architecture: Clash of Interests or a Security Dilemma?

Russia's approach towards relations with Ukraine since early 2014 heralds a major shift in Russian foreign policy. It has crossed a Rubicon that it will be difficult – though not impossible – to uncross. Indeed, Russian officials have themselves stated on more than one occasion that Russia's relationship with Europe and the United States has undergone an irreversible change and will not come back to the pre-2014 status quo.¹

Are we looking at a largely inadvertent escalation sparked by each side misreading the other's intentions, or does the conflict in and around Ukraine result from a clash of interests, with each side determined to win and prepared to pay the necessary price? This is not an idle question. Our response has profound implications for the process of conflict resolution – both within Ukraine and between Russia and the West. A security dilemma type of conflict can usually be resolved by confidence-building measures. In such cases, the contradictions are usually not difficult to overcome. In contrast to that, reconciling opposed interests requires a substantive bargain. In the absence of such a bargain, the balance of forces will need to change in order for the controversy to subside. Before that happens, recurrent spikes of tension are to be expected, at times resulting in open hostilities.

Security Dilemmas

The notion of a security dilemma has been conceptualized in three main ways. The first – an “arms race” – occurs when one actor (for example, a state) seeks to enhance its security by building up capabilities that it considers defensive, but its counterpart (another state) reciprocates because it finds it difficult to verify the defensive nature of the first actor's deployments. That happens either because the military capabilities deployed by the first actor may be used not only for defence, but also for offence, and/or because there may be no way for the first actor to convince its counterpart of its non-aggressive intentions. If the second actor responds by enhancing its capabilities, the first might feel obliged to up the ante out of concerns with the

¹ Cf., for example, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Remarks by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the XXII Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy*, Moscow, 22 November 2014, at: http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcb3/24454a08d48f695ec3257d9a004ba32e.

second actor's intentions, and so on. The resulting spiral dynamic then takes the form of an arms race.²

A second way of thinking about a security dilemma is to consider the escalation of tensions in an ongoing conflict that neither side wants to turn into war, but is nevertheless prepared to fight if it sees no other way to defend itself. Once preparations for possible – even if unwanted – war have reached a certain threshold, and the sides have exhausted all means to secure an advantage short of a direct attack, the firing of a first shot largely becomes a matter of accident. One of the sides feels compelled to start armed hostilities in order not to find itself in a potentially losing position. The sequence of events that led to the outbreak of the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 has been persuasively described in terms of this second type of security dilemma.³

A third type of security dilemma has to do with the expansion of military or trade blocs. If a country (especially a great power) faces an expanding alliance that it has no chance of joining, it may be tempted to put up resistance by arranging for its “own” opposing bloc. This may lead to the creation of two structures prone to unnecessary competition at best and confrontation at worst. Especially dangerous is of course a situation in which the two blocs engage in an arms race or a military escalation.⁴

While Russia's currently declared foreign policy interests may be clashing with those of NATO and the European Union, the short-term dynamic in their interaction on Ukraine is more characteristic of a security dilemma. This concerns, in particular, the risks of escalation of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Even more fundamentally, a slight alteration of Russia's, NATO's, and the EU's official positions regarding their interests (settling for second-best options) could turn the conflict – a largely inadvertent and avoidable brawl – into a security dilemma. It follows that, in the disagreement between Russia and the West over European security issues, we are likely dealing with a clash of interests that can be transformed into a security dilemma and then resolved through confidence-building measures.

In the following sections, I offer a perspective on the rationale behind Russia's approach to European security and integration, discuss the actions that Moscow has been undertaking over the last two years in pursuit of its goals, make several predictions about the future course of events, and discuss the role that the OSCE could play in these scenarios. The overarching question in this contribution is whether peace and stability can be restored in Europe through relatively low-profile confidence-building negotiations and other measures of the kind that are typically required to overcome security

2 For a seminal work on the concept of a security dilemma cf.: Robert Jervis, Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma, in: *World Politics* 2/1978, pp. 167-214.

3 Cf., for example, Cory Welt, The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 1/2010, pp. 63-97.

4 Cf. Samuel Charap/Mikhail Troitskiy, Russia, the West and the Integration Dilemma, in: *Survival* 6/2013-2014, pp. 49-62.

dilemmas (and which the OSCE is especially good at) or whether a more substantive and therefore difficult readjustment is necessary to address a fundamental clash of interests among the key players.

Underlying Motives

Policy analysis offers no definitive methodology for establishing anyone's motives with full certainty. Yet one can build a plausible model of Russian interests by identifying recurrent ideas and patterns in public statements by top Russian officials. Several factors having to do with both Russia's external relations and domestic politics come together to shape the core of Russia's approach to European security.

The first and most fundamental factor is the popularity among Russia's top decision makers of an offensive realist perspective on international relations and security. This perspective postulates an unstoppable struggle for survival and dominance among world's major powers. A player in that game can only feel secure after all others have been decisively weakened or – better yet – defeated. According to this view of international relations, such struggle is an inherent and inescapable characteristic of interactions in the global arena, because assurances that states could give one another of their non-aggressive intentions cannot be verified and – therefore – trusted. In one of his high-profile public appearances, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed in December 2014 that the West would have tried to undermine Russia even in the absence of the Crimea conflict, which had been cited by the West as the cause of its sanctions against Russia. Putin specifically referred to Russia's nuclear deterrent as the “bear's claws” and maintained that the West sought to “tear out [the bear's] teeth and claws” (that is, neutralize its nuclear arsenal), leaving a bear that would be no use for anything, except perhaps stuffing.⁵ Putin implied, and his close ally, Duma Chairman Sergey Naryshkin, explicitly argued, that the ultimate motive of the West was to seize control over Russia's vast natural resources.⁶

Such a worldview – especially the conviction that one's real or imagined opponents are not amenable to compromise and will press ahead with their destructive goals regardless of one's own behaviour – is clearly in accord with offensive realism. As a school of thought, offensive realism does not leave room for a security dilemma, as there supposedly is no way for the actors involved to signal benign intentions. Therefore, the only possible way for Russia to protect its vital interests is to prevent – or at times pre-empt –

5 President of Russia, *News conference of Vladimir Putin*, Moscow, 18 December 2014, at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47250>.

6 Sergei Naryshkin, *Instinkty kolonizatorov, ili podopleka globalnogo liderstva* [Colonizers' Instincts, or the Background of Global Leadership], in: *Vedomosti*, 13 April 2015, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2015/04/14/instinkti-kolonizatorov-ili-podopleka-globalnogo-liderstva>.

adversarial moves by undertaking forceful action before the threat becomes imminent. According to President Putin, in the case of Crimea, the only option available to Russia to make sure NATO forces would not be deploying on the peninsula soon after the February 2014 change of government in Kyiv was to take over Crimea. The problem with the offensive realist approach, however, is that it can easily deplete a country's resources by seeking to overpower any thinkable threat to its interests. Indeed, there have been few, if any, attempts to set clear boundaries for Russian vital interests.

Another deep-seated concern of Russia's has long been NATO's edge in military technology. NATO's high-precision weapons and missile defence systems have been especially worrisome for Moscow, as have NATO military deployments close to Russia's borders.⁷ Russia has considered its nuclear deterrent insufficiently reliable in the face of advanced combinations of non-nuclear strategic arsenals and strategic missile defence. Some long-term observers of Russia's military posture have suggested that such concerns stem from the traditional Soviet and Russian fear of a decapitating strike.⁸ From such a perspective, high-precision conventional arms can be seen as a convenient instrument for surprise "surgical" decapitation, once escalation has gone beyond conventional armed confrontation, but has still not reached the level justifying a first nuclear strike. Apparently dismayed at the lack of willingness on the part of the United States and NATO to heed Russia's concerns, the Kremlin started to look for leverage that would force the West, and especially the United States, to negotiate restrictions on the further development of advanced weapons technologies with their potential to affect the military balance between Russia and NATO.

Finally, over the past several years (since the wave of street protests in Russia against fraudulent elections in late 2011 and early 2012), the Kremlin has been looking for sources of domestic mobilization in support of the incumbent authorities. The need for such mobilization has become particularly acute in the face of slowing economic growth (registered well before the Western sanctions were introduced in 2014) and then a full-blown recession (after oil prices began to fall) as well as fears of externally orchestrated attempts to delegitimize or overthrow governments that the United States may consider undesirable. The Kremlin has argued that an integrated set of instruments is being deployed against the Russian government by the West: from attempting to undermine Russia's nuclear deterrent, via discrediting the country's leadership and destroying its morale through seemingly lawful yet subversive NGO activity, to preparing and covertly supporting the leaders of

7 For a more detailed discussion of Russia's grievances, cf.: Mikhail Troitskiy, BRICS Approaches to Security Multilateralism, in: *Air and Space Power Journal – Africa & Francophonie* Summer 2015, pp. 76-88, also available at: http://www.au.af.mil/au/afri/aspj/apjinternational/aspj_f/Archives.asp.

8 For an incisive analysis of possible Russian fears in this field cf.: Jeffrey Lewis, Bar Nunn, in: *Foreign Policy*, 17 October 2012, at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/17/bar-nunn>.

protest movements.⁹ If, from the perspective of Russian policy-makers, the United States is not amenable to compromise in that field, the only way to deal with the challenge posed by Washington would be to undermine the US's global influence and to weaken NATO by dividing it. That would be a natural offensive-realist response to the US's unfriendly presence in Russia's Eurasian neighbourhood.

The above considerations served as a backdrop to the Kremlin's decision-making vis-à-vis Ukraine in late 2013 and early 2014. However, they in no way predetermined the dramatic choices that were made by the Russian leaders. A number of second-tier, more tactical, interconnected motives lurked behind the Russian foreign policy watershed of 2014.

First, Moscow sought to assert its "special" security and economic interests in Russia's immediate neighbourhood. It was important for the Kremlin to demonstrate the resolve to prevent the admission of Russia's neighbours into NATO or the establishment of unwanted foreign military bases on its neighbours' territory. President Putin repeatedly complained about NATO's (and the United States') unwillingness to hear Russia's arguments against enlargement. Moscow spent a significant amount of diplomatic resources on making sure that Ukraine forswore the option of joining NATO by means of a law adopted in July 2010. When taking over Crimea in February 2014, Putin acknowledged that he had acted out of concern at the possible eviction of Russia from its naval base in Sevastopol by the new Ukrainian authorities and its subsequently being offered for the use of NATO countries' navies.¹⁰

As a means to increase Russia's bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU and NATO, Moscow has pursued integration with a group of post-Soviet countries since at least the middle of the 2000s.¹¹ The Russian leadership firmly believes that trade and other negotiations carried out between the EU and a Eurasian economic community will give Russia more leverage and room for manoeuvre than if such negotiations were carried out bilaterally between Russia and the EU. According to this logic, if Russia perceives its efforts to

9 Cf., for example, the interview Russia's highest-ranking national security official, Nikolai Patrushev, gave to the Russian government's daily newspaper: Ivan Yegorov, *Kto upravlyaet kaosom? [Who Rules the Chaos?]*, in: *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 10 February 2015, at: <http://www.rg.ru/2015/02/11/patrushev.html>.

10 Cf. President of Russia, *Seliger 2014 National Youth Forum*, 29 August 2014, at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46507>; cf. Also statements made by Russian officials in the documentary, *Krym. Put na Rodinu. Dokumentalnyi film Andrey Kondrashova [Crimea: Homeward Bound. Documentary Film by Andrei Kondrashov]*, *Rossiia 24*, 15 March 2015, at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t42-71RpRgI>.

11 One of the most outspoken, if somewhat colloquial, statements indicating President Putin's commitment to regional economic integration was made by him during his first presidential term in a meeting with the students and faculty of Kyiv University on 28 January 2003: "Europe has a common currency, a common space. They are profiting from being each others' neighbours much more than us. Excuse my language, but meanwhile we are chewing snot..." Quoted in: "*A my, izvinite, vse sopli zhuem...*" ["Excuse me, but we are all chewing snot"], *Gazeta.Ru*, 28 January 2003, at: <http://www.gazeta.ru/2003/01/28/amyizvinitev.shtml>.

expand its bloc to be obstructed by rival organizations, a vigorous response is necessary. Samuel Charap and I have suggested calling this dynamic an “integration dilemma” – a version of a security dilemma whereby mutually exclusive trade or defence blocs find themselves locked in a generally avoidable tug-of-war over members and allies.¹²

Over the past decade, Russian leaders have regularly complained that their proposals (called a “grand bargain” by some Russian and European experts and politicians) for a comprehensive partnership with the EU were being consistently turned down by Brussels.¹³ At times, Moscow has hinted about the presumed role of the United States in thwarting such projects as well as other Kremlin initiatives, such as the detailed roadmap to settle the Transdnistria conflict, also known as the Kozak Memorandum. More recently, Moscow felt sidelined while the agreement on Ukraine’s association with the European Union was being finalized in 2013.¹⁴ The Kremlin claimed that Russia’s economic interests would be negatively affected and demanded trilateral (EU-Ukraine-Russia) consultations on the association agreement, but this was rejected by both Brussels and Kyiv until after the agreement between them was signed and its start date was determined.

Several other short-term developments have also been discussed as possible triggers for Russia’s reaction to the victory of the Euromaidan movement in Kyiv in February 2014. Their actual role in driving the Kremlin’s decisions is almost impossible to verify or measure. It is however worth mentioning that Russian leaders repeatedly expressed frustration with the critical international media coverage of the February 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. President Putin’s view of the West as a force immutably hostile to Russia and seeking to undermine any meaningful Russian initiative could have been vindicated by Western reactions to the Sochi Olympics.

The Kremlin’s public campaign against “violent externally orchestrated coups”, which are allegedly aimed at unseating governments unfriendly to the United States, suggests that Russia may have had an interest in proving that such coups are doomed to fail. Indeed, one of Moscow’s core arguments in support of the legitimacy of the 16 March 2014 secession referendum in Crimea was that the “self-appointed” post-Yanukovych government in Kyiv lacked the authority to stop the referendum, which could only be conducted with the consent of the central government, according to Ukrainian law. The pressure applied on the post-revolutionary government in Kyiv on various fronts came in contrast to the extension of a 15 billion US dollar Russian credit line to the Yanukovych government just weeks before it was ousted.

12 Cf. Charap/Troitskiy, cited above (Note 4), p. 52.

13 Cf., for example, this article by a veteran Russian foreign policy expert: Sergey Karaganov, Europe: A Defeat at the Hands of Victory?, in: *Russia in Global Affairs*, 19 March 2015, at: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Europe-A-Defeat-at-the-Hands-of-Victory-17361>.

14 Cf. President of Russia, *St Petersburg International Economic Forum*, St Petersburg, 23 May 2014, at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/21080>.

Between February and May 2014 (when a new president was elected in Ukraine), Moscow accused the new Ukrainian authorities of extreme nationalist tendencies, while virtually ignoring the government in Kyiv.

Strategic Outcomes

Whatever Russia's calculus in the Ukraine crisis may have been, its actions will have long-term implications for European and global security. Overcoming them will be more difficult than dealing with the consequences of the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008.

Most importantly, from the perspective of other nations, uncertainty about Russia's intentions has increased significantly. In the aftermath of the August 2008 conflict, a number of influential experts and politicians in the West suggested that Russia's territorial ambitions in post-Soviet Eurasia would not extend beyond recognition of the two breakaway republics in the South Caucasus. These suggestions and the predictions that followed from them were starkly disproved in early 2014. As a result, mutual signalling of benign intentions between Russia and the members of the EU and NATO became difficult, and contingency planning for cases of quick escalation flourished. Even the security risks that had been previously considered limited in scope and potential consequences were being factored into post-2014 analyses as possible triggers of catastrophic scenarios. Discussion began in NATO on the need to return to nuclear brinkmanship as one of the means to deter Russia from encroaching on the sovereignty of NATO members – a scenario that was still considered far-fetched, but no longer science fiction.¹⁵ The failure of efforts to revitalize the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) was especially unhelpful, as tensions were rising around Russian military deployments and manoeuvres in the regions bordering Ukraine.

The Ukraine crisis also triggered a new stage in the discussion of whether and how nuclear weapons can convert into political influence. Moscow tried to spark a debate about the relevance of its nuclear posture to the situation around Ukraine. It was commonly believed that nuclear weapons can only be used by Russia to stop a massive attack on its own territory and – in certain cases – that of its close military allies, such as Belarus.¹⁶ However, according to a more expansive and alarmist interpretation of Russia's nuclear

15 Cf., for example, Elbridge Colby, NATO Needs a Nuclear Strategy Update, in: *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 May 2015, at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/nato-needs-a-nuclear-strategy-update-1432751143>.

16 For an interpretation of Russia's new December 2014 military doctrine by an influential RAND analyst, cf.: Olga Olikier, Russia's new military doctrine: Same as the old doctrine, mostly, in: Monkey Cage, *The Washington Post*, 15 January 2015, at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/01/15/russias-new-military-doctrine-same-as-the-old-doctrine-mostly>.

doctrine, Moscow could engage in “de-escalatory” nuclear strikes in conflicts that unfold beyond Russia’s homeland and do not threaten Russia’s survival.¹⁷ The risk of such a conflict between the United States or NATO and Russia being triggered in or around Ukraine became a highly contested topic in publications by Russian and American experts alike.¹⁸

In a bid to discourage other nations and alliances from encroaching on Russia’s newly defined “zones of interest”, Moscow seemed to be prepared for more brinkmanship than had been seen since the end of the Cold War. The Kremlin tried to convince the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia that Russia’s resolve to achieve its foreign policy and security goals was greater than that of the states and alliances denouncing Moscow’s policies. Some of the arguments focused personally on President Putin, whose commitment to achieving goals that he saw as morally justified was claimed by some analysts to be extremely strong.¹⁹ Such rhetoric clearly pointed to the existence of a fundamental conflict between Russia and the West – as opposed to an inadvertent security dilemma.

Russia’s demonstrations of resolve were complemented by new statements of the country’s interests and goals. Most notably, a concept of the “Russian world” was floated by the Kremlin to back up the credibility of Russia’s new foreign policy manoeuvres.²⁰ President Putin suggested that the geographic space populated by ethnic Russians meant much more to Russia than to the United States or the European Union. Therefore, Moscow was supposedly prepared to undertake much greater risks to secure its interests in the Russian world than other actors would be to prevent Russia from doing so.

However, the strength of Russia’s commitment to the protection of the “Russian world” appeared questionable, because this term had been conspicuously absent from Russian official discourse before 2014. It was not invoked even in situations when the rights of Russian citizens or “compatriots” in the former Soviet republics were openly infringed by these countries’ governments. Talk of the “Russian world” reached a climax in late 2014 and then subsided in 2015 at the time when pro-Russian activists in eastern Ukraine announced the suspension of the initiative for the region to secede from Ukraine and claim recognition under the name of *Novorossiia* (New Russia).

17 Cf., for example: Matthew Kroenig, Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War, in: *Survival*, 1/2015, pp. 49-70.

18 Cf. Mikhail Sokolov, *Putin sdast Donbass?* [Will Putin Abandon Donbass?], A discussion with Dmitri Trenin, Yuri Felshtinskii, and Alexei Ryabchin, Radio Svoboda, 14 May 2015, at: <http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/27015987.html>; Graham Allison/Dimitri K. Simes, Russia and America: Stumbling to War, in: *The National Interest*, 20 April 2015, at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-america-stumbling-war-12662>.

19 Cf., for instance, the interview given by Moscow Carnegie Center Director Dmitri Trenin to the popular “Pozner” show on Russian broadcaster Itv: *Gost Dmitri Trenin. Pozner. Vypusk ot 13.04.2015* [Guest: Dmitri Trenin. Pozner. Published on 13 April 2015], at: http://www.itv.ru/video_archive/projects/pozner/p91614.

20 Cf. Igor Zevelev, The Russian World Boundaries, in: *Russia in Global Affairs*, 7 June 2014, at: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Russian-World-Boundaries-16707>.

In another major foreign policy bid, Russia sought to upgrade its ties with non-Western (mostly developing) countries. This was done in search for alternative sources of financial capital and technologies that the West refused to supply to Russia in the wake of the Ukraine crisis and in order to catalyse concerted resistance to the West by members of the BRICS group and other non-aligned nations. The Kremlin considers the Western-centric world as a threat not only to Russia's interests, but to its very survival.²¹ Soon after the ousting of President Yanukovich in February 2014, Russian diplomats set out to warn their counterparts across the globe about the strategy of changing unfriendly regimes allegedly practiced by the United States and the need jointly to stand up to such actions.²²

A core element of this balancing strategy was Russia's outreach to China and attempts to frame Russo-Chinese relations as an emerging alliance. While Russia's interactions with China and other BRICS nations did intensify in various forms by mid-2015,²³ a fully fledged anti-US coalition failed to materialize – primarily because none of other BRICS nations shared Moscow's virulent anti-Americanism, but rather sought to use their expanding economic ties with the West to advance their economic development agenda.²⁴

Transforming the Clash?

Moscow has complained about alleged Western plans to bring about regime change and shifts of foreign policy orientation in Russia and its post-Soviet neighbours. In response, Moscow has sought to demonstrate that it will not shun from undertaking drastic measures to prevent that from happening. While Russia cannot aspire to control over the foreign policies of former Soviet republics, it definitely seeks an implicitly recognized mandate to co-ordinate approaches to post-Soviet Eurasian states with major centres of power – primarily the United States, the European Union, and China.

For its part, China may be ready to honour Russia's demands. Beijing has most likely agreed not to seek direct influence on the foreign policies of Central Asian republics along China's western border. Beijing prioritizes

21 Cf., for example, President of Russia, *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*, Moscow, 16 April 2015, at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49261>.

22 Cf., for example, the intervention of Anatoly Antonov, Deputy Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in 2014: IISS, *The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, 14th Asia Security Summit, Major Power Perspectives on Peace and Security in the Asia-Pacific: Anatoly Antonov, Deputy Minister of Defence, Russia*, Singapore, 1 June 2014, at: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20a%20dialogue/archive/2014-c20c/plenary-4-a239/anatoly-antonov-c9d2>.

23 For a chronology of recent events in Russo-Chinese relations, cf.: Yu Bin, *China-Russia Relations: All Still Quiet in the East*, in: *Comparative Connections*, May 2015, at: http://csis.org/files/publication/1501qchina_russia.pdf.

24 Cf. Troitskiy, cited above (Note 7).

commercially viable projects with these nations in extraction and transportation of hydrocarbons and has also collaborated in upgrading their infrastructure to facilitate transit from China to Europe across Eurasia.²⁵ Moscow remains comfortable (possibly nearsightedly) with this approach, because China has so far refrained from trying to directly influence government appointments or criticizing the nature of political institutions and regimes in Central Asian states.

In contrast to the Chinese approach, the European Union and the United States have attempted to change a number of deeply institutionalized policies and practices in post-Soviet republics, such as their approach to European integration and Euro-Atlantic security. While often divisive for societies such as Ukraine, Belarus, or Armenia, the goals of bridging the gaps in prosperity and effectiveness of the armed forces between post-Soviet nations and those of Europe and North America are becoming increasingly attractive across post-Soviet Eurasia. At the same time, the Russian government has never considered joining the EU or NATO to be a realistic option – both because of the tremendous amount of reform that would be required to meet the membership criteria and the unlikelihood of EU and NATO members being willing to agree to Russia's accession in the foreseeable future.

A bigger problem for Russia, however, is that while Moscow's staying power in Russia's neighbourhood remains strong, the majority of post-Soviet Eurasian countries consistently refuse to take orders or even recommendations from Moscow on positioning in regional and global affairs. Such key states as Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and even Kazakhstan are pursuing close relations simultaneously with several major powers in their respective regions and across the globe. Even Armenia and Belarus would likely do the same if circumstances became ripe for ending their isolation within the region and from the West.

In its turn, NATO fears a credibility crisis if doubt is cast on the Alliance's "open doors" policy. This policy does not directly promise, but clearly implies a degree of automaticity. NATO cannot afford persistently to turn down, on political grounds, membership applications from aspiring – and seemingly qualified – members. The unwillingness of certain Alliance members to see a candidate country being admitted into NATO could raise serious questions about the cohesiveness of the Alliance as well as its commitment to embody and protect the Euro-Atlantic community of liberal democracies. Indeed, while France and Germany were said to have objected to granting a NATO Membership Action Plan to Georgia and Ukraine at the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Berlin and Paris ultimately agreed to the summit's final declaration promising that these two candidate countries "will become members of NATO" – albeit at an unspecified future time. The room

25 Cf., for example Alexander Gabuev, Smiles and Waves: What Xi Jinping Took Away from Moscow, *Carnegie Moscow*, 29 May 2015, at: <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=60248>.

for manoeuvre in delaying the prospect of key aspiring nations to be accepted into NATO's fold is limited. The tension surrounding bloc membership can be interpreted as a clash of interests whereby each side is determined to have its way even if this requires it to pay a significant price: While NATO seeks to retain full freedom of action to pursue its enlargement policy, Russia aims to prevent accession of more neighbours into the Alliance.

Overall, the web of persistent contradictions between Russia and the West on Eurasian security issues, which has "thickened" since the onset of the Ukraine crisis, can reasonably be regarded more as a clash of interests than an inadvertent escalation.

However, it may still be possible to transform this unavoidable strategic impasse into a security dilemma that lends itself to negotiation and resolution. The key enabler of such transformation is Russia's apparent uncertainty about its ultimate goals both vis-à-vis Ukraine and the European security architecture in general. Some commentators have called such an approach "opportunistic".²⁶ Russia's view of what it wants to achieve is flexible and depends to a significant extent on both the reactions of other actors and on accidental developments. Russia's uncertainty creates an opportunity for a mix of status-focused discussions and persuasion that could help Moscow and its opponents to redefine their aspirations in a way that would make them compatible and avoid a clash.

In order to achieve that goal, a mutually binding agreement – likely a non-starter for NATO – might not be necessary. Instead, two unilateral declarations of commitment to certain principles may be sufficient. The Alliance could state that all its enlargement decisions will be driven exclusively by security considerations – which would mean that only candidates that provide a net positive contribution to NATO's security will qualify for accession. For understandable reasons, discussion of the candidates' admission prospects cannot be fully open. However, a degree of transparency would be necessary for NATO to demonstrate that it did not need to take up every membership application for fear that failing to do so would cause unaffordable damage to the Alliance's credibility.

For its part, Russia could promise not to apply pressure to or sanction in any other way the countries that NATO would be ready to accept on the grounds of their adding net value to the Alliance's security. While Moscow cannot be prevented from trying to talk its neighbours out of NATO membership, all sorts of threats or subversive activities vis-à-vis successful candidates should be forsworn.

The proposed mutual commitments may prove sufficient to overcome the integration dilemma arising from attempts to build and/or expand rival blocs in Eurasia. The logic is simple: If Russia agrees not to intimidate its

26 Cf., for example, Ilan Berman, The Economics of Deterring Russia, in: *The National Interest*, 22 May 2015, at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-economics-deterring-russia-12945>.

concerned neighbours, but rather to reassure them, NATO will have less reason to regard their accession as beneficial from the viewpoint of regional security. Moscow will not receive the right of veto over NATO enlargement decisions, and yet those decisions will be made according to understandable and transparent criteria from the perspective of a defence bloc. While conflict around “high-profile” cases such as Ukraine may not go away, an important step towards breaking out of the integration dilemma would be made. Such an outcome is strongly preferable to the continued clash over loyalties across Eurasia, which currently involves Russia, NATO, the EU, and the United States, but in not so distant future will also include China and other rising powers.

In a similar vein, an integration dilemma arising from the EU’s eastward enlargement may be mitigated by an agreement to hold trilateral consultations involving the EU, Russia, and the countries contemplating “deep and comprehensive” economic partnership with the European Union. Trilateral talks on the issues arising from the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement were conducted throughout 2015. At a certain point in these negotiations, in May 2015, the Russian representative announced that Moscow had no further objections to the entry into force of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement on 1 January 2016, although the Kremlin eventually decided to suspend its free trade regime with Ukraine from that date. These talks and the interim solution reached came in stark contrast to the refusal of the signing parties to discuss the terms of the agreement with Russia as it was being prepared for signing in 2013.

If, in reality, Moscow’s ambitions extend beyond receiving adequate guarantees that the expansion of NATO is not aimed at containing Russia, or if the Western security and economic blocs are reluctant to discuss their relations with third parties with any outsider, the sides will stay on a collision course and will continue to be prepared to spend significant resources and take serious risks to prevail in a clash. However, if Russia, NATO, and the EU are capable of limiting their ambitions and signalling benign intent, the current conflicts can be mitigated without deep institutionalization or formal agreements, which are usually difficult to pull off. Moscow may have the longest road to travel towards its partners, given the credibility crisis triggered by Russia’s policies vis-à-vis Ukraine since late 2013.

Once the sides make initial steps to break out of their security dilemmas, the OSCE may find itself in a good position to convene a high level panel of government officials or “wise persons” to advise on further confidence-building measures. The future status of Crimea may be another key issue on which the OSCE could facilitate a frank discussion and development of recommendations. The agreement of the OSCE participating States to use the Organization’s good offices for that purpose should lead to acceptance of the binding character of the recommendations.

As the pan-European institution with the greatest experience of monitoring missions and mediation, the OSCE will also find important roles to play in the coming years on a more ad hoc basis. Its monitors will be in high demand by parties to conflicts across Eurasia – first and foremost, in eastern Ukraine, where the separatist conflict is still awaiting final settlement. The OSCE should not miss any opportunity to support democratization in its participating States in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus by sending missions to monitor elections. That function will be indispensable where states make rapid transitions to pluralist democracy, as the legitimacy of the new freely elected governments will need to be internationally confirmed.

Conclusion

When discussing the ways out of the current European security limbo, we should remember that reassurance did work well in Russia's policy vis-à-vis Europe – Eastern, Southern, and Western – over more than a decade between 2000 and 2013 – before the controversy around Ukraine broke out into open conflict. Over that period, Moscow secured support – or at least understanding – among sizeable EU and US constituencies interested in continued dialogue and the expansion of business relations. Yet some of the traction that the Kremlin's ideas were getting in the EU raised concerns among EU and member-state officials. Opposition by nations such as Greece, Italy, Cyprus, and Hungary to EU sanctions against Russia in 2014-15 was clear evidence of that accumulated influence. Yet this accumulated capital was undercut by Russia's heavy-handed actions in Ukraine.

However, Moscow's interests extended beyond routine business engagement with the Euro-Atlantic community of nations. Russia aspired to high-level recognition of its role in European security, and deliberately chose to sacrifice sizable economic benefits. This resulted in both sides prioritizing uncertainty over reassurance in designing their military postures, operational planning, and – most importantly – thinking about the desired end-state of the European security landscape. Claiming that an “undeclared war” had long been waged against Russia to hobble its independent foreign policy, Moscow decided to increase its credibility through brinkmanship in both conventional and nuclear postures and policies. NATO responded in kind, with both sides facing a crisis of confidence extending far beyond the acute disagreement over Ukraine. It is here that the OSCE can step in to rescue the confidence-building mechanisms necessary to avert worst-case scenarios, restore trust, and illuminate the road towards re-inventing European security.