



NATO Foundation
Defense College

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Russia taking stock of its successes

Along with the strengthening of domestic leadership, Putin cashed in recent weeks a number of successes on the international stage.

Built with calm and patience, according to the new foreign policy approach, and refocussing on a new leadership role:

- in bilateral and regional crises (Turkey, Syria, Ukraine)
- in partnership with the East (China and Shanghai Cooperation Organization)
- in remodelling the relations with the European Union (Brexit and sanctions).

Turkey: after months of crisis due to the shoot down of the Russian fighter jet in November 2015 (allegedly in Turkish territory), which led to the suspension of the Russian tourist travels, the embargo on Turkish products and the freezing of diplomatic liaisons, the relations were resumed starting from the 30th of June 30 with the restoration of travels, and the normalization of trade and political dialogue.

The emphasis in Russia was not on the apologies of the Turkish President Erdogan in his letter to Putin, but on the will to close this incident and restore a productive partnership, especially for the purpose of collaboration in the fight against terrorism, and that was the main hurdle with Turkey.

Syria: the campaign on ground and the intensive bombing of ISIS positions have strengthened Russia's presence in the region and control over oil illicit trafficking, gaining significant portions of the territory, with an advance culminated in Palmyra's liberation. Despite maintaining differences of views on the Syrian crisis with the West and Turkey, Russia believes that the outcome of its military and economic commitment should be an occasion for the West to reformulate the objectives of the Western coalition, which cannot exclude Russia in the Syrian post Assad transition and normalisation.

Ukraine: despite the incomplete implementation of the Minsk agreements, observers are witnessing in the last times a re-evaluation by Western countries regarding Ukrainian

responsibilities and faults for the crisis, diplomacy and media included, that previously were considered as a unilateral Russian guilt.

The low intensity war that still persists between the Kiev central government and separatists in the Donbass, continues to bring about victims, but there is a de-escalation of the conflict, which eventually should lead to a negotiating table for a federal structure of the new Ukrainian republic. Even the media coverage and propaganda that accompanied the conflict are weakening their effects and this creates a better climate for dialogue.

China: in these two years of Western sanctions to Russia, after the Ukrainian crisis and the deterioration of relations with the West, looking to the East was the new mantra. Be it will or necessity, this shift has produced numerous efforts to seal economic agreements with China and intensify bilateral trade.

Never the leaders of the two countries had met so much: bilateral summits, visits, meetings in international organizations: SCO and BRICS (in 2015 under the Russian Presidency) APEC and G20, commemorative meetings to their national celebrations and military parades for the Victory in World War II.

Putin's recent visit to China saw additional several agreements signed while the summit of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) in Tashkent witnessed the entry in the organization of India and Pakistan, strengthen the Eurasian countries' block, where China and Russia play a primary role.

It remains to be seen how the Russo-Chinese spat on the South China Sea issue and on the Chinese antiterrorism co-operation without Russia will further evolve, but until now precedents are largely positive.

Europe: the unexpected outcome of the referendum on Britain's exit from the European Union and the crisis of confidence across the continent towards the European institutions, confirmed the Russian vision of EU's institutional and bureaucratic inefficiency (compounded by a slow and tortuous decision-making process) and its failure in promoting common policies.

This is accompanied, always from the Russian point of view, by the absence of a common foreign policy, largely dominated by the main ally's positions, and thus, in Moscow's view, , not enough oriented towards the protection of continental interests, of which Russia consider itself part of.

Yet until now on the one hand Russia's experience with the Eurasian Union has not been attractive from the very beginning, and it is limited to some countries of the former Soviet bloc: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, then Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joining and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as observers. But on the other we see now some expressions of interest by Vietnam and Serbia to enter the Customs Union.

It is important to understand the nature of this two-pronged Russian strategy. On the Western Front, Russia would prefer to dialogue with individual states and have a divided

Europe, distinguishing between “friendly countries” and “hostile” ones, mainly distinguishing between governments who want to lift sanctions (Italy is considered as such) and those in favour of keeping them. But on the Eastern Front Putin is working for a Eurasian Union compact under Russian guide.

Paradoxically a greater EU-Eurasian Union economic cooperation would stall this strategy anchored in the division between two blocks, but the leaderships of the two areas are still not ready for this historic step and while Europe is fragile, the Eurasian bloc strengthens and integrates.

In this context of weak political and economic European institutions, it is clear that in the West there are political currents that want to rely on the supra-national protection offered by a military bloc. In Moscow’s perception, NATO (another paradox) makes up the shortage of European foreign policy towards Russia, and, having no other means, but above all no other mission, the Organization proposes the scheme of Russia as the enemy of Europe.

The Russian leadership on the contrary, strong of the results referred above, even and again in these days is returning to revive an equal partnership in Europe and the Middle East with the West and NATO, while confronting in the rest of the world each one with its new allies. Do we trust?