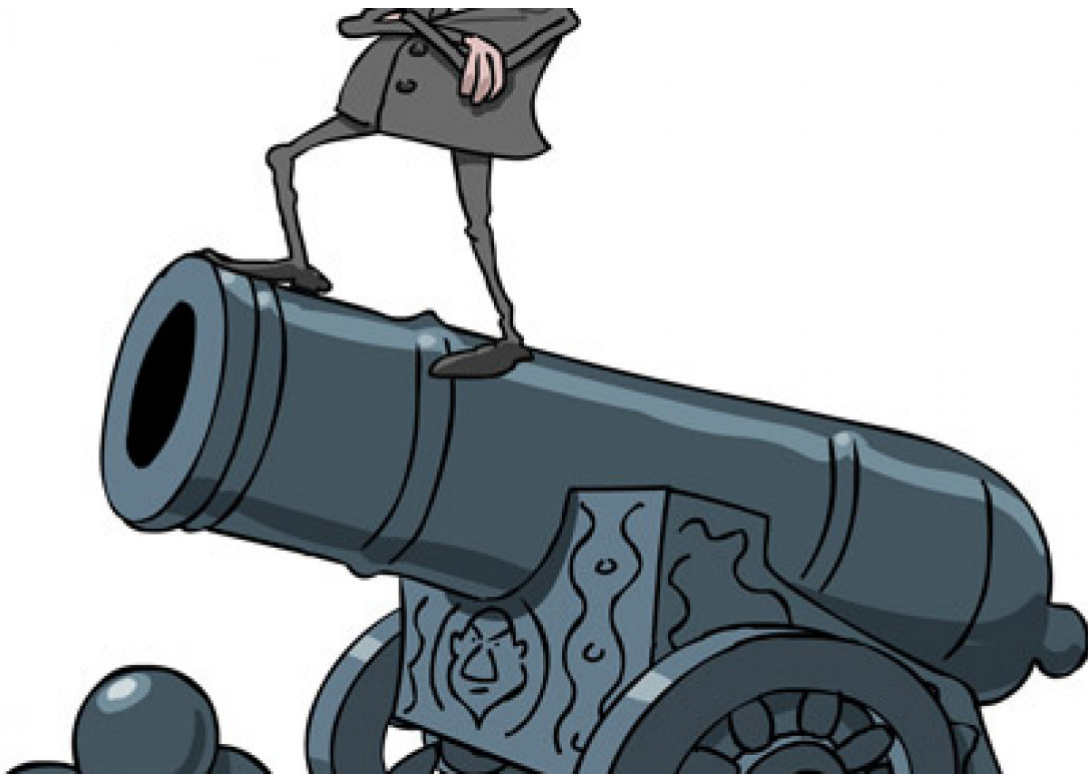


Russian Foreign Policy Is Based on Illusions

By [Ivan Sukhov](#)

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Russia's foreign policy, which continues to bewilder the rest of the world, is essentially a copy of the Kremlin's simplistic domestic policy. Both existed for many years under "greenhouse" conditions, untested by inclement weather, as it were. But the moment a serious draft swept through, they instantly became disoriented.

The first serious sign that the weather was changing on the domestic front was the mass protest rallies in Moscow in the winter of 2011-12, staged in reaction to parliamentary election results. The Kremlin found itself in a situation to which it had grown unaccustomed — citizens demanding immediate action in place of an endless series of empty gestures.

When it comes to foreign policy, the situation in which the Russian authorities now find themselves is also partly the result of a clash of illusion and reality. Russia's foreign policy has generally been more grounded in reality than its domestic policy, where leaders were generally free to pursue their every manipulative and controlling whim without encountering even the slightest resistance.

The same was not true in matters of foreign policy, where the Kremlin had to deal with partners who had their own goals and limits regarding relations with Russia. In addition, beginning in the mid-2000s the Kremlin focused its foreign policy both overseas and in the former Soviet republics on a banal desire to promote the interests of state-owned oil and gas companies.

What's more, foreign policy decisions continued to come from the same people who had declared the Soviet collapse the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century and who continued to view Russia as the rightful successor to all that was once the Soviet Union — both politically and geographically. That concept did not mesh well with the Russian authorities' fairly clear understanding of their economic limitations and their pragmatic if not cynical desire to use foreign policy as a tool for increasing Russia's hydrocarbon exports.

Ukraine turned out to be the place where Russia's pragmatism and illusory beliefs coincided. At a certain point, the security of Russia's hydrocarbon trade with the European Union became linked with Moscow's ability to exert political influence on Kiev. Initially, the security of Russia's gas pipeline through Ukraine to Europe was the unquestioned priority in all discussions concerning non-aligned status for Ukraine.

As Moscow grew increasingly involved in Ukrainian politics, Kremlin leaders no doubt frequently called to mind the words of former U.S. National Security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski — namely, that without Ukraine, Russia could never become an empire.

It became clear to Moscow leaders that Russians strongly support the idea of a resurgent empire, and that satisfying this demand would protect them from any more unexpected protests. And just as the West was more accustomed to seeing Russia in the role of an imperialist than as a champion of democracy, so too did most of the Russian establishment find the idea of empire completely natural.

Like the missing piece of a puzzle, it fit neatly into the picture of a world in which modern Russia was destined to become a magnificent hybrid between the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. In this way, Moscow's relatively realistic vision of the world was imperceptibly replaced by an illusory dream.

This illusion successfully drove subsequent events — up to a point. After President Vladimir Putin served last year as co-author of a very elegant political solution designed to avert Western military intervention in the Syrian civil war, the Kremlin began to feel that Russia really was a modern-day Soviet Union, replete with its own long-term foreign policy interests and a circle of friends that it had the necessary tools to support.

Without this increased self-confidence, the subsequent events in Ukraine would probably never have happened. Moscow's disillusionment began when its actions in Ukraine — a territory it had attempted to declare as a zone of Russia's legitimate imperial interests — met with broad and united opposition from the West.

Moscow's response was predictable. "If the West does not recognize us for whom we want to be — a magnificent hybrid of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire — we will remind the whole world that Russia was always a true Eurasian power and we can have partners in Asia as well as the West."

That explains the sudden emphasis on relations with China, the great importance given to Russia's chairmanship in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the euphoria over Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Astrakhan for the latest Caspian Sea summit.

However, these illusions will inevitably run up against hard reality. Russia's contacts and contracts with China do more than serve as an alternative to relations with the West: They place Moscow in a dangerous dependence on China, a power incomparably greater than Russia — however difficult that disparity might be for Russia to accept.

Moscow's policy for the Pacific region offers promise only inasmuch as the region itself is tremendously dynamic, although government efforts there have been intermittent at best. The APEC summit in Vladivostok in 2012 was designed to showcase the Russian flag on the Pacific Ocean, but only resulted in a series of corruption scandals surrounding the Potemkin villages hastily erected on Russky Island. Meanwhile, the population of the Russian Far East — never totaling more than half of Moscow's population — continues to decline.

The meeting with Iranian President Rouhani was nothing but a fortuitous photo op designed to demonstrate Russia's willingness to befriend anyone but the West. The ambitious Caspian Sea railway is probably destined for the same sad fate as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium that was announced with great fanfare several years ago.

In light of recent events in the Middle East, Iran will inevitably become an important part of the political configuration that the U.S. is building in the region. Iran's neighbors on the Caspian Sea long ago lost the habit of taking their cues from Russia. For example, Azerbaijan now officially positions itself as the most powerful country in the Caucasus, providing proof of how the empire is fading and changing with each passing year.

The fact that official Syrian publications have stated that U.S. pilots battling Islamic State forces in that country are essentially fighting in the trenches alongside the Syrian government army is another blow to the illusion Russian leaders held only one year ago that Moscow, alone, enjoyed celebrity in Damascus and that Russian leaders hold the ability to sway the destinies of the world.

Those illusions will continue to crumble. That is the fate of all policies based on fantasy rather than fact and of any country as yet unable to offer the world anything more than hydrocarbons and *matryoshka* dolls. It is now quite obvious that Russia can have no foreign policy at all without the West.

However, it will prove extraordinarily difficult for this or any other Russian president to regain the ground lost over the past year because the West will be extremely reluctant to again give Russia the benefit of the doubt.

What's more, if Moscow continues turning its back on the West and playing at the hopelessly obsolete game of empire, it will quickly find itself in very unpleasant company — such as the North Korean foreign minister who is currently in Moscow for a 10-day official visit.

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