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Strategies for a Kinder, Gentler Political War

What if the Kremlin is tired of being everyone's geopolitical scapegoat?

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There's talk of a "post-imperial" turn in Russian foreign policy, of consolidation of gains over aggressive confrontation. Well, maybe, but if so, what should this mean?

The main evidence adduced to suggest there has been a substantive shift in Kremlin thinking seems to be Vladimir Putin's tone and language. At last week's Valdai Forum, he was less vigorously vituperative than has been the recent norm, with some carefully calibrated praise of leaders from France's Macron to America's Trump, as well as an affirmation that he was not out to destroy the international order. (Which is true, but hardly a full-throated affirmation of a willingness to subordinate national interest to international laws and

norms.)

Then there was his televised call for an end to negative portrayals of Ukraine on Russian television. “We shouldn’t view our closest neighbor and our brothers in an unfavorable light,” he chided.

So far so positive, but with Russian proxies and allies still fighting in the Donbass, with Moscow stonewalling on the MH17 inquiry, and with Russian television commentators seemingly every bit as frothingly hostile to that “closest neighbor,” it seems too early to be talking of sea changes.

But what if it's not? What if the Kremlin, tired of being everyone's geopolitical scapegoat, is hoping to see some relief from sanctions, sniffing some kind of Ukraine deal in the offing. What if it is becoming ever-more aware of the true costs and risks of empire and confrontation and really is looking for a new strategy?

It is vanishingly unlikely that this means a wholesale revision in Russia's — Putin's — ultimate goals. His commitment to leading his country back into the global premier league, of asserting its exceptionalism and guaranteeing its sovereignty, is now so baked into his bones that it seems inconceivable that he would be reconciled to anything less. What is still highly unlikely, but not quite so implausible, is that he might be induced to accept that there may be different, even better roads to these sunlit uplands.

A positive agenda

So, what policy initiatives might help advance Russia's soft power and international leverage without sacrificing core national interests?

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The Donbass war remains an albatross around the country's neck, and finding some kind of accommodation ought to be a priority.

The Kremlin should be honest with itself: It has no interest in the Donbass, nor its impoverished and brutalized people. It made a serious strategic miscalculation when it interfered, thinking this would tame Kiev, and instead it has united and empowered it. And now Moscow is having, directly and indirectly, to throw good money after bad to avoid admitting this was a blunder.

So go all-out for a deal: a Steinmeier-formula withdrawal from the Donbass in return for a soft recognition of Crimean annexation.

The latter may for some seem hard to swallow, but realistically everyone also knows Moscow cannot and will not give it up. But there is much the Kremlin could do to sweeten the deal, from extracting militant leaders who otherwise would have a stark choice of last-ditch resistance or a show trial, to reparations (though never call them that, to avoid admission of guilt; how about 'reconstruction aid'?).

Of course, maybe it won't work. Maybe the Dutch will dig in their heels over MH17, or Volodymyr Zelenskiy cannot carry his country with him. But then at least Moscow looks like the one trying to reach a deal, while the other side blocks it.

Meanwhile, the Sochi and World Cup experiences showed that Russia can put on a show and also that contact, not absence, makes the heart grow fonder.

The visa regime is an expensive and time-consuming anachronism, so why not go beyond current plans for Schengen zone countries and essentially lift it? Maybe this will encourage reciprocity in the West (all the more useful for those spies Moscow will no doubt continue to send in), but even if it doesn't, that means more tourism (or money), more chances to bypass Western media narratives. (And again, to be cynical, more potential assets to compromise and recruit.)

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Speaking of the money, those Western investors could do with being treated like the proverbial geese laying golden eggs. Genuine rule of law and secure property rights for all may be some way over the horizon, but the convention that foreigners were essentially exempt from the raiding that is such a part of Russian business life needs to be restated and reinforced. Freeing Michael Calvey and slapping down those who traveled him would be a good start. Foreigners want to make money in Russia, where there are still fortunes to be made; they should be wooed, not worried.

Russia also needs some big causes. Climate change is all the rage, but in some ways this is a tricky one for a country still hooked on hydrocarbon export. There are other ways of presenting Russia as an environmental champion, though. Build on those pictures of Putin and various rare animals, and former chief of staff Sergei Ivanov's apparently genuine commitment to get serious about conservation? And if clearing up those refuse dumps that are such a public cause celebre can also be spun as an environmental campaign, that's a double bonus.

New bottle, old wine

And then there are the no-nos. Cut down on the trolling and information warfare; recognize and rejoice in the fact that, at present, the West will happily plunge itself into endless vicious circles of mutual recrimination and wilful misrepresentation without anyone's help.

Stop being so keen to support dictators and kleptocrats. Sure, it gets up Washington's nose (not least because they thought that was their job), but ultimately they are just looking to Moscow for money, guns and a UN veto. A few strategic allies such as Syria are worth holding onto, but in the main these are fair-weather, foul-play friends.

And perhaps stop murdering people? At least for a bit? No Chechen rebel or turncoat spy is really worth the potential international fallout.

The point is this: would any of this really leave Russia worse off? There is a prevailing narrative in the West that through cynical opportunism, weaponized corruption and blatant

breaches of international law, Moscow is somehow 'winning.' But winning what? In many ways this is rather a recognition that the West feels as if it is 'losing' in the face of the rise of China and other powers, the postnational turn of economic power, the declining legitimacy of traditional democratic systems and narratives.

But really Moscow has simply 'won' the opportunity to squander more blood and treasure supporting corrupt and self-interested regimes, and the need to find implausible new legitimating narratives to deflect the blame for the costs to ordinary Russians of its own inefficiencies and adventures.

Realistically, Russian planes will continue to bomb their way across northern Syria, National Guardsmen will continue to batter protesters in the wrong place at the wrong time, and Putin's cronies will continue to plunder the national wealth for their own gain.

But equally realistically, that need not be such a problem, and were the Kremlin to adopt a less confrontational stance, it will find that the West is often depressingly tolerant of such peccadilloes. Just ask the Saudis. Or the Chinese.

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