

RESPONDING TO RUSSIA IN A MULTI - THREAT WORLD: SOUTHEASTERN FLANK

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Abstract: *Eastern Europe has become the main arena of disputes between the US / NATO, the EU and the Russian Federation in recent decades. Starting with an economic confrontation, which escalated in the use of force by the Russian Federation against its neighbors and continuing with divergences in the Middle East and the Caucasus. The article highlights the causes of these events and the sectors in which NATO / EU were overtaken by Russia. Moreover, it comes with some conclusions and proposals that could mitigate the tendency of the Russian Federation to use brute force to maintain its supremacy over the region.*

Keywords: *Russia, strategy, conflicts, Turkey, EU, energy, Black Sea*

Abstract: *Europa de Est a devenit principal arenă a disputelor dintre SUA/NATO, UE și Federația Rusă în ultimele decenii. Începând cu o confruntare economică, care a escaladat în utilizarea forței de către Federația Rusă împotriva vecinilor săi și continuând cu divergențe în Orientul Apropiat și Caucaz. Articolul scoate în evidență cauzele acestor evenimente și sectoarele în care NATO/UE au fost devansate de Rusia. Mai mult, vine cu unele concluzii și propuneri care ar putea atenua din tendința Federației Ruse de a recurge la forța brută pentru a-și menține supremația asupra regiunii.*

Introduction. The end of the Cold War and dissolution of the USSR redraw the entire Europe map. The soviet incorporated states gained independence and freedom to have their own political agenda. However, transitional ‘peaceful process’ collapsed in some countries in a protracted conflict due to regional separatism and disagreement between belligerent parties. Russia’s strategic interest is to bloc regional interference of the EU and NATO that will drive out its influence and consequently, possibility to reassure it as regional and global power. Moreover, the Black Sea remain a key entry point for Russian confrontation with EU and NATO, and the Crimea peninsula its far post. As a result, Russia implemented a hybrid strategy that mixed military and non-military tools of state power with rogue interest of the local oligarchs. A coordinated cooperation between Russia and West through an open dialog around the South-Eastern Flank will avoid a future threat of use of force by the Russian Federation in the region. The enhancement of the military presence along South-Eastern Flank will ensure the security of its members. The cohesion within the NATO and EU members must be strengthen through political consensus that will hinder Russian intent to confuse Western.

How Russia pursues its goal in relations to West? Focus on strengthening defense. Relations between Russia and West perceived through US threat window never changed Russian foreign policy orientation. Following Yeltsin policy, Putin was very persuasive with the true goal of his overarching foreign policy aims: he aimed to end American global dominance and to switch from a “unipolar” world order to a ‘multipolar’ [7] that will allow restoring Russia’s prior global power recognition [2]. He claimed NATO and EU as threats for Russian dominance in its neighborhoods [12]. As a result, to weaken and break the cohesion between the U.S. and NATO’s European members became primary goal. Even though, during the 90’s West perceived Russia as a liberal democratic country and cooperation between them were fruitful on the security issues on Europe, Russia conducted a foreign policy oriented toward its reassertion as a great power, both regionally and globally. Therefore, every time when Western powers ignored Russian position on international relations it was keen to use force to assure its freedom and independence on security or economic choices. The 1999 Russian paratroopers march on Pristina airport, during the Yeltsin government was just to show its commitment to conduct independent political agenda yet [3], trying to work with NATO and establish a relationship with it. The most important aspect of such relationship to consider is that Putin’s foremost concern was the loss of control over Russia’s ‘near abroad’ sphere of influence [6]. To achieve its

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goal Russia followed some objectives: shaken Western cohesion, maintain Russian control over 'Near Abroad' states, returning Russia to the status of a global power shaping the international system.

To reach first goal Russia targets the Eurosceptic parties, by financing. Marine Le Pen in France is the most ostentatious example, but there are numerous others [1]. The second way is the Putin's policy to try to negotiate on a bilateral basis with individual states. Such policy will slow the sanction burden on Russian economy.

The last but not least, is his attempt to interfere in the Western political systems and information space with the goal to break Westerners' trust in democratic governments. The aim is to undermine the trust on particular candidates or to defeat in election race [11]. In a 2016 statement, Putin claimed that 'Even in the so-called developed democracies, the majority of citizens have no real influence on the political process and no direct and real influence on power', striking to spread negative trends in the West. Furthermore, such precedents Putin exploited by compromising elections, supporting extremist candidates, and through aggressive information operations stoke separations and mistrust within Western societies.

Maintaining Russian influence over the former soviet countries is at utmost importance for Putin [2]. There are several ways to reassure its 'historical right' over the region, however, the hybrid tactics applied the last decades worked to reject EU and NATO interference in the region. Moreover, the artificially maintained frozen conflict support its military presence that is a strong argument against central governments of the hosting countries.

As mentioned before, the reassurance of Russia as a great global power is the most important Putin's objective in relation with West. Russia conducts a foreign policy based on its hard power. Nevertheless, its economic constraint do not allow huge military footprint abroad. Consequently, Russia chose the tactic of small group presence that will project its ability to interfere in different regions. The main weakness of such tactic remain to be Eastern flank exposed to such actions.

Why are important Russia and Turkey relations for the Black Sea area? Cohesion of NATO and EU members. Another key aspect is Russian confrontation with Turkey in Caucasus region and Syrian war. NATO guarantee is valuable for Turkey but is prone to hinder Allied initiatives and is systematically balancing relations between Russia and the West that give Russia an opportunity to crack NATO and EU unity. Due to Turkey's disagreements with the US and Europe on several issues and the necessity to advance Turkish goals in Syria (where Russia is the dominant power), Ankara has been balancing its Alliance relations with deepening diplomatic, economic, energy, and military ties with Moscow. Putin's establishment of a long-term air and naval base in Syria was the first significant step in this effort [5]. He has also been cultivating the leaders of other states that were formerly Soviet clients and partners [6]. In addition, he has recently added to the list by deploying Russian mercenaries (at least) in Venezuela and solidifying an entente with Iran that Soviet Union never had [10].

There are two major confrontation between Russia and Turkey: Caucasus and Middle East. The Caucasus gave Putin a clear victory. There Russia achieved several objectives: maintain Russian influence in southern 'Near Abroad', secured a military foothold with a force of 1960 troops for next five years, despite its effort Turkey presence in the region was denied[9], the Armenian defeat will promote a pro-Russian leader to take power in Yerevan [4]. Consequently, Turkey failed to cash in its military success for long-term gains. Putin brokered agreement confused Turkey. However, Armenia had no choice, Russia is the only strategic ally, and its military base did not gave any advantage for Armenia. Putin sacrificed the good will and trust in Armenia by failing to come to its aid and then imposing this humiliation on it. On the other hand, Russia will be able to control the old trade routes. If Putin rallied around his Armenian allies, he could change the Azerbaijani gains, but the outcome would move Azerbaijan firmly into the Turkish camp [13]. Russia played its own game and returned its influence in Caucasus repelling Turkey and, thus, NATO.

Russia diplomatic maneuver secured the Azerbaijan cooperation, furthermore agreed on peacekeeping force from Russian Federation forces only. The one can say that Nagorno-Karabakh conflict concluded on Russia's terms, however, there was no other way because of Russian possible intervention. The experience gained during the lasting frozen period pushed Azerbaijan to agree on Russian terms. Moreover, for the Azeri president is a clear victory that strengthen internal position. Turkey remain the key NATO actor in the region to counter Russia, thus, diplomatic and economic options seems to be the best choices.

Conclusions: It is worth to say that Russia did not change its foreign policy in relation with international partners. It was a continuous quest to find the proper way to re-establish its lost greatness. Moreover, the last decade Russian activity in the Black Sea region extended its buffer zone securing its control over the Near Abroad region. Russia was able to cope with the consequences even after the Crimea annexation, being able to stand its positions in Caucasus and Middle East. In its confrontation with the West the primarily goal was to preserve the control over the 'Near Abroad' region while rejecting EU and NATO interference. In the same time, the reassurance as a global power in a multipolar world follows a tactic of small military force presence in the conflicting regions while engaging indirectly US and other actors.

NATO and EU should take rapid decisions to temper Russian will to use force. The increase of military presence in the country as Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland will strengthen security on Eastern borders. The political compromise between US and Turkey will change the security balance in the Black Sea region and will increase NATO cohesion. The increase of the democratic rule of law in Eastern Partnership countries will prevent Russian interference in their internal affairs. In relation with Russia, West must obey the compliance with international laws, and maintain and reinforce sanctions.

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