

# TWO WORLDS OF RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

*Dmitri Trenin*

THE war in Ukraine, which to most Russians—and not just the Kremlin—is a direct, if not yet a kinetic military conflict with the American-led West, has been reshaping Russia massively from within. The economy, faced with the most severe sanctions so far imposed on any country, is not only seeking ways to go around the sanctions or substitute for the absence of Western products and technologies, but is beginning to transform itself away from being the world's gas station that Russia has come to be known for in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise. Russian society, which had become increasingly atomized as few made instant fortunes, is now re-learning solidarity and finding a common cause through volunteer work. In terms of values, patriotism—reviled and scorned in the immediate post-Soviet period—now trumps liberalism, the former champion, with its cosmopolitan flavor. There is also a strong

demand for something like a set of ideas to guide the country toward the future. Seen against this background, changes in Russia's foreign policy, which are more noticeable from the outside than domestic developments, are but the tip of the iceberg.

## THE HOUSE OF FOES

Essentially, the war in Ukraine has produced an earthquake in the realm of Russia's external strategy, its use of diplomacy and military force, and radically altered the way Moscow looks at the rest of the world. The recently published Foreign Policy Concept is an indicator of where things have gone so far, but it is only a first step in a fundamentally new direction. This direction negates not only the “new thinking” of Mikhail Gorbachev, the “let's be allies with the West” posture of Boris Yeltsin, and even the “Greater Europe all the way to Vladivostok” aspirations of Vladimir Putin as a young president. In some of

*Dmitri Trenin is a Research Professor at the Higher School of Economics and a Leading Research Fellow with the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, both in Moscow.*



*“The House of Foes”*

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its crucial elements the new approach closes books on a much longer historical period of Russian history—one that was ushered in by Peter I, Russia's great modernizer and Westernizer of the early eighteenth century.

The collective West's vehement, uniform, and massive reaction to the Russian special military operation in Ukraine and NATO's progressively deeper involvement in the war there has split the universe of Russia's foreign policy into two very different pieces. West of Russia's borders, there is a “House of Foes,” composed of the United States, with its Anglo-Saxon retinue, and the countries of Europe, which are—for the first time—formally viewed in Moscow

as nothing more than America's satellites. Depending on how one defines adherence, this group numbers a few dozen countries, which the Russian Foreign Ministry has officially designated as “unfriendly.” While President Putin has publicly suggested that “unfriendliness” refers to current Western policies rather than the respective countries as such, and the Foreign Policy Concept still leaves the door open for a more peaceful, interests-based relationship with both America and Europe in some distant future, this positive scenario is conditional on those countries going through a complete turnover of their elites and the resultant change of their Russia policies. Certainly, it implies that Russia would also achieve its objectives in Ukraine.

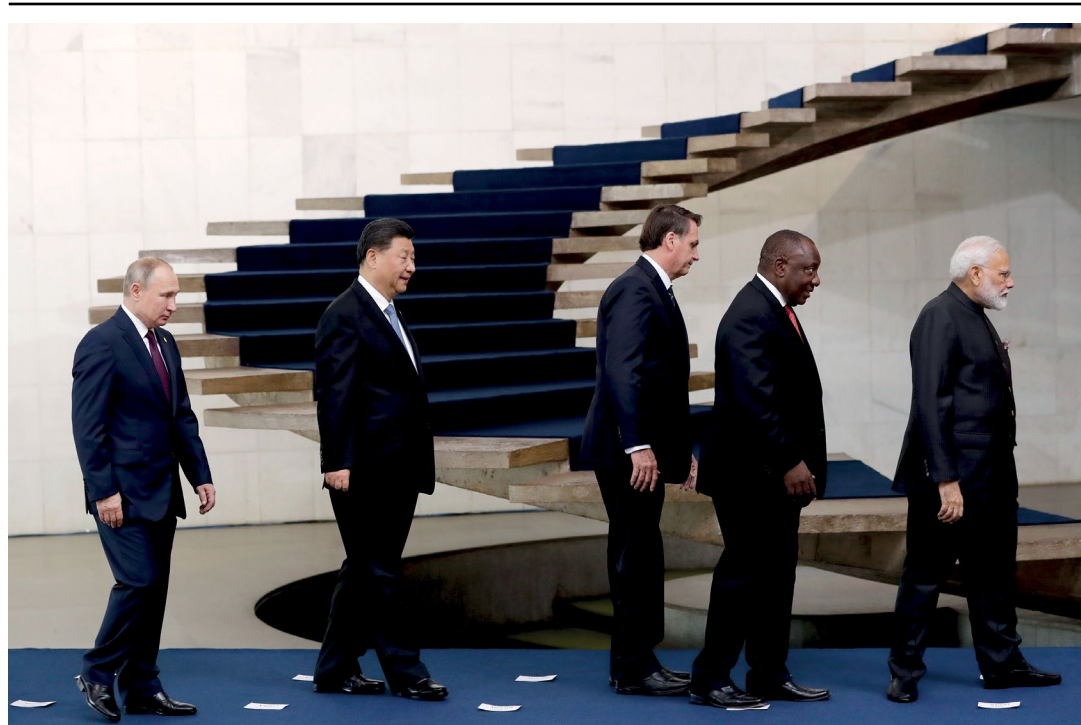


Photo: Guiliver Image

*“The House of Partners”*

In any event, a future new normal in Russian-Western relations is not expected to come about in the near- or even medium-term future. The next 10 to 15, if not 20 years, are widely expected in Russia to be a period of hybrid war, which might well expand beyond Ukraine and escalate above the conventional level. In the latter case, of course, the war will be shorter, but the consequences will be vastly greater. The shooting proxy war in Ukraine, of course, is only one dimension of the conflict, which is also being fiercely fought in the economic, financial, information, infrastructure, psychological, and other domains. Thus, for

the foreseeable future, war, irrespective of the adjective one uses to qualify it, is likely to remain the principal form of interaction between Russia and the West. For the purposes of Moscow's foreign policy, the United States and its allies—even if only as states rather than nations—remain long-term adversaries.

For Russia, this conflict is existential: should it lose it, the country will not only be stripped of its great power status but also, de facto, its sovereignty. Some fear that Russia may even be broken into a few pieces for better management from the outside. Many observers view the situation as no less serious

than in 1941, when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union; or in early 1917, when setbacks on the battlefield during World War I undermined the public trust in the Tsar's leadership and provoked a revolution that ended the Russian Empire and eventually led to a bloody civil war. The United States, official Moscow is convinced, will not stop at anything to defend its global hegemony that Russia's forceful comeback to the international scene is challenging.

What is happening in Ukraine and between Russia and the West more broadly, however, is only one piece of a much wider process that precipitates a change in the world order—away from the post-Cold War U.S. global hegemony and the five centuries-long Western dominance in world affairs. In the United States, that global geopolitical turbulence was dubbed, under President Donald Trump, great-power competition; and it is now presented, by the Joe Biden Administration, as a conflict between democracy and authoritarianism. Russians, for their part, see the underlying cause for the world conflict in the accelerating transition of the world's economic, technological, and military center from the North Atlantic back to the continent of Eurasia. As a result, the

world's power center's journey, a half millennium later, will have come full circle. Russia is not a bystander, but part of the action, pushing for change.

### THE HOUSE OF PARTNERS

This assumption about what is going on in and with the world lies at the heart of Russia's new worldview.

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It clearly prioritizes relations with the countries of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America whose rise it sees as the wave of the future. But this new priority is also a clear necessity. The West's sanctions war on Russia; Russia's expulsion from the dollar-dominated global financial system; the freezing of Russia's

currency reserves; the seizure and partial confiscation of the private property of Russian citizens abroad; pressure on international companies to leave and disinvest from Russia; setting arbitrary price limits on Russia's energy exports; issuing an arrest warrant against Russia's head of state; not to speak of the suspension of air travel and other forms of free movement of individuals and goods— all this, unthinkable only recently, amounts to a de facto blockade.

Yet, the Western effort to completely isolate Russia has fallen far short. China



and India, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Iran and the United Arab Emirates, Brazil and South Africa, along with many others, have refused to join the U.S.-led sanctions coalition—no matter how some of them vote at the UN General Assembly. Moreover, a number of these countries have significantly expanded their commercial and other dealings with Russia, benefiting from Russia's oil price discounts and the like. Moscow is embracing that part of the planet—bigger than the West not only demographically but also economically, in PPP GDP terms—as the World Majority and praises the “neutral” and even “constructive” attitude the various countries take toward a Russia in a difficulty (as far as it ties with Europe are concerned). For Russia's foreign policy, this is definitely a “House of Partners.”

Sitting at the top of this list are China and India, which have been treated by Russia at a parity level, as the great powers of the Eurasian continent. Moscow's ties with Beijing are getting stronger, due primarily to the factors endemic to the relationship itself, but undoubtedly also aided from the outside by Washington's risky drive to simultaneously defeat Russia and contain China. Beijing, which was clearly not briefed by President Putin

during his visit for the February 2022 Winter Olympics about the impending military move into Ukraine, overcame its initial reservations about Russia's actions, and has since the fall of 2022 been visibly moving closer to Moscow. It appears that China's President Xi Jinping had concluded that a showdown with the United States was now be-

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coming inevitable, and cooperating and coordinating more closely with Russia made strategic sense for China. Xi's off-hand remark to Putin as they were parting on the steps of the Kremlin palace in March 2023 that the two of them were “leading the changes that the world has not seen in one hundred years” sounds very telling. No doubt that the Kissingerian triangle from the 1970s has been turned on its head. Washington's dual containment policies toward Moscow and Beijing have backfired as Russia and China are drawing even closer together against the United States.

**T**he Ukraine war has tested India in its new position as a rising world power. New Delhi has seen a lot of suitors recently from America, Europe, and Japan all seeking to wean it off from its historically close relationship with Moscow. Yet, while India—which has set the goal of becoming the

world's third largest economy by 2040 (it is currently fifth)—is most interested in economic and technological cooperation with the West and is also wary of China, Delhi has been balancing carefully in order to avoid harming its solid relationship with Russia. Much needs to be done by both Delhi and Moscow to bring their “privileged partnership” closer to the scope and intensity of the Russia-China ties, but India's clear determination to remain a sovereign great power guarantees that Delhi will not join the Western camp against Russia. Moscow's major interest, of course, is facilitating Indo-Chinese rapprochement, which would make the Russia-India-China (RIC) trio the centerpiece of new Eurasian geopolitics. Very difficult, no doubt, but far from impossible.

China has recently scored a major diplomatic victory by brokering a Saudi-Iranian agreement to restore diplomatic relations and move toward a less adversarial relationship in the Gulf. This was followed up by a related accord between the Saudis and the Iranian-supported Houthis on bringing the war

in Yemen to a close. For the first time in recent history, a major peace deal in the Middle East has been achieved without the United States. Russia was hardly

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dismayed by China's success. Rather, the two countries are largely benefitting from the synergy of their parallel diplomatic efforts. This concerns the Saudi Kingdom, which is considering charging China for its oil in the yuan, while cooperating with Russia on the oil production volumes. This is true of Iran, which is expanding its economic relations with China; cooperating militarily with Russia; and is on the way to becoming a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This also refers to

Afghanistan, where China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan—not yet India, alas—are collaborating to ensure stability around the war-torn country.

**F**or its part, Russia continues to lead the effort aimed at a peace settlement in Syria. In the Astana process, Moscow works with Turkey and Iran; elsewhere, it actively promotes Turkish-Syrian dialogue and works with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates

(UAE) and others to have Damascus reinstated as a full member of the Arab League. In the meantime, Turkey and the UAE have turned into new hubs for Russia's dealings with the world at large, and Iran features prominently in Moscow's plans for a North-South trade corridor linking St. Petersburg and Mumbai.

### BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE NEW WORLD ORDER

One can go on and on discussing the importance that this new focus on relations with the World Majority carries for Russia. These relations, however, can do much more than compensate, in part, for the losses sustained from the rupture with the West—which of course is their immediate objective. The overarching goal of Moscow's new approach to Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America should be creating elements of a new world order that Moscow (and Beijing) loudly proclaim. It does not matter, at this stage, that while Russia is aiming to replace the current setup with a wholly new one, China is merely seeking to modify the current order by substantially reducing Western dominance in the existing institutions and expanding the influence of other players, first of all itself. As far as ending American (and

allied) hegemony is concerned, Moscow and Beijing can and do march together.

The two countries' adherence to a multipolar world dates back a quarter century. Many others around the world have since subscribed to the notion.

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However, the sort of multipolarity that would replace the one-country hegemony needs to be defined and detailed as something very different from a world oligarchy or a new concert of several major powers to rule over the world. The polycentric structure that China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Russia, and others propose must be

based on mutual respect, exclude any form of diktat, and embrace genuine multilateralism as the working principle. The key areas in building the new world order include finances, security, and information. This is where the leaders of the World Majority should move from declarations to practical steps. In each of the fields, Russia has something valuable to contribute.

The key pillar of America's commanding position in the world is the financing system built on the U.S. dollar. De-dollarization has not only become a trend in the countries that face difficulties in their relations with

the United States. It has also been accepted, in less radical forms, as a means of diversification and hedging by some American partners. Thus, while Russia and China (like Russia and India) already do much of their bilateral trade in their national currencies, the China-Brazil accord on a similar arrangement suggests a major breakthrough; if followed by Gulf countries, it may become a powerful trend. Certainly, the yuan, rather than the ruble, the rupee, or the real, is emerging as the principal instrument, despite its known limitations. This is a step in the right direction, but it cannot not be the goal. It

is time for BRICS to focus on a project of a digital world currency, which will not be controlled and cannot be manipulated by any one state. If successful, that would be a real change. Then Rio de Janeiro or Cape Town or Mumbai would be free to compete for hosting a conference laying the ground rules of the financial system for the twenty-first century.

Another pillar of Washington's domination is its system of security alliances and partnerships. It makes no sense for the Majority nations to imitate that. What would be reasonable is to turn the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which already

includes, in one form or another, much of Eurasia except for its westernmost peninsula facing the Atlantic, into a continent-wide system of international stability and cooperation. Such a system would be based on mutual respect; jointly developed and consistently applied rules; and backed by confidence-building measures, reliable communication links, and reconciliation mechanisms. This task is probably even more difficult than the previous one of founding a new world currency, but hardly impossible. See, for example, the story of stable and productive Sino-Russian relations

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that have replaced three decades of intense animosity and have confounded those Western skeptics who have been predicting an inevitable new clash between Moscow and Beijing. China's successful mediation between Tehran and Riyadh has already been mentioned. Russia's own efforts with the Turks, Iranians, and Arabs, to bring about a political settlement in Syria are also worth looking at. Rehabilitation of Afghanistan, of course, is a work in progress. The United States, which at the beginning of the twenty-first century saw itself as the dominant power all over Eurasia, continues to be active along its maritime periphery,

from Ukraine to Taiwan, and from the Gulf to the Arctic, but the heart of the continent is now essentially controlled and managed by the Eurasian powers themselves.

With the English language the world's current lingua franca, the Anglo-Saxon media rule the airwaves and way beyond. True liberation from foreign hegemony needs to include liberation of one's thinking, and development of original ideas and thought patterns rooted in the richness of the world's many cultures and civilizations. The media routinely produce narratives geared to political agendas of those who own or influence them. This information power, concentrated in a few hands, whether in the governments or in the private sector, who are actors with stakes in the game, *can* and *is* being weaponized against the presumed rivals or competitors. There, the famous freedom of speech is often a sham. BRICS countries, or a subset of them, can and should come up with a consortium of alternative world media, both in English and other languages, to provide their own narratives and perspectives. The track record of Qatar's Al Jazeera, Russia's RT, Iran's Press TV,

and China's CGTN shows what can be achieved on a national level. The Indian media have an enormous pool of resources. A joint effort would be even more impressive and effective.

The agenda that such an effort would work on would include promoting the World Majority nations' views on the future of the world order; international security; the terms of economic and trade relations; the environment, including the issue of climate change; the impact of technology on the future of humanity, and so on. It would also expand the breadth of the cultural scene across the world and examine the cultural heritage, particularly of the peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. It would promote fair dialogue among the world's thinkers, scientists, academics, and opinion leaders on the great issues of the day, and welcome those voices from the West that find no or little chance to express themselves in the increasingly single-minded media space in America and Europe. This should not be an anti-Western propaganda tool: the international consortium's prime audience should be non-Western, and

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its prime mission would be to create a sense of togetherness, community, and a common future.

#### WHAT RUSSIA NEEDS TO DO

Russia's new Foreign Policy Concept describes the country as a distinct civilization—a major change from a similar document a decade ago which embedded Russia within the European heritage. Definitions and slogans are relatively easy to come up with and replace when necessary; living up to them is much harder. Russian elites, in particular, will have to spend enough time and mount a real intellectual effort to refine their new worldview; learn to live by the values they claim as their own and then lead by example; sort out the country's philosophical heritage—which is more impressive than most outside or even inside Russia think—and candidly assess the nation's historical experience. Based on these steps, the elites should come up with a set of ideas about where they want their country to move to, and why; and, eventually, having convinced the Russian people, operationalize the resultant project—a mammoth task, which cannot be evaded or cut short if the civilization claim is to be more than a slogan.

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These elites also must think about what Russia can offer to others, and what role it can and should play in different sets of relationships. For instance, this applies to a role within the framework of post-Soviet institutions, such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and on a bilateral level with the "near neighbors" of the post-Soviet world.

The same goes for the institutions of which Moscow is a founding member and where it could wield influence, although less than commanding: the SCO and BRICS. Further, and perhaps crucially for its future, Russia should think about its role within the RIC group, potentially the leading trio of continental Eurasia. Next come the fora linking Russia to big groups of countries, from ASEAN to the African Union to the Islamic Solidarity Organization, and finally bilateral relations with key countries in each of those groups.

The breadth of the fields and depth of the tasks are daunting. The resources currently available to Moscow are but a small fraction of what is required to start dealing proactively with the many partners which are now officially Moscow's priority. Russia's economic power, while limited, is resilient

and highly adaptive; its instruments can certainly be used creatively in the new geo-economic environment. Russia's military power is not only being tested daily in the Ukraine crisis, but also clearly upgraded, even at a high cost. Russia's intellectual power, despite the decades of neglect and considerable brain drain, is impressive; what is more, it can be better focused on the needs of the nation.

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As for Russia's diplomatic power, it requires a major regrouping. Some resources can be shifted from the areas where the need for diplomatic activity has plummeted dramatically: Europe and North America. Many more diplomats should be trained anew, with a view to serving in the non-Western parts of the world. New language and regional studies courses are in order, including in the tongues of the former Soviet republics, where doing business only in Russian is no longer sufficient. Russia's domestic education curriculum would need to be expanded

to include more material about the non-Western civilizations, and its media coverage of world affairs should overcome its penchant to focus on the West 90 percent of the time.

The above is not more than a back-of-the-envelope sketch of the work that is cut out for Russia as it moves to something I have long called "the Russian Federation 2.0," complete with a fundamental

repositioning in foreign policy. This transformation was not planned. In fact, had the special military operation in Ukraine ended quickly with some important but limited gains for Moscow, it may have never started. What has followed in reality has raised the stakes to the maximum. If Russia fails in that transformation (which I don't think it will), the consequences will be dire—and not only for Russia itself. If it succeeds, the World Majority will benefit from an experienced and much more capable member ready to work toward a new international equilibrium. ●