

25th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group
“Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”, on
“Discussing a South Caucasus Short of Russian Dominance”

31 March 2023, Tbilisi, Georgia,

Paper by Dr Marat Terterov for Panel 1:

“The likeliest scenarios for tomorrow’s Russia”¹

The folly of predicting Russia’s future

When undertaking the task of seeking to forecast a ‘likely scenario’ for tomorrow’s Russia, one has to start with a caveat – predicting Russia’s future and what fate awaits the country in light of its continued military excursion in Ukraine is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. In other words, it is almost impossible to predict future political developments in Russia with any real certainty. This includes any efforts to predict whether Russia will continue to remain the arch belligerent in Ukraine, or whether it will be prepared to make concessions, or to forecast what impact either (or other) of these developments in the current conflict in Ukraine will have on the Russian regime of Vladimir Putin.

We have already seen since the start of last year’s war in Ukraine how many notable analysts of Russian politics in the West have made bold predictions about what will happen to Russia. The Russian economy would collapse, many thought, in light of the West’s layer of sanction after sanction against Moscow, as well as the exodus of international business from the country which seemingly took place throughout 2022. Similar forecasts were made about the Russian military, particularly after early gains made by the Russian army in Ukraine were repelled by Ukraine’s defenders and Kiev went on to liberate territory previously held by Moscow as the war continued. None of these predictions actually happened, however. Neither Russia’s economy nor its military have shown any sign of imminent collapse, despite the undeniable challenge that the protracted conflict in Ukraine is throwing at both Russia’s economy and its military.

We should also remind ourselves that, despite US intelligence warnings about Russia’s imminent plans to invade Ukraine having turned into ‘public broadcasts’ in the weeks leading up to the Russian invasion on 24 February last year, very few analysts can claim that they predicted the outbreak of the war with any accuracy. It does appear to be the case that the Kremlin, and Russia’s President, Vladimir Putin, in particular, like to keep their opponents in the West guessing as to what may happen next. It may be the case that Putin revels (and perhaps derives personal pleasure) in the manner in which the former and late British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, once described Russia: a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Or it may be the fact that top level decision making within Russia, which is likely dominated by an extremely tight inner circle, has become so opaque that it is almost impossible to predict future political developments in the country with any reliable accuracy.

¹ *The original paper has been published with the Study Group Information on “Discussing a South Caucasus Short of Russian Dominance”, Editors Frederic Labarre, George Niculescu, Band XX/2023, by the Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna, 2023.*

Imagining Russia without Putin (in a historical context)

In line with this opacity, it is also worth reminding ourselves that back in August 1999, a fresh (and almost baby) faced Vladimir Putin appeared almost out of nowhere, and was appointed by then Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, as his Prime Minister. Yeltsin developed a habit of rotating his Prime Ministers rather frequently during the latter 1990s. Putin's appointment was the sixth change in the position since the appointment of Victor Chernomyrdin to Yeltsin's Premiership in August 1996. He was a little-known commodity outside of the government of St. Petersburg, or outside of Yeltsin's narrow group of presidential acolytes at the time. While it may seem to be almost unimaginable today that Putin could disappear from the Russian (and for that matter international) political arena as mysteriously as when he first appeared on it, it is worthwhile contemplating – in terms of our bigger question of likely scenarios for Russia's future – the impact that Putin's departure may have on Russia's relations with the West, if not the future of Russia itself.

And at this point, the task of forecasting likely scenarios for Russia's future might become somewhat simpler, particularly if one is to refer to some lessons from the history of Russia's (or the Soviet Union's) relations with the West, or with European powers more broadly. Let us allow ourselves for a moment to imagine a future Russia without Putin and to ask ourselves how such a scenario would play out in terms of Russia's relations with the West by posing the following questions:

- Would a Russia without Putin lead to a rapid rapprochement in relations between Moscow and the Western powers? One would assume that any affirmative response to this question would also lead to, if not require, some form of convergence between Russia's domestic political culture, norms, and values to become more closely aligned to those of the countries of the West
- Would a Russia without Putin subsequently abide by the rules of the post-Cold War European security order, which was largely perpetuated if not created by the US-led Euro-Atlantic bloc?
- Or would Russia's new leadership continue with a truculent, if not revisionist, international position towards the West, refuting NATO expansion into its neighbourhood, advocating Russia's national interest first and further defending Moscow's strategic interest in the former-Soviet spaces of inner and outer Eurasia? One could also assume that any affirmative response to this question would be fuelled by a continued divergence between Russia's domestic political culture, norms, and values with those of the countries of the West.

Reflecting back on history informs us that seminal events in Russia's (and the Soviet Union's) history such as the death of Stalin hardly changed the overall course of relations between Moscow and the West. While the assumption of power in Moscow by Nikita Khrushchev in 1953 may have initially led to a form of reset in relations, as well as a degree of political liberalisation within the Soviet Union, rivalry and competition between the superpowers brought the world to the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis in late 1962. Similarly, when Leonid Brezhnev replaced Khrushchev as the Soviet leader in 1964, some level of re-set again took place between Moscow and the West, particularly during the early 1970s. However, Soviet-American rivalry in many international arenas remained, leading to a new low point in relations between East and West following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

Gorbachev's era of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union is widely associated with an improvement in relations between Moscow and the West, as well as with the end of the Cold War. However, these emergent trends were more the result of Soviet weakness at home, external market factors which impacted poorly on the Soviet economy and ultimately the implosion of the Soviet state rather than a structural convergence between Moscow and the West. This brief historical insight provides us with some perspective on contemplating the type of relationship that might evolve between Russia and the West in the event that Vladimir Putin, in power now for over two decades, would no longer rule Russia.

Post-Soviet Russia - the 'compliant power': 1992-2008

When it comes to the current, post-Soviet relationship between Russia and the West, we can speak of roughly two broad and sometimes overlapping eras (periods). During the first era, spanning from the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and lasting until the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008, Russia can be seen as largely accepting the Western-led post-Cold War international order, particularly the evolving European security architecture, which was realigned after the Cold War to incorporate one-time Soviet allied states and former-Soviet Baltic States into the NATO Alliance. During this period of nearly two decades, Russia, in a state of internal disarray and marred by substantial domestic political and economic instability during the 1990s, largely adapted to the Western-led international order and was a compliant power.

This was an era of relatively harmonious relations between Russia on the one hand, and Europe and the United States on the other, underscored by growing international trade and massive foreign investment into the Russian economy, particularly when the Russian political landscape and economic environment started to stabilise during the early Putin years post-Year 2000. With the Cold War over, the Soviet Union fading into the sunset and the Warsaw Pact disbanded, there was now a feeling (at least in the West) that Russia had embarked upon an inexorable journey of democratisation and transition to a market economy. A unique moment in history had arrived. There was no more talk of *Iron Curtains* or East Vs West, but rather of one integrated economic space spanning all the way from Lisbon to Vladivostok, and of likeminded value sets between Russia and the West. Despite the economic and political turmoil ongoing inside the country, particularly during the liberal yet chaotic Yeltsin years, Russia would become 'like us', some of us perhaps thought at the time.

While the sense of rivalry and competition that had characterised the Soviet Union's relations with the West appeared to subside during this period, Russia's own sense of self identification as a great power, if no longer a superpower, remained deeply entrenched in the country's national character. Moscow's foreign policy doctrine changed substantially in the 1990s and into the early 2000s, from a the superpower of yesterday, to a Eurasian power and eventually an energy superpower under Putin, with a focus on spheres of influence in the countries of the former-Soviet Union, or near-abroad, as they were often referred to in Russia.

Yet while Moscow perceived itself as the definitive geopolitical actor in its near-abroad, Russia was treated (at best) as a junior partner and (at worst) a second-rate power by Washington if not Europe during this time, particularly during the Clinton and (George W) Bush presidencies. NATO expanded inexorably towards Russia's borders during this period, generating a sense of bewilderment if not betrayal within Russian elite circles given that Moscow was in a mood of geopolitical retreat in Europe and many of its other former satellites across the developing world.

There were tensions over what Moscow perceived as Western double standards over recognition of statelets such as Kosovo at the expense of Russian ally, Serbia, which was bombed by NATO in 1999, precipitating the fall of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade in 2000.

Moreover, there was substantial resentment in Moscow over perceived Western meddling in the domestic politics of former-Soviet countries, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and more notably Ukraine. All three countries became embroiled in (what became dubbed as) 'Coloured Revolutions' which led to the toppling of increasingly unpopular regimes in the case of Georgia (2003) and Kyrgyzstan (2004), and the rise to power of a seemingly pro-European president in Ukraine following a disputed election in which a 'pro-Moscow' candidate was defeated (2004-05). Ukraine's Orange Revolution, a much more complex phenomenon than the pro-European political tack which emerged around it in the Western media, was merely a sign of post-Cold War, East-West rivalries which were simmering under the surface.

Post-Soviet Russia - the 'revisionist power': 2008-23

In 2008, Russia stopped being a compliant power adapting to the Western-led post-Cold War European security architecture and commenced a new foreign policy doctrine giving rise to the second era of its relations with the West. In August 2008 Russia invaded Georgia, precipitating a short war between the two countries and severely shaking up the pro-Western regime of Mikhyail Saakashvili, who came to power through Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003. This game changing event marked the end of Russia's post-Cold War trajectory of a compliant actor adapting to Western geopolitical power-plays, and assuming the role of what British House of Lords Member, Lord Robert Skidelski referred to as a revisionist power. In fact, Skidelski, a prolific Russia commentator who is also Professor Emeritus at Warwick University, referred to Russia as the pre-eminent revisionist power – both in Eurasia and farther afield internationally.

Russia's invasion of Georgia and the retrenchment of its previous position as a compliant power did not come without warning. In fact, some analysts refer to Putin's truculent speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 as a clear message delivered to the West that Russia will no longer tolerate its geopolitical double standards, payment of lip service to Moscow's national security concerns with respect to NATO expansion, and, in particular, meddling in its near abroad with a view to pursue regime change through civil society groups and pro-democracy NGOs. There was also the question of crossing Moscow's red lines – NATO's Bucharest Summit in April 2008 was interpreted by some in Russia as offering a (NATO) membership road map to Georgia. Ukraine could follow suite.

The West seemed to be going out of its way to make Moscow feel uncomfortable and there was little sign that it would reduce the tempo. It is widely perceived that Russia's decision to invade Georgia and to overthrow its (in Moscow's opinion) troublesome, pro-Western regime, was at least partially (if not fully) motivated by the desire of preventing Tbilisi from becoming the first post-Soviet state outside of the Baltics to join the NATO Alliance. The war, however, resulted in the first full scale crisis in relations between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War. During the period of Russia as a revisionist power in the post-Cold War era, the Georgia crisis would merely prove to be a sign of things to come.

Following the crisis in Georgia, Barack Obama become President of the United States and there was some effort made on the part of Washington to carry out a reset in relations with Russia. Moscow also had its sympathisers amongst the more powerful states of Europe, namely France

and Germany, with whom Russia had cultivated deep economic (particularly energy) ties. In fact, quite bizarrely, a Summit was held in the resort of Deauville (Normandy, France) in October 2010 where the French president of the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, hosted German Chancellor, Angela Merkel and Russian president of the time, Dimitry Medvedev, to discuss prospects for closer ties between Russia and NATO.

Some analysts even dubbed the Summit as a platform to discuss possible Russian membership of the Alliance, which Putin himself raised as a possibility whilst interviewed on a British TV show some years earlier, during his first presidential term. However, relations between Russia and the West again turned tense following the eruption of the Arab uprisings (popularly dubbed as the Arab Spring in 2012), and particularly as a result of Moscow's unwavering support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, whom the West was targeting as another candidate for regime change.

Despite the war in Georgia and subsequent crises in the Middle East, the ups and downs in Moscow's relations with the West in the several years which followed did not lead to a cessation of relations between Russia and the West. In fact, Russian revisionism in foreign policy and consolidation of security interests in its near abroad was predominantly limited to Moscow's non-acceptance of the Western-led post-Cold War European security architecture. Russia continued to recognise the Western-led international economic order and the post-Cold War phenomenon of globalisation, from which it benefited greatly. It continued to engage in deep economic cooperation with the West, particularly Europe, since Russia was a major exporter of energy and other raw materials to the continent. Russia's economy recovered substantially from the shocks and overall downturn of the 1990s, leading to substantial domestic transformation and helping Vladimir Putin consolidate power following his assumption of the Russian presidency in March 2000.

In fact, Putin's arrival as president came in parallel to the commencement of a substantial increase in Russian oil production and export of oil to international markets. Following a partial collapse during the 1990s, Russian oil production had recovered by the early 2000s and rivalled Saudi Arabia as the world's largest oil producer. Both countries were producing around 10 million barrels of oil per day by the time Putin became president, although Saudi Arabia exported substantially higher volumes due to Russia's large domestic consumption of its own (oil) production. Russia also supplied roughly one third of the gas consumed in the EU, as well as a large share of the bloc's oil, which created substantial economic interdependence between Russia and Europe. This interdependence became stronger following the 9/11 terror attacks on New York by Saudi terrorist, Osama bin-Laden's group, Al Qaeda, which led to decision makers in Europe eyeing Russia as an alternative oil supplier to Saudi Arabia. A formal track EU-Russia energy dialogue was opened in the early 2000s and remained active despite geopolitical crises between Russia and the West over Georgia and the Middle East.

Additionally, the price of oil started to increase noticeably following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, catering to a substantial revenue boost for the Russian state. By the time Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, the price of oil had reached record levels (\$US144 per barrel in July 2008), fuelling resource nationalism and state-driven economic preponderance. The high oil price, as well as the robust state of the Russian economy, which was now under far better management than it was during the 1990s, allowed for Moscow's greater confidence in the exercise of foreign policy adventurism in its near abroad and taking a tougher stance towards the West in defence of its national interests. Russia was well placed to embark upon its new path of geopolitical revisionism in the post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic security and foreign policy architecture.

Ukraine – the straw that broke the camel’s back between Russia and the West

It was Ukraine, however, not Georgia, nor Syria, which ultimately became the straw that broke the camel’s back when it came to Russia’s relations with the West. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 can be viewed as an ultimate expression of revisionism – or rejection – of the Western-led, post-Cold War European security architecture. Russia’s invasion was a game changing event in post-Cold War European geopolitics which will have lasting effects for years, if not decades to follow, leading many of us to ponder the future of Russia, as well as to pose the question of whether Russian relations with the West are gone forever.

Indeed, perhaps the most profound impact of the war in Ukraine is not so much the deepening standoff between Russian and the West in the military-security-geopolitical sphere. It is rather that the war, and multiple sanctions packages hurled at Russia by the West in response to the invasion, has led to a near complete rupturing of economic and social ties between Russia and the countries of the West. This has also led to Russia realigning its own economic and social ties with much of the rest of the world – China, India, the Gulf States and the Middle East, the BRICS countries and Africa, perhaps to a lesser degree. Post-Cold War processes of globalisation involving Russia have not ended. They have merely taken on a new form of diversification as a result of the war and have greatly accelerated trends which were already forming before the invasion.

We should also note that the crisis in Ukraine did not begin purely and solely on 24 February last year. Its roots are firmly entrenched in an earlier crisis, widely dubbed as *Euro-Maidan*, running from November 2013 to at least mid-2014, if not in Ukraine’s Orange Revolution of 2004-05. Most Russian political scientists (as well as historians) will argue that Russia and Ukraine, as countries and as people, are highly intertwined, if not inseparable. While the two countries are both sovereign states, whose borders and territory are articulated through legally binding treaties to which both countries are parties, the realities of post-Soviet development of both states has resulted in a form of social and economic integration which is almost impossible to decouple.

Further, by the time Putin became president of Russia, in 2000, Russia was also by far the largest foreign investor in Ukraine and the nature of economic (ie, business) ties between key stakeholders in both countries created a highly integrated if not unified economic space. The situation was not dissimilar between Russia and other post-Soviet successor states, although in the case of Ukraine it was likely deeper both in terms of volume (of trade and investment) and strategic in the nature of assets under commercial exploitation.

Thus, it should hardly have come as a surprise that when the EU-pushed (overly hard) to have Kiev sign a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement with Brussels in late 2013, a response from Moscow followed. It is more than likely that the decision of Ukraine’s then president, Viktor Yanukovich, not to sign up to the agreement on behalf of his country was a decision deeply consulted with (if not made in) Moscow. At the same time Moscow promised billions in soft economic aid to Ukraine, effectively in return for Kiev not signing up to the EU offering. The refusal of Yanukovich to sign the agreement with the EU, however, was perceived by a large part of the Ukrainian population as the government’s rejection of the country’s European aspirations and sparked widespread political unrest across Ukraine, particularly in Kiev.

Political unrest in Ukraine continued unabated, despite multiple efforts by Yanukovich to appease and placate the protestors, including compromise offerings such as holding presidential elections. Following the eruption of violence, Yanukovich’s position as president became untenable and he

ultimately had little choice but to flee Ukraine to take up sanctuary in Russia. Thus, in early 2014 Ukraine's *Euro-Maidan* movement toppled the pro-Russian Yanukovich regime, leading to the formation of a national governance structure comprised of a broad coalition, with a pro-Western, anti-Russian orientation. But instability in Ukraine only deepened, following the rejection of the new government's policies, including various measures promoting *Ukrainification*, in the predominantly Russian populated regions of eastern Ukraine, namely Donetsk and Luhansk. This opened the door for Moscow's intervention in Ukraine in order to 'protect' Ukraine's millions of ethnic Russians, as well as Russia's invasion of the Crimean Peninsula, where the Russian Black Sea fleet was based in the strategically important city of Sebastopol. A plebiscite in the now Russian controlled Crimea followed, with the population voting in a popular referendum to unite with the Russian Federation. The West denounced the move as nothing short of an annexation endorsed by sham vote.

As was the case when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, the West condemned the Russian invasion of the Crimea, whilst Russia was also accused of inciting the uprising against Kiev in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The violence in Ukraine's east rapidly spiralled into a civil war, where Russia backed the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics as legitimate sovereign entities. The EU and US responded by slapping sanctions against Moscow and relations between Moscow and the West further plummeted to a post-Cold War low when pro-Russia separatists in Ukraine's east shot down a Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 leading to the deaths of all 298 persons on board in July 2014. This tragic episode was particularly heartfelt in Australia and The Netherlands, since the flight was reportedly bound from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur and onto Australia, with many nationals of the two countries becoming victims of the disaster.

Nevertheless, despite the tensions that erupted between revisionist Russia and the West over the *Euro-Maidan* crisis in Ukraine during 2013-14, Russia continued to work closely with Europe in multiple areas of economic cooperation, particularly energy. Russia's Gazprom announced a major gas pipeline initiative with several European energy majors in 2015 – the Nord Stream II gas pipeline – while German, French and American oil companies developed large scale projects in the Russian oil and gas sector. Numerous foreign investors remained highly active in the Russian retail, banking, telecoms, and many other sectors of the country's economy. Russians flocked to Europe as well as America for tourism, whilst social cultural and scientific exchange flourished between Russia and the West. All of this took place despite the ongoing civil war in Ukraine's east, Russia's unequivocal backing of Ukraine's separatists and its control of Crimea. All of this would change drastically come 24 February 2022.

Future scenarios for Russia – and for Russian relations with the West

So, what of future scenarios for Russia, both domestically, as well as in terms of its foreign policy trajectory as a revisionist power, in light of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine? The answer to this question, to some degree at least, depends on the manner in which the conflict may end, whether it ends at all, or whether it continues to lumber on endlessly as a regional yet contained conflict, similar to other unresolved conflicts in the former-Soviet space, including Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia and Azerbaijan), Transnistria (Moldova) or Georgia's unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Comparison could also be drawn to many other unresolved international conflict hotspots, ranging from Yemen (Iran Vs the Gulf Arabs) to Northern Cyprus (Greece Vs Turkey), to Western Sahara (Morocco Vs Algeria) and of course the question of Taiwan (China Vs

Taipei). Although none of these (occasionally un-) frozen conflicts have yet been resolved to the satisfaction of the parties to the respective disputes, all countries involved in the aforementioned conflicts continue with their daily lives, as best they can.

When it comes to Russia's current war with Ukraine, which in essence began (albeit by proxy and in regional format) in 2014 rather than on 24 February last year, it is clear that the West has underestimated the resilience of Russian economy and society, particularly the latter's capacity to come together and rally around its leadership in the face of what many Russians perceive to be a proxy war waged against the country by the (far from benign) West. In wake of a large part of the Russian population buying into the Kremlin's narrative that Russia is defending its national interest in its near abroad in light of NATO expansion to its borders, or even the very sovereignty of the Russian state, it is unlikely that Russians will oppose the war *en masse* at any time soon.

Those Russians who opposed the invasion and the subsequent destruction which followed during the initial part of the conflict, expressed their protest by rapidly leaving the country. Another wave of Russians fled the country during the autumn of 2022, when the Putin regime announced partial mobilisation of the male population. There is little present-day sign that the Russian political establishment is under any threat of imminent collapse and large segments of the Russian population exhibit patriotism and continue to rally around the regime. The situation is perhaps similar to large segments of European, British, or American populations expressing gestures of solidarity with Ukraine in their own countries.

Similarly, there is little sign of any imminent Russian economic collapse. Despite wave after wave of US and EU sanctions against Russia, as well as what appeared to be an exodus of foreign business from the country during 2022, the Russian economy continues to show no less resilience than Russia's society. We have already mentioned earlier in this essay that much of Russia's foreign trade and investment flows were already becoming diversified towards new partners in Asia and the Middle East prior to the 24 February invasion. The conflict merely accelerated this process, taking it to new levels of realignment. Russia has important commodities to sell on the international markets and will always likely find buyers, although perhaps at reduced prices. Oil, gas and other Russian commodities (including grain) have remained in high demand throughout the heightened periods of fighting in Ukraine. Russia's blockade of Ukrainian grain exports last year only served to heighten demand (as well as the price) for Russian grain.

Furthermore, the war has had the impact of further spiking up the price of oil, gas and other commodities, causing far more pain for industrial and household consumers in Europe rather than for the Russian population, which benefits from subsidized domestic energy and is largely shielded from price shocks on the international markets. Russia has found ample buyers for its oil and gas commodities following the West's partial ban on Russian energy imports, causing little dent in the Russia state budget. To the contrary, Russian oil and gas companies, as well as its oil and gas commodity traders, have reaped massive rewards from the soaring energy prices in 2022 – similar to oil companies in the West and national champions in the OPEC countries. Russia's domestic market is also showing little sign of downturn. Restaurants and the service industry in the big Russian cities remains busy, Russian retail chains continue to expand and continue to cater to growing domestic demand, while e-commerce and online trading continues to thrive, according to multiple personal accounts from visitors to and from the country.

So too has the Russian military shown substantially more resilience than many Western military analysts may have given it credit, particularly those who regularly reported massive Russian casualties and reversal of territorial gains made by the Russian army earlier in the conflict. Many

Western military analysts predicted that ‘the clock had passed midnight’ for Ukraine shortly after 24 February – implying that the country’s collapse in wake of the Russian invasion was imminent. Similarly, many such commentators wrote off the Russian military as a bunch of hacks, following stubborn Ukrainian resistance early in the conflict and once it was becoming clear that Russian initial military objectives in Ukraine would not be attained.

At the start of 2023, other analysts predicted a large-scale Ukrainian counter offensive which would result in driving the Russian military back to its lines of pre-24 February 2022. None of these assessments proved correct. The war grinds on. It has become largely regionalised in the east of Ukraine and now appears to resemble the sort of attrition warfare which characterised the conflict prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion on 24 February.

Predicting an end game in Ukraine against this backdrop, and indeed for Russia’s future, is far from simple – as we already alluded to at the outset of this essay. With no Russian political, economic, or military collapse anywhere in sight, it is likely that the war will continue to grind on into the foreseeable future. Furthermore, assuming that Russia’s economic realignment towards Asia and the Gulf continues to generate revenues for the Russian state and that the ‘rest of the world’ countries do not yield to Western pressure and do not turn against Moscow, it is unlikely that Russia will lose the war on the battlefield. That said, with the West doing just enough to prop up Ukraine militarily rather than entering into the conflict unilaterally, it is also unlikely that Russia will come out of the war as a clear winner.

The likely scenario resulting is that Ukraine becomes Russia’s new Afghanistan – a protracted conflict which will continue to absorb the nation’s abundant human and other resources in the name of national pride, defence of its sovereignty and rejection of Western meddling in countries it considers to be vital to its national interest. That said, Vladimir Putin is not Leonid Brezhnev, success in Ukraine has become closely tied to Putin’s own political legitimacy (regime survival) inside Russia, and there is very little sign that a Mikhail Gorbachev style personality is anywhere on the Kremlin horizons. In fact, if one takes into account the underlying power structure of the Russian regime, it cannot be discounted entirely that Putin’s successors will not take Russian relations with the West to an even more brazen path in the event that the current Russian president disappears from the scene.

An afterthought – did the United States create Vladimir Putin?

Finally, it should be said that any scenarios about Russia’s future are not only predicated on developments taking place in Russia itself, whether this be talk of economic or political collapse of the system, or due to what might eventuate on the battlefields in Ukraine. Russia’s future, and particularly the question of whether it will remain a revisionist power staunchly rejecting Western meddling in its ‘backyard’, if not the post-Cold War European security order more broadly, will greatly depend on how the West will treat Russia itself.

As mentioned earlier, Russia largely played the role of a compliant power during the 1990s and part of the 2000s, for the most part accepting the Western-led post-Cold War European security order. Moscow adapted to evolving realignments in European geopolitics, particularly in Central Eastern Europe and the Baltics during this period. It also allowed for the opening up of its markets, including strategic sectors such as the oil industry, to foreign investment. It may have been the case that Russia expected more from the West (namely the US and Europe) in terms of geopolitical

convergence as well as support for the country's transition towards a market economy, if not democratic governance, in return for its compliance.

However, instead of working towards any 'grand bargains' with Moscow, or developing a road map for strategic cooperation, both Brussels and Washington pursued active policies of integrating former-Soviet successor states into Euro-Atlantic supra-national institutions, namely NATO and the EU. This form of policy making did not only place great emphasis on countries such as Georgia and Ukraine, which we have discussed already at some length above, but also Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, which the US State Department supported strongly during the 1990s and early 2000s by backing oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian which circumvented Russia. Pipeline projects such as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline, through which substantial volumes of oil and gas are currently supplied to international markets, were all backed politically by Washington in order to provide Kazakh and Azeri hydrocarbons alternative export routes in circumvention of Russian territory. As one former-top level US decision maker recently stated reflecting on the time, 'happiness comes in multiple pipelines'.

The 'happiness' within the US State Department was not equally shared in Moscow, however. New export routes for Kazakh oil and Azeri oil and gas would result in loss of revenue for Transneft, the Russian state oil pipeline monopoly, which charged tariffs to transit Caspian oil through Russian territory, as well as loss of political leverage for Moscow over its near abroad. Moreover, intensive activity on the part of both the EU and NATO to integrate post-Soviet successor states into Euro-Atlantic institutions was also seen in Moscow (at best) as the West pulling these countries out of the Russian orbit and possibly even (at worst) as an effort to partially isolate Russia internationally. A paranoid or firebrand Russian politician, nationalist or patriotic at heart, may have been forgiven for thinking that the West ultimately set the bar at the disintegration of the Russian state – the settlement of old scores and unfinished business from the Cold War era (although it is highly unlikely that such scenarios were being played out in Western capitals to any serious degree).

Vladimir Pozner, a well-known Russian media personality, argued in a public lecture delivered in 2018 in the US that it was in essence the United States that 'created' Vladimir Putin. Pozner argued that Putin's speech in February 2007 at the Munich Security Conference was a pivotal moment in Russian relations with the West in the post-Cold War era, where Putin de facto announced Russia's policy of revisionism, as referred to by Lord Skidelski earlier in this essay. While the core arguments of Pozner's lecture may have been somewhat exaggerated in view of his target audience, it is worthwhile reflecting on the content of his talk. In particular, one can contemplate as to whether we would have arrived at the current abyss in Russian relations with the West had the latter developed a different, perhaps less outwardly expansionist, track in its policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood, or Russia's near abroad.

Diplomacy and foreign policy are a long game – as long as the history of Russia's relations with the West, the Soviet Union's relations with the Americans, and with the Russian Empire's relations with the European powers prior to that. National pride and domestic politics play a big part in relations both within and between rival powers. Domestic economic health, or conversely the lack of it, also plays no small part in future outlooks and impact scenarios. The Russian economy was to a good part transformed by the time it invaded Georgia in August 2008 and the country's leadership, for better or worse, felt that it was both ready and that it was time to stand up to the West more firmly than before. Similarly, when it came to the decision to invade Ukraine in

February last year, its leadership took a calculated gamble – perhaps its most brazen ever since the end of the Cold War – in conducting a geopolitical power-play which it knew would lead to a stiff reaction from the West. On both occasions, Putin’s regime in Russia was far readier to bear the brunt of the consequences of its actions much more than would have been the case had such geopolitical brinksmanship been exercised in the 1990s by Boris Yeltsin.

As it stands at the moment, it is quite possible that both Russia and the West are looking for an exit out of Ukraine, despite regular public reference to further escalation, where both sides need to save face in view of the crisis that has been created. Time will tell whether an exit acceptable to all parties, including Ukraine, can be found. In the meantime, continued Western sanctions and the West’s arming of Ukraine to prop up Kiev without being able to penultimately defeat Moscow on the battlefield will only continue to induce commensurate Russian countermeasures, perpetuating the conflict and aggravating continued Russian revisionism as well as rejection of the prevailing Western-led, post-Cold War European security order.