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A Way Ahead With Russia

by Chris Westdal
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POLICY PAPER

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▶ **Executive Summary**

Canada and Russia are on speaking terms again. Our government has abandoned Stephen Harper's policy of vocal disdain and the attempted isolation of Russia. We stand against Russian "interference" in Ukraine but, in the words of Global Affairs Minister, Stephane Dion, "the more we disagree, the more we have to discuss."

This paper describes the setting of Canada-Russia re-engagement in terms of current tension in East-West, NATO-Russia relations and of heightened Canadian foreign policy aspiration; rehearses the case for earnest, long-term Western and Canadian engagement, with investment of senior attention and talent; cautions that, though a bit of spring has sprung, there is a lot of ice to thaw, as bilateral sanctions are likely to be lifted only in step with allies and the implementation, halting at best, of the Minsk peace plan; assesses Russia's vulnerabilities and the record of its interventions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria; recommends active Canadian support, by all means, for Ukrainian-Russian reconciliation and for a better fence, a "mending wall" between Russia and NATO; and suggests formats and first steps toward the normalization of bilateral and multilateral relations with our Arctic neighbour.





INTRODUCTION

After a decade at daggers drawn, the two largest countries in the world are on speaking terms again. Our government has abandoned Stephen Harper's policy of vocal disdain and the attempted isolation of Russia. Prime Minister Trudeau and Global Affairs Minister Dion emphasize that "Russia's interference in Ukraine must cease" [1] – but, the Minister says, "the more we disagree, the more we have to discuss," adding that "in our relations with Russia ... we will seek the best results for Ukraine." [2] The Harper line, recall, was that we'd have no relations whatever with Russia until Crimea was back in Ukraine – and the cows came home.

THE SETTING

Canada seeks re-engagement with Russia bearing new credentials and commitments. We have a new leader with evident potential to play a significant role in the world. In a rough season, we're in a new league. Our contender will need good lines, substantive support. What's more, we are now embarked on a five-year campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council. We'll need coherent platform and performance. At our foreign ministry, we'll need an A-team.

We seek re-engagement with Russia at a complex and dramatic juncture in East-West relations.

On the one hand, we're all but back to Cold War. Popular Russian and Western narratives collide head-on. To the Kremlin, the West is an enemy again, out to contain and to weaken Russia. To the West, Russia is an aggressive spoiler, out to undermine Ukraine, Western unity, NATO, the EU and much more.

Sabres are rattling on both sides. Russia has made much show of new arms – from the Donbas to the Middle East. The West is bristling too. President Obama seeks to quadruple, to US\$3.4 billion, this year's funding for heavy weapons for NATO in Europe, where NATO members' military budgets and capabilities remain modest. [3] The act reaffirms the North Atlantic link, that unique US trans-oceanic projection of power. Once again, as through the last hundred years, Europe in distress seeks US remedy.

On the other hand, while all these risks have been escalating, East-West relations are being warmed by the flames of the Middle East.

Driven in part by the wanton slaughter of Christians, the Pope has met the Patriarch. That's epochal. To fight vicious Islamic fanatics, Christendom unites! Catholics may gain an antidote to celibacy. The Kremlin, which coddles and sanctions the Russian Orthodox church, may gain soft power, of possible use in Ukraine, which the ancient Christian schism still divides.

In the Middle East, Russia and the US are already cooperating, albeit fitfully, by bringing Iran in from the cold, head-bashing Syrian parties and their backers to talk, abiding Assad (for a while at least) and fighting ISIS. With luck, a major East-West, Shia-Sunni proxy war may yet be averted.

So what's it to be: Cold War II, with reinforced NATO deterrence of an alienated Russia – or cooperation, if at the start only opportunistic, with sanctions relief and rapprochement? There is



no simple answer. It looks to me like a bit of both. F. Scott Fitzgerald comes to mind: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” [4]

THE CASE FOR EARNEST ENGAGEMENT

Let's not get ahead of ourselves, though. Some spring's sprung, but there's a lot of ice to thaw. Our bilateral relations are constrained by sanctions, likely to be lifted only in step with allies and the fulfillment, halting at best, of the Minsk peace plan for Ukraine. What's more, in mid-March, in order to “demonstrate our firm resolve ... and strengthen our collective ability to hold [Russia] to account,” [5] we imposed new sanctions on specified Russian and Ukrainian entities and individuals (a kick in the shin which does seem an odd first step in our new dance).

Internationally, though, it's a quite different story – because Canada's and the West's relations with Russia are about much more than Ukraine. Post-Pax Americana (which was, for many angry to this day, more Americana than Pax), the tumultuous, seldom complementarily multipolar world we're in includes Russia as a major player, like it or not, whatever the price of oil. In the leading dramas of our age, Russia plays key roles.

The largest country in the world, the greater part of Mackinder's "World Island", [6] Russia and its relations east and west have long been and remain matters of fundamental geopolitical significance, given the potential of nuclear war and, for us in the West, given that an alliance of Russia, the largest, and China, the most populous state on earth, would be a potential world hegemon, antithetical to the West (and as inimical to US geo-strategic interests as would be the German-Russian alliance Mackinder so feared a hundred years ago).

That is the largest reason for the West to engage Russia, seeking to cooperate. There are many more – from European interest in Russian energy, resources and trade, to Arctic nations' interest in cooperation, to global interest in the climate and the conservation of nature (of which Russia has the largest share), to all our interest in the tortuous search for a more stable balance of powers - and perhaps some redrawn maps - to relieve the violent miseries of the Middle East.

There are also obvious Canadian reasons to engage Russia - in earnest, long-term, investing senior attention and talent. As Arctic neighbours, we command two-thirds of the northern latitudes of the earth. There has long been rich potential in our political, economic and cultural relations. One day, we may exploit it. Meantime, though, we Canadians live between two nuclear-armed heavyweights – and must be bound to try to see that they get along. Presidents Obama and Putin are far from friendly, but Foreign Ministers Kerry and Lavrov have been working together for years now. Should this fall's US presidential election bring a harsher approach to Russia though, our Canadian instinct for intermediation, for doing what we can, however modest, to keep the peace between our neighbours, will make as compelling, elementary good sense as it did through the Cold War.

BEING REALISTIC

Now, as then, we will have to be realistic. Though our country is large, second only to Russia, only one in every 200 people on earth is a Canadian. We account for about two per-cent of the



world's economy [7] and one per-cent of its military spending. [8] We sit at G-7 and G-20 high tables, but still, that one lonely seat we have in the 193-member UN General Assembly is about our fair share. Given Canada's weight and means in the world, we have no choice but realism. The world is far from our command.

Several of our values collide with Saudi Arabia's, for example, but we share interests in balancing Persian power, in sustaining some order in oil markets – and in selling arms, with a blind eye to the obvious fact they'll be used, if and as need deemed be, for repression. We have values the Chinese don't share either, yet have no choice but engagement; they're a quarter of mankind. Some of the same might be said of the US some days. In each case, though, and certainly as well in the case of Russia, we must take the world as it is, not as we wish it were. If we confined our foreign relations to the like-minded, we'd have very few relations – and not much of a role at all in the world.

THE RECORD OF RUSSIAN INTERVENTION

Given the reality of Russia's significance, we should want to comprehend it, to get a grip on its character.

For a start, it is a Russia that has been making it clear for most of a decade now that it is not going to get pushed around, particularly on its own borders, with its obvious interests ignored, the way they were when Russia was on its knees.

Thus, in 2008, Russia challenged the West in Georgia - and the West, most sensibly, backed down. Mikheil Saakashvili took Dick Cheney far too seriously, picked a fight with Vladimir Putin - and lost a good chunk of his country (which, South Ossetia and Abkhazia alike, had been dying to leave). An EU-sponsored enquiry later blamed both sides for the war, noting that Tbilisi had fired first. [9]

In 2014, Russia said no again in Ukraine: no, the Maidan would not yank Ukraine to the West; no, Ukraine would not undermine Russian security; and no, the Kremlin would not rent its Sevastopol Black Sea Fleet base from a member of NATO. There has been much bloodshed since, but the facts remain that Kyiv can't make the West care more – and can't make the Kremlin care less. We are not going to fight World War III for the Donbas - and Russia is not going to stop defining the geo-strategic orientation of Ukraine as a fundamental security interest.

Now, in Syria, Russia's saying no again. No, its old ally will not be overrun by fanatics. No, Assad will not be abandoned – not hunted and hung like Saddam or murdered in a ditch like Gaddafi. No, Russia's existential interest in relations with Islam (the confession of an eighth of Russians) will not be ignored. And no, there are few Queensbury rules. War is heavyweight hell – and civil war, Russians know, worse.

It is common, with reference to this record, to attribute rising tensions to Russian "aggression". There is, though, plenty of blame to be shared. Russia is newly assertive, for sure - and sensitive to slight; it combines a thick hide with a thin skin. It is determined to promote its interests in its volatile neighbourhoods and in the world by, among other means, containing NATO and



maintaining credible nuclear deterrence, whatever the Pentagon spends. We'll have to get used to all that.

But Russia is also painfully vulnerable – exposed across its vast southern flank from the Caucasus through Central Asia to the Far East. The federation's scale alone is daunting, given Russian demography. Its vulnerability is economic too. The Kremlin knows it can't win an arms race. Russia's strategic posture is necessarily defensive.

It's been said that nothing is more offensive than Russia on the defensive, but consider: Russia's behaviour in Georgia and Ukraine is as remarkable for what it did not do as for what it did. Provoked to no end by Saakashvili and damned if Georgia was going to bring NATO to the Caucasus, Moscow did take that fragile state apart and make the point to NATO, forcefully, that it could take Tbilisi too –but it did not. It parked its tanks 35 kilometres away for a few days – and then it brought them home.

In Ukraine, provoked again on its borders, Russia did take Crimea, fuel Donbas insurrection, and make the point that it could have taken the region overnight or Kyiv in two weeks, by Putin's estimate, and moreover that it could have acceded to the fervent entreaties of Donbas separatist leaders that their region, like Crimea, be annexed by Russia – but, again, it did not.

Moreover, it is no secret that Russia could quickly overwhelm the Baltic states – but it hasn't and likely won't. In each case, the taking would be the (relatively) easy part, the keeping and the consequences something else entirely. Russian memories of the bloody cost of occupying Afghanistan are still fresh. Their federation, an empire in all but name, is too big for its means already. It needs to grow no more.

Vladimir Putin appears to agree. In Georgia, in Ukraine and in Syria, he has been careful not to bite off more than Russia can chew. His interventions have been forceful, coherent and militarily competent – but also finite. Indeed, in Syria, having used force effectively to rescue Assad, Putin then used (partial) withdrawal effectively to press the embattled Syrian to compromise. In both judo, Putin's martial art, and chess, Russia's national passion, the idea is to perceive and, ideally unexpectedly, to exploit an opponent's weakness, all while never exposing one's own, never plunging too far.

While these calibrated uses of force may not make Russia quite the "force for stability and good in the world" [10] our Prime Minister seeks, nor do they warrant the perception - and the fear, so widely mongered - that we must contend with a belligerent, expansive Russia, anything but a force for good.

I think it fair to imagine that with Russia we deal with a bear - a big, old, proud one, provoked now and suspicious, which will, as bears do, defend itself ferociously - whatever the cost, whatever the price of imported cheese. It is a Russia that has, fatefully, been written off before – the *Economist* writes it off weekly – but a Russia which has never succumbed to Western power and doesn't look like doing so now, however much of its business we go on trying to mind, whatever we make of its political economy, however much we lecture that it should be more like ours.

All that said, Russians are not the hostile, marauding menace to Western interests in the world their critics portray. Even if they aimed to be, they're not ten feet tall and, with their plate



so full and oil so cheap, they couldn't afford the cost. Moreover, the vast contraption which is their federation – 85 jurisdictions strung across 11 time zones – faces fundamental political, economic and demographic problems.

I believe that, even as we balance and deter its power and ambition, today's is a Russia we can live with. We can do business with it. We can seek its better sides, build confidence, keep peace. We can cooperate in the Arctic with it. We can fight ISIS with it. Why, we might even be able to stop the ruinous tug of war for Ukraine with it - and make some room and peace and quiet for that tormented state.

FORMATS AND MEANS OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

Multilaterally, Canada's re-engagement with Russia can readily begin. In the world of the UN and its myriad agencies, of the Arctic Council, the OSCE, the NPT, the NATO-Russia Council, the International Support Group for Syria and many more, Russia is unavoidable, its diplomats able and relentless. In all these settings, our delegations can start again with Russia's, seeking common ground, despite our withered bilateral links.

Bilaterally, we can start anew with a few basics, such as the resumption of normal diplomatic and Embassy functions and officials' policy consultations focussed on concrete interests. We might begin with subjects relatively free of contention, such as anti-terrorism or cooperation in the Arctic.

Without getting ahead of ourselves, we should also be planning for Ministerial engagement. It may be premature to imagine Stephane Dion visiting Russia or Sergei Lavrov coming here, but the two Ministers might well soon schedule substantive talks on the margins of a multilateral encounter.

Having paid Russia the essential respect of diplomatic re-engagement - and in doing so recognized that its interests must be taken into account - what matters now is what substance we bring to the encounter, what attitude and comprehension, what vision of Eurasian security, what policy pursued in NATO.

Minister Dion's plan to seek the best outcome for Ukraine in our relations with Russia makes good sense. I think there is no good outcome for Ukraine that involves hostility with Russia, no good outcome without reconciliation, an end to this tragic Slavic civil war, nor without Ukrainian freedom to trade with both Europe and Russia, not just one or the other. Bilaterally and multilaterally, by all means, these are the outcomes we should seek for Ukraine.

In our consultations with Russia – and with the US and our NATO partners – we will need to address the bigger picture as well: above all, the need for a better fence between Russia and NATO, a “mending wall,” [11] in Robert Frost's phrase, the need for new understanding and a big new security deal. In it, a neutral Ukraine, essential cartilage in the skeleton of Eurasian security, might, at last, be given a chance - by both sides - to unite, recover, reform and progress.

And the rest of us might sleep better too.



ENDNOTES:

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▶ **About the Author**

Chris Westdal was Canada's Ambassador to Ireland, Russia, Uzbekistan, Armenia, the UN and the Disarmament Conference in Geneva, Ukraine, South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Bangladesh and Burma. He worked previously for CIDA in India, Nepal and Tanzania (as a member of a University of Toronto economic advisory team). In Ottawa, he worked at CIDA HQ, DFAIT and the Privy Council Office. He is now a consultant, corporate director and occasional commentator on Canadian foreign policy. He has served on boards with corporate interests in Ukraine and Russia and is the chairman of Silver Bear Resources, a TSE-listed company developing a silver deposit in Yakutia.



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