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The Cold War 2.0 – a New Phase?

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1. Introduction

The current Russian foreign policy posture is based on fear which is deeply embedded among the elites. However, we do not know if the present threat is perceived as existential, somehow ultimate, or not. Whatever it is, we are at the inflexion point at the moment because the new administration in the White House will probably try to establish a new coherent, consequent, and transparent strategy vis-à-vis Russia. This is why the Kremlin has recently upped the ante in the ongoing game with Washington. Now the United States must formulate an answer which, in turn, will determine the future course of the Cold War 2.0, at least for the time being.

It is, certainly, debatable whether the current state of relations between the Western world and Russia may be labelled the Second Cold War. The arguments for using this parallel are as convincing as are the opposite ones. Nonetheless, it is rather obvious that since 2014 we have observed accelerated changes in the international security environment caused by the increased tensions between Russia and the West. Therefore, we need a term which will designate these changes and indicate that the relationships between Moscow and the western capitals are significantly different from those existing before the seizure of Crimea. The use of the term “cold war” seems somewhat natural, as it emphasises the adversarial nature of the said relationship. Thus, bearing in mind all important differences between the current Cold War and the previous

one, we will label the current state of Russo-Western relations the Cold War 2.0 (to our knowledge, it was [used for the first time](#) by Dmitri Trenin in March 2014).

2. Characteristics of the Cold War 2.0

The current iteration of a cold war is, to a great extent, an artificial product of the Kremlin. We have [mentioned](#) many times that we strongly agree with the argument that the current tensions have been intentionally inflated by the Russian authorities. They have been seeking new sources of the legitimisation after the so-called “Putin’s Consensus” [waned](#) by the break of the second decade of the 21st century. Its nature was simple: the new president provided the Russian people with the unprecedented growth of wealth in exchange for tacit approval for the dismantlement of democratic institutions and the building of an authoritarian regime. However, soon after the financial crisis of 2008, it became apparent that the Kremlin could not deliver on its promises to sustain continuous growth, which actually stalled by the end of the decade. Vladimir Putin was, therefore, forced to seek additional legitimisation, and he found it in inflating threat perception and heightening international tensions. This strategy finally led to the open conflict with Ukraine, which served as a wake-up call for the West and marked the beginning of the new Cold War.

Undoubtedly, there are other dimensions and characteristics of the conflict we describe. The western countries do not agree on many of the demands Moscow deems legitimate on historical, geopolitical and other grounds. On the other hand, the Russian leadership’s mindset is deeply rooted in the highly conservative paradigm of everlasting and inevitable conflict with the West. These contradictions have inexorably led to misunderstandings and the lack of elementary trust which greatly contributes to the building of threat perceptions in Moscow and in the western capitals alike. We also witness mounting regional rivalries which stem from important economic and strategic interests and add a global dimension to the contradictions between the Western world and Russia.

We can summarise to this point that the Cold War 2.0 is not a conflict as acute as its predecessor. It is also highly manageable, as both sides may use various and flexible tactics to escalate-deescalate tensions, if needed, without risking open confrontation. It is specifically visible in the Russian actions. War-like rhetoric, [not-so-covert operations](#) against the Western societies, and regional tensions set the stage for what may look like a global and extremely dangerous conflict between superpowers. But behind the scene, there is a cold-blooded calculation intended not to cross the line, which would mark a full-blown conflict between the United States, a real superpower, and Russia, a relatively weak state unable to sustain economic, social and technological development.

This is how the Cold War 2.0 has looked like until recently. But now the situation shows some signs of a change.

3. Recent Developments

The last half-a-year has seen important developments as far as the Russian activities on the front-lines of the Cold War 2.0 are concerned. At first glance, nothing substantial has changed – the East-West relations have remained within the limits of a controlled confrontation. However, the

level of this confrontation has been elevated to the highest point to date, as far as both rhetoric and actions are concerned. The most notable types of activities that may be considered as intended to increase tensions are as follows:

The ongoing inflation of threat perception. In recent months the political narrative aimed at accusing the West of assaulting Russia has been significantly ramped up. The arguments are familiar, as politicians and commentators blame the West for covert work to destruct Russian society, the preparation of war against Russia, and so on. What is relatively new is the frequency and fervour with which these accusations are being [formulated](#).

The super-weapons hype. This is, again, nothing new, Vladimir Putin since at least 2018 has often boasted about the [newest types of weaponry](#), purportedly unique, which give the Russian armed forces a real edge against the West. These weapons do exist and are indeed formidable, but it [does not mean](#) that the overall military balance has recently been significantly tilted in Russia's favour. On the contrary, the strategic nuclear balance is alive and well, and [several](#) hypersonic warheads do not change it. Moreover, the conventional power projection capabilities of the Russian military remain highly limited, especially in comparison to the United States. However, it does not preclude the Kremlin from [advertising](#) the Russian armed forces as having an advantage over the western ones.

Not-so-covert operations against western societies. Russia continues and ramps up its [information warfare](#) aimed at stirring unrest in the West. The hacking campaign is also mounting. What is interesting, and what may mark some change, is that these activities are increasingly visible. It may, indeed, be unintended, but it also seems that the Russian authorities care less and less about that. One might even argue that the semi-openness of activities against the West suits Russian aims by adding to an intended unrest.

Flexing the military muscles. The concentration of a vast [army](#) near the Ukrainian border in Spring 2021 was an unprecedented show of force. Setting aside the debate to what extent the threat posed by this deployment was credible in military terms, that demonstration clearly conveyed that Russia is powerful and ready to act according to its own assessment of the threat. This kind of demonstration is, of course, nothing new, but its magnitude is not.

Crackdown on the opposition. Again, nothing is original regarding quelling dissent in Russia, only the scale and depth of the process are increasing. The Russian authorities allow a smaller and smaller margin of freedom of expression, and this is an ongoing process. But blunt repression against Alexei Navalny and clumsy handling with his imprisonment and the resulting illness mark growing nervousness within the ruling elites. We believe that the Kremlin notices the mounting social instability and predicts its further growth, but also feels that there is no good remedy for that. The increasing repressions paired with generous but unreliable [promises](#) of social transfers seem to be a sign of this nervousness.

4. An Inflexion Point?

One of the most obvious explanations of the abovementioned developments is that the Kremlin is preparing to get to terms with the new president of the United States. Despite the fact that the new American administration is preoccupied mostly with domestic problems, there are also pressing international issues which must be addressed in a comprehensive way. The relations with Russia surely belong to this category, so Joe Biden has to make crucial decisions regarding how he is going to shape them. He is expected to be more principled, consequent, and probably more active in countering what is widely perceived in the West as a threat from Russia. That is why Vladimir Putin ups the ante with the use of a very assertive strategy. It is not the only natural for the Russian president, but it is also in line with the Soviet/Russian tradition of aggressive negotiations.

This explanation is certainly true; Russia is surely preparing to arrange its relations with the new president of the United States. But we think that a more nuanced approach may expose some additional dimensions of the situation that are not as obvious and may be considered factors of change in the course of the Cold War 2.0.

We strongly believe that fear is the most important emotion which governs the Russian increasingly alienated power elites. Specifically, one of the most important factors shaping the Russian foreign strategy is a genuine perception of the threat from the West. No matter how inflated and unjustified, this perception persists as it is based on centuries-old tradition and historical experience, tightly embedded in the Cold War mindset of the current Russian ruling circles. This perception is rooted not only in the “fortress under siege” syndrome, which has been carefully cultivated for centuries. It also encompasses a conviction that a conflict between nations belonging to cultures that are so much different is inevitable and natural. Certainly, the Russian government does not necessarily believe that western nations are actually preparing for an armed invasion of Russia. But it surely believes in ongoing organised covert effort to undermine Russian society, change its values and finally destroy the nation by integrating it into the western, individualistic, difficult to control and exploit society.

This fear also has a deeper personal dimension. The Russian elites are increasingly fearful of their own fate. If successful, a purported western onslaught on the Russian values would also mean the utter destruction of the political system and the downfall of the elites, both economic and political ones. If allowed to grow, Western-like, consumeristic, and demanding society will inevitably (re)invent political participation, an increased control over the authority, and other institutions which are usually called democratic. This is the deepest source of fear of the elites who watch the unfolding [social change](#) in Russia with great unease. The response is not only the increasing repression against the society, but also growing hysteria in portraying the West not only as decadent but also malevolent and threatening.

It is necessary to stress that fear we have mentioned is not new. For centuries the Russian system was fearful of its own society’s knowledge of the western world. It is enough to mention Marquis de Custine’s observations from two hundred years ago, the Soviet propaganda narrative, or the current activities of the Russian troll farms operating in the information space. What marks the current situation somewhat different is that fear is matched with the prevailing understanding

of Russia's weakness. Despite boasts of super-weapons, the Russian elites acknowledge, at least tacitly, the ugly truth about the real status and capabilities of the Russian Federation as a government and an international actor. They understand, at least to an extent, that the state is unable to sustain economic growth and progress in the social sphere, and it also lags behind the world leaders of technological development. In the international realm, Russia seems unable to promote its own interests in ways other than blunt coercion of weak neighbours, military sabre-rattling, and aggressive special operations combined with information warfare aimed at disrupting other nations' economies and politics. So, the Russian elites are aware that such foreign policy does not compare to the powerful and diverse instruments wielded by the United States, Western Europe, or even China.

Moreover, Russia's weakness is deepening, even in the military sphere, but particularly within the economic realm. It does not only refer to the indicators but, first of all, to the economic structure, which is getting more and more inefficient. Overreliance on hydrocarbons export, lack of sufficient investments, bad management, capital outflow, brain drain and other deficiencies are widely acknowledged in Russia, even if not widely discussed in public. This situation, however, cannot be changed due to the political structure of the state. It is because this very structure, which is the cause of its degradation, is also the foundation of the state. Russia, understood as a political, economic, and social structure is, and again it is a centuries-old tradition, only a vehicle through which those in power are entitled to rein the country for their own purpose.

This combination of mounting weakness and intrinsic fear is what, in our opinion, explains well the current developments on the frontlines of the Cold War 2.0. However, it does not explain important details which would indicate the direction of changes in Russo-American relationships, which will probably occur in the coming months. The key question, extremely difficult to be answered, is whether the Russian authorities truly think that they are already cornered and there is no way out. In other words, do the frightened Russian elites believe that their way of life and the state of their possession is actually existentially threatened?

If this is true, the world is in great danger because the Kremlin will not hesitate to use every means in its possession to defend the current status quo. It will not allow the international position of Russia to deteriorate any further and will fiercely counteract any threat, a real or an imagined one. Despite its relative weakness, the Russian Federation will at least try to muster all means and resources to defend and fight back. As an obvious outcome, the East-West confrontation will become even more acute than today, less manageable and more prone to escalation. It may lead to dire consequences, even if the nuclear exchange is, most likely, to be avoided. Certainly, the course of events will depend on many factors, of which the most important is Washington's strategy towards Russia. Specifically, it is not clear at the moment if the new administration is ready to acknowledge the gravity of the situation and decide to offer Russian elites some assurances.

But if the case presented above is not necessarily true, we may be witnessing a sort of a "madman strategy" supposed to press the U.S. to accept a far-reaching deal with Russia. Vladimir Putin has always [longed](#) for such a Yalta-like agreement which would solidify Moscow's position, alleviate fears, and ensure that the Russian elites would weather the storm of economic hardships. In this case, the course of events, at least in the near future, also depends on Washington's

response. If Joe Biden decides to strike a deal favourable for Putin, the relations may quickly be normalised. If not, the character of the Cold War 2.0 will not change profoundly, although it will be more predictable, as the strategies will have been displayed and acknowledged.

All in all, we have come to a sort of the inflexion point where the new U.S. administration is confronted with a difficult task to fathom the Russian perception of threat and formulate adequate policy. Currently, Washington's long-term strategy vis-à-vis Moscow is not clearly visible, it may even be non-existent, so we do not know what is going to happen. On the one hand, Joe Biden is a pragmatic politician who certainly does not want to increase the level of confrontation, which is of no benefit to the United States. It would suggest that the new U.S. president is going to appease Russia to decrease somewhat the tensions and profit from cooperation. But, on the other hand, his principled approach to values and the often expressed intention to curb Russia's aggression suggest that he is going to take a firm and consistent defensive stance.

5. Conclusion

The current Russian foreign policy posture is based on fear which is deeply embedded among the elites. However, we do not know if the present threat is perceived as existential, somehow ultimate, or not. Whatever it is, we are at the inflexion point now because the new administration in the White House will probably try to establish a new, coherent, and transparent strategy vis-à-vis Russia. This is why the Kremlin has recently upped the ante in the ongoing game with Washington. Now the United States must formulate an answer which, in turn, will determine the future course of the Cold War 2.0, at least for the time being.

There are so many possible scenarios for the next several months and years which makes it impossible to list them all within the framework of this article. Suffice to say that they range from a Yalta-like deal which would encompass acknowledgement of Moscow's sphere of influence and its co-chairmanship of the world's affairs, to utter dismissal of Russian interests by the United States.

To make an "educated guess" concerning a possible American answer to the Russian gamble, we would venture to speculate as follows.

We know that what Moscow needs most is a general agreement, which would elevate Russia to the status of a de facto superpower with an acknowledged sphere of influence and treated as equal by the U.S. However, the United States and the West as a whole do not need to strike a deal of that sort due to several reasons. Firstly, contrary to many suggestions, the Western institutions, economies and societies are still strong and relatively healthy, especially in comparison to weakening Russia. Secondly, the current Russian strategy to sow chaos in the West is less effective than one might think, for it has been exposed and is fervently countered by the western governments and societies. Thirdly, the expected post-Covid economic rebound will also most likely contribute to calming down internal political conflicts in the Western countries, diminishing the Russian influence. And fourthly, the prospect for the Russian economy and society will remain rather gloomy, even if the prices of hydrocarbons rise in the coming months. Summarizing, Russia is much less dangerous than it seems, and the West is far stronger and stable than it appears.

Considering the above, we believe that the new American president will not be willing to offer Putin more than face-saving concessions in several areas of mutual relations and/or in regions important for Russia. The decision to extend the New START treaty may be considered a harbinger of this kind of strategy. It may also indicate a domain in which the face-saving operation for Vladimir Putin may be conducted with the greatest effectiveness. Bearing in mind the American military preponderance and Russian economic weakness, Russia [cannot](#) embark on the new strategic arms race. Therefore, Vladimir Putin has [offered](#) the former U.S. president important concessions even before the election in November 2020 in exchange for the prolongation of the New START treaty. Now, Biden's quick decision to extend this agreement for five years is trumpeted in Moscow as a victory.

That is why we expect the arms control process to be reactivated soon, probably within a year. For Moscow it will be a great relief, as it is afraid of the possible new arms race, even though it brandishes novel super-weapons. Moreover, negotiations will provide many face-saving opportunities, as Russians may use it to show resolve and display the strength of the country. After all, the United States and Russia are more or less equal only as far as nuclear weapons are concerned. Putting them into the spotlight underscores the status of the Russian Federation as a global power, giving the Russian elites and society a sense of greatness. Vladimir Putin, in turn, will have a chance to pose as a world-class leader, equal to the American president. For Washington, arms control negotiations will be an opportunity to show the willingness to lead the world responsibly and ease the burden of strategic armaments. The United States is also very much interested in providing Russia with some face-saving opportunities.

If our predictions are correct, it seems that the Cold War 2.0 is about to enter its new phase. It will be marked first of all by increasing institutionalisation and even greater predictability than before. Both sides will remain entrenched around their demands and threat perceptions, but they will also try to create some framework for their mutual relations, especially with regard to arms control. The negotiations will not necessarily yield a quick effect in the form of disarmament treaties but will surely contribute to global stability.

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