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The fallacy of ‘compartmentalisation’: the West and Russia from Ukraine to Syria

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Abstract In the post-Soviet space as well as the Middle East, Western leaders have largely failed to heed ample evidence that the goals of the Russian leadership are fundamentally opposed to those of the EU and the US. Whereas Moscow seeks to counter Western influence and roll back the US’s role in the world, the West has proposed a win–win approach, seeking to convince Moscow that its ‘true’ interests should lead it to cooperate with the West. When this has not worked, Western leaders have ‘compartmentalised’, isolating areas of agreement from areas of disagreement. This approach has come to the end of the road because the assumptions that undergird it are false. So long as Western powers fail to understand the fundamental incompatibility of their interests with the deeply anti-Western interests of the current power brokers in the Kremlin, they are unlikely to develop policies that achieve success.

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Introduction

Western relations with Russia have come to be dominated by a serious contradiction. While Russia repeatedly engages in behaviour that opposes Western interests and undermines the post–Cold War world order, the Western response has been ambivalent. The US and Europe have taken rhetorical and practical steps to counter Russian behaviour or impose a cost for it on Moscow, including sanctions. But in parallel, Western leaders have emphasised the interests they share with Russia. Indeed, they have talked up the notion that ‘we need Russia’ for the management or solution of various international problems. In the recent past, the most obvious example has been the West’s confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, which can be contrasted with the effort to achieve cooperation over Syria. This squaring of the circle is based on the logic of ‘compartmentalisation’: the separating of areas of agreement from areas of disagreement.

While this sounds good, is it in practice a realistic policy? The case of Syria suggests otherwise. Indeed, it is now clear that Russia intervened in Syria with the stated aim of combating Islamist radicals, particularly the terrorist organisation calling itself the Islamic State (IS). Yet few, if any, of the bombs dropped by Russia targeted IS: instead, they were almost exclusively targeted on those Syrian opposition formations that have been trained and supported by the West and Turkey (*The Guardian* 2015; Nissenbaum et al. 2015; Miller and Fitzpatrick 2015).

The Syrian case, therefore, raises serious issues. Can matters so crucial to both parties truly be separated from each other? If the West believes in compartmentalisation, does Russia also share this approach? If not, what are the implications? This article contends that Russian foreign policy operates on a fundamentally different logic than that of the West; that Russia and the West systematically talk past each other and infer different things from their mutual agreements; and that Moscow as a matter of course seeks to exploit the Western efforts to compartmentalise as a way to undermine Western interests.

The Western approach to Russia: appealing to common interests

While a full overview of the US’s and Europe’s relations with Russia is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that Western policies rest on a recognition of Russia as a global player of crucial importance whose cooperation is crucial to managing key international issues. Beyond Russia’s veto power in the UN Security Council, Russia has had a stake in many of the issues at the centre of international relations in

the past two decades. For example, Russia was considered a key partner in the war on terrorism and in transit operations for the war in Afghanistan. Similarly, it was seen as a key partner whose cooperation was required to roll back the Iranian nuclear programme. Russia's cooperation has also been sought to manage the unresolved conflicts in the post-Soviet space—an approach that somehow survived Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. The US, Russia and France continue to co-chair the negotiation process to resolve the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict. And, of course, Russia's influence over the Assad regime in Syria was thought to make its cooperation central to Western goals in that conflict.

Across these areas of interaction with Russia, Western policy has been built on the following approach. First, Western leaders have depicted relations in terms of a win–win situation, in which the West and Russia share common interests. Second, where Russian behaviour has suggested otherwise, Western diplomats have focused on explaining to Russia, and to the wider public, why Russia's 'true' interests should lead it to cooperate with the West. And third, in the many cases where these urges have proven futile, Western leaders have decided to compartmentalise: to seek to isolate areas of agreement from areas of disagreement. Needless to say, Western leaders, for the most part, have seen their own intentions as noble, and have assumed that the Russian leaders, too, have honourable intentions. When even this approach has failed, as it invariably has, Western leaders have tended to seek explanations as much in their own behaviour as in Russia's. If Moscow will not work with us, the reasoning goes, we must be doing something wrong. If Moscow does not trust us, we must seek ways to rebuild confidence—certainly, this was the assumption of the US 'Reset' with Russia launched in 2009. Only as a last resort, and as a result of great frustration, have Western leaders concluded that their efforts have failed because Moscow's interests diverge fundamentally from those of the West. They have yet to draw out the implications of that conclusion.

The Russian approach: a zero-sum game

During the 1990s, a real partnership with Russia based on common values—or at least a common approach—appeared possible. But since Vladimir Putin came to power, Moscow's approach has in fact been based on an entirely different logic from that of the Western approach. Fundamentally, the Russian leadership has been focused on the task of rebuilding Russia's power and influence on the global scene—and in particular, in reasserting an exclusive sphere of influence over the former Soviet space—but not only', to use former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's phrase following the invasion of Georgia in 2008 (Kramer 2008). In the process, Russian officials have aimed to reduce what they view as the Western, and particularly American, 'hegemony' in world affairs. Indeed, to a considerable extent, Russian leaders are informed by a world-view that sees the West, and particularly the US, as an aggressive and arrogant force that seeks world domination at the expense of the marginalisation of others (Rolofs 2007). While US actions in the Middle East have contributed to this perception, it is by no

means reserved for the US: when the EU launched the Eastern Partnership, Russia saw this as a threat to its historical sphere of influence.

Furthermore, the character of the Russian government has important implications. It is by now well-documented that Russia's is not only a strictly authoritarian regime, but a strongly kleptocratic one (Dawisha 2014). As Sherr (2013) has explained, the regime's overarching aim is 'the creation of an international environment conducive to the maintenance of its system of governance at home... "national interest" means *regime* interest first and foremost'.

This, in turn, informs Russia's approach towards the West: Moscow views the West—and particularly the EU and NATO as institutions—not just as a threat to its interests, but to the survival of its regime, given the power of attraction of the normative principles underlying these institutions. Indeed, 'the more the EU's norms and practices gain adherents and traction, the more incongruous Russia's model of governance appears' (Sherr 2013). As a result, Russian policies actively seek to divide and undermine Europe, in particular through information warfare and through direct support for both far-right and far-left political forces in Europe that oppose NATO and EU integration, and support Russian policy goals (Foster and Holehouse 2016; Krekó and Gyori 2016).

Where Western leaders have tended to give Russian leaders the benefit of the doubt, the Russian approach has been the opposite: a fundamental distrust of the intentions of the West. Since Russian leaders seek to maximise their power and influence at the expense of the West, they have shown an inclination to assume that the West is doing exactly the same. On the creation of the Eastern Partnership, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov asked 'what is the Eastern Partnership, if not an attempt to extend the EU's sphere of influence?' (Pop 2009). This divergence in political mentality is derived, no doubt, from the divergent political culture of Soviet Russia. It is this culture that has framed the world-view of the current leadership crop—which itself is disproportionately formed of those with a past in the security services (Dawisha 2014). Indeed, the approach of the Russian leadership is derived from the Leninist conception of politics as a zero-sum game, defined in terms of who will prevail over whom—summarised in the Russian phrase '*Kto-kogo*'. As American writer and diplomat Raymond Garthoff has put it, the phrase encapsulates a situation where 'the gains of one side were automatically losses to the other, ruling out genuine compromise, reconciliation, shared interests, and conflict resolution by any other means than prevailing over the other' (Garthoff 2001, 393–4).

In sum, the West has sought relations with Russia on a win-win basis, seeking common interests, but it has tended to misjudge what the Russian leadership's interests are—in part because of a tendency to extrapolate what Russia's interests *should* be if Russia operated as a Western country. By contrast, Russia has increasingly seen relations with the West as a zero-sum game, in which it has been Russia's aim to undermine the Western-led international order, as well as sow division within Western institutions themselves.

This does not mean that the West has not made its share of mistakes. The US invasion of Iraq, the recognition of Kosovo's independence and the Libyan intervention that led to the killing of Muammar Qaddafi can all fairly be criticised for failing to abide by international standards, and for being examples of Western unilateralism. The point, however, is that in none of these situations was the West's aim, let alone its primary objective, to undermine Russian interests. By contrast, Moscow has continuously seized on every Western mistake, ascribed the worst of intentions to it, and used it as a precedent to achieve its own unilateral goals at the expense of Western interests.

Russia's build-up to Ukraine: hybrid war in the Caucasus and Central Asia

Events in the former Soviet space provide the clearest example of the Russian subversion of Western interests and international norms, as it is an area where Russia has overt claims to geopolitical domination. Following Vladimir Putin's ascent to power, there was an initial improvement in Russia–West relations. Deep frustration with the Yeltsin regime had set in, in the West, and many welcomed the election of a younger, more effective leader who seemed able to put Russia back together. And following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, Russia immediately seized the opportunity to portray itself as an ally in the fight against terrorism. Yet significant differences between the West and Russia continued to mount in parallel, and were centred on the post-Soviet space, which formed the focus of Putin's policies.

Putin quickly benefited from his support for the anti-terror coalition: the West, collectively, responded by dropping most of its vocal criticism of Russia's warfare in Chechnya (Cornell 2003; Headley 2005). Moscow then followed up by gradually increasing pressure on Georgia. The timing of this was no accident. In September 2002, the US movement towards military action in Iraq was well under way. On the first anniversary of 9/11, Putin threatened military action against Georgia, trying to link Georgia with international terrorism. As Devdariani (2002) put it, Putin tried to 'set up terms for a trade with the United States'. No trade was forthcoming, and instead a US Train and Equip Program for the Georgian military enabled it to reassert control over the Pankisi Gorge, and thus remove the rationale behind Moscow's threats (Cornell and Yalowitz 2004, 112). Nevertheless, Moscow gradually stepped up its pressure on Georgia, using economic warfare (including a full embargo in 2006), diplomatic pressure and subversion, as well as the manipulation of unresolved conflicts. In 2007, Russia twice used force against Georgian territory (Cornell et al. 2007). This was not met with a concrete Western response, and thus directly led to Russia's premeditated invasion of the country in 2008 (Asmus 2010). Following this invasion, the Russian leadership took a leaf out of the American book, and demanded a regime change in Georgia—betraying the true aims of the military campaign (Rice 2011). The operation in Georgia, of course, was a precursor to Russia's military actions in Ukraine six years later.

The decline of Russo-Georgian relations is often blamed on the government of Mikheil Saakashvili, who came to power in the Rose Revolution of 2003. But it is important to recall that the deterioration of relations followed Putin's coming to power in 1999, not Saakashvili's in 2003. The Rose Revolution, however, did affect the geopolitics of the region, because it injected a normative aspect into the realpolitik of the post-Soviet space. The Bush administration's Freedom Agenda led it to increase support for Georgia and subsequently Ukraine, while the US's commitment to less democratic countries that had aligned with Washington waned. Moscow seized on this opportunity to back up authoritarian governments across the region, and to instil in them the fear that Washington was out to overthrow them (Ambrosio 2009). This policy produced results on several occasions. Most notably, in 2005, Moscow lobbied strongly to have the American military base expelled from Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan, and in subsequent years worked to ensure the removal of the remaining US base in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, Bishkek's refusal to follow Moscow's line on this issue led Moscow to deploy a new tactic—supporting a coup d'état of its own, which brought down the government of Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010 (*Stratfor.com* 2010). The US base was closed in 2014.

Furthermore, since 2010 Moscow has aggressively stepped up its efforts to forcibly reintegrate the former Soviet Union, strong-arming countries into joining first the Eurasian Customs Union and subsequently the Eurasian Economic Union (Starr and Cornell 2014). In sum, Moscow's policy in the former Soviet space in the past 15 years has been fairly straightforward: a growing pressure on post-Soviet countries to desist from integration or alignment with the West, and a readiness to deploy ever-harsher instruments of power to advance its goals.

The Western failure to respond

The Western approach to Russia has generally failed to recognise this fundamental divergence of interests, and has sought cooperation and common interests. Up until the Russian invasion of Georgia, the US, France and Great Britain were continuing to draft UN Security Council resolutions praising the Russian peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia, in spite of Russia's increasingly interventionist policies in that territory. Further, Western leaders tried to explain to Moscow that stable, democratic states on its periphery would be in Russia's interest. Even after the war, the West imposed only a few short months of sanctions on Russia, which were promptly lifted after symbolic Russian concessions. Indeed, the incoming Obama administration responded with its Reset diplomacy with Russia—essentially rewarding Russia with newfound attention and an effort to improve ties. A full review of this initiative is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is notable how Moscow interpreted the Reset: on the one hand, as an admission that the Bush administration, not Russian policies, had been at fault for the poor state of bilateral relations; and on the other, as an implicit acceptance of the Russian 'sphere of privileged interests' in the former Soviet space. As Shevtsova (2014) has noted, 'the Russian elite interpreted the reset as weakness on the part of the Obama Administration and as an invitation to be more assertive in the post-Soviet space and beyond'. As Blank (forthcoming) has observed, Obama administration officials 'admit

that the objective of the reset policy was to restore some formula for integrating Russia with the West. However, they never seemed to grasp that Russia, even during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, was not interested in any such integration'.

This led the Reset diplomacy to fail by 2012. Yet it was not replaced by any other clear initiative, and there were no concrete steps taken when, in September 2013, Moscow coerced Armenia's president, Serzh Sargsyan, into abandoning a fully negotiated Association Agreement with the EU in favour of accession to the Eurasian Union—without any prior communication with his cabinet or parliament (Grigoryan 2014). Again, this was a precursor to the much more substantial pressure that Ukraine was exposed to, which eventually led to the Euromaidan and subsequently to Russia's war on Ukraine.

European leaders did not fare better. In 2010 the German government took the initiative to explore the idea of closer security cooperation between Europe and Russia. At a summit in Meseberg in June 2010, Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Medvedev signed a memorandum to 'explore the establishment of an EU–Russia Political and Security Committee'—if implemented, a considerable step towards changing the architecture of European security. But Merkel explicitly raised the resolution of the conflict in Moldova's Transnistria as a test case for EU–Russia security cooperation, and the memorandum promised joint efforts in that direction (Socor 2010). Moscow failed to respond, in spite of the considerable policy gains it stood to reap if it had cooperated on this conflict.

A case of compartmentalisation par excellence is the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, for which the US and France are co-chairs of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe process tasked with resolving the conflict. Russia's role in fomenting the conflict in the early 1990s is well-documented, and many observers consider it self-evident that Russia has no interest in its resolution—because the conflict essentially guarantees Moscow's control over Armenian foreign and defence policy. The conflict thus provided Russia with a foothold in a region that Russian leaders have considered of great strategic importance for over two hundred years. Despite this, Western leaders did not object when, following the Russian invasion of Georgia, President Medvedev very publicly took the lead in the peace process. Far from pointing out the hypocrisy of this initiative, Western leaders willingly went along with it up until its failure. This approach did not end with the war in Ukraine. Even after Russia fomented a new unresolved conflict in the Donbas practically out of thin air, the US co-chair in the negotiations, Ambassador James Warlick, continued to argue that the US and Russia 'see eye to eye' on Nagorno-Karabakh (Tamrazian 2013). That statement wilfully ignores the now obvious fact that Moscow uses 'frozen conflicts' as a key instrument in subverting and undermining the sovereignty of post-Soviet states.

The conflict in Ukraine is, in a way, the consequence and culmination of Western policy towards Russia in the former Soviet space. Having seen little resistance to its steps to perfect tactics of hybrid warfare against smaller post-Soviet states, there was little to restrain Moscow from taking the plunge in Ukraine in 2014. In fairness, while far from ideal, the Western response to the Ukraine crisis has, so far, been substantial. Western leaders have imposed tough sanctions and maintained the unity of the transatlantic alliance for over two years—a considerable achievement compared to 2008. Yet while this

has no doubt come as a surprise to the Russian leadership, it has not undone Russia's effective truncation of the Ukrainian state.

Syria: incompatible interests

The most recent example of compartmentalisation is Syria, where the US has gone to great lengths to solicit Russian cooperation—so much so that the US secretary of state was prepared to wait for three hours for a meeting with Vladimir Putin (Walker 2013). And yet again, American and Russian interests remain opposed. While the US seeks the removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Russia is the strongest supporter of the Assad regime on the international scene. In support of this, Russia found a perfect opportunity to intervene in autumn 2013, when President Obama appeared to be on the path to begin military action in Syria. Obama's delineation of a 'red line' regarding the regime's use of chemical weapons appeared to have forced a reluctant US president into a new conflict in the Middle East. His reluctance was deep-seated, and exacerbated by America's previous underestimation of the threat posed by IS. As a result, Obama's own urge that 'Assad must go' (*Wall Street Journal* 2013) was tempered by apprehension about what would follow a collapse of the Syrian regime. Sensing this reluctance, Putin launched his own plan, centred on the removal of the Syrian regime's chemical weapons. Obama rapidly embraced this exit strategy, and urged Congress to indefinitely postpone a vote on military action (Boyer 2013). However, the development sent out shockwaves across the wider region—with a serious loss of credibility for the US president, and the marked return of Russia as a power player in the Middle East.

Indeed, it is against this backdrop that Russia's military deployment in Syria should be evaluated. The Russian leadership had clearly concluded that the US did not have a Syria strategy, and that Turkey, which wanted to intervene to topple Assad, would not move without the US in lockstep. As George Friedman (2016) has argued, Russia's intervention in 'Syria was not about Syria'. It was motivated in part by saving the Assad regime, but equally by 'showing that it could' (Friedman 2016) to the US and to a domestic audience, following being bogged down in Ukraine:

It demonstrated to the United States that it had the ability and will to intrude into areas that the United States regarded as its own area of operations. It changed the perception of Russia as a declining power unable to control Ukraine, to a significant global force. Whether this was true was less important—it needed to appear to be true. (Friedman 2016)

In so doing, Moscow in fact applied a number of the lessons learned from its warfare in Chechnya. Indeed, during the second Chechen war Moscow applied most, if not all, of its resources to defeating the nationalist, moderate elements of the Chechen resistance—rather than targeting the radical Islamist, indeed jihadi, elements of the resistance. While counter-intuitive, the reason was straightforward: removing the moderate forces essentially removed any opponent to Moscow with international legitimacy, thereby essentially forcing the West, reluctantly, to accept that the choice in Chechnya

was between Russia's brutal appointee, Ramzan Kadyrov, and Al Qaeda-type jihadis (Foxall 2015).

Similarly in Syria, the Russian intention all along was to leave a choice between the Assad regime and IS, a situation in which Western leaders would grudgingly accept the Syrian regime as the lesser evil. It is for precisely this reason that Russian bombing overwhelmingly targeted not IS, but Syrian opposition groups aligned with the US, Turkey or other Arab allies. In other words, whereas the US and Europe ideally want to defeat IS and ease Assad out of power in a negotiated settlement, Russia wants to eliminate any military force on the ground that could help to achieve that objective. The goals of the West and Russia are simply incompatible. Yet in spite of this, the US and Europe continue to seek ways to convince Moscow to cooperate to resolve the Syrian conflict.

The way forward

From the above, it is abundantly clear that the Western approach to Russia has come to the end of the road. The cause of this failure lies not primarily in problems with the implementation of policy but in the very assumptions that undergird it. Russia's interests diverge fundamentally from those of the West. Indeed, they are deeply anti-Western. As long as the Western powers fail to understand this, they are unlikely to develop policies that achieve success.

What, then, is the alternative? It rests, foremost, on reversing the Western, and particularly American, disengagement from affairs in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East that has been manifest for nearly a decade. The Obama administration's ambition to extricate the US from military morasses in the Middle East was understandable. It is now equally apparent that neither the world nor the US is better off for leaving the security affairs of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus or the Middle East to others. Indeed, there is a widespread belief that 'any foreign intervention essentially, if not exclusively, entails large-scale military operations as distinct from diplomatic or indirect approaches like providing weapons or using forces to display resolve and deter conflicts . . . such interventions are also believed to be inherently futile' (Blank 2014, 167).

This will also mean ensuring that vacuums do not arise that can be filled by Russian adventurism. In Eastern Europe, the lack of Western vigilance, and particularly the absence of American engagement in security affairs, was key to creating an environment in which the Russian war in Ukraine became possible, just as the same neglect had created permissive conditions for the invasion of Georgia in 2008. In Syria, the Obama administration's hesitation and indecision did exactly the same—allowing a situation to emerge which provided fertile ground for Russian action against Western interests. In both cases, the disagreements within the US administration, almost public in their character, allowed Moscow ample time to draw conclusions and act on them. Even more recently, the Western failure to react substantively to renewed fighting

between Armenia and Azerbaijan in April 2016 has once again allowed Moscow the privilege of taking the lead, to the detriment of both countries.

With regard to Russia, the solution begins by understanding that Moscow sees all areas of conflict through the prism of its zero-sum foreign policy. Thus, all conflicts or crises are interlinked and constitute opportunities to undermine Western cohesion and Western interests. If this reality is recognised, it will become possible to adopt policies that advance Western interests both in each of these conflicts and in general, and will prevent Moscow from taking advantage of Western weakness or incoherence.

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