

# Moscow's 'reactive' foreign policy risks turning Russia into a declining power

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30/04/2015

*How have Russia's long-term foreign policy goals been affected by the Ukraine crisis? **Cristian Nitoiu** writes that Russia's actions during the crisis have been largely reactive and that the country has suffered from both isolation from the West and the perception from non-Western actors that it now operates from a position of weakness. He argues that a clear long-term strategy is required to prevent Russia from becoming a declining power on the global stage.*



Throughout the Ukraine crisis Russia has seemed to be one step ahead of the West. Its actions have caught the EU and US by surprise and the West was not prepared to counter Russia's assertive stance during the crisis. Despite this, however, the image of Russia taking the lead in the crisis is nevertheless highly misleading.

At first glance the Russian annexation of Crimea and support for the rebels in the Donbass region could be seen as part of a well-defined long-term strategy which had been planned in advance. However, Russia's foreign policy is far more reactive than this. Putin has proven to be skilled at anticipating the moves of the West, as well as their response to Russia's actions. Moscow's engagement in Ukraine was in fact a reaction to the perception that a change in the world order is imminent and being driven by the West.

For the Kremlin, the US intervention in Iraq, the independence of Kosovo and the Arab Spring have been a sign that the West is trying to carve out a new world order from which Russia is increasingly squeezed out. Russia's assertive actions in Ukraine can be framed as a response to this: Moscow hoped that by acting first and by surprising the West it could take advantage of the changing world order and transform the rules of the game for its own benefit. Putin himself has characterised the decision to annex Crimea and reshape the geopolitics of the region as a **sudden reaction** to the fall of the Yanukovich regime.

Besides catching the West off guard, Russia has also aimed to strike friendships with other powers unhappy at what they see as the Western-led world order. China, India and Turkey have been at the **forefront** of Putin's efforts to push for a world order where Russia has an important voice. He has swayed the leaders of these countries with preferential energy or military deals in exchange for the recognition of Russia's status as a great power. However, both strategies are not sustainable in the medium-term and already seem to have become problematic.

First, Russia has lost the element of surprise. The West has **lost** what faith it had in Putin and is now less willing to accept that Russia is working for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and the preservation of Ukraine within its current borders. Reports of Russian soldiers fighting in the Donbass



region have also [flooded the internet](#), making it increasingly difficult for the Kremlin to convince the international community of its neutrality in the conflict.

Moreover, both the EU and the US are far better prepared than a year ago to take a decisive stance toward Russia. In the event of a further breakdown of the Minsk agreement, which has been [predicted in the West](#), the US is likely to more seriously consider sending lethal weapons to Ukraine. This will not only [escalate the conflict](#), but will also see Russia trapped in a situation that is bound to strain its economy, which is already weakened by current military efforts and economic sanctions. While the EU may have 'sleepwalked' into the crisis when it pushed for Ukraine to sign its Association Agreement, Russia is now sleepwalking into a conflict which the West is increasingly more willing and better equipped to handle.

Second, Putin's efforts to secure support from non-Western powers have fallen short of achieving their desired effects. These actions have not been part of a clearly defined long-term strategy, but have rather been a reaction to the stand-off with the West and other developments such as the US 'pivot' toward Asia.

China, India, and Turkey view Russia as an increasingly isolated state which is in a position of vulnerability. They have therefore come to appreciate that they hold the upper hand in most negotiations with Moscow. Moreover, there are [indications](#) that Russia's refusal to acknowledge the presence of Russian troops in Crimea and the Donbass region has made these states less willing to place trust in Moscow's good faith.

Putin's visits to each of these countries over the last year have been [presented](#) by the Kremlin as key successes in his strategy for challenging the West. However in each case Putin was faced with extremely [tough negotiations](#) and was forced to make concessions far greater than he would have wished. The overall impression portrayed to the rest of the world by these actions has not been one of strength, but of a Russia that is in [decline](#) and which may already classify as a second rate power.

Vulnerability and dishonesty are dangerous traits in a multipolar world and in order to shake off this image Russia will need to present a model of engaging with global actors on a more strategic basis, rather than merely anticipating or reacting to what other states do. There are three elements which could be included in such an approach.

First, Russia should seek to build trust with other states by shifting its discourse from simply defending Russia's national interest to a more general approach that takes a lead on key areas of global concern, such as humanitarian issues. By adopting a strategy that looks beyond the abstract ideas of patriotism, nationalism and sovereignty, Moscow could emphasise that it seeks to act globally rather than merely to enhance its national interests at the expense of others.

Second, Russia must address the perception that isolation from the West has made it vulnerable. Ultimately, this would entail a long-term process of shifting the sources of power and wealth of the Russian state. However a short-term goal should be to diversify the Russian economy and end its over-reliance on energy and military exports. A more solid and diverse economy based on the development of other sectors such as agriculture and general manufacturing would make Russia less vulnerable to sanctions or the hard-bargains driven by non-Western actors.

Finally, Russia must show that it can offer a more viable and equal alternative to the Western-led world order. It needs to convince other states that the Russian alternative does not involve mere extortion and gives an equal voice to states disaffected by the West. Currently, Russia's main alternative, the Eurasian Union, is failing in this regard, as [Belarus](#) and [Kazakhstan](#) are increasingly exhibiting a lack of influence over its direction.

Survival as a great power in a multipolar world is ultimately about taking the initiative and being recognised by other states. On both counts, Russia's current foreign policy falls short of meeting these principles. Without shifting its approach from a reactive strategy to an active one built on clear long-term goals, Russia is at risk of returning to the level of status and power it held during the 1990s.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## **About the author**

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