

US POLICIES TOWARDS RUSSIA IN THE LIGHT OF WAR IN UKRAINE: FROM ENGAGING A “COOPERATIVE POWER” TO DEFENSIVE CONTAINMENT OF REGIONAL “CHALLENGER”

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List of contents

Introduction

US policies before Crimea: Russia as a “cooperative power” – illusion or reality?

US policies after Crimea: Russia as a geopolitical and ideological challenger

Long-term trends in US strategy after Crimea: No “pivot to Europe” only defensive containment of a regional power. What are the potential risks?

Introduction

The main ambition of this paper is to analyze the main changes and drivers of American policies towards Russia recently. The Ukrainian-Russian conflict, which erupted in spring 2014, was defined as a game changer not only for European security architecture and NATO itself, but also as for the US foreign policy in the regional context. Russia, being one of the focus points of Barack Obama’s “change” – with so-called “reset” of bilateral relations – was defined as a “cooperative power.” According to that concept the United States made endeavors to incorporate Russia to the US-led international system, also by offering unilateral withdrawal from political, economic and also military positions. While the “reset” did not bring watershed-like progress or change in Russian-American relations, on the contrary, the US administration kept the bilateral relations with Russia in “low profile” in comparison to the Asia-Pacific, not to mention the focus on “building strong America at home.” The eruption of crisis and later open military conflict in Eastern Europe turned the American attention towards Russia, but with significant limits. First, it will not slow the “rebalancing” towards Asia-Pacific; second, the US engagement in Europe, in general, militarily and politically, remains limited, but with important regional, intra-European rebalance towards the East; third, the US will not take active lead to reverse Russian gains, but will focus on defensive “containment” of Russia, in order to limit its further military, strategic or territorial gains. A major strategic shift could appear only if Russia will decide to destroy the Ukrainian statehood and threaten the Eastern flank of the Atlantic Alliance, which has a potential to rewrite strategic map not only regionally but also on a global scale.

US policies before Crimea¹: Russia as a “cooperative power” – illusion or reality?

One of the most important modifications of American foreign policy during president Barack Obama, so far was related to Russia. The first presidential period’s paradigm was driven by “change,” with the “reset” in American – Russian relations as one of its key elements. The “doctrine of change” had deeper meaning than just some modifications: the “change” itself had to have strategic consequences by increasing the American “soft-power” or “attractiveness” which had to broaden the US room of maneuver worldwide (Ondrejcsák 2009).

Based on belief that the global public will accept that the Obama-led United States is “different” than during the previous administration, and by showing “goodwill” it is possible to solve problems even in most complicated and controversial bilateral issues with countries like Iran or Russia. As Samantha Power, one of the leading security policy advisors to Barack Obama wrote in the *New Republic*’s March 3, 2003: *“Instituting a doctrine of mea culpa would enhance our credibility by showing that American decision-makers do not endorse the sins of their predecessors.”* As President Obama emphasized in his program-giving article in *Foreign Policy* (Renewing 2007) and later in several speeches, including the symbolic one in Cairo (Obama Cairo Speech 2009), he wanted to break with the “past” and re-establish American influence in its complexity.

It was obvious that without a remarkable progress in US-Russian relations there is no global success of “change.” It led to the concept of “resetting” those relations and building a new basis for future cooperation. Besides approaching the Russian leadership after his election (Baker 2009), Barack Obama spoke about necessity to “reset” bilateral relations also in Moscow in July 2009, while Vice-President Biden was first who used the term itself in his speech given at the 2009 Munich Security Conference (Biden, Munich speech, 2009). In his speech given at the New Economic School he identified countering nuclear proliferation and global terrorism as the most important common challenges (Obama 2009). But rather than particular issues, the appeal for general cooperation and “working together” based on common interest, was the most important message he delivered.

1 “Crimea” is understood symbolically for reference to combined Russian military and political actions and operations in Ukraine, from the beginning of 2014. The first formal milestone was the annexation of the peninsula by Russian Federation, after conducting military and special operation forces operations (February-March 2014), followed by increased political and military engagement in Eastern part of Ukraine.

The key concept of the “reset” was the endeavor to integrate Russia to US-led international system, and to transform Russia into a “cooperative power.” What’s more, “cooperative engagement” was one of key elements of Barack Obama’s first National Security Strategy, released in 2010. The document (NSS 2010, 11) declares that the US “*seeks to build a stable, substantive, multidimensional relationship with Russia, based on mutual interests*” (NSS 2010, 44). The same wording was used in 2012 Strategic Defense Guidance: “*our engagement with Russia remains important, and we will continue to build a closer relationship in areas of mutual interest and encourage it to be a contributor across a broad range of issues*” (White House 2012). Moreover – despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February/March 2014 and annexation of Crimea – the US Quadrennial Defense Review issued in March 2014 still declared that the US “*will continue to work to achieve a Europe that is peaceful and prosperous, and we will engage Russia constructively in support of that objective*” (QDR 2014, 35).² Those declarations also showed these two, but mutually interlinked tracks of US politics towards Russia. First, the pragmatic level, based on belief of possibility of cooperation in concrete areas based on mutual interests of both states. It includes nuclear proliferation issues and reduction of nuclear arsenals, as well as transport and logistics in the operation in Afghanistan troughs Russian territory most exclusively. The second, more strategic level issue was the “cooperative power” concept itself.

In order to make Russia interested in the US concept, and according to paradigm of “change,” the US was willing to cancel or modify several programs or policies which were perceived by Russia as problematic or controversial. It included the cancellation of building up of elements of global missile defense in Central Europe (missiles in Redzikowo,³ Poland and radar site in Brdy, Czech Republic) in 2009 which caused a wave of resentment in the region, especially Poland and finally led to plans to build and develop a “national” Polish BMD capability (Kulesa 2014). The Obama administration also eased the enthusiasm in continuation of the NATO’s expansion, and the discussion about it (in accordance with the views of some influential European allies, including Germany and France). While the US administration formally confirmed its commitment to further NATO enlargement on permanent basis, it did not express the necessary leadership in order to push the idea forward (even though the then-Secretary of State, Clinton declared at NATO’s Chicago summit “*I believe this summit should be the last summit that*

2 Nevertheless it is necessary to add that the document itself was prepared at least several months ago, and the authors could not predict the events in the beginning of 2014.

3 For detailed background on this issue, including political framework and technical details see (Kulesa 2014).

is not an enlargement summit" (RFE-RL 2012). In reality it did not hold true and further enlargement did not happen in Wales in September 2014).

On the other hand it would be a simplification to substantiate both the revision of the BMD concept and the reduction of the momentum of NATO enlargement only as a result of changed US policy towards Russia. Several high-ranking representatives of the Obama Administration were skeptical towards the BMD project itself launched by the previous US administration. Their concerns were related to the crucial technological challenges and/or financial sustainability. Internal political disputes in the Czech Republic as opposition against the radar grew, as well as Polish-American disputes over additional US commitments (out-of-NATO), as well as Iran's modified focus on more limited-range missile also contributed to changes of the US approach (Gates 2014). As Former Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates argues *"Those who would later charge that Obama walked away from the third site in Europe to please the Russians seemed oblivious to growing Polish and Czech opposition to the site and, more important, to the reality that the Defense Department was already reordering its missile defense priorities to focus on the immediate short- to medium-range-missile threat. While there certainly were some in the State Department and the White House who believed the third site in Europe was incompatible with the Russian "reset," we in Defense did not"* (Gates 2014).

The Obama Administration's reserved approach towards further enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance was also based on internal US discussions of the future of Eurasian geopolitics. One of the ideological architects of the NATO enlargement to Central Europe and Baltics, Ronald Asmus mentioned significant differences in stability, internal cohesion, and economy of Central European countries, compared to countries like Ukraine or Georgia: *"the western Balkans, Georgia, Ukraine, and the wider Black Sea region are less stable and more at risk today than central and eastern Europe were a decade ago"* (written in 2008 - author's note) (Asmus 2008). However, he supports the "expansion of the democratic West" which requires a new strategic approach in new circumstances: *"A world in which Ukraine has successfully anchored itself to the West would be very different from one in which it has failed to do so. A world in which Georgia's success has sparked democratic progress in the region and helped stabilize the southern flank of the Euro-Atlantic community would be a much safer one than a world in which Georgia has become an authoritarian state in Russia's sphere of influence"* (Asmus 2008).

Despite American motivations based on internal calculations or broader strategic circumstances one cannot exclude the strong role of the “Russian factor” and its central role in BMD modifications as well as potential NATO enlargement. By those concessions, the American administration planned to make Russia interested in constructive cooperation with regards to Afghanistan to secure a significant increase of logistic and supplies to US and NATO troops through Russian territory (Padrtová 2012), Iran’s nuclear program (by engaging Russia as a part of international coalition executing economic and political pressure on Teheran), or reducing strategic nuclear forces (in April 2010 the US and Russia signed a nuclear arms reduction treaty, START which reduces nuclear capabilities of both states in operationally deployed nuclear warheads to 1,550 among other limitations), (U.S. DS n.d.). Besides that, the American administration also supported Russia’s accession to World Trade Organization, a long-awaited Russian aim, which was postponed as a consequence of Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, but came to fruition in 2012.

Besides American efforts to attract Russia, the overall trends in US strategy and security thinking at the global level could be described as favorable for broader strategic reconciliation. The “rebalancing” or “pivot” to Asia-Pacific also supported – albeit indirectly – the “reset” with Russia by turning American attention and resources away from regions strategically important for Russia (South Caucasus, East Europe). The “new approach” of the US foreign policy caused serious doubts in those regions about the American commitment to their security long before the announcement of the “pivot,” which were expressed in “open letters” (RFE-RL 2009), as well as discrete political and diplomatic messages⁴ towards the Obama administration. These concerns were intensified in early 2012 after the release of the US Defense Guidance whether the “rebalancing” will not leave Europe and South Caucasus more vulnerable to Russian assertiveness (for more detailed analyses see (Rhodes Panorama 2012). On the other hand, Central European representatives are often “locked” mentally in their region and exercise regionally-limited approaches, often without taking the broader or global strategic framework into consideration. This is especially the case for US-Russia relations, and American approach towards Moscow, when Central Europeans tend to forget its broader, in some cases global dimension, which naturally affects their region.

4 Those concerns were more or less openly communicated via diplomatic channels but also on informal conferences, consultations (author’s consultations with Central European, Georgian and Azerbaijani representatives).

US policies after Crimea: Russia as a geopolitical and ideological challenger

The basic conceptual problem from the very beginning was whether it is possible to harmonize the US position as a status quo power in Europe and the regions around, as well as in the Middle East, with Russia's position as a "challenger" of the status quo, especially in the South Caucasus and also in East Europe.

While the American administration under Barack Obama made serious efforts to turn Russia into a "cooperative power" (as described above), Russian steps were made in quite an opposite direction. While the steps of Obama administration which were tailored to engage Russia were taken with reluctance by American allies, for Russian leadership, they were seen as not sufficient. The most important challenge was how to "offer Russia enough," keep the confidence of regional allies, and not to compromise American security interests. That challenge would be extremely serious even if the Russian leadership would have a will to play a role of cooperative power and define its security interest not as an alternative to the West or NATO. But despite American steps, Russia positioned itself not only as a geopolitical challenger of the US, but also as an "alternative" in ideology, values and a way of organizing its society.

Russian opposition towards the West in general, but especially NATO and the United States was increasingly present not only in political discourse, but also in strategic documents. President Putin's speech at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 12, 2007 can be considered as one of watershed moments. He declared opposition towards the "unilateral" approach of the United States, NATO enlargement and missile defense to be built in Central Europe (Putin 2007). In the Military Doctrine adopted in 2010 the enlargement of NATO or its "*move the military infrastructure of NATO member countries closer to the borders of the Russian Federation*" is considered as one of the main "external dangers" for Russian security. The same description applies for "*the creation and deployment of strategic missile defence systems*" (Kremlin 2010). All these concerns ranked very high on the hierarchy of "dangers" listed by the document. In this same vein, the "National Security Strategy of Russian Federation until 2020" declares, Russia's long-standing opposition to potential *eastward enlargement of the Alliance and plans to move its military infrastructure to Russian*

borders, as well as attempts of NATO to play a global role in security relations (White House 2009), (SCRF 2009).

While Russian concerns related to NATO enlargement and missile defense could be – in theory – addressed by *rapprochement* of the Obama administration, some other elements were hardly to be harmonized with US security interests. At the global level, Russia has become a challenger of the United States-backed international system and status quo, which was materialized by Moscow’s strategic return to the Middle East during the Syrian crisis early period (and especially in 2013), among others. At the regional level, the doctrine of protection of Russians abroad could be considered as a direct threat to countries with significant Russian minorities, with some of them being endangered by their statehood (including Ukraine, as the events in early 2014 demonstrated). That doctrine also becomes one of the critical elements of the 2010’s Military Doctrine, especially in reference to the use of Russian Armed Forces. According to the document one of the key missions of the Russian Armed Forces is to “*ensure the protection of its citizens located beyond the borders of the Russian Federation*” (Kremlin 2010).

Moreover, while the US announced serious military downsizing in Europe leaving only two Combat Brigade Teams of land forces (Sheftick 2012), (and still capable air force) – and Europe demilitarized itself dramatically, with very rare exemptions (and solely Poland in Central Europe) – the Russian Federation conducted the most serious military reform and build-up in the post-Cold War period, especially after the analysis of the shortfalls during the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008.⁵ Besides the reform and reorganization of Russian Armed Forces, serious modernization programs took place supported by serious budgetary increase, by 50% since 2008 (Perlo-Freeman and Solmirano 2013). Simultaneously with that Russia conducted several large-scale military exercises which included operations in Western strategic direction, as Zapad-2013 (September 20-26, 2013), (Järvenpää 2014). From 2008 Russia also renewed long-range training and “showing-the-flag” flights of its strategic bombers, both above the Pacific and Atlantic.

Besides the military build-up and exercises, the Russian leadership increased the pressure on domestic scene, especially against the NGOs, considered as a “fifth column” of the West. Moreover, in 2012 – during the attack against the US diplomatic corps in Libya, conducted in September 11th, 2012 – the U.S. Agency for International Development (one of key supporters of democratic transition in the country) was

⁵ For detailed analysis of Russian military reform see (Hass 2011).

expelled from Russia. Also the Nunn-Lugar program for cooperation on destroying and securing old Soviet-build weapons of mass destruction was cancelled by Moscow. These particular steps were connected with the overall deterioration of US-Russian relations after the switch-over of the Putin-Medvedev tandem at presidency and disputes over NATO's operation in Libya in 2011.

Until the Russian military operations in Ukraine begun it was, at least at the theoretical level, possible to maintain some kind of balance between the above-mentioned three elements of the US dilemma. The United States reduced and modified its ambitions to build up a missile defense capability in Europe, the American diplomacy was trying to assure Central European allies about the US commitment to their security, and Russia exercised "only" doctrinal and rhetorical assertiveness. On the other hand, it did not create any significant progress in US-Russia relations, which increasingly became more antagonistic after the political changes in 2011-12, but not openly competitive. Russia gradually became first as a "challenger" for USA-backed strategic status quo, and then openly broke it in February-March 2014. Alongside with the geopolitics, Russia presented itself as an "alternative" in ideology, and an example for some authoritarian, or authoritarian-like regimes in the European space.

At the beginning of 2014 the Russian invasion to Ukraine, occupation and annexation of Crimea, together with military engagement in Donbas seriously changed the strategic situation in Europe. First, Russia broke a taboo of territorial integrity of Ukraine (or a sovereign European state, in general); second, by Russian military operations it became clear that the basic paradigm of European security and/or military strategies ("no threat of major military conflict in Europe"), is not valid anymore and Russia poses a real military threat at least for Central and Eastern European states; third, by seizing Crimea the Russian military gained excellent power-projection possibilities, not only in Black Sea basin but also towards Central Europe. Besides those strategic-level shifts, there are serious consequences at tactical level, especially the ability of Russia to employ multi-level and combined operations to reach its strategic goals. It includes, besides military operations, the potential to shape "strategic choices" of several European countries by political influence, economic blackmail or influence, misusing of minorities; plus psychological operations combined with propaganda and very extended and creative use of special operations to create an "opposing mass" and seize strategic points in the very first phase of military operations.

From the very beginning of the Russian operation in Ukraine the US and NATO announced several steps as a reaction to Russia's actions. Along with economic sanctions, the most visible were the operative reinforcements of Allied, mostly American presence in Central Europe and the Baltics (for more details see Ondrejcsák and Rhodes 2014). President Obama also announced the so-called European Reassurance Initiative in June 2014, with budgetary support of around 1 billion USD. It includes small increase of the US presence, including increased presence in NATO's Baltic Air Policing, expanded naval presence in Baltic and Black Sea, expanded Marine rotations through the Black Sea Rotational Force in Romania, as well as improvement of infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe and repositioning of certain equipment (air force in Central and Eastern Europe and Marines in Norway) and more robust American participation in joint military exercises and trainings with allies (White House 2014).

The "temporary" reinforcements and US announcements were followed by political-strategic decisions made at the Wales summit⁶ which made a significant turn in the overall strategic orientation of the Alliance, bringing it "back" to its original mission, the territorial defense. The crucial question in this regard is whether those changes and commitments made by the US are of a strategic nature with global consequences able to modify long-term US strategies or their impact will remain at the regional level.

Long-term trends in US strategy after Crimea: No "pivot to Europe" only defensive containment of a regional power. What are the potential risks?

The key question after those developments was whether Europe and Russia will witness a new "pivot to Europe" by the United States and how the open Russian break-up of Europe's strategic balance will affect the US foreign and security policy as well as its global military posture. The US reactions can be grouped into several mutually overlapping areas: military, political and economic. For the purposes of this analysis – to assess whether the modifications launched by the US are of regional importance or have a broader global impact – it is necessary to look at the military and political sphere.

⁶ By creating Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) tailored for deployment at NATO's periphery, relocating some infrastructure towards the East to Central Europe and Baltics, increasing, however only temporary or rotational, military presence, Defense Capabilities Initiative (Belkin 2014).

At the level of military, we witnessed redeployments of US forces to the territory of Central European and Baltic States, as described above. On the other hand, it is very important to stress that the overall strength of those redeployments did not reach the strategic level and did not reverse the trend of downsizing the overall US military presence in Europe. The increase of military presence in Central Europe was managed as an "intra-European" redeployment, it means, the overall European military presence of the United States did not increase. Moreover, even this intra-European redeployment is limited, this despite several Central European representatives having advocated for more robust US military presence in the region, including former Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, now speaker of the Polish Parliament (Marshal of the Sejm), Radek Sikorski, who called for the deployment of "two heavy brigades" or 10 thousand troops to Poland (Waterfield 2014). Nevertheless, the main US military hubs in Europe remain in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, which have increasingly changed their mission to support out-of-Europe deployments.

The military reaction of the US is based both on political and strategic perception of Russia. At the political level, the description of Russia by the US president as a "regional power" was crucial to understand the US approach. As President Obama declared "*Russia is a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbors — not out of strength but out of weakness,*" "*They don't pose the number one national security threat to the United States,*" (Wilson 2014). Contrary to China, which is increasingly considered as a global player, Russia's global weight in the eyes of the US decisionmakers is decreasing. What's more, the description of Russia has dramatically changed in comparison to previous decades, when Russia was perceived as a global actor with global ambitions and possibilities. The clear evidence of the shrinking of Russia's importance and position in US strategic thinking are its description and decreasing importance in American strategic documents, among others. The first National Security Strategy of 1994 issued by president Clinton's administration has put emphasis on transformation and transition of Russia (NSS 1994), followed by the Strategy from 1997 which emphasized integration of Russia into European system as a strategic goal of the US: "*Our objective is to complete the construction of a truly integrated, democratic and secure Europe, with a democratic Russia as a full participant.*"... "*we seek to define a new and coherent NATO-Russia partnership, one that ensures Russia's full participation in the post-Cold War European security system*" (NSS 1997). The most recent Strategy released by the Obama administration in 2010 states that

“Russia has reemerged in the international arena as a strong voice” (NSS 2010, 8), but de facto lowers the country’s strategic importance vis-à-vis China and Asian allies and partners (NSS 2010, 44). The only sphere where Russia’s weight is considered significant is the reduction of nuclear forces. However this “change” of hierarchy has begun already during the G.W.Bush, as evidenced in the administration’s strategic documents, especially NSS 2002 and 2006, but also demonstrated by the Quadrennial Defense Reviews.

To sum up, the military, political and economic elements of the American reaction to Russian operations in Ukraine reached only the regional level, but not global-strategic. This is in accordance with American perception of Russia’s place in the global system expressed in “political speak” as a “regional power,” and also its potential and capabilities which does not require a more robust US engagement from the US perspective. If it was not for the nuclear strategic forces, the Russian military is still mediocre in comparison to American capabilities. It is capable of launching a successful offensive against militarily weaker neighboring states, as Georgia or Ukraine, and probably would be able to do so in the Baltics, in Central Asia, but still lacks the potential to launch a large-scale operation against the European allies. However analysis of Russian capabilities strictly from traditional military and economic point of view could lead to false consequences and underestimation of Moscow’s non-traditional capabilities. Among others, these include the extended use of special operations, destabilization of political and economic system of Central European states, as well as economic and political blackmail. The theoretical threat remains that Russia will not only challenge the existing status quo in Central Europe but will try to break it in case of lack of American (and European) engagement. By applying the “Narva doctrine”⁷ Russia has a potential not only to threaten the security of the Baltic states, but also compromise NATO and the Alliance’s overall credibility which could lead to break up of current European and Euro-Atlantic security architecture. This could in turn spell fatal consequences for American security as well.

Based on current American perspective taking into account limited Russian potential and less emphasis put on non-traditional operations and activities, the US places Russia in a position of a decreasing regional power from a long-term perspective, rather than assigning it a status of a

7 To deploy special operation forces, to disrupt a Baltic state, to create chaos by ambiguity, to apply political and economic blackmail, to destabilize the political system by using minorities and extremist groups, but everything under the threshold of NATO’s Washington Treaty’s Article V. about collective defense.

global player. After the events in Ukraine, the United States has replaced the concept of "cooperative power" to limited containment, which is strictly defensive and does not incorporate offensive measures. It did not change the historical trends; notably the rebalance towards Asia, and will still "only" guarantee a partial American strategic attention to East Europe.

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