

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE: HOW MOSCOW COURTS THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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SUMMARY

- Russia's war on Ukraine has locked Moscow and the West in a contest for global support. Both would like the rest of the world to side with them against the other.
- But they are both likely to ultimately realise that the rest of the world is not swayed by narratives, but by pragmatic engagement.
- This type of transactional relationship comes easier to Moscow than it does to the West, as evidenced by Russia's past outreach efforts.
- Since the beginning of the war though, Russia has become a one-issue country with all its foreign relationships now subordinate to the war effort.
- Russia's resources to engage with different regional agendas and partners' needs have shrunk and it is compensating by doubling down on propaganda. The war has forced Moscow to audit its foreign policy priorities and caused policy changes on several files.
- The West has an opportunity to profit from Russia's weakened position in this context. But it needs to learn to adapt its normative positions to a more pragmatic approach that focuses on its partners' – as well as its own – needs.

It was a few months into Russia's war on Ukraine when reaching out to the global south became a topic of discussion in the West. Having been shocked by the invasion, Europe speedily heaped new sanctions on Russia, bussed millions of Ukrainian refugees to safety, and scrambled to send arms to Kyiv. By summer 2022, though, when Russia had retreated from the outskirts of Kyiv and the West began to consider its longer-term strategy regarding the war that by then was there to stay, winning over the rest of the world emerged as one of the ideas.

The idea has both a symbolic and a practical dimension. If the non-Western world condemned Russia as wholeheartedly as the West does, Moscow would be isolated and may realise that it had reached a dead end. Furthermore, if the non-Western world joined the West in imposing sanctions on Russia, this would soon affect Russia's war-waging ability.

Meanwhile, Russia is doing the same, trying to solicit the support of the non-Western world and rally it against the West. This is clear in most of President Vladimir Putin's speeches these days, in which he castigates the West and invites the "global majority" to rise up against it. "It is obvious that the model of globalisation, which was largely formed by Western states – of course, in their own interests – is in a state of deep crisis," Putin stated at a recent foreign policy conference in Moscow. "A new, fairer, and more democratic system of international relations is emerging that meets the needs of the world majority."

But Russia's charm offensive will likely lead it to the same conclusion that the West is slowly reaching: this is not a battle of narratives. The West's attempt to explain to the rest of the world why it should side with Ukraine has been met with a firm rejection in the global south, where countries do not want to be forced into cold war style binary decisions that would limit their choices of partners and therefore their paths to growth.

Each of these countries has an agenda and agency of its own. They will choose their partners according to who can engage with them better in a practical and down-to-earth manner. Russia has been successful in its recent history in engaging with many countries across the global south through trade policy, security assistance, and diplomatic activities. But while Moscow's messaging stresses its goal of a "fair multipolar world", after the demise of Western hegemony, its war on Ukraine has limited its ability to act in the spirit of that multipolar world – to focus on the true needs of other countries and regions, as opposed to just treating them to anti-Western speeches.

The trajectory of Russia's relations with the global south may provide the West with some hope for its efforts to reach out to the rest of the world, if it can adapt its normative approach in favour of something much more pragmatic. This will not be easy. But adaptation is

something the free and democratic world has historically been better at than the authoritarians out there.

Russia's exploration of the world

Russia's relations with the non-Western world lend themselves to a fairly neat periodisation into three eras: 1992-2012, 2012-2022, and since February 2022.

For the first 20 years of independent post-Soviet Russia, most, if not all, of Moscow's international relationships were subordinate to its relationship with the United States and Europe. The way that global power became blended with Western values in the early 1990s left Russia with little choice. During that time, Moscow often used its leverage in third countries to please the West. In 2001, for example, Putin famously allowed the US to establish military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan during its 'war on terror'. Russia also signed up to a number of Western-led peacekeeping missions and lent advice to the US military in Afghanistan.

This is not to say that Moscow was always helpful to the West – increasingly it was not. But even when its position was unyieldingly at odds with that of the US and Europe, Russia's guiding motives were rooted in its overarching conversation with them. For example, Moscow firmly opposed the West's approach to Kosovo, which was based on human rights and the responsibility to protect principle, and refused to recognise Kosovo's independence, remaining loyal to its state-centric approach to international law. Putin later referred to Europe's support for Kosovo's independence as “driven by fleeting political considerations and their desire to please – I will put it bluntly – their big brother in Washington”.

The same is true of the conceptual level. When former foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov penned his conception of a multipolar world in the mid-1990s, for him it was about countering US hegemony and “constrain[ing] the United States with the help of other major powers” – as opposed to fruitful cooperation with non-Western countries as an end in itself. Likewise, Putin's now infamous Munich speech from 2007, in which he attacked the “unipolar order” dominated by the US in front of a Western audience gathered in Germany, should be understood – despite its insulting tone – first and foremost as an attempt to make the West change course.

This changed when Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012. He stopped giving polemical speeches to Western audiences and redefined Russia as a non-Western country – at least politically, though not quite culturally. By this stage, the Kremlin had decided that Russia would not achieve a satisfactory position in the Western-centric international system – one

Russian expert even suggested that the whole of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (between 2008 and 2012) was a sort of scoping exercise to see what Russia could achieve through greater cooperation with the West, with a discouraging verdict. Russia's relations with the rest of the world thus became ends in themselves, no longer capital to be used in Moscow's dialogue with the West. As Putin explained in late 2014, "Our goal is to have as many equal partners as possible, both in the West and in the East. We will expand our presence in those regions where integration is on the rise, where politics is not mixed with economy, and where obstacles to trade, to exchange of technology and investment and to the free movement of people are lifted."

Russia's involvement in Syria offers a good example of this evolution. In September 2015, Russia's intervention may have started out as part of Moscow's conversation with the West. Putin explained in a speech at the UN on the eve of Russia's intervention that "We think it is an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian Government and its Armed Forces, who are valiantly fighting terrorism face-to-face." But it soon morphed into something else. Addressing the rebellion was not as swift as Moscow may have hoped, which may have been a blessing for Russia, as it meant that it dealt closely with numerous regional actors, resulting in its return to the Middle East as a power broker to be reckoned with. Soon enough it was the only outside power that was on talking terms with all regional actors: Israel as well as Iran, the Turks as well as the Kurds. This was no small feat and, as Moscow found out, it came with financial bonuses – Saudi Arabia, for example, began to view Russia as a relevant actor and became much more open to hearing Moscow's views when setting oil quotas and prices. "This operation has brought true dividends," one Russian commentator stated at the time.^[1]

Emboldened in Syria, Russia started its forays into Africa. These followed a pattern somewhat similar to that in Syria – Moscow began by offering regime support to beleaguered leaders, for example in the Central African Republic in 2017 and Mali in the early 2020s, likely expecting to capitalise on the relationships later in ways that presented themselves. However, unlike in Syria, Russia's operations in the Central African Republic and Mali relied on private military companies (PMCs), often the now infamous Wagner group, rather than direct state involvement, and were likely steered by special services, rather than the Russian ministries for foreign affairs or defence. This offered Moscow considerable flexibility: an option to deny involvement should things go wrong, while reaping the fruits of what went well.

By early 2022, it seemed that Russia's decade as a 'non-Western power' had served it well. It was finally finding its feet in a world in which it was no longer a superpower. In a way, in early 2022 Moscow had it all: as neither the US nor China wanted it to side with the other, it was on talking terms with both. It was building up leverage in numerous corners of the world,

which could be used as and when needed. It had learned to effectively use military force to achieve political ends. Finally, even the US under President Joe Biden seemed ready to talk with Russia in a new manner, including about security, moving away from the post-cold war US policy to nudge Russia to accept its values-based security system. Even Ukraine's neutral status outside NATO suddenly seemed well within reach: by February 2022, there was a common, if quiet understanding among Western leaders that Ukraine's NATO membership was off the agenda for the time being; the question was just who should spell it out and how.

It is logical to ask, against this background, why Putin felt the need to launch an all-out war against Ukraine – because that war wrecked it all. Russia lost its ability to balance between China and the Western world. With its relations with the West broken, it suddenly became a lot more dependent on China for diplomacy, investments, trade, and technology. Now that the bulk of its army is preoccupied in Ukraine, Russia has lost its previous ability to flex its military muscles elsewhere. And following the mutiny of the late Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin against the Russian army, Moscow's handy tool in Africa is severely hampered.

Since February 2022, Moscow's relations with the rest of the world have been strictly in service of its war needs. Its invasion of Ukraine has made Russia a one-issue country, with few resources to devote to other agendas. In this context, Moscow must assess whether its foreign policy can directly help or hinder its war effort, and act accordingly, even if this neglects its other interests or reverses some long-term policies. When Azerbaijan took Nagorno-Karabakh by force in September, for example, Russia did not intervene, despite its efforts over the last years to preserve the status quo and its pride in being loyal to allies – unlike, as Moscow claims, the West. Moscow's relations with Baku and Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev's patrons in Turkey are now more important – helping the Kremlin to circumvent Western sanctions – than those with its Collective Security Treaty Organization ally Armenia.

Moscow is now seeking military aid, trade – relying on sanctions evasion – and political support from anyone willing to offer it. Africa, for instance, has seen a flurry of Russian diplomatic activity in 2023 – from a Russian-African parliamentary conference in Moscow in March to foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's tour of Kenya, Burundi, Mozambique, and South Africa in the summer, to the Russia-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg in July. Putin himself failed to attend a BRICS summit in South Africa, with Lavrov attending instead – likely because of the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC). But on his recent trip to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (which are not members of the ICC), he was accompanied by a large delegation of state officials and companies in search of deals on energy and trade cooperation.

In these relationships, Russia often finds itself reduced from a deal-maker to a deal-taker, forced to accept the conditions its partners set for lack of options and leverage. For example, Russia would benefit hugely from the planned Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline, which if constructed, would allow it to export its western Siberian gas – which was destined for European markets – to China. But Beijing, feeling no urgent shortage of gas, is in no hurry to approve the deal, meaning when it is eventually passed it will likely carry higher prices and terms that strongly favour China, in ways that would have been unthinkable before the war.

Moscow and Tehran

Moscow's relationship with Tehran illustrates the fluctuations in Russia's behaviour throughout these three eras.

The relationship between the two countries has always been guided by an array of factors, including economic interests, regional issues of the Caucasus and the Middle East, and the nuclear file. But before 2012, the most defining factor that shaped how Moscow treated Iran was Russia's relationship with the West, especially with the US. Until 2012, Moscow's relations with Tehran tended to move in the opposite direction to Russia-US relations, with Russia leveraging its links with Iran to shape its relations with Washington.

For instance, in the 1995 agreement between US vice president Al Gore and Russia's prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, Russia agreed to end military exports to Iran by 1999 and to refrain from signing any new deals – a promise that caused significant bitterness in Tehran. The souring of Russia-US relations during the waning years of the George W Bush presidency then saw a new upswing in Russian-Iranian cooperation that was again abruptly halted in 2010, when Medvedev, engaged by President Barack Obama's reset policy, supported the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929 that paved the way to harsh international sanctions on Iran. In addition, Russia unilaterally halted the export of S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Iran. In later interviews and writings, Russian experts on Iran readily admitted that the reason behind these fluctuations was that the Kremlin used its links with Tehran to gain leverage in Washington.

Putin's return as president in 2012 put an end to that. As he started to upgrade Russia's relations with the non-Western world, he also embraced Iran, calling it an "old traditional partner" – language that had rarely been heard before. In 2015, Putin overturned Medvedev's cancellation of S-300 missiles to Iran; and when the arms deliveries began in 2016, Iran in fact received an upgraded S-300 PMU-2 model, as the older promised version was no longer in production.

Russia's involvement in Syria from 2015 further intensified the two countries' military cooperation. In 2016, Iran, in an unprecedented move, allowed Russia to use its Shahid Nojeh Air Base in Hamedan for attacks on Syria. And while Russia's and Iran's interests in Syria or the wider region never entirely overlapped, the cooperation remained harmonious enough – despite Iran's many doubts and misgivings having seen Moscow repeatedly change course and break promises in the past.

Since February 2022, the cooperation between Russia and Iran has reached unprecedented levels, with Iran becoming one of Russia's most steadfast allies. Russia's attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure in the winter of 2022-2023 were carried out overwhelmingly with Iranian drones; while Moscow is about to return the favour by increasing its military exports to Tehran. Russia and Iran have also increased their efforts to jointly resist Western sanctions and political isolation by trading sanctioned goods and circumventing the dollar. Iranian reports also suggest that trade with Russia has skyrocketed, with the transit of goods through the International North-South Transport Corridor that connects Russia to India and the Asian market via Iran already increasing by 350 per cent in the first seven months of 2022. Moscow has also turned a blind eye as Iran continues to expand its nuclear programme at an alarming rate.

Before 2022, Moscow remained mindful not to antagonise the West or Israel through its relations with Tehran. Russia also benefitted from being part of the international cooperation formats on Iran's nuclear issue: the P5+1 format – including the UN Security Council's five permanent members: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the US, as well as Germany, that have been working on the Iran nuclear deal – survived the annexation of Crimea and for a while served as one of the few venues where Russia and Western countries could still cooperate (before it fell victim to Donald Trump's presidency). Now, however, Moscow no longer cares about upsetting the West, or possibly even the nuclear issue.

Characteristic of the current page in Russia's history, the partnership between Moscow and Tehran is now much more equal, sometimes putting Moscow in the role of a demandeur. Moscow urgently needed Iran's Shahed drones in winter 2022-2023, for example, when its

own drone production was still lagging behind. The same may soon be true of Iran's missiles. Iran – which before 2022 was the most heavily sanctioned country in the world – has now acquired in Russia an even more sanctioned ally. Russia, in turn, can benefit from Iran's know-how about life under Western sanctions.

Russia's outreach efforts in Africa

The twists and turns of Russia's engagement across Africa also paint a telling picture. In the Soviet era, Russia's presence on the African continent was massive. Moscow offered generous economic and defence assistance to the regimes it considered friendly – including Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Mali – as well as to Marxist groups in countries with less Russia-friendly regimes, such as South Africa and Rhodesia. Russia also hosted thousands of African students at its universities. By 1990, 30,000 African students were studying at Soviet universities, which amounted to a quarter of their total foreign students. Although life in the Soviet Union differed from the image Russia promoted abroad, leading to disillusionment and occasional protests by African students, this nonetheless produced sizeable numbers of Soviet-educated, Russian-speaking people among the technical, technocratic, and political elites of several African countries. In a 2001 interview, the rector of Moscow's Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University boasted about several high-profile alumni, “the president of Guyana, the Cuban ambassador in Ukraine, the health minister of Nicaragua, the national university rector in Equatorial Guinea, the foreign minister of the Ivory Coast”. This student population was a potential resource of soft power, which the Soviet Union failed to make full use of because of its collapse. The newly free Russia of the 1990s largely lost interest in Africa – and did not have the resources for development aid. While it kept its extensive network of embassies, and maintained some trade relations, for instance with Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, and South Africa, it did not dedicate much effort to new political ideas or initiatives.

From the mid-2000s, Russian officials made some high-level visits to Africa – Medvedev, for instance, visited Egypt, Nigeria, Namibia, and Angola in 2009. But Russia's return to the continent started in earnest after 2012 and, in particular, after 2014, when its relationship with the West became strained following its annexation of Crimea. Suddenly, Africa saw an uptick in ministerial-level visits and trade with Russia – which almost doubled from \$9.9 billion in 2013 to \$17.7 billion in 2021. This was, nonetheless, still an order of magnitude below Africa's trade with the EU or China.

But Russia did carve itself a niche where it faced little competition: providing security assistance to beleaguered rulers across the continent, typically through PMCs. Mali and the

Central African Republic are the best-known examples of this. But while exact data is hard to come by, the Center for Strategic and International Studies identified at least seven Russian PMCs that have carried out a minimum of 34 operations in 16 African countries since 2005. In Mali, this resulted in the withdrawal of European forces, which find it hard to compete with their policy of stabilisation based on sticks and carrots.

Between 2012 and 2022, Russia also became a major arms exporter to Africa. From 2018 to 2022 it provided 40 per cent of African imports of major weapons systems – more than Africa’s total arms imports from the US (16 per cent), China (9.8 per cent), and France (7.6 per cent) during the same period.

Russia had a number of advantages in its engagement with African countries. For one, its security assistance came with no strings related to human rights or political standards attached, unlike that of European countries. Russia’s weapons may not have been the most sophisticated in the world, but they were cheap, enjoyed a reputation for being reliable, and had proven themselves in the past; the Russian Kalashnikov machine gun has even been depicted on the flag of Mozambique since the Soviet era. Politically, Russia was in a position to present itself as a friendly outsider: neither a former coloniser like Europe, nor a suspected future challenge like China, to which many African countries are indebted. Moscow has tried to promote itself as a pragmatic and practical partner to Africa: the agenda of the first Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in the autumn of 2019 – attended by 43 African heads of state – featured a plethora of practical topics, from trade and development to digitalisation and climate change, although real-life results remain a different question.

Over the past decade Russia has also resumed hosting African students, with the numbers gradually rising again since the sharp decline after the collapse of the USSR to now surpass Soviet levels, with 35,000 Africans currently studying in Russia. Russia has sometimes used the successful careers of Soviet-era students to advertise study opportunities. Choguel Kokalla Maïga, the prime minister of Mali – which made the reputationally risky vote in the UN against an immediate end of war in Ukraine and welcomed Wagner – for example, studied in the Soviet Union. “I lived in the Soviet Union for 11 years. I am a Muscovite,” he said in a recent interview that is happily shared by Russian embassies in the region.

Russia's transactional approach to the continent seemed to be a winning ticket – often also compared to Western policies which came with political conditionalities and were rooted in a normative worldview. It is therefore somewhat ironic that since 2022, Russia has made its approach to Africa considerably more propaganda heavy. Moscow is now racing against the West in its attempts to win the hearts and minds of the “global majority”, and it sees Africa as a major battlefield in that fight.

In its rhetoric and stylistics, the Kremlin is suddenly borrowing unashamedly from the Soviet playbook. For example, in a speech at the second Russia-Africa summit in the summer of 2023, Putin stated, “The ideals of freedom, independence, and sovereignty are also very important now in the difficult period of international turbulence, when a truly multipolar world order is evolving and the era of domination by one country or a group of countries is coming to an end... However, those who are used to their exceptionalism and monopoly in global affairs are resisting this ... Russia and African states call for building a new, fairer global architecture.” For comparison, in his 1981 book for African audiences, former general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, wrote very similarly about Russia's relations with African countries, saying that Moscow had “built and continue[d] to build our policies in accordance with the principles of equality, respect for sovereignty and independence, noninterference in internal affairs, and the recognition of every nation's right to determine its own destiny and path of development”. Brezhnev claimed that “The Soviet Union and our Communist Party are waging a struggle for the strengthening of peace and security of peoples and against the arms race which is constantly urged forward by NATO.”

Still, in this new international context, Putin's appeal to anti-Western rhetoric is unlikely to be successful. Indeed, the number of heads of state attending the 2023 Russia-Africa summit dropped more than threefold, from 43 in 2019 to 17, making the summit “a relic of better times”. The West should not over- or misinterpret this as Africa's loyalty to the Western position, however, or as a sign of a decline in Russia's footprint in Africa when it comes to arms trade or security. But it does suggest that African leaders are not keen to ally with Russia against the West in the way that Putin hopes.

Russia's dilemmas

After a decade of having fairly successfully diversified its policies away from their Western focal point, the war has ushered in a period of political austerity for Russia, in which it now often has to prioritise and choose what is worth pursuing. This has caused it new dilemmas on

many files.

One such dilemma relates to nuclear arms control in general and North Korea in particular. In addition to Iran, North Korea has emerged as an important arms supplier to Russia, with reports that it is shipping munitions at scale. What it produces might be of low quality, but it is nonetheless useful for Russia, which cannot yet produce enough artillery shells to keep up with its demands for the frontlines. It was widely acknowledged that the summit meeting between Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was almost certainly focused on future cooperation on armaments.

This new rapprochement has raised questions about the resilience of Russia's position on North Korea's nuclear programme. Since 2006, the UN has passed several resolutions sanctioning North Korea for its nuclear weapon development, which Russia has supported. Now, foreign policy circles in Moscow are discussing the possibility that Russia may drop these sanctions, especially after it vetoed a UN proposal by the US to introduce additional sanctions against North Korea in May 2022. On the other hand, Russian experts have noted that so far Moscow is treating the issue cautiously and it is not a given that it will go against the already existing sanctions that it voted for. "We have a strange combination of policies, one element of which is legalism," said an expert interviewed for this paper, "we recognise the legality of UN. We are its founders, one of the pillars on which it stands. Hence our unwillingness to break its decisions." [2]

In many ways, though, Russia's approach to nuclear issues and strategic stability is changing nonetheless as it tries to link other issues to its priority in Ukraine. Another expert commented that the "big question is whether Russia can separate the problems of strategic stability and non-proliferation from the war in Ukraine – stick[ing] to some agreements despite western engagement in Ukraine", but admitted that Russia's decisions to freeze the START treaty in February and de-ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in October make one pessimistic in this respect. [3] "At the times of the Cold War, the US tried to link different issues, but Moscow was critical of that – saying that strategic stability is so important that nothing else should be linked to it. Now the roles have changed – Russia tries to link, while US tries to compartmentalise," the expert commented.

Iran's nuclear deal is a case in point. It was a rare issue on which dialogue between Russia and the West had continued after 2014, despite Russia's annexation of Crimea. Now, however, Moscow seems to acquiesce to Iran's nuclear activities and to be happy to spoil Western efforts to roll back Iran's nuclear programme, which would harm Russia's war effort in Ukraine. In March 2022, for instance, amid Western hopes of nearing a revival of the Iran nuclear deal, Russia derailed the talks by demanding a written guarantee that new Western

sanctions related to Ukraine would not impede Russian trade with Iran.

The war in Ukraine is also interfering with Russia's relations in the Middle East, where it seems to be slowly losing its unique position as the outside power that is on talking terms with all regional players. Its growing reliance on arms trade with Iran, as well as its desire to court "the global majority" and oppose Israel's most powerful backer, the US, likely contributed to its decision to side with the Palestinians following the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October. Putin's initial comments about the war were measured, but he grew increasingly critical of Israel, and notoriously received a Hamas delegation in Moscow in late October. Ostensibly this was to discuss the fate of Israeli hostages, but Israeli officials understood it as a blow to Israel and the West. The Israeli foreign ministry expressed "displeasure with the role Russia is playing" in the war against Hamas and stressed that it hopes that Moscow will take "more balanced" positions. While both Russia and Israel might be inclined to limit the damage to their cooperation – as both have things to lose from a break-up of the relationship – Moscow's formerly unique position in the Middle East certainly seems more fragile.

In light of the war, Russia will also likely have to rethink some of its policies in the former Soviet Union, prioritising the practical over the symbolic. Its relationship with Armenia is an instructive example. Moscow's support for Armenia in its territorial dispute with Azerbaijan had already started to fracture before the start of the full-scale war on Ukraine, partly because of a dislike of Armenia's Western-leaning President Nikol Pashinyan. But when Baku made a dash for full control of Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow was left with little choice but to choose the practical over its allegiance to Armenia.

Another dilemma that Russia will face is between urgent matters and important or strategic ones. This will probably concern Russia's relations with China more than any other policy area. Over the last decade, Russia had gradually been upgrading and intensifying its cooperation with China, selling it more and more sophisticated arms systems, increasing trade in energy, intensifying summitry, and reconciling regional projects. But until 2022 it maintained some distance, with areas where China was not welcome. For instance, the technology at the headquarters of Moscow's state-of-the-art facial recognition system came from Russia, if possible, and if not, was imported from the US. [4] Russia only imported low-level items such as power banks from China. Now though, as in the case of the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, Russia might not have the luxury of asking itself when and in which areas it is willing to work with China and on what terms, or care about longer-term dependencies. "Many here believe that the US wants to liquidate Russia as a state," a leading Russian expert on China and military affairs said already back in 2019. "And, if the US wants regime change and to break up the country now but China might become a problem in ten years' time, then there is little to think about." [5] This logic can only have intensified by now.

Russia could try to balance its dependence on China by engaging more with other non-Western actors like India and establishing a stronger presence in Asia-Pacific in general – something that has been an ambition since 2012 at least and a recurring theme throughout Russia's history. However, Moscow has never been particularly successful at this. And the war in Ukraine makes it even harder: Russia now does not have sufficient diplomatic and economic resources to play a proper regional role, and its existential need to prioritise Ukraine makes it harder to develop a proper foothold in Asia – leading regional scholars to conclude that today, "Russia is facing a situation where it is simultaneously critical for it to engage with the Asia-Pacific as a future powerhouse in world affairs and more difficult than ever in the post-Soviet period to achieve this aim."

Finally, the war has had a drastic impact on Russia's diplomatic ranks. Russian diplomats are exceedingly well trained, primarily at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), with advanced language skills and far broader country expertise than the average Western diplomat has – which in theory should make Russia very well-positioned to engage with the global south. On the other hand, since Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria, its decision-making centre has been moving away from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which by the eve of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was firmly sidelined. As an expert working with the ministry explained back in 2019, "foreign policy is militarising". And as it does so "many files move elsewhere; the MFA only executes decisions taken elsewhere". The ministry's increasingly top-down working culture has made the bottom-up flow of ideas and analyses all but a sacrilege, inevitably curbing Russia's creativity and agility, as well as its ability to adapt

to the new practical agenda of the day. And while Russia's special services, shady oligarchs, and other foreign policy actors may indeed be less constrained in their actions, they still cannot replace a proper diplomatic service – especially when it comes to building a new era, as opposed to wrecking an old one.

Putin's recent doubling down on ideology and anti-Western narratives in his relations with the global south may be a sign of weakness more than strength. His reliance on ideology and narratives could betray the fact that Russia no longer has the capacity to engage with different regional agendas and build relations like it did between 2012 and 2022. Instead, Putin has to rely on negative mobilisation to try to convince the rest of the world that even if the common regional agenda is absent, they still have a common enemy.

From a competition of narratives to a competition on engagement

By now it is clear to both Russian and Western experts that they cannot win over the rest of the world with narratives. A recent MGIMO [paper](#), for instance, analysed the positions of most of the non-Western world on the war and concluded that “the non-West, actually the world majority, disapproves both [of] what Russia is doing regionally against Ukraine and what the US-led West is doing globally against Russia”. This finding is in distinct harmony with recent [research](#) conducted by ECFR in China, India, and Turkey, which found that while most people in these countries disapprove of Russia's war on Ukraine, they are not ready to join forces with those who oppose Russia. Most non-Western countries do not want to become pawns in a new Russia-West ideologised standoff. Instead, they would like an “[à la carte world](#)”, in which they are free to choose different partners according to issues and needs.

What matters is therefore not the narratives but how the non-Western world is engaged in practice, and who has the things the world wants and offers them better. Russia seems to have an advantage in this regard: transactional relationships come easier for Moscow, and particularly for Putin. Russia has a history of successfully engaging in a transactional way with several important players in the global south – though its resources for that may have become less available since February 2022. Meanwhile, the West has conditioned itself to think about the world in normative terms. Western politicians are also vulnerable to domestic audiences that – amid the growing maximalism and polarisation of today's world – may not forgive compromises with their agendas.

That said, the West has strengths that Russia lacks. It is still a formidable trade bloc with a wealthy internal market. And when it channels its creative energy towards a practical solution

to a problem, it can achieve miracles – as shown in 2022, when the West radically reduced its gas overdependence on Russia in the course of a few months. Europe therefore needs to steer its conversation with the rest of the world in a pragmatic manner, and play to its strengths. As one Russian analyst put it, “If the name of the game is security, Russia will invent another Prigozhin. But if the name of the game is development, then Moscow has little to offer.” [6]

Russian thinkers now acknowledge that back in the Soviet era, Moscow’s priorities about ideological (Communist) purity cost it a number of partnerships that could have been fruitful, had Moscow had a more pragmatic approach. Putin, who has repeatedly compared Western liberalism to Lenin’s Bolshevism evidently expects the West to commit the same mistake and allow its normative notions about the world to get in the way of its real interactions with that world. Putin also seems to be betting on the fact that the West can either be a hegemonic power or no power at all. He does not seem to expect the West to adapt to life in a world in which it is no longer as absolute a hegemon as it was three decades ago. He may turn out to be right.

Or he may not: in 1976, during the heyday of the Soviet Union’s engagement with Africa, the Soviet minister of foreign affairs Andrey Gromyko gave a speech at the UN, in which he proposed starting to work with African governments on “a new international economic order”. The idea was to establish a Soviet-African initiative to overturn the Western-established economic world order with its trade and financial institutions. But he failed because the West got its act together and came forward with better and more attractive policies. There is no reason why it cannot do so again if it learns to use its leverage in ways that are suitable for the new world.

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- [1] Author's interview with Russian expert, off the record, Moscow, March 2020.
- [2] Author's interview with Russian expert, off the record, online, early December 2023.
- [3] Author's interview with Russian expert, off the record, online, early December 2023.
- [4] Author's interview with Russian China expert, off the record, Moscow, May 2021.
- [5] Author's interview with Russian China expert, off the record, Moscow, May 2021.
- [6] ECFR interview with Russian analyst, off the record, online, December 2023.

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