

Putin's strategy: stabilization through subordination to the US

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Abstract

Russia's position in the world is determined by its relations with the US. After its defeat in the Cold War, both democrats and communists hoped for some form of parity but the US had not defeated Russia to concede parity. The US unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2001, the START negotiations lost all meaning, NATO has steadily expanded despite Russia's objections and Russia has accepted US bases in Central Asia. Russia can seek solace in the NMD not being technologically convincing, in NATO being too flabby for action (and Russia itself being a part of NATO), in the terrorist threat of the Taliban being eliminated, and in the absence of direct confrontation with the US. In order to ward off threats like the Chechen insurgency, Russia has turned its attention to reforming the army and to conventional capability. Today, Russia's dealings with Libya, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea have more to do with commercial calculations than challenges to the US. Its special relationships with China and India – that are genuinely independent of the US – are likewise driven by commercial issues, such as large scale arms sales, rather than strategic considerations, although the latter are always kept in reserve should they be needed.

Resum

La posició de Rússia en el món ve determinada per les seves relacions amb els Estats Units. Després de la seva derrota a la guerra freda, tant els demòcrates com els comunistes esperen alguna forma de paritat, però els Estats Units no havien derrotat Rússia per concedir la paritat. Els Estats Units es van retirar unilateralment del Tractat ABM el 2001, l'inici de les negociacions va perdre el seu sentit, l'OTAN s'ha expandit gradualment malgrat les objeccions de Rússia i Rússia ha acceptat les bases dels Estats Units a l'Àsia Central. Rússia pot buscar consol en el fet que el NMD no és tecnològicament convincent, que l'OTAN és massa feble per a l'acció —Rússia també forma part de l'OTAN—, en l'eliminació de l'amenaça terrorista talibana i en l'absència d'un enfrontament directe amb els Estats Units. Per tal de protegir-se de les amenaces com la insurgència txetxena, Rússia ha fixat la seva atenció a reformar l'exèrcit i en la capacitat convencional. Avui els tractes de Rússia amb Líbia, l'Iraq, l'Iran i Corea del Nord tenen més a veure amb càlculs comercials que no pas amb desafiaments als Estats Units. Les seves relacions especials amb la Xina i l'Índia —que són realment independents dels Estats Units— també tenen motius comercials, com ara la venda d'armes a gran escala, i no motius estratègics, tot i que aquests últims sempre es mantenen a la reserva per si són necessaris.

I

The path that led to Russia's inexorable defeat in the Cold War from 1945 to 1991 was governed by its policy choices that were dominated by analogies with other great power defeats in history. Subsequent to this defeat, Russia was presented with several choices. It could accept the defeat and attempt a recovery and reassertion as did Prussia after 1806, Russia after 1856 and 1918, and Germany after 1919. Alternatively, it could accept defeat and collaborate with the victors in a new power bloc as did Britain after the American War of Independence, France after 1815, Germany and Japan after 1945, and even Britain and France after 1945 since their victory led to the irreversible decline of their status having become auxiliaries of the US in the manner of Germany and Japan.

Russian politics was polarized around these choices, as if no other options or possibilities were available. Broadly speaking, the communists chose the first option of recovery and reassertion, and the democrats the second option of recovery and collaboration, on the basis of a recovery to European development levels. The democrats could and did present their positions as a victory, not over the US or the West, but over a communism that was polemically portrayed as Stalinist, totalitarian, and stagnant. The communists could project no victory of any kind, not even over their own inadequacies. The democrats expected and promised that their great triumph would result in Western bounty in the quantity and quality that resuscitated Germany and Japan after 1945 and ensured their stability, prosperity and security over the next half-century. To make it more feasible, Russia would shed the dross of the less developed and Asiatic regions of the Soviet Union, in particular Central Asia and Transcaucasia. The dissolution of what was called the Soviet Empire and the subordination to the US was based on a logic that by historical analogy seemed flawless.

This marked the culmination of the struggle for mastery of the world that had been waged from the end of the nineteenth century by the six great or imperialist powers, the US, the UK, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan. There were too many competitors for a globalised world: World War I had not solved the problem, which was then carried over to World War II under a different ideological banner. A partial solution emerged with four of the rivals being knocked out of the contest, leaving just the US and the USSR as contenders. Nuclear power made a "hot war" between the two impossible and so the great joust continued in the form of a "cold war" with "hot proxy wars" by client nations until the bitter end in 1991 that left a clear winner.

During the Cold War however, the two super powers enjoyed something akin to a condominium of the world. The silver lining of democratic defeatism was the hope – advertised as an expectation – that the history, size, resources and capacity of Russia would ensure that it became a partner to the US (in line with the Cold War condominium) rather than a prosperous vassal, as other European countries had become, or a regional power, such as China. Thus the democrats could offer more than the communists: European prosperity over Soviet social security, capitalist dynamism in lieu of socialist stagnation, access to the world instead of parochial isolation, and possibly even the condominium of the world through peaceful collaboration instead of debilitating arms races and confrontation. They were making an offer that few could refuse.

Not only does history not repeat itself, whether as tragedy or farce, but in this case the analogy was inadequate and self-serving to both the contestants. Both have ignored what is perhaps the decisive aspect of the recovery of Europe and Japan after World War II. Both were reconstructed, not as an end in itself, but as a Cold War strategy against the single antagonist that was the Soviet Union and communism. After the Cold War, there was no such single focus, and there would be no compulsion to reconstruct Russia beyond ensuring stability for nuclear security, containing terrorism, policing the neighbourhood (Transcaucasia and Central Asia), peacekeeping, combating organised crime, and insulating the prosperous world from lean and hungry immigrants. The US victory at the end of the twentieth century is unique in history. Never before has a single power been left with no other possible competitor anywhere on the planet. To reconstruct the defeated party as a potential challenger once again would defeat the purpose of such a victory. Collaboration would be meaningful only in conditions of effective subordination, as in the case of Europe to the US, or limitation, as with India and China. Russia's recovery, in the absence of a further overarching contest, presaged both insubordination and super-power capacity. The US could not possibly endorse a Russian recovery and reconstruction in strategic terms.

Moreover, both democrats and communists ignored two further possibilities. The first was another famous historical route, extinction, as occurred with the Ottoman and Hapsburg empires, reduced to the nation states of Turkey and Austria respectively. This route was recommended by diehard cold warriors such as Zbigniew Brzezinski who wanted to see Russia contract to a European Russia. The further relevance of the analogy is that the decline of these empires lasted a century and a half until their final extinction in the aftermath of World War I. Naturally enough, no one in Russia could contemplate such a future. The second possibility, perhaps the most realistic of all, was that Russia should gradually become a regional power in the league of China and India without recovery to European levels or partnership with the US. This is the legacy that Gorbachev and Yeltsin left to Putin.

II

Russia's global position and much of its domestic evolution is now governed by its relationship with the US and the multilateral institutions and alliance systems dominated by the US. After the defeat and dissolution of the Soviet Union, the persecution and attenuation of the Communist Party and the further dismantling of Soviet State and economic structures, through regionalisation and privatisation respectively, helped achieve the US's next major priority: eradicating strategic parity. This, in effect, was accomplished when the US withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 on 13 December 2001. The militarisation of space had begun in earnest: land-, sea- or air-based missile systems offered little or no protection from missiles based in space. Russia was not afforded even the fig leaf of a joint revision of the ABM Treaty, and it was made clear to both the Russian public and the wider world that fundamental strategic questions would be decided unilaterally by the US. The Russian response has been resigned and sober. Russia has consoled itself with the observation that the US National Missile Defence system is still being tested and Russia is still in fact secure.

Under these circumstances, the significance of arms reduction talks and agreements is diminished. START 1 was signed in 1991 and it went into force in 1994. To date it is the only strategic arms reduction treaty that has been carried out fully, with both sides reducing overall warhead counts to 6,000 each. START 2, signed in 1993, fixed an upper limit of 3,000-3,500 deployed warheads but it never came into force. START 3 discussions were begun in 1999 but were superseded by the Moscow Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reduction on 24 May 2002. This set the limits at 1,700-2,200 strategic nuclear warheads by 2012 but Putin had already offered the low figure of 1,500 in November 2000, as can be inferred from Russian budgets. Nuclear deterrence is changing in meaning and “unacceptable damage” now seems to be possible whether the levels are 1,500, 3,500, or 6,000. This suggests that the US is not a Russian target and visa-versa. It also implies, although not explicitly, that when the NMD takes effect (if it ever does) such deterrence will be of little significance and relegated to low priority.

As Russia submits to US strategic priorities, it has abandoned any attempt at positioning itself militarily in space. Indeed, it has gradually reduced the scope of its space research and exploration programme and has progressively committed itself to strategic arms reductions. Its main security concern is no longer the US, and even if it were, it is confident, for the time being, that it has the capacity to inflict “unacceptable damage.” Its security problems arise more from the conventional sources of secession, terrorism, proliferation, and organised crime. Russia, however, is unprepared for these threats in terms of the military and armament structures required and the Chechen “ulcer” exposes this with the density of a black hole.

As a result, Putin has been persuading his military establishment to gradually accept this dramatic shift in focus. In 2000, the issue of strategic versus conventional forces was thrashed out between Sergeyev, the defence minister, and Anatoly Kvashnin, the chief of General Staff, and Putin tipped the balance in favour of conventional forces leading to the eventual replacement of Sergeyev by Sergei Ivanov. Indeed, this argument remains valid to this day: should precious resources be squandered on accumulating ICBMs, SS-27s, and SS-25s (which will never be used) while items urgently needed for the uninterrupted hemorrhage in Chechnya (be they attack helicopters, fixed wing aircraft for fog, body armour, steel helmets or more advanced assets like smart weapons) cannot be acquired even when they are produced by the Russian defense industry itself? The Chechen insurgency, combined with waves of terrorism and organised crime, has reinforced these arguments many times over. While the choice in favour of conventional military development is gaining ground, superior Russian skills in various advanced but underused technologies are available on the world market, whether for India, China, or even Iran and the US. These may lead to acrimonious disputes and hard bargains with the US, but they should not be mistaken for strategic challenges: they are at most commercial ventures, political postures, bargaining positions and individual or institutional entrepreneurship which, in certain circles, is called corruption.

But the transition to contract or volunteer forces from conscript forces is tortuous and bitterly contested. In the event of an emergency, a new system of reserves and mobilisation would have to be available and it would have to integrate training with civilian higher education institutions. Subsistence salaries of 1,000 roubles a month would have to increase considerably to attract appropriate youths. Boris Nemtsov, the leader of the Union of Right Wing Forces, suggested some-

thing in the region of 7,000 roubles a month. In addition, infrastructure and provisions for families would need to be made, for instance schools, crèches, jobs for spouses, etc. Eventually, despite the astronomical costs involved, the endemic crisis and the ineffectiveness of the army meant many difficult decisions had to be made and, in November 2001, Putin set the transition to contract forces into motion. This began with the Pskov Airborne Division, in September 2002 and, in July 2003, a timetable was set by which at least half of the army would be on contract by 2007 and military service would be reduced from two years to one year. There has been strong resistance from the military establishment, but Putin has paid it no heed.

The problem with reorientation to conventional forces does not end here. So far conventional military preparedness has been based on a NATO attack, or an invasion which was to be countered by overwhelming force on land, sea, and air, and, in the event of failure, by nuclear attack. The military proved its importance by staging the grandiose West versus Belarus-Russia exercise in 1999 to stall NATO at ground-, sea- and air-level apparently in response to the Kosovo War of 1999. It did so yet again on 20 January 2004, when all conventional forces and strategic forces – including cruise missiles – were thrown into the colossal “Operation Shield” exercise apparently to test responses to the American National Missile Defence system. Critics have suggested that these were perhaps sops to the military and more of an exercise to attract votes as Putin headed for elections in March 2004. Alternatively, this may have been a technical requirement since Russian ICBMs are up to 30 years old and have to be periodically test-fired to check for efficiency. The testing takes the form of an exercise, placating all those concerned.

However the conscription army of over one million, its training and doctrine were all based on assumptions which critics, including Putin, dismissed as obsolete – despite the military establishment’s opinion to the contrary. Insurgency, terror, and crime cannot be deterred or defeated by nuclear power or vast conventional forces. They need the swift, professional action of volunteer units with sophisticated training, not masses of ill-trained conscripts and millions of reserves. They require a different range of specialized military hardware like reconnaissance-attack systems, military transport and multi-purpose combat planes and high-precision weaponry. Thus, the rigid distinction between armed forces for external defence and internal security must fade.

The debate over Russia’s transition to a contract army involves important strategic choices over and above the obvious financial ones. If the existence and the territory of Russia cease to be under threat, and if it must prepare more for insurgency, terror, and crime, would it not be slipping into the same position as the Europeans in relation to the US? As Condoleezza Rice put it in 2000 during the presidential election campaign, America would fight the wars and the Europeans would follow with the peacekeeping. The military would become yet another Soviet relic, which in effect it already had.

The dilemma for Russian strategic planners was tremendous. What if American military force was to be turned on Russia as it was on Yugoslavia in 1995 and 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 1990 and 2003 and possibly on Iran? How would Russia respond to a threat from China? Russian democrats – and several Western power centres – believe that these dangers have dissipated with the Cold War, that integration with the West forecloses such possibilities and that in the last resort – at least against China – the nuclear option remains. The Military Doctrine and the

National Security Concept were both revised in 2000 to reaffirm the nuclear option, the first when the conventional threat was too great, and the second when other means to ward off aggression were inadequate. The process of arriving at decisions is tortuous and marked by bitter dispute, but it seems to be heading steadily away from Soviet levels of independence to European forms of dependence and integration.

III

The Russian response to NATO's expansion fits into this pattern of protest and eventual quiet submission. This has occurred so far in three phases. Russia signed the NATO Partnership for Peace Initiative in June 1994 and participated in the Implementation Force and its successor, the Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia in 1995. May 1997 saw the NATO-Russia Founding Act leading to higher levels of cooperation and a Russian voice in NATO councils. Yeltsin presented this to the Russian public as the elimination of the NATO threat since Russia had to be involved in any decision. Nonetheless, NATO and American officials never failed to repeat the brutal clarification of Madeleine Albright, the secretary of state, that this represented a "voice not veto" for Russia. This cooperation or integration has been taken a notch higher with the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in May 2002 to deal with terrorist threats, crisis management, non-proliferation, arms control and confidence-building measures, theatre missile defence, search and rescue at sea, military-to-military co-operation, defence reform, civil emergency response, and new threats and challenges (including scientific co-operation and airspace management). An indication of the West's confidence in Russian subordination is the affirmation made by the NATO secretary-general, Lord Robertson, who in October 2002 described Russia as part of the solution, not the problem. Robertson went on to say that he was looking forward to more intensive collaboration in the handling of terror strikes and weapons of mass destruction among other issues of high priority to the West. Moreover, by 2000, Putin had already declared that Russia was prepared to join NATO.

Russia was horrified by NATO's plans to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in its first expansion phase. Russia saw this as a betrayal and an aggression on behalf of the West. As the democrats saw it then, NATO should have disbanded itself in response to the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. It was a "gentleman's agreement" as Gorbachev naively expressed it, and there were periodic reminders of the fate of the Weimar Republic. This complaint, however, fatally ignored the reality of victory and defeat in the Cold War. If NATO remained a threat, Russia would have reduced reaction time from anti-ballistic missiles systems, the Russian cities of Kursk, Bryansk and Smolensk were highly vulnerable, the Russian Baltic Fleet was hemmed in with strategic Polish ports in hostile hands and NATO's tactical nuclear weapons could be deployed on the new territories that were so much closer to Russia. As if to illustrate the danger, NATO attacked Yugoslavia twice: during the Bosnian War in 1995 and during the Kosovo War in 1999, to the chagrin and outrage of Russia. While Russian public opinion was shocked beyond belief that their fellow Orthodox Slavs and anti-fascist brothers-in-arms were being hounded and bombed by the unholy alliance of Cold War and World War II foes, Russian strategists had concerns beyond such comradely sympathy. They were concerned by the West taking unilateral decisions in an area that Russia had declared its close interest and they were anxious lest these became the first of a series of NATO interventions. Russia participated in NATO peacekeeping in

both Bosnia and Kosovo although Russia's Serbian "brothers" were at a disadvantage in that process – a disadvantage that Russians intended to mitigate. Their presence was slender and something of a token gesture, with just 1,200 out of 20,000 in Bosnia-Herzegovina and 3,600 out of 40,000 in the Kosovo force (KFOR). It is a symbolism that satisfies both parties: the Russians are not isolated and the West has Russia hitched to their chariot.

Beyond such face-saving formulae, it is clear that Russia has had to participate in its own humiliation by acting as a very junior partner of the very foe it loudly denounced. The only analogy is Germany's participation in all the causes championing liberal democracy and against a totalitarianism that included its own National Socialist past and any putative revivals. But Germany has been reconstructed by repudiating and being ceaselessly required to repudiate that Nazi legacy and post-War Germany presents 1945 as a victory over Nazism, not over the Germany that exists today. Russian democrats and Western ideology machines pursue a symmetrical argument with respect to Soviet socialism through totalitarian theory but since the Cold War victory was not total (as the allied victory was in 1945) the notion of an ideological victory needs to be demonstrated for Russians to truly internalise its meaning. Russia's resistance and grumbling about NATO is an indication of lessons not learnt and of the need to drive the point home further. Russia's defeat in the Cold War was not total, it was not as final as a single event, instead it was processual.

Accordingly, the two seemingly contradictory processes go on simultaneously: NATO's expansion apparently against Russia, and Russian integration into that same NATO. NATO's continued existence into the nineties, which would presumably entail a further defeat and decline of Russia, brought about a 40 % Russian public opinion vote in favour of joining the organisation and the Partnership for Peace, both in 1994. This helped neutralise Russian objections to both the unilateral NATO strike against Bosnia in September 1995 and the exclusion of Russia from jointly managing the Bosnian crisis and it ensured Russian participation in Bosnian peacekeeping from 1995. The admission of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to NATO, to Russia's dismay, was accompanied by the NATO-Russia Founding Act in May 1997 by which Russia secured "a voice not a veto." The admission not only of Slovenia, Romania, Slovakia and Bulgaria but also of the Soviet territory of the three Baltic republics in November 2002 virtually coincides with the deeper Russian integration into NATO structures through the NATO-Russia Council of May 2002.

There is an obvious convergence between Russian and Western strategists against their respective "diehards". NATO's indefinite expansion and Russia's incorporation suggests the obsolescence of NATO by deliberate over extension. However those seeking security are satisfied: Western triumphalists see Russia pushed to the wall, Eastern European states feel safe from Russian revanchism and Russia is reassured by its inclusion to virtually all NATO structures. Such a gargantuan alliance is too flabby for effective offensive military action but it can be involved in peacekeeping campaigns. Hence, America is setting a new trend of acting virtually independently and cobbling together variable alliances for each campaign. Its action against Iraq in 1990 and 2003, Serbia in 1999 and Afghanistan in 2001 were all based on ad hoc groupings assembled for the occasion. In a sense then, Putin's (and indeed Yeltsin's) policy of turning an apparently unending defeat and decline into an advantage by working with the victor is paying dividends, at one strategic level at least: the menace of NATO dwindles as it expands.

Actions pursued by Russia to compensate for this situation were insufficient and as a result both the Military Doctrine and the National Security Concept were marginally revised in 2002 to more aggressive postures to emphasise the nuclear option. Massive military exercises such as West '99 have been carried out in response to simulated NATO attacks. The potential of the Russia-China-India triangle is regularly investigated. The Shanghai Group has evolved steadily into a stable consultative forum for a sub-strategic level of Central Asian questions. The Commonwealth of Independent States, despite its hopelessly toothless nature, continues to function as a base for periodic ad hoc groupings put together by Russia. And Russia sustains a vigorous diplomacy and sometimes collaboration with what America has termed the "rogue states", now the "axis of evil", that is, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. But every one of these passes under the overarching relations with the US whose strategic priorities are never thwarted, not even in dealings with the "rogues".

IV

This master-slave dialectic of improvement through submission was demonstrated dramatically in Central Asia after the al-Qaeda attack on the US in September 2001. In one swift move Russia invited the US to base itself militarily in Central Asia and to begin reorienting both the domestic politics and the geopolitics of the region. This manoeuvre achieved what Russia had not been able to achieve in the preceding ten years. It rooted out the sources of jihad and terror in Afghanistan, it brusquely dismissed Pakistan's dreams of Curzonian strategic depth in Central Asia and it compelled the US and its European auxiliaries to accept Russia's campaign in Chechnya. Russia and the US are now partners in a domain that is a strategic priority to both. But they paid a dear price, indeed almost the same as Russia has had to pay since perestroika. Russia lost exclusive rights in Central Asia and instead became a junior partner to the US in that vital region. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), consisting of Russia, China, and four Central Asian states has given itself the main task of combating Islamic militancy, with the secondary objective of containing American hegemony. However, given the American leadership of the crusade against extremist Islam, this must function under American aegis, even if without the US's direct participation. Containing the US, under such circumstances, is disabling, to say the least. Although Russia had been excluded entirely from Europe and Yugoslavia, which was in fact its grievance, it was being gradually and most cautiously readmitted through NATO structures in a subordinate capacity. In Central Asia, the principle of joint management of crisis has been accepted from the outset, albeit under American leadership and always with an element of uncertainty as to whether it would mutate into American unilateralism. But Russia has derived some satisfaction from both the joint management and the freedom it was permitted in Chechnya.

The US is now in a position to do in the "near abroad" what it has done these past fifteen years in Europe. It oscillated between excluding Russia from the region by direct management and functioning through Russia. The depth of Russian presence did not make it easy to exclude Russia in the manner it had been from Europe. The patented US instrument for the purpose was human rights and civil society or the proliferation of non-state actors in the political realm. This permitted considerable infiltration by US and European organisations as compared to the limited scope for Russia and other local organisations to do the same. But this also included the danger-

ously double-edged situation of jihad based in Pakistan and Afghanistan, useful in part because of its yeoman service in defeating the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and possibly of use by extension in the region generally to douse Russia's great power aspirations. Partnership with Russia was more pragmatic and stable but Russia resisted for a long time on the ground as this was a traditional sphere of Russian influence. Unilateral American action in the area would have aroused Russian hostility on a greater scale than in Yugoslavia. The al-Qaeda attack on America transformed Russian opinion on US presence, both official and public, into one of acceptance. The US profited enormously in strategic terms from the terrorist attack, as did Russia, although to a lesser extent. The European pattern of Russian coordination with the US had become extended to the Russian soft underbelly.

Islamic militancy is likely to remain a decisive factor in the near future. In the absence of a universal redemptive creed like socialism, it becomes a powerful tool against the seemingly eternal profanity and humiliating domination of the West. Roman Catholicism assumed this role in Eastern Europe, chiefly in Poland and Lithuania, against orthodoxy, Imperial Russia and Soviet socialism. Not surprisingly, Roman Catholicism and Islam were deployed to enormous effect against Soviet domination. Eastern European Roman Catholicism could be integrated comfortably into the structures of European civil society, evidenced through the secularisation of the Western world in the nineteenth century. It delivered Poland and Lithuania from bondage in Eastern Europe and vindicated Western Europe's Cold War confrontation.

These same structures, however, were presented in much of the Islamic world as the perpetuation of deprivation and cultural humiliation. Islamic militancy is one of the reflections of the parochialism of socialism and liberalism, of the post-modern doctrines of emancipation, and of the asymmetries of world-wide development. At the same time, Islam is being constructed as the principal challenger to what is described as "Western civilisation" and its loudly trumpeted values of freedom and democracy and as a substitute for communism that played this part until the end of the Cold War. Islam has been cast in a role that makes it a target and compels it to fulfil itself as one despite itself. The latest civilisation theory, by Samuel Huntington, regurgitated yet again after the Cold War, despite more than a century of damaging criticism of its inadequacies, has granted Islam with this dubious honour.

The strategy has been sharply focused by isolating a posited militant essence to Islam, discerning its universal manifestations and calling for a worldwide crusade against it. Putin preceded Bush in this matter by identifying such isomorphous groups throughout the Islamic world from Indonesia to Kashmir, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Arab countries to Chechnya. After the al-Qaeda attack in September 2001, Bush transmitted this same message with all the US resources at his command and they now use the same language of instructions as their military chiefs, employ the same rhetoric and pursue the same easily identifiable enemy. Russia has accepted subordination in Central Asia and despite having the satisfaction of seeing one set of strategic objectives fulfilled, namely the end to Islamic militancy in the region, it surrenders another objective, that of hegemony. What is more, rather than fulfilling its objectives in Europe, Russia's experiences amount to the surrendering of its positions to NATO. Islamic militancy and terror, however, have perhaps been able to unite America and Russia to a far greater degree than either the rhetoric of "universal human values" or the concept of the "Common European Home".

Russia being embroiled with terror and Islamic militancy brings us to the question of Chechnya. On the face of it, this needn't have been a strategic issue at all, even as an insurgency. It doesn't pose a threat to the existence of Russia or any of its key interests and it should have remained a local insurgency (however incompetent and corrupt) that the Russian army had to deal with. But even this has passed under the overriding US-Russia relationship in two ways.

The first was the opportunity for the West to use Chechnya as leverage against Russia. This is occurring on a muted scale through the usual human rights interventions. Radio Liberty broadcasts to Chechnya, Chechen offices and conferences function in Europe, and Chechen guerrillas find safe haven and passage for their arms supplies in Georgia. Given the country's numerous routes to the West, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and its eagerness to join NATO, Georgia is very open to suggestion by the West. These tensions between Russia and the West through Georgia and Chechnya place them, as it were, in the traditional spheres of US-Russia relations and great power politics.

The second is the Islamic militancy which has added another twist to the already complex story. Chechnya is largely Muslim, but the insurgency is essentially secular that exploits the politics and criminal establishment in Moscow and elsewhere to good effect. But Russia is a common target for jihads from Central Asia and Afghanistan and for Chechen insurgents. In search of funding, guerrillas have made good use of the mafia in Moscow and also of financiers from the Islamic world. Thus, the jihad has spilled over into Chechen territory and Moscow has long been trying to persuade the rest of the world that Russia is fighting this hydra in Chechnya. September 2001 made Russia's case much more persuasive. That said, the US didn't take it on directly, rather it took the opportunity to strike a bargain with Moscow that would limit human rights criticisms for the sake of support in the new Afghan war. The Russian case took another step forward when in February 2002 the US announced that al-Qaeda had found refuge in Georgia, in the Pankisi Gorge, which Russia had always denounced as a hideout for Chechen terrorists. This led the US to make commitments in the region that went beyond pipeline politics and leverage against Moscow. Straight away, two hundred US men began training a Georgian Rapid Deployment Force of 1,500 men and 500 border guards to gain control of the Pankisi Gorge and root out al-Qaeda. The Pankisi itself is located about 70 kilometres into Georgia and has been maintained by the Georgian security and interior ministries as a safe haven for organised crime by never entering the area themselves but extracting bribes at the entrance. Chechens are free there, not so much due to the malevolence of the Georgian government as to the criminality of its administration. This shared interest between the US and Russia was further consolidated by the Chechen hostage taking crisis in Moscow in October 2002 that left 118 Russians and 50 Chechens dead. To Europeans and Americans at least, Russia and the West were seen to be fighting the same cause. The Bali bombing merely served to reinforce the same point.

As long as the same groups target Western and Russian interests, Russia secures important support in its campaign in Chechnya. But once again, it has both led to and exposed Russian dependence on US priorities. Russia has not been able to develop the capacity to stamp out the Chechen insurgency, whether politically or militarily; its army is too ill-equipped, ill-trained and

corrupt to be able to do so and Russian politics exerts its baleful influence on this issue. It has often been reported that the insurgents buy their arms from underpaid Russian forces and dissident Russian political manipulators, financiers and others who are engaged in Chechnya to embarrass opponents in Moscow. The US has rushed in to help Georgia against al-Qaeda, but not Russia. In fact, it is doing little more than toning down its propaganda machine leaving Russia highly vulnerable to low-key Western interventions. Chechnya, which is within Russia, has been subjected to the logic of the Central Asian pattern: Russia can only protect its security interests and escape being marginalised by surrendering larger claims and integrating with the US. Having made this strategic choice, it will be permitted room for manoeuvre in institutional and commercial competitions.

VI

There are, however, three areas in which Russia appears to be independent of US hegemony: the “rogues”, China and India. Putin has been ostentatious about his friendship and collaboration with Iraq, Iran, and North Korea and this is put down to Russia’s traditional penchant for self-assertiveness and confrontation with US hyper-power. However, it should be immediately evident that such a thesis is untenable. If Russia must surrender positions in vital spheres like NATO expansion, the European Union, Yugoslavia, Central Asia, Transcaucasia and Chechnya, why should it exert itself in these marginal areas which are calculated to provoke fits of apoplexy in the US? In short, Russia is merely manoeuvring for a better negotiating position. To take the Iraq case first. Iraq owed Russia 11-12 billion US dollars dating from Soviet times, and Russia regularly reminded the world that any US action in Iraq would have to take care of Iraqi debts to Russia. To reinforce the case, Russia entered into some 67 agreements with Iraq worth some 40 to 60 billion US dollars in August 2002. Although Iraq did not have the capacity to pay for such projects, Russia was closing such agreements on the eve of a major war. Perhaps Iraq hoped that this would move Russia to persuade the US to stall or soften the blow it was about to deliver. Similarly, perhaps Russia reckoned it would be able to demand compensation from the US after the war. Moreover, if Saddam Hussein were to be removed from power without a change of regime (a situation that would allow the country to emerge from the “doghouse”) Russia, having finalised so many agreements would have gained an advantageous position.

Russian collaboration with Iran, however, appears to be more offensive to the US. Russia has been assisting Iran in its nuclear energy generation projects, perhaps to test US opposition or to persuade the US to offer compensation either now or at a later date when Iran is subjected to the same fate as Iraq in the “axis of evil”. The US has already offered compensation and has agreed to help Russia’s industry in a move to distance Russia from Iran. For example the US offered to help dismantle obsolete submarines and reduce chemical weapon stockpiles. Moreover, the US offered to purchase Russian “Afghan” helicopters (Mi-8s) and pay \$20 billion for reprocessing nuclear waste over the next twenty years. NASA also addressed the space lobby to suggest paying Russia for services for the International Space Agency. However, all these offers were subject to Russia extracting itself from agreements with Iran. Russia has essentially been bargaining in domains where it can bargain. This should not be confused with strategic moves, at least not at present.

VII

Russia's relations with China have been dramatically improving, especially since 1995, and with further energetic action by Putin. It is now called a strategic partnership and the partners regularly call for a multipolar world in lieu of the unipolar world dominated by the US. Besides demilitarisation, arms reductions and border demarcations, the driving force of the relationship has been trade in arms and defence technologies with Russia supplying and China taking. Industrial collaboration is of limited significance because China is not attempting to upgrade its ancient Soviet industry, in which Russia could have played a role. Instead China is starting from scratch in modern high technology industries by importing from the West, for example aeroplanes from Boeing or Airbus, not Tupolev, and collaboration with General Motors or Audi, not Lada. In the energy sector, however, there is a complementarity of interests, Russia exporting gas and oil to China, a country that requires ever greater volumes of such energy for modernisation. Trade in arms and defence technologies is however the bond between them. China is the biggest importer of both, and Russia maintains a vigorous trade in the one sector that is internationally competitive. Russia sees itself as about fifteen years ahead of China in such capabilities and therefore is sanguine for the moment. Some aspects of the trade could be directed against the US, also within narrow limits. The most important purchases are SU-27 and SU-30 aircraft, S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, and Sovremenny destroyers. Of these, the Sovremenny destroyers would be especially effective against US aircraft carriers based near Taiwan – should the need arise. This relationship seems to be substantially commercial rather than strategic. If it does have strategic implications, they will be more a source of worry to Russia than to the US. Both Russia and China are keenly aware of the importance of bilateral relations with the US and talk of a “strategic relationship” and a “multipolar” world has more to do with making some room to manoeuvre rather than with challenging it. This is, however, one example of Russia breaking out of the overarching Russia-US relations, in that Russia is not obliged here to improve its prospects by subordinating to the US and then working its way up.

Russia's other independent relationship is with India. Indeed, this is the oldest, most stable and independent relationship that Russia enjoys. However, as with Russia's relationship with China, having once been a genuinely strategic association during the Cold War, this is now a chiefly commercial relationship. Again, India is a major importer of arms and sundry technologies in nuclear, space, and other crucial science and technology fields. As in the case of China, here bilateral relations with the US take precedence over all others, including such tried and tested relations as these. This is not to suggest any deterioration, indeed relations are at their best and there is little reason for them to deteriorate. However the international context has shifted them from the strategic to the commercial. Under these circumstances, one important development is likely to occur. Russia, owing to strategic factors dating back to the Cold War, has placed its priorities with India rather than with Pakistan. However, if the US can conduct excellent bilateral relations with both India and Pakistan, Russia is very likely to want to do the same. This is possible because the main strategic question of Cold War binary choices is out of the way. It is also attractive because Pakistan opens up commercial possibilities, which Russia is desperately in need of at the moment. But this will not be at the expense of good relations with India, which Russia will seek to maintain rather than jeopardise, in line with the general logic of Russia's strategic calculations the world over.