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## Russia: Powers in the balance

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### The Kremlin wants to rewrite Europe's security order as a bulwark against Nato, while wooing China

When top US, European and Russian officials gathered beneath the gilded chandeliers of a baroque Vienna palace last month to discuss European security after the Ukraine crisis, the ghosts of history were watching.

Two centuries earlier in salons like these, statesmen from Europe's great powers met in the 1815 Congress of Vienna — the first big attempt to agree treaties designed to ensure transcontinental peace, after the defeat of Napoleonic France. A year after Russia annexed Crimea and invaded east Ukraine, Moscow diplomats have now proposed a new Vienna congress to boost stability on the continent.

But if last month's gathering of present and former leaders, foreign ministers and scholars was a prototype for such a meeting, it did not bode well. Participants in the largely off-the-record gathering — organised by the Munich Security Conference — traded recriminations. Russia's behaviour in Ukraine, western officials charged, had blown a hole in Europe's whole postwar order. The continent now faced a new cold war which — with a real east-west conflict at the heart of Europe and Russia's sabre-rattling with nuclear missiles — was more perilous than the first.

“If we don't handle it right,” says one participant, “we're all going to be regretting it for ever.”

Though the fighting in east Ukraine still simmers despite a February ceasefire agreed in Minsk, the crisis has faded from the daily headlines. Yet as the EU rolls economic sanctions against Russia into a second year, and amid next week's anniversary of the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine with the loss of 298 lives, it is no nearer a resolution.

One problem for the west in figuring out how to respond to Moscow's military intervention has been understanding what Russia is really aiming to achieve. Vladimir Putin's Kremlin telegraphs its intentions in oblique ways. But through the fog of propaganda emanating from Moscow, the outlines of the real goals behind Russia's actions are starting to emerge. Policy makers are grappling with how any long-term settlement might be found, not just of the Ukrainian conflict, but its underlying causes.

Moscow appears to be seeking a fundamental rewriting of Europe's whole system, or “architecture”, of security. Yet by riding roughshod over the existing rules it has both convinced the west of its seriousness in its pursuit of those goals, and made them politically much more tricky for the west to accede to.

The process of finding a resolution could be long and risky — and, given the huge differences between the two sides, could ultimately fail. Javier Solana, the former Nato secretary-general and

EU foreign policy chief, says Europe is dealing with a continuation of the implosion of the Soviet Union, in the same manner we dealt in the 1990s with the implosion of Yugoslavia.

### Spheres of influence

The consensus among diplomats and analysts is that Mr Putin has not – as some feared last year – embarked on a rampage to rebuild the Russian or Soviet empire in a literal sense.

But Moscow is looking to expand its area of control: by re-establishing an exclusive sphere of influence at least within the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. It is unclear whether this zone excludes the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia – which have already joined the EU and Nato. Optimists drew some reassurance from the fact that when a Russian lawmaker called for the prosecutors' office to investigate whether the Baltic states' independence declarations from the USSR had been illegal the Kremlin distanced itself from the idea.

Such a zone would in effect give Moscow a veto over former Soviet republics' choice of partners, above all blocking further expansion of Nato – which it sees as a fundamentally hostile, US-dominated alliance – to neighbours such as Ukraine or Georgia.

Although Russia grabbed Crimea after last year's Ukrainian revolution, it seems reluctant to absorb eastern Ukraine, despite calls to do so from the rebels it is backing militarily. Instead, Moscow aims to use the rebel-held region as a lever to influence or destabilise Kiev's pro-western government.

Mr Putin's claims that Moscow must protect Russians like those in Crimea, left outside its borders by the Soviet collapse, may largely be cover for his geopolitical aims. But it could provide a pretext for more military interventions should he want to exert pressure or counter further expansion of western influence, anywhere from central Asia to the Baltics.



The Kremlin's agenda reflects Russia's bitter narrative of the recent past. Instead of welcoming it into the European family after the cold war, Moscow says Europe and the US took advantage of its weaknesses to absorb its former allies, expanding the EU and Nato to Russia's doorstep.

When the US talk show host Charlie Rose asked Mr Putin at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum last month whether respect, equality and a buffer zone were Moscow's demands, the president was irritated.

“You know, I hear this all the time: Russia wants to be respected. Don’t you? Who does not? Who wants to be humiliated?” he said. “This is not about trust. This is about having our interests taken into consideration.”

Some experts suggest the Russian leadership’s paramount interest is holding on to power; it has cultivated a “humiliation myth” and hyped up supposed external plots to rally domestic support since Mr Putin returned as president in 2012 amid street protests. But the intense anti-western rhetoric has permeated society. Polls show most Russians agree the west is bent on bringing the country to its knees. And that, warn the country’s beleaguered liberals, could make it a threat.

“We implore you, work with us, we are a force for good,” says a senior executive in a Russian state company with extensive links to foreign investors. “You have to understand that Russia is dangerous when she is isolated.”

### **Updating the framework**

Western observers variously suggest Russia is seeking to rewrite the way the cold war ended or create a “new Yalta” – referring to the 1945 meeting where Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt carved up postwar Europe.

Russian diplomats and officials prefer to present Moscow’s aims as reforming Europe’s security framework through a “new Helsinki” – updating the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. This set of accords stabilised relations between the west and the Communist bloc at the height of the cold war. By confirming post-second world war borders, Helsinki also put beyond doubt Soviet control of countries east of the Iron Curtain.

A new Helsinki has been tried before. In 2008, former president Dmitry Medvedev proposed a new treaty including all European nations and the US, to transcend the dividing lines Moscow sees as imposed by Nato. The west gave it short shrift, arguing the idea had a clear subtext of carving out a new Russian zone of interest and neutering Nato.

“Helsinki I was a classic sphere-of-influence deal, and that just can’t be done any more,” concedes Fyodor Lukyanov, chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, a Moscow think-tank.

Russia’s top diplomats have lately floated a different idea – a modern-day Congress of Vienna. Sergei Karaganov, a foreign policy veteran close to the Kremlin, launched the proposal in state media last month.

But Moscow’s new Concert of Nations would look very different from its Viennese predecessor. Mr Karaganov argues that declining western economic power and the rise of emerging markets will create powerful new regional blocs. He proposes replacing narrow attempts to revamp Europe’s order with a “forum for Eurasian co-operation, development and security . . . which could try to work out new rules and regimes for the entire Eurasian continent”. A senior Russian foreign ministry official agrees: “If we want to renew the European security order, we must broaden it. Most importantly, we must bring in China.”

Whether as an ally in security talks with Europe and the US or as a counterweight to the west, Mr Putin is busily wooing Beijing. This week, he will host China’s President Xi Jinping and other leaders for a summit of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation in the Urals. The SCO has become Moscow’s vehicle of choice to build a common agenda with Beijing and broaden its

power base beyond its central Asian members. Moscow is moving to make India, Pakistan members, and if UN sanctions are lifted Iran as well.

While China is avoiding anything that could create the impression it is building an alliance with Russia, analysts say Beijing might be ready to participate in broader security consultations.

Whether or not talks on a new security architecture could ever include China and Asian states, Russia's push for such negotiations poses a dilemma for Europe and the US. Western leaders and diplomats warn they cannot be seen to have been forced to the table by Moscow's adventurism to renegotiate a system they did not believe was broken. They also cannot negotiate over the heads of smaller states, a style of great power politics which is anathema in western capitals today.

US officials, meanwhile, insist peace must first be restored to Ukraine, and Russian troops withdrawn. Only then can the west even begin to think about discussions on revising the rules of the European order. The US has also responded to requests from the Baltic states and Poland by leading efforts to bolster NATO's defences. It confirmed last month that it would position heavy weapons in the Baltic states, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania. At the same time they will contribute to a planned 5,000-strong Nato rapid reaction force to deal with crises in eastern Europe.

### Forms of containment

Many senior officials suggest Europe and the US should return to a form of cold war-style containment, with several components: maintain sanctions until the Minsk ceasefire is implemented in Ukraine; further strengthen NATO's defences; pour more money into Ukraine to fend off economic collapse; keep the door open to further western integration for other ex-Soviet republics; then dig in for a potentially lengthy and uneasy stand-off with Moscow.

“Everyone says we don't want another cold war. But containment worked,” says Toomas Hendrik Ilves, president of Estonia. “It was unpleasant, people were nervous, but . . . we didn't have people killed in [wars in] Europe.”

Some influential voices say the west should also engage with Russia. “There has to be dialogue about how we can help Russia create a new way of meeting its anxieties, historical concerns and its need to feel that it is secure in the new world of which it is a part,” says Sir Malcolm Rifkind, the former UK foreign secretary.

Mr Solana, the former EU foreign policy chief, agrees: “We share this continent, so we have to talk,” he says.

Yet some diplomats, even from ex-Soviet states, warn Europe can never be safe unless the status of Russia's neighbours is fixed. Oleksandr Chalyi, a former Ukrainian deputy foreign minister, says his country was seen as a key element of European security when it voluntarily gave up its Soviet nuclear arsenal in 1994. It later became a “key element of insecurity, because Washington, Moscow and Brussels didn't manage to agree on its security status.”

Military neutrality, like that of Austria after the second world war, might be in Ukraine's best interests, he says, if it were backed by collective security guarantees and allowed Kiev to choose its own political and economic direction. Austria joined the EU, but not Nato.

Navigating from today's confrontational environment to such an outcome would require courageous diplomacy at least equalling that of the statesmen of 1815. But the alternative might yet focus minds. As another senior Vienna participant warned, the longer the Ukrainian conflict

festers, the greater the danger of it spreading to other parts of Europe. "And then," he says, "war on a wider scale could become thinkable."

#### **Timeline: Decades of realignment**

**1945** Yalta conference. Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt meet in Crimea to discuss Europe's postwar reorganisation.

**1949** Nato, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, is formed between the US and countries in western Europe.

**1955** The Warsaw Pact defence treaty among Communist states is signed, partly in response to West Germany's incorporation into Nato.

**1975** The Helsinki Final Act eases cold war tensions and recognises postwar borders.

**1989** The Berlin Wall falls, communism collapses across eastern Europe.

**1990** Reunification of Germany. The Paris Charter, allowing European states to choose their own alliances, is seen as ending the cold war.

**1991** The Soviet Union collapses, creating 15 independent states.

**1999** Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic join Nato. Nato bombs Serbia during the Kosovo crisis, angering Russia.

**2004** Seven more ex-communist states, including the three former Soviet Baltic republics, join Nato.

**2008** Russia fights a five-day war against ex-Soviet Georgia, after moves towards bringing it into Nato.

**2014** Protests topple Ukraine's Russian-leaning president Viktor Yanukovich (left). Russia annexes Crimea and foments war in eastern Ukraine.

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