



Vladimir Putin: heir to the Realpolitik of Kissinger?

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Commander Gilhodes considers that Vladimir Putin has pursued a disconcerting foreign policy since he took over the leadership of Russia, but that he has nevertheless managed to bring his country back into the game of the powers that count on the international scene. It seems pertinent to try to decipher his intentions through the prism of Realpolitik that Kissinger advocated for American diplomacy during the Cold War.

Outside its borders or among the Russian population itself, President Vladimir Putin leaves no one indifferent: he fascinates or outrages. During his successive terms of office? from 1999 to 2008, then from 2012 to the present day, to which we can add the term of office of Dimitri Medvedev from 2008 to 2012? his foreign policy has been scrutinised and analysed by specialists from all over the world and by the media, and the only consensus that can be noted is that it is extremely confusing.

While some fear the return of a new Cold War, one can nevertheless see Vladimir Putin's geopolitical vision through the prism of one of the greatest thinkers of American diplomacy of this era, Henry Kissinger. In particular, through the concept of Realpolitik, which he developed and which can be described as follows: achieving concrete and achievable goals that are strictly in the national interest, alternating diplomacy with the use of force and seeking a balance of power. The term Realpolitik was first used in the 19th century by Ludwig ^{von} Rochau to describe Chancellor Bismarck's policies in building German unity. Realpolitik is detached from all ideology and moral values, which can give it a rather cynical character. The Russian President and the American Secretary of State know each other well and respect each other. It would hardly be surprising if they share a common understanding of the great diplomatic game.

When Vladimir Putin succeeds Boris Yeltsin as head of state, he inherits an economically defeated country with an impoverished, humiliated and uprooted population. His main goal is clearly to rebuild the unity of Russia, and he chooses to do so by restoring Russian

national pride to make people forget the country's economic and demographic difficulties.

Vladimir Putin's first terms in office, a mixed policy

Vladimir Putin's foreign policy cannot be easily judged over the first two terms of office (2000-2004 and 2004-2008). Indeed, as an excellent judoka and a follower of the "flexible way", he was content during this period to observe the balance of power on the international scene.

In the face of the Europeans, he asserts his "Europeanness". He reassured them of his lack of inclination towards the countries of the "near abroad" [1], quoted Kant and his notion of "perpetual peace" and declared that NATO was not considered an enemy. However, when Putin visits Asia, especially China, his words change tone, charging Westerners by flattering Asian sensibilities. He thus denounces the interference not authorised by the UN that the West allowed itself during the Kosovo crisis[2] in the name of a humanitarian operation.

Putin's resentment has been fuelled over the years by the expansion of NATO on the one hand (Hungary, the Czech Republic and above all Poland in 1999, Bulgaria, the Baltic countries, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia in 1999) and on the other hand by the expansion of the European Union (the European Union and the United States in 1999). In 2004, Albania and Croatia in 2009 and the invitation extended to Montenegro in 2016) and of the European Union on the other hand (ten countries of the former Eastern bloc including the Baltic States in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania in 2007). These eastward enlargements accentuate the feeling of encirclement that Putin cultivates among his population.

The test of strength could have begun as soon as the colour revolutions [3], pro-European movements that shook some ex-Soviet countries, but Moscow had favoured diplomacy and economic pressure to support the pro-Russian leaders. In particular, the threats of cutting off gas supplies to countries dependent on Russian deliveries are well known. Aware of his weakness on the international scene, Vladimir Putin was content to play the diplomatic game in the early years. This also gave him the opportunity to make his handling of the Chechen conflict in 2000 part of the global fight against terrorism.

Countering foreign influences in the spheres of influence and beyond

From 2008 onwards, Vladimir Putin's political game (under Medvedev's presidency, then his own) consisted of playing on two overlapping levels. The first is to promote a multipolar world in which Russia would play a leading role. The aim is therefore to limit the influence of the United States and/or the "West" on the international scene. The second is to defend, by more or less coercive means, Russian interests. In 2008, Vladimir Putin defined Russia's vital interests as extending to Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Arctic and its Pacific coast. In this way he wants to protect his "marches", especially in the West.

Russia's first strong response took place in Georgia in 2008. Russian troops were deployed in South Ossetia to support the separatists, just as they had already supported those in Georgia's other separatist region, Abkhazia, in 1992-1993. This first step is

followed by a second one in 2014 in Ukraine, a conflict that is much more high-profile in the West. The crisis of the Euromaidan, a pro-European movement here again, gives Moscow the opportunity to seize the Crimea by deploying its "little green men" [4] and to destabilize the Donbass [5] in the East.

These two interventions were very largely supported by the Russian population. They helped to isolate Georgia and Ukraine from the West, while sending a very clear message to other countries in the sphere of influence that might be tempted to follow the same path. But the Ukrainian crisis has also played a major role in rebalancing the diplomatic powers: Moscow has become a key player in the negotiations, in particular for the Minsk 2 agreements in February 2015.

It should be noted that Putin only acts militarily with caution when the balance of power is favourable, again according to 'Realpolitik'. The West has condemned these actions, has taken economic retaliatory measures, but has not taken up arms. The test must be transformed and, for the first time since the fall of the USSR, Russia is intervening beyond its sphere of influence. It is Syria that offers it the opportunity to gain a foothold in the great international game [6]. [6] Moscow is implementing its own coalition to support the Alawite power and thus thwart the plans of the West. Putin then became a key player in the resolution of the conflict, while moving closer to Iran. He also made Russia's multi-centenary dream of access to the warm seas come true. It is done with the port of Tartous. Then, following tensions with Turkey, which shot down a Russian Su-24 on the Syrian border, Putin chose to reconcile with Turkish President Erdogan. This allows him to have an ally within NATO itself.

Vladimir Putin has achieved by small targeted actions what he proclaimed in 2013, i.e. not to "be a vassal in this unipolar world" [7]. Since then, he has multiplied demonstrations of force (incursions of submarines or aircraft off the European coasts) to maintain the position he has acquired.

Towards a new empire?

Some would like to see in the recent armed interventions of Putin's Russia the will to regain the borders of the USSR. It is unlikely that Putin has the ambition to recreate an empire, as this is not in line with his realistic policy. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see what each of the "imperial" visions brings to his own thinking.

- An empire within historical borders

The legacy of the Russian tsarist can be found in a notion still advocated today in Russian slavophile intellectual circles, that of Russia's own way, of its messianic destiny[8] in the face of the growing decadence of the West. Putin most certainly shares this vision, when he criticizes the weakened democracy and the decadence of morals in Europe. One can also note in this historical legacy Moscow's visceral attachment to Ukraine, which was the heart of Rus', the first Russian state. It was also in Kiev that Russia was baptised. Putin, like most Russians, supports this unshakeable link that should exist between the two countries, which partly explains the harshness of the current crisis.

- A Soviet empire

Putin is not nostalgic for the USSR, nor for communism as such, but he has exploited the

values of that time, which are patriotism and the glorification of the army. He is opposed to the restoration of any state ideology. He has been criticised for his statement that "first and foremost, it must be recognised that the fall of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the Soviet Union.g], but he later justified this by explaining that he was talking about the humanitarian catastrophe for the 25 million Russians who found themselves outside Russia's borders. The reminder of the Soviet history also allows him to affirm that it is the USSR that saved Europe from fascism, and the same speech was used in Ukraine to justify the struggle of the pro-Russians against the "fascist" parties. One sentence sums up Putin's thinking on the USSR: He who does not regret the destruction of the Soviet Union has no heart. And he who wants its identical reconstruction has no head" [10].

- A Pan-Slavian Empire

The Pan-Slav concept still has a certain value in Russia, which is proved by the Russian feeling of betrayal on the Kosovo issue. It is, however, too broad to cover any reality and is not much more concrete today for countries such as Poland or the Czech Republic.

- A Eurasian empire

The ad hoc concept of the Eurasia is comfortable, because with variable geometry, it can be adapted in all circumstances. As Putin often reminds us, Russia has European Christian roots, but 15 million Russians are Muslims and the majority of its territory is in Asia. He is working towards a Eurasian union and the use of the rouble for all countries. In 2014, this union concerns Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, which will be joined in 2015 by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. When he was elected for the third time in May 2012, he declared that he would "become the leader and the centre of gravity of the whole of Eurasia". However, it is an illusion to believe that the Baltic countries, Ukraine, Georgia and some Central Asian countries will join it. Success is only partial.

But it is also its rapprochement with China that should be noted here. Putin wooed her as soon as he came to power. "Russia will always be based on its two pillars, the European and the Asian" [11]. Although the two countries agree on certain values (distrust of Europe, willingness to counter the United States, affirmation of national sovereignty) and are members of the SCO [12] and first-rate economic partners, it is hardly credible that relations go beyond normalization. China is keen to follow its own path in international relations and Russia would risk playing the "junior partner" in a very unbalanced alliance in favour of the Chinese.

A realistic policy of influence

In spite of the significant advances on the international scene that Russia has made thanks to its President's realistic strategy, the President remains aware of the country's structural, economic and demographic weaknesses. Vladimir Putin is anxious to develop a real strategy of influence to support his foreign policy. On the one hand, this allows him to exalt this path specific to Russia, and on the other hand, to counter the export of European and American values in the world, values that the Russians do not consider universal. Vladimir Putin wants to take advantage of the large Russian diaspora in the world to develop his strategy of influence. He goes so far as to distribute Russian

passports to those who request them in Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine, in order to increase the weight of Russian minorities in neighbouring countries. He wants to rally Russian expatriates to the cause of the homeland so that they support Russian outreach.

Elsewhere in the world, it is through the development of Russian cultural centres that the Russian language and culture are promoted. But in 2007, it also set up Institutes for Democracy and Cooperation in Paris and New York to respond to Western criticism of human rights in Russia and to monitor and report back on shortcomings in these host countries. The media are not to be outdone with the development of Sputnik and Russia Today, which comment on current events from a Russian perspective. The former provides information on its website in more than 30 languages; the latter has a television channel broadcasting in Russian, English, Arabic and Spanish, in addition to internet platforms in German and French. Finally, the Orthodox Church can be cited as a vector of influence. The Moscow Patriarchate is trying to get closer to the other Orthodox, even to reclaim certain churches built in the world before the revolution. Thus in France, having been unable to recover the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, Moscow had the Trinity Cathedral built on the Quai Branly, which houses a new Russian spiritual and cultural centre.

Finally, the policies of influence could be extended to supposed interference in the elections in the United States, such as the support that Vladimir Putin gives to certain pro-Russian candidates in Europe. Russian supporters could thus push for the lifting of economic sanctions against Russia. All these actions of influence are minor objectives that support the former secret agent's realistic vision.

Realpolitik is a cynical vision where only the interests of the country are taken into account. It requires reliance on a "healthy" country, which may be judged as well as perilous in Russia's current situation? the weakness of its GDP, the quasi-monoculture of oil and gas industry, the absence of real economic reforms, the weight of international sanctions, the demographic problems. But the success of each blow dealt by Putin, on the other hand, makes it possible to compensate for this economic situation among the Russian population, which is rediscovering patriotic pride. For her, Russia bears the seeds of global renewal after years of humiliation. This is Kissinger's assessment of his heir, Vladimir Putin: "He coldly calculates Russia's national interests as he sees them, those which he believes, certainly rightly, have unique characteristics. For him, the question of Russian identity is particularly crucial. For, with the collapse of communism, Russia lost almost 300 years of its history. And so the question "What is Russia?" is very much on their minds. And it is a problem we never had".

After graduating from the École spéciale militaire de Saint-Cyr, promotion "Général de Galbert", Commandant GILHODES chose the weapon for his equipment. After serving with the 1st Combat Helicopter^{Regiment}, in the maintenance squadron, as unit commander at the NH90 Joint Training Centre and as deputy officer at the After serving with the 1st Combat Helicopter Regiment, Maintenance Squadron, as Unit Commander at the NH90 Joint Training Centre and as Deputy Officer in the NH90 Technician Training Division, she is currently studying Russian at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO) after her year at the War Academy.

1) The most generally accepted definition of "the near abroad" includes the former republics of the USSR except the Baltic States.

2) NATO intervened between March and June 1999 in the Kosovar conflict by bombing Serbia. Under Resolution 1244 of 10 June, the UN takes over the administration of Kosovo. The status of this province remains undetermined until 2008, when Kosovo proclaims its independence.

3] Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and Jeans Revolution in Belarus in 2005. Moscow regularly accused the CIA and Western NGOs of being behind these revolutions.

4] The Russian soldiers deployed on the spot do not wear any distinctive sign on their uniforms.

5] Self-proclaimed People's Republics of Lugansk and Donetsk.

6] At the appeal of Bashar el-Assad, Putin proposed the plan for a new anti-terrorist coalition before the United Nations (UN) on 28 September 2015, then intervened against the EI and the rebels from 30 September 2015.

7] Speech to the Valdai Club, 19 September 2013, Novgorod region.

8] Legacy of the notion of Moscow, 3rd^{Rome} of Philothea of Pskov, 1510.

9] Address to the Federal Assembly, April 25, 2005, Moscow.

10] Direct line to the readers of the daily Komsomolskaya Pravda, February 9, 2000.

11] Interview with the Chinese daily Renmin Ribao, the news agency China News and the television channel RTR, 16 June 2000.

12] The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an Asian regional intergovernmental organization created in [2001, which](#) includes Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, [. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan.](#)

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