

¿Por qué a Rusia le interesa tanto Ucrania?

Resumen:

Henry Kissinger siempre ha defendido que, tanto para mantener una relación mínimamente armoniosa con Rusia como para una geopolítica global equilibrada, Ucrania debería ser reconocida como Estado colchón. Muchos en Occidente piensan que con el Kremlin no se puede hacer concesiones de principios. En cualquier caso, la potencial incorporación de Ucrania a la OTAN ha terminado por romper las relaciones Este-Oeste y existe el grave riesgo de un aumento de las tensiones entre ambas partes. Moscú, que juzga que Occidente quiere debilitar y marginalizar a Rusia, hará todo lo que esté en sus manos para impedir la adhesión de Ucrania a la Alianza Atlántica. EE. UU. se juega su credibilidad y no se vislumbra una solución aceptable para los actores implicados. La población de Ucrania es la principal víctima, la paz y la estabilidad previsiblemente también.

Palabras clave:

Ucrania, Federación Rusa, OTAN, EE. UU., conflicto, Crimea, Donbas.

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Introduction

Since 2014, with the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, Ukraine has become the main stumbling block in Europe's security landscape. This spring, the deployment of a powerful Russian force along the Ukrainian border has once again highlighted the strategic relevance of this poisoned conflict.

So far this century, developments in the East-West relationship have returned the country to its historical position as a borderland, which is precisely why it owes its name to the Slavic language. Two different and largely conflicting approaches collide in what can be defined as a strategic dialogue of the deaf, with the main victim being the Ukrainian population itself. While the United States, as NATO's leader, protects principles that have guided Western nations since the end of the Cold War, the Kremlin has a typically geopolitical perspective that defends interests perceived as vital, while at the same time deep-seated feelings of national identity come into play.

Moscow is entrenched and has no intention of allowing the neighbouring country to enter the West's sphere of influence through NATO membership or any other means that would facilitate this in the future. Such an outcome would turn Ukraine into a state hostile to Russia in close understanding with the other anti-Russian countries of Eastern Europe. Moreover, it would mean Russia's acceptance of US diktat and the consequent relinquishment of its great power status.

On the other hand, President Biden, with his slogan "America is back", wants to restore America's democratic leadership and set clear limits to Russian adventurism. The experience of previous presidents, all of whom attempted rapprochement with the Eurasian power and ended up further away from it than they were when they came to power¹, has led the occupant of the White House to discard any path of appeasement in favour of insult as a means of laying his cards on the table before the game begins.

¹ GRAHAM, Thomas. *Let Russia be Russia. The case for a More Pragmatic Approach to Moscow*, Foreign Affairs, November/December 2019, p. 134.

Neither side seems willing to seek a solution that would resolve the situation on terms acceptable to the other, and the confrontation is becoming increasingly ideological and passionate.

It is to be expected that Russia, which has extensive experience in dealing with entrenched problems, will let the clock tick, casting its nets of influence, preventing the stabilisation of Ukraine and reacting whenever the situation is compromised, and that a defensive Kremlin will continue to pursue its aggressive hybrid strategy that exploits its adversary's weaknesses. NATO's strategy also tends to push Russia towards an increasingly reinforced Sino-Russian entente in the context of a multipolar international order that continues to fracture and polarise.

The Kremlin's increasingly assertive foreign policy, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its intervention in Syria in 2015, caught many by surprise. However, this course of action was the consequence of Russian President Vladimir Putin's worldview based on more than two decades of dissatisfaction with the West, as well as his accumulated experience in pursuing his central goals: regime preservation, the end of US hegemony, and the re-establishment of Russia as a global power. In Washington, it had come to be believed that the brief period of accommodation with Moscow from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s had become the new normal for the relationship with Russia. However, this period was an anomaly². Putin's foreign policy, similar to Russia's historical one, is essentially assertive, a circumstance exacerbated by the differences in perceptions with the West.

George Kennan in his famous article *The sources of Soviet conduct* stated that "While the Kremlin is basically flexible in its reaction to political realities, it is by no means unamenable to considerations of prestige. Like almost any other government, it can be placed by tactless and threatening gestures in a position where it cannot afford to yield even though this might be dictated by its sense of realism³." This remains true today and has been partly ignored by Washington in the belief that it was dealing with a lesser rival,

² BUGAYOVA, Nataliya. How We Got Here With Russia: The Kremlin's Worldview. ISW, March 2019. http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Report_The%20Kremlin%27s%20Worldview_March%202019.pdf.

³ "X" (KENNAN, George F.): 'The Source of Soviet Conduct.' Foreign Affairs, July 1947.

having overlooked that “Russia is not as strong as it looks when it looks strong, nor as weak as it looks when it looks weak.” This was the case when President Obama declared in March 2014 that “Russia is a regional power that threatens some of its immediate neighbours, not because of its strength but because of its weakness⁴.” Putin’s reaction has been to proclaim: “No one listens to us then. So listen now!” and demonstrate with facts that Russia has the will to protect its geopolitical interests and its status as a great power, accepting no treatment from the US other than as an equal.

This paper seeks to explain the reasons why the Russian leadership attaches so much importance to the Ukrainian issue and highlights the enormous difficulties that Western countries will face in ensuring that a strategy of pressure and isolation of Russia leads to an outcome favourable to NATO’s own interests.

History and identity come to complicate matters

Ukraine is a state made up of both territorial and historical scraps. Its stormy history serves both to defend a pro- and anti-Russian position, and it is difficult to arrange the events that make it up in a coherent way, without falling into Manichean simplifications. In any case, the Russian people are dominated by the feeling that Ukraine is an extension of their own nation⁵ and it is certainly not easy to draw a clear line between Russian and Ukrainian, especially in the territories closest to the Russian Federation. Russia’s borders have always been so dynamic and the Russian state itself is a reality made up of such diverse elements that the traditional concept of nationhood and sovereignty does not solve this difficult equation. Moscow basically believes that if Ukraine was part of the Russian empire for three centuries, including during the Soviet era, nothing should prevent it from regaining some kind of link with Russia in the future. Be that as it may, the cement must be prevented from drying up by drawing a definitive border that places the sister nation in alliance with a West that desires –according to the Russian leadership– a weak and marginalised Russia.

⁴ Holland, Steve, Mason, Jeff. Obama, in dig at Putin, calls Russia 'regional power', Reuters, 25 March 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-weakness-idUSBREA2019J20140325>.

⁵ SHERR, James. Nothing New Under the Sun? Continuity and Change in Russia Policy towards Ukraine. International Centre for Defence and Security, July 2020. https://efpi.icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2020/07/ICDS_EFPI_Report_Nothing_New_Under_the_Sun_Sherr_July_2020.pdf.

For the British historian Geoffrey Hosking: “Britain had an empire, but Russia was an empire and perhaps still is⁶.” There is no doubt that the current ruling elite feels a strong sense of imperial nostalgia, as most of them were part of the Soviet state machine. Mark Galeotti refers to this by characterising Vladimir Putin as “homo sovieticus”, not because of the then prevailing Marxist ideology, but because of the mark left on him by having served in a Russia that was a dominant and, in its own way, respected power⁷.

In November 2016, Putin unveiled a seventeen-metre high statue in the centre of Moscow of Prince Vladimir I, conqueror and unifier of Kievan Rus, baptised in Crimea in 988, the Russian equivalent of the combination of the Visigothic kings Leovigild and Recaredo in medieval Spanish history, and whom Patriarch Kirill called “father of the Russian people and symbol of the unity of all the peoples of historical Russia⁸.” In doing so, he conveyed a double message: the essential foundational bond that unites the two nations and the Russian nation’s own cultural roots that it does not intend to renounce in favour of the perceived imposition of the values of Western societies.

That first great Russia succumbed to the Tatar onslaught of the 13th century. It was not until the end of the 17th century that the Tsarist empire began to incorporate Ukraine under Peter the Great. The two world wars led to shifting borders and successive waves of internal and external conflicts with brutal repression that each interprets in his own way.

In 1903, at the second Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party, Lenin had proposed the recognition of the right to self-determination of nations oppressed by Russia. This laid the foundations on which the question of the territorial integration of the republics of the USSR, which in Article 72 of the Constitution had the right to freely secede from the USSR, would be resolved in the future.

During the Cold War, the possibility of a Soviet republic becoming independent seemed a pipe dream. However, the events of 1989-91 led to the collapse of the USSR with the dismemberment of all its republics.

⁶ HOSKING, Geoffrey, *The Freudian Frontier*, Times Literary Supplement, 10 March 1995, p. 27.

⁷ GALEOTTI, Mark. *We Need to Talk About Putin*. Ebury, 2019.

⁸ EFE, *Putin inaugura un monumento a Vladímir, el príncipe que cristianizó Rusia en 988*, Moscow, 4 November 2016.

The day after the coup attempt in August 1991, Ukraine had declared its independence, with a certain period of stalemate, and decreed the suspension of Communist party activity. The desire to seek a better future detached from the defunct USSR joined the independence movement of a nationalist nature. On 8 December Ukraine, Russia and Belarus agreed to create the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

The most sensitive issue at the time was the nuclear weapons deployed on Ukrainian territory, the third largest arsenal in the world after the US and Russia. But international pressure and the memory of the Chernobyl accident made it easier for Kiev to hand over all its tactical weapons to Moscow in 1992, to subsequently hand over its strategic nuclear warheads, to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty in November 1994 and to declare Ukraine a nuclear-free state⁹.

The territorial issue of Crimea, which had been transferred in 1954 by Khrushchev from Russia to Ukraine and had the status of an Autonomous Republic, was another major challenge that was settled in March 1994 when Moscow signed a compromise with Kiev recognising Crimea as part of Ukrainian territory, as well as the inviolability of its borders. From the Russian point of view, it was understood that NATO was no longer a strategic rival and would not take advantage of this –a verbal commitment that did not materialise on paper– since Russia's main naval base was located on the peninsula. Thus, in 1995 Russia and Ukraine signed an agreement to allow part of the Russian Black Sea fleet to remain in the port of Sevastopol.

Developments in Russia's strategy towards Ukraine

From the outset, it was seen in Moscow as one thing to dissolve the Warsaw Pact and even the separation from the non-Slav Soviet republics, and another to break with Ukraine and Belarus, territories linked to Russia by centuries of common history, culture, traditions and family ties. Moreover, it was thought that these republics would never be able to sustain themselves completely independent of Russia. If for Kravchuk the CIS

⁹ CHARAP, Samuel, COLTON, Timothy J., "Everyone loses, the Ukraine crisis and the ruinous contest for post-soviet Eurasia", IISS, January 2017.

represented a civilised divorce, for the Kremlin Ukraine's independence was interpreted as an aberration.

With Ukraine there was a close interdependence in energy, finance, industry –a particular case was the military industry, where the part of the Soviet defence sector based in Ukraine had accounted for close to one-third of Soviet defence-industrial production– and economic model, reinforced by the interests of those who benefited from this relationship in Ukraine. More subtle and also more easily penetrable by Russia were the irregular and partially criminalised trade relations that developed in the shadow of the oligarchic structures. The interaction of all these circumstances made Russian influence not only significant but systemic, acting as a structural factor in Ukraine's internal affairs¹⁰.

In Yeltsin's early years, integration with the West and the CIS were seen as complementary goals and interdependence would make Ukrainian independence in the strict sense impossible. This idyllic vision soon dissipated, and with Primakov's appointment as foreign minister in 1996, distrust of the West returned¹¹. From then on, and even more so with Putin's arrival, the Kremlin believed that Russia had to recover from its weakness to re-establish itself as a global power and promote a new international order with Russia as an equal rather than a subordinate of the US. Nevertheless, Putin believed that understanding with Washington was possible, something that 9/11 and the common fight against terrorism should facilitate.

Although the sovereignty of the newly independent states seemed already "irreversible", the Russian leadership believed that key areas of sovereignty should be "delegated" to Russia. Since then, Moscow has always underestimated the importance of Ukrainian national sentiment, which has been greatly strengthened by the seduction of Western dynamism and the rejection of a Soviet past linked to Russia, not to mention the very crisis into which the great neighbour to the East had fallen.

Ukrainian political and industrial elites, including powerful oligarchs, learned to profit from integration with Russia by minimising political compromises with Moscow. However, with

¹⁰ SHERR, James. Op. cit.

¹¹ RUMER, Eugen. *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action*. Carnegie Endowment for international Peace, June 2019. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Rumer_PrimakovDoctrine_final1.pdf.

the arrival of the new century, by restoring the vertical of power in Russia, Putin made this dynamic much more difficult. Not only did he coordinate and subordinate the economic actors that had been privatising Russia, but he used economic pressure to extract political concessions from Ukraine. Russian oil and gas became the main instrument of coercion. The new Foreign Policy Concept of June 2000 affirmed the need for “a friendly belt on the perimeter of the Russian border.” In 2003 Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union, the initiative on which Putin’s intended regional integration was to hinge.

However, Ukrainian civil society did not enter the equation, making the 2004-2005 Orange Revolution a complete surprise for the Kremlin and Yushchenko’s triumph a sensitive setback. Suddenly, Ukrainian hopes for NATO and EU membership took on an aura of realism. Putin interpreted the colour revolutions as a covert method of the West to destabilise Russia and declared closer relations between the Atlantic Alliance and Ukraine and Georgia as a threat¹².

Relations with Washington became strained, Putin failed to wrest an agreement from Western powers to halt NATO expansion. The integration of the Baltic republics into the Atlantic Alliance in 2004 was the last move eastwards that the Kremlin was willing to concede. For Moscow this was a red line, while the Russian economy was recovering and Putin had returned ambition and confidence to the Russian Federation.

However, the theory of the “End of History” had given great confidence in the resilience and moral authority of the liberal international order presided over by the US, and it was thought in Washington that other countries, including Russia, would eventually submit to it.

In the end, it would turn out to be a strategic “Blackjack” badly played for not recognising that, after so much already achieved, the prudent thing to do was not to raise the bidding any further.

¹² BUGAYOVA, Nataliya. Op. Cit.

In 2007, at the Munich Security Conference, the Russian president raised the tone of his speech and expressed his strong opposition to such an American hegemonic order, “a world where there is a lord and master... This is detrimental not only to all those who are part of it but also to the master itself... NATO expansion is intended to encircle Russia.”

At the Bucharest summit in April 2008, Ukraine’s and Georgia’s requests for NATO membership were considered, although the decision was postponed. In Western capitals it was thought that Russia was powerless to prevent this and would have to accept the decision of sovereign nations. As stated by Thomas P. Ehrhard, the US felt it was the victor, and Russia as a weak country not only had to suffer what they must, but was also ignored¹³. Russia, to make it clear that it would not accept such a logic, responded with the brief military campaign in Georgia in August of that year, which met with a very timid response from the West and was followed by a rapid recovery of relations between the two sides. The Kremlin thought that the message had been understood and that its strategy was working. However, in anticipation of what might happen in the future, it initiated a profound military reform of the armed forces that had proven to be almost obsolete.

Moreover, the gas crises of 2006 and 2008-2009 had inflicted much economic damage on Ukraine and its mismanagement of this latter crisis incurred reputational cost as well. Adding the losses from the global financial meltdown, Ukraine lost 15% of its GDP in 2009¹⁴.

This allowed Moscow to regain the initiative. Viktor Yanukovich’s victory in 2010 seemed to suit the Kremlin’s purposes. The new Ukrainian president’s primary objective was to make his own position and that interests of his oligarchic “family” impregnable. By abandoning any intention to integrate Ukraine into NATO, he hoped to secure a free hand with the EU. Moscow had no intention of accepting this and increased the pressure on the neighbouring country excessively, demanding full sectoral integration and “synchronisation” of socio-economic relations. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement

¹³ EHRHARD, Thomas P. Treating the Pathologies of Victory: Hardening the Nation for Strategic Competition. Heritage.org, 30 October 2019. <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/topical-essays/treating-the-pathologies-victory-hardening-the-nation-strategic>.

¹⁴ SHERR, James. Op. cit.

became the new *casus belli* – if Kiev opened up to the EU, Russian-Ukrainian trade would be severely limited and the Eurasian Economic Union would languish. The Ukrainian president had to give in, but once again, Ukrainian civil society turned the tables and, in November 2013, the Euromaidan revolution broke out. Having got everything he wanted from Yanukovich, Putin lost Yanukovich and also lost Ukraine.

In February 2014, judging the situation very dangerous for its interests with the likely loss of the Sevastopol naval base and Ukraine's NATO membership, the Kremlin deployed military forces in Crimea, organised a referendum for its integration into the Russian Federation and caught the West by surprise once again. Moscow then began manoeuvring in western Ukraine to take control of more pro-Russian territories. Armed conflict broke out in Donbas in April that has claimed more than 14,000 lives.

The war that began in 2014 marked the end of a twenty-five-year effort to “synchronise the development” of Russian-Ukrainian relations by peaceful, albeit indirectly coercive, means. In the months following Petro Poroshenko's election as president, military-industrial cooperation was halted, Russian banks were sanctioned, trade was drastically reduced and gas imports were reduced to almost zero¹⁵.

Since then, there has been no diplomatic breakthrough and, beyond various initiatives and commitments, the Russian side is trying to prevent the neighbouring country from eventually joining NATO or the EU. The relationship with the West has suffered a very serious deterioration that is very difficult to reverse. All indications are that the only solution the Kremlin would accept would be the neutralisation of Ukraine. Moreover, the Kremlin's rhetoric aims to make it clear that Crimea's reincorporation into Russia is already irreversible. Putin is counting on the fact that as long as the conflict remains active at its current level, Ukraine's chances of joining the Atlantic Alliance are nil. This is also enough to ensure that his word will be heard in Kiev.

Strategic considerations

None of the measures taken by the US and its allies have fundamentally changed Russian attitudes or views. On the contrary, in order to defend interests deemed

¹⁵ Ibidem.

essential, the Russian leadership has hardened its positions, become much more aggressive and leapt to a more far-reaching strategy. Thanks to its successes in Syria, it has regained a pre-eminent position in the Middle East, asserted its status as a major power and begun to operate in theatres far from its borders, particularly in the Mediterranean and Africa. Where the White House takes one position, as is the case in Myanmar, the Kremlin takes the opposite.

Any strategy must be directed towards achieving an objective. It is not a question of reinforcing one's reasons with arguments, but of reflecting on whether or not the chosen course of action contributes to the desired end and what the resulting scenario will be. As in a game of chess, you have to try to foresee what the other player's moves will be in order to find the best outcome on the board. In a few years, however, we have moved from a context of understanding that the Cold War's end had brought about to a relationship of open confrontation.

NATO's decision to expand further eastwards, despite the Kremlin's explicit objections, underestimated Russia as a rival, assumed that it would be sufficient for the existing international order to support Western views, and pursued a course of action that, while upholding important principles, did not contribute to the security of Alliance members, which is the Alliance's primary purpose. However, in the balance of strategic interests at stake there was a huge imbalance between what enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance represented for both sides.

Russian leadership has borne a heavy cost –with studied determination and defiance, it has endured opprobrium, exclusion from capital markets, restrictions on high-tech imports, NATO deterrents and even the possible failure of its most cherished economic project in Europe, the Nord Stream II pipeline– and has further tightened its strategic partnership with China in order to finally break the international order in whose name the strategy was being pursued and that, rightly or wrongly, the Kremlin perceived as a serious threat to its vital interests.

The attempt to further expand NATO has ruined Ukraine, has significantly increased insecurity in Eastern Europe, has contributed to the configuration of a multipolar international order, and has transformed a poorly armed Russia that claimed an immediate area of influence to a more aggressive one with a powerful military profile that has significantly expanded its strategic ambition and outreach¹⁶. Now, how do you get the genie back into the lamp?

Within the Allies there are different approaches on the issue, which Moscow would like to exploit given the importance of firmness and unity on such a sensitive issue. More of the same does not seem to be the solution. The dilemma is thus served.

Conclusion

The relationship between Russia and the West is by nature difficult, the two sides are separated by very different strategic cultures, and Moscow does not accept an US led international order in which Russia is not recognised as a major power.

At present, relations can be considered broken, with a tendency to deteriorate further. The main stumbling block has been the attempt to enlarge NATO to the east, and in particular the incorporation of Ukraine, beyond the line reached in 2004 with the incorporation of the Baltic republics.

The Kremlin has seen this as a threat to core interests and Washington's desire to weaken and marginalise Russia.

To prevent this, Putin has taken serious risks and damage to his country and has tightened the relationship between Moscow and Beijing in a successful effort to shut down the liberal international order presided over by Washington.

With Russia not recognised as having a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, it has broken the perceived NATO encirclement, intervening with great skill in the Syrian war. From its vantage point in the Middle East it has expanded its geopolitical ambitions

¹⁶ PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. El desencuentro con Rusia y las claves de su estrategia militar. IEEE Analysis Paper 22/2020, 17 June 2020.
http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA22_2020JOSPAR_Rusiamilitar.pdf.

to demonstrate by deeds that the Kremlin is not willing to be ignored in the concert of major powers

Henry Kissinger was not so far off the mark when he said that Ukraine should have served as a bridge rather than an outpost for one another¹⁷.

We are now faced with a scenario that benefits neither side, yet it is very difficult to back down from the reached positions. Russia is entrenched and has no intention of letting go of its prey. There are different sensitivities within the Alliance, yet it is important to maintain cohesion. China is pleased to see the gap widening. It is easier to make a judgement on the state of play than to find a solution. Perhaps the upcoming Geneva summit between Biden and Putin will provide some clues.

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¹⁷ KISSINGER, Henry, Interview by Jeffrey Goldberg in The Atlantic, 10 November 2016. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/kissinger-order-and-chaos/506876/>