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Assessing the trajectory of West-Russia relations in Eastern Europe: Gauging three potential scenarios

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Abstract

The Ukraine crisis and the subsequent cooling of West-Russia relations has elicited a number of popular arguments as to the trajectory of the relationship, many of which are alarming and pessimistic. After acknowledging the current impasse that has emerged between the coalition of Western actors, Ukraine and Russia since the signing of the second Minsk agreement in early 2015, this article speculates three medium-term scenarios for the West-Russia relationship in the context of Eastern Europe. An optimal scenario whereby the relationship is reset along complementary trade and energy interests, a suboptimal scenario which would see the development of a New Cold War, and a pragmatic middle option that reduces the shared neighbourhood, especially Ukraine, to a Finland-style buffer state are offered. Of the three presented scenarios, it is argued that because Russia is prepared to pay a higher cost than the West, right now, it will likely end up with a more favourable outcome (the pragmatic scenario) than the rest.

Policy Recommendations

- The pragmatic scenario is desirable when the difficulty of achieving the optimal scenario and the lose-lose nature of the suboptimal scenario are factored in.
- For the West: Understanding the high price Russia is willing to pay to assert its hegemony in its near abroad is imperative to developing a coherent and viable strategy.
- For Russia: Realising the long-term costs of its aggressive actions in Ukraine and more broadly in its near abroad is urgently required.
- A commitment to greater European security integration by the West – whether through NATO, the EU or a new institution altogether – could reduce Russia's bargaining power significantly in the long term.

Introduction

Finding solutions to the Ukraine crisis and the subsequent cooling of West-Russia relations remains a conundrum for practitioners and scholars alike.¹ Something of an impasse has emerged since the signing of the second Minsk Agreement on the 11th of February 2015 which has meant that the questions of Ukraine and the West-Russia relationship remain open-ended. Much uncertainty envelopes the geopolitics of Eastern Europe with many of the key actors in this setting facing significant internal challenges which potentially affect the medium-to-long term trajectories of West-Russia relationship in Eastern Europe. The European Union (EU) is not only struggling to be a coherent international actor, especially with regards to its Eastern frontier, its very future remains shrouded in doubt (Gehring et al., 2017; Patomaki, 2017). The United States had been undertaking a pivot to Asia before the Ukraine crisis, but since the election of Donald Trump, few confident assumptions can be forwarded about the direction of American foreign policy; all of which has large implications for NATO (Cooper, 2014;

Kaufman, 2017). Russia is a state in decline - whether economic, social, political or as an international power - but as its power to shape international politics dissipates, its regional focus has intensified which has raised fears about what its end goal is in Eastern Europe (Neumann, 2015; Wohlforth and Zubok, 2017).

Certainly, the current state of affairs tends to generate more pessimistic than optimistic predictions for the medium term future of Ukraine, Eastern Europe, and the West-Russia relationship. However, the West-Russia relationship is not necessarily pre-ordained to remain quagmired in a pessimistic, competitive, and antagonistic setting, despite the popularity of such an argument in the current discourse.² West-Russia relations in their shared neighbourhood are complex and involve a multitude of variables ranging from systemic power distribution globally and regionally; the role identities and ideologies of the key actors, the decision-makers' perceptions; and the unique foreign policy-making processes, to name but a few. Thus, while relations are clearly quite competitive right now, there is no guarantee that this will become the new

¹ Here the West is used to denote the United States, the European Union, EU member states, and NATO.

² Mainstream media publications such as The Economist, Time, Foreign Affairs, and Foreign Policy, among others, have all published articles predicting a further cooling of the West-Russia relationship.

norm in West-Russia relations. Using a neoclassical realist analytical framework, this article examines three of the most likely scenarios - positioned along a continuum from optimal to suboptimal - and then examines which of these is the most likely outcome in the medium term future.

Three plausible scenarios

The three plausible scenarios offered in this essay stem from the findings of a comprehensive historical analysis of the Ukraine crisis, especially the underpinning EU-Russia relationship, that culminated in the book: *EU-Russian Relations and the Ukraine Crisis* (Smith, 2016). This study was undertaken through employing a neoclassical realist theoretical framework. Neoclassical realism, in a nutshell, is a loose coalition of the structural realist focus on how the distribution of power affects international politics with the classical realist focus on how variables drive foreign policy outcomes at the state level (Rose, 1998).

The neoclassical realist framework guiding this research examined one external variable - the Eastern Europe security complex - and

two internal variables - role identity and decision-makers' perceptions.

The external variable - the Eastern Europe security complex - is treated as a systemic stimulus which exogenously helps drive the scope and ambition of a state's foreign policy. A regional security complex, as defined by Buzan (2003), is a regional subsystem of the broader international system in which the participating units (predominately sovereign states, but also, in some contexts, international organisations) have interlinked security perceptions and concerns. The regional setting is important - arguably more so than the broader international setting - because "most political and military threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones" so "insecurity is often associated with proximity" (Buzan, 2003, 141). Furthermore, the more unstable the distribution of power within a regional system is, especially evident in unbalanced - i.e. no agreed security architecture³ - bipolar and multipolar settings, the more likely states will be affected by the actions of the other, especially larger, members of the complex. In the context of West-Russia relations, it is argued that the Eastern Europe security

³A security architecture is defined by Tow and Taylor (2010, 96) as an "overarching, coherent and comprehensive security structure for a geographically-

defined area, which facilitates the resolution of that region's policy concerns and achieves its security objectives."

complex has been of great importance over the past 15 years: especially since the enlargement of NATO and the EU and the re emergence of an ambitious Russia in its near abroad (Smith, 2016).

The two internal variables examined, identity and perceptions, are treated as an interlinked intervening process - an identity-perceptions framework - which helps translate the systemic stimuli, via the domestic setting, into a foreign policy outcome. Identity - namely, the values, beliefs, norms and assumptions which a state prioritizes for its international role - acts as a kind of cognitive framework for decision makers; a filter which makes sense of the international system and how an entity should appropriately act within it (Juneau, 2015, pp. 44-6). Perceptions, namely the perceptions held by decision-makers, of their state's relative power and other states' power, interests, and motivations are, unlike identity, not constrictive but rather swing the policy options available to a state (within the ideational parameters) based on their perceptive calculations (Juneau, 2015, p. 43). Thus, within the domestic foreign policy making process of states, it is argued that identity adds parameters of appropriate behaviour from which perceptions inform consequential policy recommendations.

Schweller (2004) developed a strain of neoclassical realism called "a theory of mistakes" because neoclassical realism helps a researcher, to a certain extent, explain suboptimal outcomes in foreign policy making, and, to a lesser degree, suboptimal international political outcomes in regional settings. Furthermore, given that neoclassical realism is very much a problem-driven approach, it is a useful tool for offering feedback in the form of policy critiques and recommendations. Thus, using neoclassical realist-informed observations of the West-Russia relationship in the context of the Ukraine crisis, this article offers three plausible scenarios - an optimal, a suboptimal, and a middle-ground 'pragmatic' scenario - for the medium to long-term trajectory of West-Russia relations.

Optimal scenario

A realistic optimal scenario for the West-Russia relationship in the medium term is the development of a complementary relationship that focuses on the win-win potential of trade and energy relations and minimises the fear and antagonism of the diverging security preferences of the two key Western institutions (the EU and NATO) and Russia. Therefore, such a scenario is

predicated on the EU, NATO and Russia agreeing on a security architecture for Eastern Europe. From Russia's perspective, for a new security architecture to be agreed, NATO would have to unequivocally rule out further expansion eastwards and the EU give up its putative quest for a unipolar Europe based on its norms and values (Haukkala, 2015). Incidentally, both EU and NATO membership remain key aspirations for the Poroshenko government in Ukraine (The Telegraph, 2017). However, neither the EU nor NATO has - in response to Poroshenko's statements - explicitly ruled out Ukrainian membership in their institutions the future. From the EU and NATO's perspective, a security compromise with Russia would only be palatable if Russia agreed to rethink its conceptualisation of being the hegemon of its near abroad and allow 'joint management' of Eastern European security. Joint management would essentially allow the countries caught in the shared neighbourhood - Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine - to be independent of Russia's overbearing shadow, allowing them to have close ties with the West if they so choose.

4 Incidentally, at the 1989 Malta Summit, the West and the Soviet Union tentatively agreed a post-Cold War security architecture for Eurasia which balanced power on the continent; a situation where both sides agreed not to pursue any hegemonic goals. However, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, this security

Such a compromise has not seemed remotely possible since Russia's first push to reclaim its near abroad hegemony in the mid-2000s (Noutcheva, 2017). In addition to the two security compromises mentioned above that an optimal scenario would necessitate, solving the Crimean conundrum and the separatist movements in the Donbass would probably also be obligatory pre-requisites to a binding security architecture being agreed.

If a complementary security architecture could be found between the EU/NATO and Russia, likely an architecture built upon a bipolar balance of power (with the West and Russia representing the two clear - equal - poles), it would allow the relationship to be rebuilt on positive-sum foundations (Rynning, 2015).⁴ An EU-Russia free trade agreement would be the ultimate tool to recalibrating the relationship towards cooperation and partnership. Although such an agreement seems largely fanciful in the current climate, as recently as late 2014, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, stated that Russia would be interested in creating a "unified economic and

agreement was abandoned and the West - through its two main European institutions, the EU and NATO - asserted a normative, economic and security hegemony over Eurasia, at the expense of the largest country, Russia.

humanitarian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok" through linking the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014). Furthermore, despite a significant drop in trade flows between the EU and Russia, Russia is still the EU's fourth largest trading partner while the EU remains Russia's number one trade partner (European Commission, 2017a). Furthermore, such a setting would also have positive implications in the areas of energy, mobility, transport, education and even security and defence relations while allowing the "common spaces" initiative to return to the fore of EU-Russian relations and the United States to recommence its Asian pivot.

For such an optimistic scenario to unfold, significant changes are required in the West-Russia relationship. Firstly, both the West and Russia need to better understand one another. Such an outcome would firstly need Western actors (especially the EU and NATO) and Russia to make changes to their identity-perceptions frameworks. The West's putative civilising mission (evident in the role identities of the EU and NATO) would need to be softened to accept that pursuing hegemony - whether political, economic or normative - in Eastern Europe is not only unrealistic, it is also undesirable as it risks an

escalating security dilemma (and even conflict) with Russia. This is not to say that the EU should abandon its economic, political, or normative focus or that NATO should abandon its security role, but rather they should widen the scope of their policy making to acknowledge Russia's power position in Eastern Europe. This would mean the EU would accept that Russia has legitimate interests in its near abroad and that, subsequently, pursuing zero-sum policies there is detrimental to European security. For Russia, its Eurasian great power identity was clearly a source of its assertive and, at times, belligerent foreign policy responses to changes in the triangle (Smith, 2017a). Refocusing the Eurasian hegemon aspect of its identity, while keeping its great power focus, would be a prudent way for Russia to soften its role identity toward Ukraine and the West. This would allow the key Western actors to have legitimate interests in Eastern Europe and for Ukraine (and the other states of the neighbourhood) to have a relatively independent foreign policy, both of which would minimise the threat perceptions at the heart of Russia's foreign policy-making.

Suboptimal scenario

Some pessimistic suboptimal (extreme worst-case) scenarios that have been raised for the broader West-Russia relationship envisage a grave escalation of contention and acrimony to the point where war, even nuclear war, between Russia and NATO could erupt (Kaplan, 2016; Majumdar, 2016). Given Russia's propensity to sabre rattle and use strong rhetoric as well as undertake actual interventions in Ukraine, coupled with NATO's retaliatory posturing in Central-Eastern Europe, it is unsurprising that many have interpreted these developments as potential first steps on the pathway to out-and-out military conflict. However, such a scenario is mostly farfetched as neither Russia nor NATO probably has an appetite for escalation to the point of war between the two, because such an outcome clearly tilts the cost-benefit analysis of both too far towards the cost direction.

A more plausible suboptimal scenario is that something of a New Cold War - albeit a smaller and more localised version than the original Cold War - emerging in Eastern Europe (and potentially the Middle East if

divergence continues over issues such as Syria and Yemen). Such a setting would not have an agreed security architecture, which, like the original Cold War, would make the threat of military confrontation appear imminent and precipitate a security dilemma and an arms race between both sides.⁵ Indeed, Cold War-style paranoia and anxiety have ostensibly returned to the West-Russia relationship, especially in those countries in the vicinity of the Ukraine crisis, and could escalate further (Smith, 2017b). Russia has increased its projection of military power towards the West, most notably through its undertaking of numerous exercises around the Kaliningrad oblast; the recent Zapad 2017 exercise involved as many as 100,000 personnel (Sukhankin, 2017). Conversely, NATO has similarly ramped up the size and number of exercises on its Eastern border - albeit not to the scale of Russia - as well as creating the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) - a "Spearhead Force" for rapid protection against threats to NATO member states sovereignty - for the member states closest to Russia (Abts, 2015).⁶ However, despite this clear increase in tension since the Ukraine crisis, the global threat embodied by

⁵ David Lake (2009, 61), in his assessment of the different types of regional security complexes argues that the most unstable is a bipolar regional setting, especially one which has no agreed security

architecture, which makes the region "highly competitive and conflict prone."

⁶ The VJTF currently comprises four battalions stationed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

the original Cold War will not return to the broader West-Russia relationship.⁷ Nevertheless, in such an environment, the predominately beneficial trade and energy relations that characterised the EU-Russia relationship for the first 15 years of the post Cold War era would be eradicated and replaced with out-and-out mercantilism, with trade and energy used purely for statecraft. The deterioration of the relationship to a point where no cooperation exists and clear security divergences between the great powers reign would have the potential to essentially rip the shared neighbourhood of Eastern Europe in half - a process which has arguably already started. Thus, hypothetically, in Ukraine, Crimea, the Donbass region, and potentially Bessarabia would represent a "Novorossiia" bloc of Ukraine that would be fully aligned, if not incorporated, within Russia, with the rest of Ukraine becoming an entirely Western-facing state (Toal, 2017). For the remaining two states, Belarus would likely become even more entrenched within Russia's sphere and Moldova would likely move closer to the EU (although further complications arise there

given the role of Russia in the breakaway state of Transnistria).

A suboptimal scenario like this will be born from increased dissonance and confusion. Therefore, for this to occur, threat perceptions of all involved would likely have to become more anxious and paranoid. The West would strengthen its putative policy of subordinating Russia through exploiting an array of power dimensions - such as economic, normative, and soft power - while simultaneously remaining unwilling to understand Russia's anxieties and fears (Sakwa, 2015). This would mean that NATO would continue to build progressive relationships with the countries in the shared neighbourhood while keeping the prospect of future membership firmly on the table. Additionally, the EU would maintain its Eastern Partnership policy in a continued attempt to Europeanise its eastern frontiers while not explicitly ruling out future membership for those countries. At the same time, Russia's Eurasian great power identity could strengthen further which would increase their perceptions of NATO and the EU - under the putative control of the United States - as representing anti-Russian

⁷The Cold War became a globally significant contest largely because it involved the two clear poles of a bipolar international setting. While the West-Russia relationship could return to similar levels of

antagonism, the global setting (now an emerging multipolar world) has changed significantly, especially with the Rise of China and India and Russia's terminal decline (Smith, 2017b).

imperialist forces (Forsberg and Pursiainen, 2017). This would make Russia's foreign policy decision-making for its near abroad and Ukraine - which would become a 'make-or-break' national interest - even more pessimistic and zero-sum, ruling out any opportunity for compromise and raising the potential for more conflict.

Pragmatic scenario

A third scenario, one which is situated somewhere between the optimal and suboptimal ones presented above (thus, a "pragmatic" option) is that the shared neighbourhood, especially Ukraine, becomes a buffer region between the EU/NATO and Russia. Although this scenario is perhaps the closest to the current impasse, if such a scenario is to eventuate as a medium-term outcome a tacitly agreed security architecture would still be required as a safeguard from the relationship descending into the suboptimal scenario presented above. Therefore, the security architecture would be a loose agreement on the bipolar nature of Eastern Europe and that the shared neighbourhood would represent, at least on paper, a no-go zone regarding security

interests. Indeed, such an outcome has become popular in the discourse - championed by luminaries such as Brzezinski (2014) and Kissinger (2014) - and has been coined the Finlandisation approach as it has similarities with the security compromise the United States and the Soviet Union made concerning Finland's positioning during the Cold War.⁸

The problem of this suggested pragmatic solution is that it would officially render Ukraine, as well as Belarus and Moldova, passive and without agency in the triangle; essentially, they would cede much of their external sovereignty in return for stability. While this is understandably a hard sell to those countries, to what degree these countries had any real agency in the relationship prior to the deterioration of West-Russia relations is debatable, especially if you view sovereignty as relative, not absolute. In addition to reduced sovereignty, the questions of Crimea and Donbass would likely remain open and unsolved, with the former remaining a part of Russia and the latter becoming a frozen conflict. Furthermore, there is fear that Russia could use the frozen conflict to exude indirect influence over Ukraine, which has been its

⁸Although, in reality, Finlandisation was a begrudging bandwagon of the Soviet Union by Finland more than

a coherent agreement by the United States and the Soviet Union (Walt, 1985).

modus operandi in Georgia since the early 1990s where Russia backs two breakaway regions: South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Mankoff, 2014). Indeed, although Finland was officially a non-aligned buffer state during the Cold War, in practice, the Soviet Union exerted a significant amount of influence - certainly more than the United States - over Helsinki. On a more positive note, this scenario would not only pacify some of the underpinning security threats but also likely see a halt to the rapidly diminishing trade links between the EU and Russia (total trade diminished by 43% from 2012 to 2016) and Russia and Ukraine (total trade diminished by 76% from 2012 to 2016). Furthermore, a Finlandisation-style agreement could potentially stabilise Russia-Ukraine energy relations - which have ceased to exist since Russia stopped supplying gas to Ukraine in late 2015 - which would also have implications for the strained (but still lucrative) EU-Russia energy relationship (Siddi, 2017). Importantly, however, this scenario would not create an environment conducive to pursuing cooperation like the optimal scenario presented above. Rather, it would merely stabilise relations, providing a bulwark

against deterioration of the relationship towards a suboptimal scenario.

For this pragmatic scenario to eventuate, both the West and Russia would need to agree that the potential for the suboptimal scenario - a New Cold War - is undesirable and put in place some agreements, whether formal or informal, to protect against further deterioration of the relationship towards it. Finding basic common ground, probably through embracing the pragmatic feedback on offer from the crisis to date, would be a key component of this scenario eventuating.⁹ Furthermore, the identity-perceptions frameworks of the EU and NATO and Russia would need some alteration to alleviate the prevalent misunderstanding and confusion (as outlined in the section about the optimal scenario), although not to the extent required for the optimal scenario. The EU and NATO would need to recognise that Russia is insecure about Western encroachment and is prepared to respond in a strong and swift manner when its perceived national interest is threatened. Indeed, some EU member states - including Italy, Hungary, Slovakia, Greece, and Cyprus, and, to a lesser extent, France and Germany - have iterated that they are open to ending sanctions against

⁹ Wohlforth and Zubok (2017) outline in more detail the steps which would have to be taken by the West

and Russia to enable a pragmatic compromise between the two.

Russia and ultimately covet some form of strategic partnership in the long term (Tamkin, 2017). However, countries such as Poland and the Baltic three, and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom, are strongly against an end to sanctions and any idea of a strategic partnership, and, in fact, lobby for harsher policies against Russia - making the EU's chance for a coherent position difficult. Conversely, Russia would need to recognise that while the key Western actors have not been prepared to punish them that severely for their aggressive action in Ukraine to date, beyond sanctions and ostracization, the long-term success of its Ukraine actions is less than guaranteed. The ongoing cost of sanctions and international ostracisation have hurt Russia somewhat - although Russia seems more susceptible to low oil prices - and when coupled with Russia's apparent terminal decline, its long-term outlook is bleak (Movchan, 2017). Incidentally, Vladimir Putin recently submitted a draft resolution to the United Nations Security Council to send a peacekeeping mission to patrol the ongoing conflict in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine, perhaps demonstrating a more diplomatic stance, although few are prepared to buy Russia's sincerity at this stage (Coyle, 2017).

Which scenario is the most likely?

Given that the Ukraine crisis and the cooling of West-Russia relations has come about due to the prevalence of zero-sum policies, not only by Russia but the West, predicting the future trajectory comes down to which side, if any, is most willing to make concessions on their policies. Indeed, each of the purported scenarios, save for the suboptimal scenario, requires some form of concession and ultimately probably benefits one power over the other, with a silver bullet win-win scenario largely fanciful.

Regarding the optimal scenario, the West, especially the EU, would probably accept a scenario like this as being preferable to the other actors because it would allow them to prosper in the trade and energy relationships. Furthermore, this scenario would significantly minimise the security risk presented by an aggressive Russia looking to challenge the EU's presence in Eastern Europe, although it would, conversely, require the West, especially the EU, to shelve its ambitious normative policies for Eastern Europe and accept Russia as an equal. Russia would consider a scenario like this as a large concession and probably against its perceived national interest of being the unquestioned hegemon of its near abroad.

However, this scenario is still preferable for Russia to the threat of having the West pursue a strategy of asserting its Eastern European hegemony as it would elevate Russia to an even standing with the EU and NATO, something it has desired for some time.

Regarding the suboptimal scenario, there would be few winners in this scenario. Russia, undoubtedly, of the main actors would perceive such a result as being the most palatable as it would fit in line with their perceived vital national interest of having Ukraine unaligned with the West while challenging the Western-centric security architecture of Eastern Europe to assert Russia's great power status and position as a regional hegemon. However, at the same time, the price to achieve this would be grave and place immense pressures on Putin's regime and Russia's internal situation, which has already been undermined by ongoing economic strife. None of the Western actors involved would desire a scenario like this in Eastern Europe. The West seems to have zero political will to head down this pathway: the United States has become somewhat uneasy as a security guarantor for NATO's Eastern members while the EU's ineptitude in all things geopolitics would render it practically useless in such a scenario.

Regarding the pragmatic scenario, this would arguably represent a more favourable outcome for Russia while being less so for the EU and Ukraine. For Russia, this result would fall short of their initial aims in Ukraine but nevertheless give them assurances that Ukraine's desired Western future would be halted while also enabling some minor reconciliation of its relationship with the West; most notably an end to sanctions and ostracisation. Furthermore, given that the prospect of Ukraine re-aligning towards Russia is now extremely remote, Russia is probably content with having Ukraine reduced to a Finland-style buffer state, particularly if it keeps control of Crimea and props up Luhansk and Donetsk in the Donbass region; giving the Kremlin insurance if the setting changed rapidly. For the West, it would represent a clear concession of its ostensible pre-crisis aim of having a West-facing Ukraine. However, a scenario like this would still represent a preferable alternative for the West to the suboptimal scenario presented above because it would entail the West maintaining its dominant economic standing.

Of the three offered scenarios, it is argued that the pragmatic scenario represents the most likely outcome. This is because Russia's foreign policy-making capabilities far

outstrip that of the EU's and its willingness to incur substantial costs in the pursuit of its foreign policies has largely pacified the involvement of NATO and the United States, both of which do not have the same interest in raising the stakes over Ukraine. Russia is, therefore, arguably the key actor in obtaining rapprochement in Eastern Europe as it holds many of the necessary cards to finding a solution (or is at least the most willing to play them). Consequently, when this is considered, the scenario of having Ukraine reduced to a Finland-style buffer state represents the most likely scenario not only because it likely fits within Russia's notion of acceptable outcomes but it is also a tolerable outcome for the West and, although it would not be celebrated in Ukraine, it would probably represent a necessary compromise to ensure stability and security - especially as Ukraine has somewhat lost faith in the West in recent years.

It should go without saying, but crystal-ball gazing has its limitations and predicting outcomes in such a complex and multi-layered relationship is fraught with difficulties. Nevertheless, at the very least, the three offered scenarios represent the three broad directions in which the relationship should develop in the near future. Indeed, the presented likely pragmatic scenario

suggests that Russia will end up with arguably the most advantageous outcome of the examined actors in the relationship. Certainly, Russia has proven to be agile in pursuing its interests in Ukraine, demonstrating a greater appreciation of the geopolitics of the Eastern Europe security complex as well as some success in calling the West's bluff. However, Russia's apparent position of power in deciding Ukraine's (and perhaps Eastern Europe's) fate is not without its weaknesses. Russia's strategies, to date, have been notably short-term in focus with its long-term game less than assured, especially when the costs associated with its actions are factored in amidst the more general decline Russia has been experiencing.

Russia's apparent short-term bargaining power in engineering an advantageous outcome in Eastern Europe could also be further pacified if the West can demonstrate not only resilience but also a deeper commitment to Eastern European security. While such a development seems questionable right now - especially with the United States seemingly disinterested in NATO and European security in general under Trump and the EU facing several existential crises which place the very future of the institution in doubt - it is still possible

that Western Europe emerges out of these crises in a stronger position (Leonard, 2017). Indeed, Germany's apparent willingness to play a stronger security role, perhaps in spearheading greater security integration beyond NATO while also, along with the French, promoting deeper EU integration post-Brexit, could produce a stronger and more cohesive check against Russia (Spohr, 2017). However, even if the bargaining power advantage was to switch from Russia to the West in the near future, a better understanding of Russia (same goes for Russia's understanding of the West) and of the geopolitics of Eastern Europe is a prerequisite to forging a more optimal outcome. Until that happens, the West-Russia relationship will continue to move towards the pragmatic scenario while the more extreme optimal and suboptimal scenarios will periodically appear as distinct possibilities. Although neither side probably wants the descent of the crisis towards a New Cold War, such an outcome could happen if no amendments are made to the identity-perceptions frameworks of the various powers. Identity and perceptions are often hard to change and the confusion and misunderstanding at the heart of the West-Russia relationship has been there for centuries. Therefore, striving for the optimal scenario, despite it appearing as the least

likely of the stated scenarios while protecting against the suboptimal should rationally remain a focus of the West and Russia, otherwise a lose-lose suboptimal outcome could be a distinct possibility.

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