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A Russian-Western Rapprochement?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: There have been hints over recent months of improvement in Russian-Western relations that could have major implications for the balance of power in the Eurasian landmass.

The Ukraine crisis of 2014 was a watershed moment in modern Russian-Western relations as it marked the critical divide between the powers. Anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the West, though not working perfectly, have succeeded in limiting Russian advances in eastern Ukraine.

Over the past several months, however, hints in the European media as well as practical foreign policy moves point to a new scenario: a rapprochement between Europe and Russia.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Europe's top human rights body, recently confirmed that Russia is returning as a member following its five-year suspension over the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Many French, German, and other European politicians have grown more open about finding common ground with Moscow.

Nor is this sudden rapprochement one-sided. There is a discernible increase in the willingness of the Russian government to improve relations with troubled neighbors Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

Over the past three months, numerous meetings have been held between Moscow and Kyiv officials, prisoners of war have been exchanged, and significant progress has been made on the holding of elections in Donbas and Luhansk – and perhaps even on giving special status to the two breakaway regions. A deal announced by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy triggered protests in Ukraine and praise from the Kremlin. In Moldova, the Russian government cooperated with pro-Western political parties to bring

down the corrupt government of Vlad Plahotniuc. Changes are taking place even with Georgia. On September 26, the Georgian and Russian FMs (David Zalkaliani and Sergey Lavrov, respectively) met for the first time since the Russian invasion in 2008.

Though these moves might seem local, they represent a broader shift in which Moscow is taking the geopolitical initiative. Over the past several months, Western resolve to keep a unified position on Russia has significantly weakened.

German chancellor Angela Merkel will be retiring soon and French president Emmanuel Macron is set to take a leading position in the EU. France has long desired a bigger role in the international arena, and there is now a correlation of geopolitical developments that benefit Paris.

Macron took the initiative of welcoming Vladimir Putin to the Fort of Brégançon in France, an invitation many politicians deemed unnecessary. The meeting might have passed largely unremarked had not Macron draped it in messianic geopolitical messages. “We cannot rebuild Europe without rebuilding a connection with Russia; otherwise Russia will move closer to other powers,” he said, adding that a unified vision of Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok should be revisited.

A few days later, he went further, stating that new sanctions are not in Europe’s best interests and that “pushing Russia from Europe is a profound strategic error.” Europe’s “weaknesses and mistakes” have pushed Russia to boost its alliance with China and revive its influence in Syria, Libya, and Africa, he said.

This message perfectly encapsulates the grand strategic shift that has taken place over the past several years in Eurasia. As BESA rightly forecast [last year](#), Russia was likely to find itself in a position in which the West and China were competing with one another for its favors.

For the Russian political elite, the nascent West-China confrontation offers a chance to enhance its weakening geopolitical position throughout the former Soviet space. Moscow is correct in thinking both the West and China dearly need Russian support, and this logic is driving its noncommittal approach toward Beijing and Washington. As a matter of cold-blooded international affairs, Russia wishes to position itself to encourage the US-Chinese rivalry for its alliance.

In allying itself with China, Russia would expect to increase its influence in Central Asia, where Chinese power has grown exponentially since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. Moscow has never voiced official concerns about this matter, but that is not to deny the existence of such concerns within the Russian political elite.

However, if Moscow chooses the US, the American concessions could be more significant than the Chinese. Moscow would certainly demand a freer hand in Ukraine and the South Caucasus as well as guarantees that NATO's expansion into the Russian "backyard" be stalled.

The surfeit of geopolitical activity from the European side reflects the changing American strategic vision of the role of the US in the world. As Washington withdraws from a number of global responsibilities and its relations with Turkey, Iran, and China worsen, Europe has to act more robustly to compete effectively with Russia and a rising China.

Though recent Western moves and statements could mean Russia's pivot to the east is producing the desired result (a Western fear that Russia will be lost to China), Moscow's positions in Ukraine are unlikely to return to those of the pre-2014 crisis period.

True, anti-Russian sanctions are unlikely to be bolstered and could even be scrapped entirely, and Moscow might get some concessions in the former Soviet territories, such as tacit recognition of its rule over Crimea. But overall, the West will have gotten more out of the Ukrainian crisis than Russia. Up to 90% of Ukraine's territory is now associated with the European single economic market. Military actions by Russia to bring Ukraine and other former Soviet states back into the fold will not bring about the desired results, as rising state institutions and nationalism among local populations will be tough to subdue in the long run.

Even in immediate terms, there will be difficulties for Russia. For example, though Ukraine has agreed to change its constitution, this will happen only if all armed formations have left the area and Ukraine regains control over about 400 kilometers of borderland with Russia. "There cannot be and will not be elections held at gunpoint," Ukrainian president Zelenskiy said.

The geopolitical landscape is changing fast across the Eurasian landmass. As it did over the centuries, Russia will continue to position itself at a distance from the rising warring camps of China and the Western powers. Each needs Moscow, and the Kremlin knows it. Chaos in the super-continent could usher in an era of a much stronger Russian role in northern Eurasia, though it would have a more limited scope than that envisioned among the Kremlin elites.

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