

The Origins of the Ukraine Crisis and the Need for Collective Security between Russia and the West

Tom Sauer

Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium

Abstract

The relationship between major powers in the world determines the level of global stability. Two constellations are imaginable: balance of power and collective security. The end of major (world or cold) wars offers possibilities for change from one constellation to another. This article tries to explain the origins of the Ukraine crisis. It posits that the crisis in Ukraine is only a symptom of a wider conflict between two major powers (or power blocs), whose origins can only be understood by assessing the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe. Instead of having integrated Russia in a collective security organization on an equal level, the West kept NATO alive and by doing so deteriorated the relationship with Russia. Despite different warnings from Moscow, NATO invited Ukraine to become member, and the EU offered Trade and Association Agreement talks to Ukraine. As a result, the relationship glided back towards a classic balance of power relation with spheres of influences. To prevent similar conflicts in the future, Russia should be integrated into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Ideally, the existing collective defence organization (NATO) should be transformed into a collective security organization with the inclusion of both Russia and Ukraine.

Policy Implications

- The way how the 'losers' of a (cold) war are treated determines the stability in the aftermath. The international community did well after 1815 and 1945, but failed miserably after 1918. The argument of this article is that also after 1989 the West missed an opportunity to integrate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture (on an equal basis). The end of (cold) wars are perfect times for trying to move from one great power constellation to another (e.g. from pure balance of power to collective security).
- Collective defence organizations (= alliances) are inherently unstable as they are constantly looking for an external enemy. This article argues that NATO's prolonged life after the Cold War is not normal, and contributed to the crisis with Russia (by extending NATO to the East, incl. plans to include Georgia and Ukraine). Collective security organizations (like the UN) are more stable.
- American and European interests sometimes overlap, but not always, also within NATO. One can observe a pattern whereby the US pushes the Europeans to accept the American view. For instance on NATO extension (certainly in 2008), as well as on missile defence. This article implicitly argues that the European member states within NATO should be more careful to agree with the US view if it does not fit their own interests.
- EU's Neighbourhood Policy is failing, not only *vis-à-vis* Ukraine and Russia, but also in Northern Africa and the Middle East. There is a fundamental need to rethink EU's Neighbourhood Policy.
- Of the three main great power constellations, classic balance of power is the least stable (as in our case). Collective security is more stable, and should have been the objective after the end of the Cold War. After the Ukraine crisis, the goal to create a collective security organization in the wider Europe is even more urgent. (The most stable constellation is a security community).
- Politics and policies are sometimes fraught with misperceptions, miscommunication, and miscalculations. That also applies to the global level. Some power constellations are more prone to these deficiencies than others. There is less chance for misperceptions, etc., in a security community than in a pure balance of power system. Applied to the Russian-West relationship, the existing balance of power system is prone to misperceptions, miscommunication, and miscalculations.

The invasion and occupation of the Crimea by Russia and its support for the rebels in Eastern Ukraine question the viability of the global political order. The occupation is a major transgression of the basic rules by one of the main players in global politics. Many experts, however, believe that not only Putin is to be blamed, but that the West is

also responsible for the crisis (Mearsheimer, 2014; Sakwa, 2016; Walt, 2015). Putin reacted to (what he regarded as) illegitimate actions by the West, including NATO enlargement towards the borders of Russia. The puzzle that this article raises is why the West – first NATO, but later on the EU – was not aware that its Ukraine policy was very risky

and could have been regarded as an offensive act by Russia, which in its turn could have triggered a reaction. The dominant explanation for this blindness is that the West acted by looking to the world through liberal glasses (Mearsheimer, 2014). The West believed that in time more and more states would become democratic and peaceful. The problem with this explanation is that it may explain why the EU and NATO expanded to the East, but it fails to explain why the West did not incorporate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. For this reason, the liberal theory falls short of explaining Europe's policy on Ukraine.

This article contributes to filling this gap in the literature. It describes and explains how it comes that the West has failed to integrate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture after the Cold War in a way that satisfied Russia. It posits that the crisis in Ukraine is only a symptom, whose origins can be understood by the failure to establish a collective security organization. Taking into account this analysis, it is not abnormal that the relationship between Russia and the West glided back towards a classic balance of power system.

In the remainder of this article two constellations between major powers are first described. Second, the dynamics among them is explained, including the role of perceptions and communication. Third, this theoretical framework will be applied to the relationship between Russia and the West after the Cold War leading up to the crisis in Ukraine.

Two types of global power relationships

Global policy is more shaped by large than small nations. That is at least what realists argue (Waltz, 1979, pp. 72–73). If large nations do not go along well, a large part of the world may feel the consequences. Focusing on relations between large nations, one can make a distinction between two ideal-types of relations: balance of power and collective security. The reality corresponds more to a continuum.

A first type of grand power constellation can be categorized as a pure balance of power relationship. Defensive realists assume that states – including large states – do not behave in an expansionist way; they are satisfied once they have a sufficient amount of power. Once they feel secure, they do not strive to have more power. Security triumphs over power. The result is a relatively stable balance of power between the major states (Waltz, 1979, Chapter 6). The bipolar system during the Cold War can be regarded as an example.

To be able to feel secure in a balance of power system, large nations – at least those that are landlocked – prefer to have friendly neighbours. If not, spheres of influences help to protect their country from being attacked. Spheres of influences can be formalized in the form of alliances, or can be informal. In turn, the major goal of members of an alliance, or a collective defence organization, is to support each other militarily in the event of external attack. According to the theory of alliances, this should deter potential enemies from attacking in the first place, and therefore yield stability and security. Even in informal spheres of influences any

potential danger will be regarded as a matter of the highest concern, and may yield an aggressive reaction and war. A structural problem of alliances is that they are constantly looking for external enemies that may jeopardize their territory. This process, however, may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Mistrust may create more mistrust, tensions, conflicts, and war. In short, a mismanaged balance of power system may end up in war.

Second, if a balance of power system is softened by agreed security rules among the major large nations, we speak of collective security (Kupchan and Kupchan, 1991; 1995). Collective security organizations aim to enhance security by establishing rules that want to prevent and manage conflicts among its member states. These rules commit them to predictable patterns of behaviour that will positively influence the threat perception. A crucial condition in this regard is that all major powers feel equal and treat each other as equal. The latter, however, does not mean that they have to share the same values and beliefs, including with respect to the type of domestic political system.

A historical example of a collective security system is the Concert of Europe (1815–1854), when the five major states in Europe agreed on basic rules with respect to external (and even internal) security. Another example of a collective security organization is the United Nations that to a large extent was paralysed as long as there were two alliances around. Again, alliances (or collective defence organizations) are difficult to reconcile with collective security systems because alliances are looking for external enemies, which stands in opposition to the idea of collective security.

While collective security is generally more stable than a balance of power, collective security organizations are not completely immune to tensions and conflicts among large nations either, and if mismanaged they may end up in a classic balance of power relationship, and eventually war. However, the main advantage of a collective security system is that it will not crumble as easily as a pure balance of power system in case of deviance.

Misperceptions and miscommunication

How state behaviour and shifts in balances of power are perceived by other states is most of the time as important as the behaviour itself. When the intentions are benign, but the actions are perceived as malign, the effect of the action may have the opposite effect as intended. A lot of factors determine the quality of perceptions between two or more actors: the nature of the political system (democratic versus authoritarian) and more in particular the degree of trust and openness, the degree of empathy, knowledge about each other, grooved thinking, and bureaucratic politics (Jervis, 1976). Misperception and miscommunication are less present in a collective security organization than in a pure balance of power system.

Beside the type of global power relationship, the theory of perceptions and misperceptions may help explain the behaviour of Russia and the West in the post-Cold War period. A 2015 report of the UK House of Lords EU Committee

(2015, p.6), pointed out: 'We [also] observe that there has been a strong element of "sleep-walking" into the current crisis, with [EU] Member States being taken by surprise by events in Ukraine. Over the last decade, the EU has been slow to reappraise its policies in response to significant changes in Russia. A loss of collective analytical capacity has weakened Member States' ability to read the political shifts in Russia and to offer an authoritative response. This lack of understanding and capacity was clearly evident during the Ukraine crisis, but even before that the EU had not taken into account the exceptional nature of Ukraine and its unique position in the shared neighbourhood'. This statement can be extended to the period since the implosion of the USSR. Already since the end of the Cold War Russia did not feel respected by the West, and the West apparently never fully understood this (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2009–2010; Pouliot, 2010). That in turn has to do with a lack of knowledge of each other: Putin does not know the West; and the West does not know Putin. Both blocs also communicate differently. As Hill points out (2016, p.142): 'In Western views, the Russians should adopt a different discourse when conducting foreign policy. As a result, we completely miss the core message that Putin is trying to transmit. This frustrates Putin and causes him to think that he has to deliver the message again; but even more forcefully – or even forcibly, by backing up his words with military action'.

How peace is settled determines the post-war period

To explain dynamics among the two types of constellations – balance of power and collective security – power shifts between large nations have to be analysed, as realists argue (Waltz, 1979, chapters 7–9). Collective security systems have the advantage of being able to absorb changes in the balance of power. The system that is most vulnerable to power shifts is the classic balance of power constellation. Power shifts in such a basic constellation may lead to (world) wars. War between major powers therefore results from a fundamental shift in the balance of power that either leads to expansionist behaviour by the upcoming state, as is predicted by the theory of Offensive Realism, or by a preventive war by the state that is losing power. The underlying assumption of Offensive Realism is that large nations always want to have more power, and that they are prepared to expand to the detriment of other – most of the time smaller, but sometimes also large – states (Mearsheimer, 2001). Examples are the rise of Germany at the end of the 19th century as well as in the interbellum, twice leading to a world war. Some observers believe that today's Russia belongs to the category of expansionist states (Kroenig, 2016).

Wars between major powers – let alone world wars – are humanitarian disasters. After such a war, the international system is reset. These are the moments when new rules are agreed upon among the major powers and new collective security systems may see the light of day (Ikenberry, 2001). These moments can be regarded as major turning-points in

history. More in particular, the way a large nation is treated after having lost a war determines the type of configuration the world (or region) tumbles in, which in its turn determines whether the period thereafter is characterized by stability or war. Losers of wars tend to take revenge, except if they are integrated in a collective security system. Winners of wars may also take revenge. Most of the time, however, winners aim for stability and order. The best way to reach that goal is to create a collective security system.

Looking at the past 200 years, four major turning-points in history can be distinguished: the Congress of Vienna (1815); the end of the First World War; the end of the Second World War; and the end of the Cold War. The large nations in the post-Napoleonic Europe decided to include France – which had lost the war – into the European security architecture. This Concert of Europe yielded stability and peace for decades, at least until the war in the Crimea in 1854, and one could argue even longer. The *Concert Européen* was more than a balance of power system: it was a collective security regime.

In contrast, after the First World War the international community failed to integrate Germany. The Treaty of Versailles was in Germany perceived as *Das Diktat*. The exclusion of Weimar Germany led to the rise of Nazism and German expansionism, which to a substantial extent explains the origins of the Second World War. At the same time, the first global collective security organization was established in the form of the League of Nations, at least on paper. In practice, the League failed due to the absence of major powers. Their absence can in its turn be explained by a lack of institutional power given to the large powers within the League of Nations.

After the Second World War global governance was managed better. Having learned lessons from the previous negative experiences, large nations were treated as a special category (but equally among each other) in the UN, the newly established collective security organization. The five victors were given a permanent seat and veto power in the UN Security Council. This realist element made the system work, or at least work better than the League of Nations. Furthermore, the two major powers that had lost the war – Germany and Japan – were integrated in the international community, at least in the Western part of the world. Unfortunately, the UN became paralysed by a balance of power system in the form of the bipolar Cold War configuration with two alliances standing opposite each other. Within the Western world, though, a security community – an improved version of collective security – was created that still exists today.

In the remainder of this article, we will describe how the end of the Cold War was mismanaged, leading to disappointments, misperceptions, miscommunication, and miscalculations, creating a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy and a downward-spiral to the existing balance of power of today. The methodology that will be used is process-tracing: the major events that have led to the Ukraine crisis, and how they were perceived, will be described. At each stage, we will try to assess on which point on the continuum between

balance of power and collective security – as defined above – the relationship stood, and was perceived as such. The claim that this article makes is that not only Russia but also the West mismanaged the transition period, resulting in a gliding back to a balance of power system that finally ended up in war in Ukraine.

Missed opportunity in the post-Cold War period: unfulfilled expectations by – and Western neglect of – Russia

At the end of the Cold War, the world was divided, with two alliances opposing each other. Not many had predicted that the Cold War would come to an end in 1989. It was certainly not pre-cooked by the leaders in the Kremlin. Soviet President Gorbachev wanted to change the economic and political system of the USSR in a gradual way. In contrast, the USSR and the Warsaw Pact imploded in 1991. Russia was left behind with a fundamentally different domestic political situation: a Communist Party that had shrunk to small proportions and a state-based economy that was radically transformed by believers in shock therapy capitalism. The result was a superpower that fell apart, both geographically and economically. With a GNP as small as Portugal in the beginning of the 1990s, Russia was regarded as ‘a developing country with nuclear weapons’. The country was also hit by a financial crisis in 1998. The Russian political leadership was not very strong either. The image that remains of President Yeltsin is that of a populist that liked to drink a glass or two of vodka. Overall, the Russian foreign policy establishment and politicians felt humiliated because they had lost the Cold War, although they did not like to admit that. Compare that to the triumph of the West after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The capitalist economic system proved to be stronger than the state-based economic system of the USSR, at least for the time being. The Western values of freedom and liberty prevailed. In the summer of 1990 President Bush Sr. heralded the New World Order.

As the Cold War came without much bloodshed to an end, one could have expected that the relationship between Russia and the West be built on the basis of a more peaceful nature. Many Western pundits and politicians hoped that Russia would be integrated in the main Euro-Atlantic security organizations. Russia in its turn hoped that NATO would transform itself from being a military alliance into a predominantly political organization. Even better – in the eyes of Moscow – would have been the abolition of NATO and its replacement by a pan-European collective security organization. Obviously realists predicted the end of NATO too, as alliances are per definition temporarily, as was shown again by the demise of the Warsaw Pact (Mearsheimer, 1990).

Contrary to what is sometimes said, it is not that the USSR or Russia were not interested in joining the Western security organizations. Gorbachev tested the idea of NATO membership a couple of times in a prudent manner, for instance during the German reunification talks with US Secretary of State James Baker in May 1990 (Sarotte, 2014). Also President Yeltsin, for instance in September 1993, made

clear that Russia had an interest in joining NATO (Goldgeier, 1998, p. 88). Even President Putin in his first term was potentially interested in ‘a broader participation’ in NATO (Lyne, 2015, p. 4). Admittedly, Russia never formally asked to become a NATO member because it knew the answer in advance. Although Russia joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme, it was never invited to become a regular NATO member.

The idea of integrating Russia in the existing Euro-Atlantic security organizations on an equal footing was not taken seriously in the West. For the West it seemed business as usual: the existence of NATO was not called into question when Germany was unified and brought under the auspices of the EU and NATO (Zelikow and Rice, 1998, p. 277). In the Western foreign policy establishments the idea of collective security was seen as an academic and long-term exercise at best.

The best way for integrating Russia into the Western security organizations would probably have been the establishment of a new collective security organization, possibly in the form of an upgraded Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). That scenario was dismissed in the West by those who could not imagine a future without the Atlantic Alliance. US President Bush Sr. ‘warned President Mitterrand [already in April 1990] that no other organization could “replace NATO as the guarantor of Western security and stability”’. He continued: ‘Indeed, it is difficult to visualize how a European collective security arrangement including Eastern Europe, and perhaps even the Soviet Union, would have the capability to deter threats to Western Europe’ (Sarotte, 2014, pp. 94–95). The CSCE was regarded as weak in 1991, and NATO’s Secretary-General Manfred Wörner (1991, p. 5) wanted to keep it that way: ‘With 38 members today and no doubt over 40 tomorrow, with the option of a veto imposed by just one member, and without an executive, the CSCE for the foreseeable future will remain burdened with structural weaknesses which will limit its effectiveness’. The CSCE that had helped strengthening the idea of human rights and liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR – that was upgraded to the *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (OSCE) in December 1994 – always remained in the shadow of NATO (Mosser, 2015).

In short, the end of the Cold War was a missed opportunity. Instead of creating a new regional security system based on the principles of collective security, the West did not abolish NATO and refused to invite Russia.

NATO Expansion and the Balkan wars

To make matters worse from a Russian point of view, NATO that was in search of a new identity acted in a way that was disliked by Russia, more in particular the war against the Bosnian Serbs (1994–1995), NATO expansion, and the war against Serbia (1999). With the USSR and the Warsaw Pact gone, NATO found new enemies (Klare, 1995), more in particular authoritarian regimes outside NATO territory that were responsible for gross human rights violations. For NATO, the adagio was acting ‘out of area or [being] out of

business'. The first time ever that NATO used force was against the Serbs in Bosnia in 1994, and one year later against Serbia itself. Because of the historical ties between Serbia and Russia, this led to the first major frictions between NATO and Russia.

The move by the West that hurt the Russia-NATO relationship even more was inviting some Eastern European states to become members of NATO and later on the EU. These former Warsaw Pact member states were begging for membership in the Western institutions, both for economic and security reasons. From a liberal point of view, they had the right to be admitted. Within the same logic, it is however hard to explain why Russia was excluded. From a realist perspective, in contrast it is easy to understand why a regional power like Russia was not admitted.

The first time that NATO expansion was mentioned was in 1990, even before the implosion of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact. From the beginning, Moscow warned that NATO expansion would create new lines of division. Russia regarded NATO extension as an expansion of NATO's and US sphere of influence. That message was certainly heard by Western decision-makers, but apparently not fully understood. Former Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Galvin warned already in the mid-1990s: 'We won the Cold War, but we're losing the peace after the Cold War. There is no doubt in my mind about it. We do not think about the Russians enough, about whom they are and what they're doing. *We don't think much about the way they think of us ... We should consider folding NATO in a bigger organization ... We need a whole new organization that bring the Russians on board*' (Gardner, 2014). Also George Kennan and Paul Nitze, two foreign policy giants of the Cold War categorized by Gardner (2013, p.41) as 'alternative realists', opposed NATO expansion (Kennan, 1997; Nitze, 1998). Their arguments were echoed by Western academics of whom most of them would define themselves as realists (Brown, 1995; Kamp, 1995; Kupchan and Kupchan, 1995; Mandelbaum, 1995).

Nevertheless, despite warnings from the US State Department for deteriorating relations with Russia, President Clinton declared in 1994 that the question was no longer 'whether' but 'when' NATO would expand. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic were formally invited in 1997 to join NATO, which happened two years later. To compensate, NATO tried to mask the tensions with Russia with the signing of the NATO-Russian Founding Act (1997). The latter included the promise by NATO not to station nuclear weapons or foreign troops on a permanent basis in the former Warsaw Pact countries. Earlier, President Clinton had promised President Yeltsin that eventually a *democratic* Russia could become part of NATO (in line with the neoconservative and neoliberal argumentation *à la* Fukuyama) and stated that in the meantime NATO expansion would not threaten Russia's interests (Goldgeier, 1998, p. 97). The latter clearly showed a lack of understanding of how Russia perceived the situation.

To understand Russia's reaction to NATO expansion better it is crucial to go back to what had been promised to

President Gorbachev at the time of German reunification. Gorbachev was promised that Germany would be reunified without expanding NATO. As there is a lot of myth-making around this episode, it is useful to have a closer look to what exactly has been said by whom. US Secretary of State James Baker and German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, respectively on 9 and 10 February 1990, pointed out that German reunification would not lead to NATO expansion. James Baker, when speaking to Gorbachev in Moscow, stated: 'We understand that it is important not only for the USSR but also for other European countries to have guarantees that – if the US maintains her military presence in Germany within the NATO framework – there will be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction of military presence one inch to the east' (Zelikow and Rice, 1998, p. 182). Similarly, Genscher told his Soviet colleague Shevardnadze: 'We are aware that NATO membership raises complicated questions. For us, however, one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the East' (Kluschmann et al., 2009; Welsh, 2014). Ten days earlier, Genscher had already made the same point in a speech in Tutzing: 'it is for NATO to declare unequivocally: irrespective of whatever happens within the Warsaw Pact, there will be no expansion of NATO's territory to the East, *that is, closer to the borders of the Soviet Union*. Such security guarantees are important for the Soviet Union' (Rühle, 2014a, p. 3). Two days after that speech, Genscher repeats the same message at a press conference with James Baker in Washington DC: 'What I said is there is no intention [by NATO] to extend to the East' (Zelikow and Rice, 1998, p. 176). Rühle (2014b, p. 236), an advocate of NATO expansion at that time, later on admits that the German reunification 'was achieved through countless personal conversations in which Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders were assured that the West would not take advantage of the Soviet Union's weakness and willingness to withdraw militarily from Central and Eastern Europe'. It was on the basis of these promises that Gorbachev agreed with the German reunification. As the historian Mary Elise Sarotte (2014, pp. 93–94) explains: 'After hearing these repeated assurances, Gorbachev gave West Germany what Kohl later called 'the green light' to begin creating an economic and monetary union between East and West Germany – the first step of reunification'.

The argument that these promises by the West had only to do with East Germany and not with Eastern Europe (Kramer, 2009; Rühle, 2014b, p. 236) is not correct. NATO expansion towards Eastern Europe was already raised by Hungary in February 1990 and by an internal State Department note a few weeks later (Sarotte, 2010, p. 118). Genscher pointed out to British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd on 6 February 1990: 'that when I talked about not wanting to extend NATO, *that applied to other states besides the GDR* [East Germany]. The West could do a lot to alleviate the current developments for the USSR. The declaration that NATO has no intention to expand its territory eastwards would be particularly important. NATO does not intend to expand its territory to the East. *Such a statement must not just refer to East Germany but rather be of a general nature. For example, the*

Soviet Union needs the security of knowing that Hungary, if it has a change in government, will not become part of the Western Alliance' (Sarotte, 2010, p.117).

The argument that these promises were done orally and therefore are not legally binding is not convincing either. It is correct that these guarantees were not repeated in the German reunification agreement of 12 September 1990. Oral agreements, however, are agreements too (Shiffrinson, 2016, p.16). Russian foreign policy expert Sergey Karaganov explains why the USSR did not emphasize that point again during the negotiations: 'We did not demand written guarantees because in an euphoric atmosphere of that time it would have seemed almost indecent, like two girlfriends giving written promise not to seduce each other's husbands' (Garfinkle, 1997, p. 106).

Lastly, the argument that it was up to the Eastern European states to decide about their own future is correct. The choice, though, was framed between NATO membership and the status quo. The choice could have been framed differently: between NATO, the status-quo, or the creation of a new organization based on collective security, including Russia over time. That last option was never offered by the West.

The third and last move that deteriorated the relations with Russia in the 1990s was NATO's bombing campaign against the Serbs *without* the authorization of the UN Security Council in 1999, leading to Kosovo's autonomy and independence later on. The war started two weeks after the first wave of NATO expansion. For Putin, who at that time was head of the KGB, Kosovo was a turning point (Hill and Gaddy, 2015). In his view, the West – by acting unilaterally – openly denied Russia's legitimate interests. The latter was at odds with the principles of collective security.

Changing expectations by Russia

It is therefore not surprising that Russia felt betrayed and that Russia as a result of these Western actions started to change its expectations about its role in the future organization of European security. Karaganov believes that the West pursued a policy in the 1990s like the victors of the First World War in Versailles: 'Of particular annoyance to Russia's political class were systematic deceptions and hypocrisy, broken promises, and declarations that the very idea of the existence of spheres of control and influence in world politics was outdated and no longer corresponded to modern realities and concepts. The West never missed a chance to expand its own ostensibly non-existent sphere of influence' (Karaganov, 2014). Also Arbatov (2014) blames the unilateral attitude of the US: 'The US suddenly saw itself as 'the only superpower in the world ... The US treated Russia as if it were a loser country'. Lukin (2016, p. 98), another Russian observer, agrees: 'The post-Soviet consensus between the West and Russia was based on at least a Russian understanding that both sides would move towards closer cooperation, respect each other's interests and make mutually acceptable compromises. Yet, only Russia followed this understanding in practical terms'. While the latter is probably exaggerated,

there was indeed an asymmetrical power relationship between the West and Russia in the 1990s that led to more compromises by Russia than by the West. As a US observer explains: 'US leaders thought that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, they had created a new framework of relations with Russia, and that the new Russia, under President Boris Yeltsin, had agreed to that framework. Putin sees it differently. Russians never agreed to accept the role the West assigned them in the new framework – that status of a large but second-rank European country' (Hill, 2016, p. 143). As a former KGB officer in East Germany at the end of the 1980s, Putin felt personally humiliated. When he became president in the year 2000, he did everything he could to restore Russia's power in the world. In contrast to what sometimes is insinuated, however, Putin did not immediately change gears with respect to Russia's policy *vis-à-vis* the West. Vladimir Putin hoped to improve the relationship too (Freedman, 2001; Lyne, 2015, pp. 2–4). Russia's emphatic reaction to 9/11 is a testimony of this.

Instead of trying to improve the relationship, the Bush administration apparently could not care less. President Bush announced two months after 9/11 that the US would unilaterally abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty. That bilateral treaty, signed and ratified in 1972, aimed to keep the number of ABM systems limited in order not to undermine their respective nuclear deterrents. The Treaty was an important factor of strategic stability during and after the Cold War. By abolishing the ABM treaty and by developing and constructing strategic missile defence systems in California and in Alaska, rhetorically meant against 'rogue states' like North Korea and Iran, the Russian deterrent was undermined. That was at least Russia's perception (Sauer, 2011). President Bush furthermore convinced NATO to install US missile defence systems on European territory. These theatre missile defence systems (including radar systems), near the border with Russia, were regarded as an even bigger threat by Moscow. The lack of a cap on the number of interceptors combined with the possibility to link these interceptors with strategic sensors on radar and satellites made the Russians apprehensive, and even according to Western experts logically so (Lewis and Postol, 2008; Postol, 2000). This blocked further progress in arms control. Largely because of missile defence Russia suspended the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty and refused to let START II (on strategic nuclear weapons) enter into force.

Putin also felt humiliated by the US when it invaded Iraq in 2003 *without* a UN Security Council resolution (Stent, 2014). It was perceived by Putin as further evidence that the relationship could not be defined in terms of equality and collective security. Furthermore, Putin could not prevent a second – even larger – round of NATO expansion in 2004: Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the three Baltic states joined both NATO and the EU. The Westernization of the Baltic States in particular was sensitive as they had belonged to the USSR, be it against their will. Germany, France and the UK were hesitant to take the Baltic States on board precisely because they were afraid of the reaction of Russia. The US pushed nevertheless the expansion through.

As a partial compensation, Russia became member of the G-8, and the Russia-NATO Council was established in 2002.

Also the EU disrespected Russia, or that was at least the feeling in Moscow. Already in the first draft of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in March 2003, no distinction was made between Russia and many smaller states in the Mediterranean (Arbatova and Dynkin, 2016, p. 84).

Mistrust by a disillusioned Russia and autism by the West

From 2003 onwards, the project to integrate Russia in the West became more difficult as Russia itself more or less gave up on the idea. Mistrust dominated more than before. Russia basically turned inward and lost hope of becoming part of a European collective security organization.

Another turning-point in Russia's attitude towards the West were the coloured revolutions that took place in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, respectively in 2003, 2004 and 2005 (Lyne, 2015, pp. 7–8). These events were interpreted by the Kremlin as being organized or at least supported by the West (Mearsheimer, 2014). Moscow feared that such events could also happen in Russia. As a result, a more nationalist and anti-Western card was played by Moscow. The latter fitted with growing nationalist demands from within Russian society that had become richer in the meantime. Pressure to follow a more independent path from the West was growing.

2007 is the year in which Putin's patience publicly ran out. As Hill and Gaddy (2015) remark: 'Putin believed that he had been rebuffed or deceived at every turn by the West'. At the Munich security conference, he lashed out against the West: 'And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them. But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO Secretary General Mr Wörner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: "The fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee". Where are these guarantees?' (Putin, 2007).

Tellingly, the Russian cyberattack against Estonia was one of the first clear indications that Russia was willing to react. Balancing was again part of the game. However, the West – and especially the US – wanted to take NATO expansion one round further. This time Georgia and Ukraine were on the list. For historical, economic and identity reasons, Georgia and especially Ukraine were red lines for Russia. They clearly belonged to the Russian sphere of influence. Even the Western architects of the post-Cold War security architecture were aware how sensitive the Ukrainian case was (Asmus et al., 1995).

Two months before the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov warned US Ambassador William Burns pointedly of 'fears that the issue *could potentially split Ukraine in two, leading to violence or even,*

some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene'. Burns sent a cable to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice which title was 'Nyet means nyet: Russia's NATO enlargement red lines' (Binney et al., 2014). Despite warnings on the future of Ukraine by President Putin who was present, the 2008 NATO Summit decided to invite Croatia and Albania to become members, and opened the door for eventual membership for Georgia and Ukraine. The statement – pushed through by President Bush himself at the Summit – read: 'These countries *will* become members of NATO' (NATO, 2008). By doing so the West – and more in particular NATO – clearly transgressed Russia's red line.

Russia reacted by provoking and invading parts of Georgia in 2008. The West in its turn did not react, which was noticed by Putin (Speck, 2014). One year later, Gazprom cut off all supplies to Ukraine, again without much reaction by the West. In hindsight, this episode can be regarded as a prelude to the Ukraine crisis. Aviel Roshwald (2008), history professor at Georgetown University, predicted already in 2008, six years before the crisis: 'To let Ukraine join NATO would almost *inevitably trigger a Moscow-orchestrated secession from Ukraine of the ethnically Russian Crimean peninsula, home to the Russian navy's Black Sea base*'. It is remarkable that the foreign policy establishment in Washington DC and Brussels missed similar observations. Harvard professor Stephen Walt's (2015) judgment is harsh: 'The failure of US diplomats to anticipate Putin's heavy-handed response [in Ukraine] was an act of remarkable diplomatic incompetence'. A similar remark can be made with respect to the Eurocrats in Brussels.

With President Medvedev and President Obama in power, a short and relatively shallow honeymoon period arrived. One of the first decisions by President Obama was the offer to push the 'reset button' with Russia, while Medvedev himself had earlier on – in a speech in Berlin on 5 June 2008 – proposed a new European Security Treaty based on the principles of collective security (Medvedev, 2008). The latter, tellingly, did not yield much enthusiasm in the West. In the end, the 'reset' made matters worse as it increased again Russia's expectations (Liik, 2015, p.2).

The Ukraine crisis

In parallel with the economy, Putin's popularity began to fall in 2008 and hit a low in the period 2011–2012, leading to large-scale street protests in Moscow. The protesters wanted political change and not another term by Vladimir Putin. President Putin reacted with repression. According to Michael McFaul (2014), who was the American ambassador in Moscow from 2011 to 2014, Putin also played the nationalist card culminating in taking back the Crimea (McFaul, 2014). The West, however, helped Putin by providing the ideal pretext (Allison, 2014), something that McFaul does not want to admit.

Ukraine is by far the largest neighbouring country on Russia's Western borders, through which Napoleon and Hitler have tried to conquer Russia twice in the past two hundred

years. Ukraine and more in particular the Crimea also included Sebastopol, a port that was leased by Russia. Ukraine and Russia had substantial economic relations. Ukraine was a former member state of the USSR and the Crimea was handed over to Ukraine by Soviet President Khrushchev in 1954. For all these reasons it is no surprise that Russian strategists wanted to keep Ukraine as a kind of buffer state. Russia abhorred the idea that Ukraine and Georgia would become member of NATO, or the EU for that matter as the EU was more and more regarded in Moscow as an organization that is closely related to NATO.

Given that Ukraine belonged to the Russian sphere of influence, at least in the eyes of Moscow, the West should have behaved carefully *vis-à-vis* Ukraine and Russia. That is at least one could expect from a defensive realist – let alone liberal – point of view. That, however, did not happen. To the surprise of many, the EU started up Trade and Association talks with Ukraine without having an agreement with Russia. That was a recipe for disaster. After first having conceived the Eastern Partnership Programme in 2008–2009, the EU made economic overtures towards Ukraine in the form of offering a Trade and Association Agreement in 2013. Interestingly, several articles in the Association Agreement also contained security issues, which – together with the promises at the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008 – may indeed have drawn Ukraine into the Atlantic Alliance over time (Sakwa, 2015, p.569).

Russia felt disrespected again, this time by the EU (Schmidt-Felzmann, 2016). As Gardner (2014, p. 10) states: 'If the EU had begun to negotiate an accord with Russia first and then with Ukraine later (...) then the present crisis might not have grown to such disastrous proportions'. But that did not happen due to pressure from Poland and the Baltic States. Others explain this neglect by the EU by pointing to its postmodern, liberal self-image: 'the EU also failed to grasp that what they saw as a benevolent power could be viewed by others as a threat' (Krastev and Leonard, 2014, p. 3). Sakwa (2015, p. 557), follows the same line: 'The substantive claim to normative superiority undermined the EU's ability to engage with others in Europe on the basis of sovereign equality'. Liik (2015, p. 3) quotes an unnamed Brussels official saying: 'Russia never said it wanted a sphere of influence in Ukraine! Had they said so, we would have approached the issue differently'. This quote shows that there was clearly a lack of understanding of Russia in the EU.

In reaction to the EU effort, Russia built a Eurasian regional order. In the autumn of 2013, President Yanukovich even promised to bring Ukraine into the Russian-led customs union. Crucially, the EU blocked that prospect, something that President Putin did not appreciate (Allison, 2014, pp. 1256–1257). A promise of EU membership was never explicitly given to Ukraine, but it was never excluded either. When Ukrainian President Yanukovich chose a last minute deal with Russia instead of the EU, large parts of the Ukrainian population (especially in the Western parts of Ukraine) were deeply disappointed. They had hoped that the strengthened relationship with the EU would end a sustained period of bad governance and corruption, and one day would open

the door for EU membership. These expectations were suddenly crushed, and led to the popular uproar on Maidan and the flight of Yanukovich to Russia. The rest of the story is known. The 'coup', which in the eyes of Moscow was supported by the West, led in its turn to the occupation of the Crimea by Russia, and later on to unrest in the Eastern parts of Ukraine. The world was shocked, especially after an airliner was shot down, most likely by pro-Russian rebels in the East of Ukraine. Headlines in the Western media talked about 'a new Cold War'.

Back to the future

It is abundantly clear that the current regional security architecture in Europe is in need of fundamental adaptation. As two Russian experts observe: 'In none of the post-bipolar-era crises – NATO's operation against Yugoslavia in 1999, the 2008 Georgia conflict and the current Ukrainian crisis – have the current security organizations designed to resolve such conflicts been able to perform their duties effectively' (Arbatova and Dynkin, 2016, p. 77). Both Russia and the West should therefore fundamentally rethink their policies *vis-à-vis* each other. They should first of all learn from the mistakes of this crisis.

If push comes to shove the relationship between the West and Russia is more important than the relationship between the West and Ukraine. The West needs Russia to resolve conflicts in the Middle East (as the successful negotiations with Iran show), and to manage global threats like nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and global warming. A better relationship between Russia and the West will also be advantageous to Ukraine, while the opposite is not automatically true. Ukraine can have a trade relationship with both the West and Russia. However, it would be better that Ukraine does not become member of NATO, at least as long as no durable solution has been worked out with Russia. A neutral Ukraine is also recommended by realists like Brzezinski (2014), Kissinger (2014) and Mearsheimer (2014).

In the short-term, politicians and officials on both sides should meet more regularly both in formal groupings (like the NATO-Russia Council) and informal networks. One of the first points on the agenda should be to try to prevent incidents (in the air and on sea) that could escalate. Confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) could be taken to enhance trust. The same applies to arms control initiatives in the conventional, nuclear, or ballistic missile defence realm.

In the longer term, the best way to reassure Russia is to include the country in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, and this time on an equal basis; not to exclude it. If Russia and the West want to supersede a balance of power relationship, they have to create a proper collective security organization.

Conclusion

The Cold War was lost by Russia. The West apparently never fully understood what that meant for Russia. In contrast to

what one could have expected on the basis of the history over the last 200 years, Russia was not fully integrated into the West thereafter. This can be partly explained by the fact that the need was felt less than in previous cases because the Cold War ended without much bloodshed.

The West was too prudent – too realist – in contrast to what Mearsheimer (2014) claims. As previous cases have shown, historic transition periods need an institutional back-up. The West even provoked Russia by expanding both the EU and NATO without setting limits to that extension. It also installed missile defence systems near the Russian borders, also without setting limits. It fought wars without the consent of Russia, one of the five permanent members of the UN Security-Council.

On different occasions, Russia acquiesced and took constructive steps *vis-à-vis* the West (e.g. after 9/11). There were, however, limits to Russia's patience and limits to the incursions to its legitimate national interests. More in particular, touching the status of Georgia and Ukraine were red lines for Moscow. As the *Financial Times* (Buckley et al., 2015, p. 6) concluded: 'It is a tale of ... Western underestimations of just how far Mr Putin was prepared to go to defend what he presents as Russia's fundamental interests; and above all, of two sides talking past each other, locked into entirely different narratives'. Tellingly, the EU bureaucracy and the foreign policy community of the 28 states failed to predict the crisis. There was clearly a lack of understanding and empathy on behalf of the West that failed to notice that Ukraine was regarded as a buffer zone by Russia. Also Walt (2015) points out that: 'The Ukraine crisis did not begin with a bold Russian move or even a series of illegitimate Russian demands; it began when the United States and European Union tried to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and into the West's sphere of influence ... Russia is not an ambitious rising power ... it is an aging, depopulating, and declining great power trying to cling to whatever influence it still possesses and preserve a modest sphere of influence near its borders, so that stronger states – and especially the United States – cannot take advantage of its growing vulnerabilities ... It is lingering fear, rather than relentless ambition, that underpins Russia's response in Ukraine'.

This crisis has not much to do with Russian imperialism, let alone Western imperialism. It has to do with a lack of strategic long-term thinking and acting by the 'winner' of the Cold War. The absence of a liberal blueprint for fully integrating Russia into a regional collective security organization is the underlying cause of this crisis. The Ukraine crisis is only a symptom.

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Author Information

Tom Sauer is an Associate Professor in International Politics at the Universiteit Antwerpen (Belgium). He is author of *Nuclear Arms Control. Nuclear Deterrence in the post-Cold War Period* (Macmillan, 1998), *Nuclear Inertia. US Nuclear Weapons Policy after the Cold War* (I.B.Tauris, 2005), *Eliminating Nuclear Weapons. The Role of Missile Defense* (Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2011), and co-edited *Nuclear Terrorism: Countering the Threat* (Routledge, 2016).