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Is Russia still a superpower?

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Russia considers the conceptualization of a policy of "soft power" and "hard power" active, at least in the environment of Russia's proximity, mainly with the former members of the USSR. Russia wants to be once again a dominant actor on the international scene. Russia is increasingly worried about the progressive "encirclement" of its territory, with the enlargement of NATO and the reduction of its field of influence. In 2018, for United States, Russia is still perceived as the main geopolitical enemy, with China. However, economically, Russia has lost much ground to the United States, Europe and China. At the end, the military effort will be more difficult to grow in the case of a new arms race.

La Russie considère la conceptualisation d'une politique de "soft power" et de "hard power" active, du moins dans l'environnement de proximité de la Russie, principalement avec les anciens membres de l'URSS. La Russie veut redevenir un acteur dominant sur la scène internationale. La Russie est de plus en plus inquiète de " l'encerclement " progressif de son territoire, avec l'élargissement de l'OTAN et la réduction de son champ d'influence. En 2018, pour les États-Unis, la Russie est toujours perçue comme le principal ennemi géopolitique, avec la Chine. Cependant, sur le plan économique, la Russie a perdu beaucoup de terrain face aux États-Unis, à l'Europe et à la Chine. Au final, l'effort militaire sera plus difficile à faire croître dans le cas d'une nouvelle course aux armements.

Superpower, Russia, military effort, strategic forces, national defense

Superpuissance, Russie, dépenses militaires, forces stratégiques, défense nationale.

The militarism of the Soviet Union was the main feature of the real autocratic system, with the organization of the permanent threat to its existence and the will to be organically aggressive against capitalism and market economies. For more than a decade after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Russia's image as a dominant military power was clearly tarnished. Disarmament is often judged to be very favourable for economic development, but it brings with it a destruction of the old economic as well as social equilibrium. For an economy that is in transition as well as in recession, disarmament constitutes a political decision of considerable importance for the international community. Because economic development is certainly a condition for peace, it is important for the world community to realise that it is necessary to actually "purchase" disarmament, independent of economic conditions based on competition. However, for Russia, the enterprises were not adapted to market situation, their labour potential were inefficient and there was a quick process of disqualification. The famous and honoured USSR military industrial complex were not efficient at all to solve the crisis and the economic situation of Russia was clearly declining, with a reduction of the life level of the large majority of citizens.

At the beginning of the 21th century, Vladimir Putin considered the conceptualization of a policy of "soft power" and "hard power" active, at least in the environment of Russia's proximity, mainly with the former members of the USSR. The structural weaknesses of the Russian economy were not a sufficient reason to limit the defence effort. The threats of countries that were both revanchist and determined to dictate their worldviews were important. At the same time, the promotion of a new "vertical of power" aimed at restoring the credibility of the state and securing the integrity of the national territory. The return of "Greater Russia" was back in the discourses, with a particular goof conjuncture with new financial means derived from massive exports of fossil fuels, the improvement of national budget accounts, and the creation of a new political system, artificially similar at democracy. In this context, military spending and the military-industrial complex were once again perceived as effective fertilizer for the growth of research and development, new technologies and investments for the national economy. The military forces are not perceived a burden for the national

economy, but as a new development of the political force on international relations of Russia, with the interests they produce on soft power and sometimes on “domination effects”.

At the beginning of 2018, in principle, the forces in favour of rearmament and an increase in the budgets allocated to armies do not lack arguments and assets, in the face of an economic globalization that is not accompanied by better political, military, economic, and geostrategic relations between states. Russia wants to be once again a dominant actor on the international scene.

For Vladimir Putin, the United States and its allies want to reduce Moscow's international role, in order to direct, the affairs of a unipolar world, dominated by universal Western values, the market economy and the democracy of the "Enlightenment". They are referring to "an end of history " with no other potential states conflicts than the economic power relations in an international competitive process. In this framework, the "peaceful" relations between the states become the continual development of philosophical, religious, economic and social values of Western societies. For Putin, Russia has to assume its share of independence and respect for its own values.

Inter-state agreements with the United States, the European Union and NATO can only be based on the application of the principles of equality and mutual respect for the interests of each participant.

However, the will of the countries is to develop economic and political power, as historically, they develop colonialism and wars against Russia and emerging countries. NATO and US military forces, in several places in the world develop their imperialist temptations. Traditional Russia must defend its values in order to resist the forces of homogenization and tropism of Western civilization. Vladimir Putin is critical of the functioning of the new world economic order inspired by Western values, has the firm intention of restoring the legitimacy of his international action even if he is more and more contested because of its inability to reform an economy based on the predation of the national economy by the opportunists in power (the oligarchs replacing the nomenklatura) and national institutions granting de facto excessive power to the executive.

The neo-imperialist forces of the West, especially with the expansion of NATO, are also seen as a threat to Russia's security. They carry out hostile political actions in the former Soviet

Eurasian space in order to weaken the solidity of the Russian sphere of influence, such as in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, but also with the Arab "spring", the support to regime changes in the Middle East (Syria, Libya or Iraq) and the political role of non-governmental organizations in order to destabilize Russian institutions. Russia's support for Syria is based, in large part, on the existence since 1971 of a logistical base of the Russian Navy in the port of Tartus, the only supply point in the Mediterranean Sea for its warships. Russia's return to the Middle East is part of a long-term policy, in favour of Arab nationalism. The new "cold war" is decentralized in the near and Middle East. It is the ambitions of Western powers that are deemed dangerous to the country's security, especially since the Crimea affair.

Russia is increasingly worried about the progressive "encirclement" of its territory, with the enlargement of NATO and the reduction of its field of influence.

In opposition, the European Union strongly contests the policy of the Russian state, it still does not recognize the illegal annexation, in the sense of international law, of the Crimea and it condemns the acts of destabilization of Ukraine by Moscow. In this context, Russia's relations with the European Union have been disrupted, more aggressive, and therefore less negotiated. Yet, this situation persists, it settles in time and relations between the two poles are bogged down, the EU waiting for a very unlikely surrender, the other side turning to new potential allies. Since 2014, as a result of these European reactions made of a spiral of sanctions prompting counter-sanctions, the Russian national security strategy has been refined, it defines its national strategic priorities and the measures to be taken to satisfy them within the framework of an economic and military development deemed sustainable.

Moscow claims a more equal sharing of international power, particularly in favour of the emerging economies. The use of force in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria supports this demand. To this end, Russia also exercises a more devious "soft power" (of which the suspicion of actions on elections in the United States, France and even Germany in particular is a troubling testimony) and a "hard power", whose real or virtual effectiveness is always discussed, but feared, by international actors. The strategy of nuclear terror, although artificially muted, is still firmly anchored in the minds of governments in negotiations with Russia. Moscow has still considerable nuclear weapon that gives it a

special responsibility vis-à-vis the United States in the international concert of a new world with evolving polycentric overtones. A new international order in the making is becoming particularly dangerous and anarchic; the control of markets, raw materials and communications is the subject of intense, secret, underhanded struggles, likely to lead to new regional wars. Russia wants to maintain a pre-eminent global influence and a zone of influence in the former Soviet space, both to strengthen a Eurasian integration process and to have buffer states in case of conflict with other countries. Russian military forces can help in this construction.

The factor of military power remains central in the Russian ambition to maintain and develop an influence on the destiny of the world and more concretely on the "sphere of its privileged interests" of the space of the former Soviet Union. For Vladimir Putin, the military effort is never considered a cause of economic crisis, military technologies are at the heart of development, arms industries are competitive on international markets and Russia's prestige in international negotiations also depends on its military strength. Military force remains a parameter of global power and sovereignty, even if the massive and forced occupation of a given space and its inhabitants is no longer the breeding ground for political capitalization over the long term.

Established in 2002, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) now includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Uzbekistan suspended its participation in 2014). NATO being strengthened, the objective was therefore to ensure a common defence against all possible military aggression suffered by its members, under the high protection and coordination of Russia. In 2010, Dmitri Medvedev launched a ten-year program to modernize the armed forces, which has been continued and reinforced by Vladimir Putin. Military spending rose from 16 per cent in 2010 to nearly 26 per cent of the federal budget in 2015. In 2016, the defence budget was reduced by about 30% (between 41 and 43 billion euros, and 3.1% of GDP), but efforts to optimize forces have been significantly implemented. The government focus on re-equipping forces. Nevertheless, the military sector remains a priority for maintaining Russia's leadership and renewal on the international scene. Russian military expenditure conceived as a factor of real "hard power" converted into virtual "soft power. It is a question of finding a balance between the effort of arming a

country and the need for its sustainable development, it being understood that the two objectives are not contradictory.

This modernization policy, which is the bearer of a new strategic approach, concerns all the armed forces and aims to transform the traditional mass mobilization of the "Russian-Soviet" armies into a more compact and operational professional force. Within this framework, rearmament has also been significant and brutal, encouraged by speculation on the price of energy resources.

This defence instrument is now presented as an asset for Russia in its search for power, even if the members of this organisation are not yet fully aware of their responsibilities organization are not always "fully grateful" to Moscow, on the crucial issues of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and on the deceiving Collective Rapid Reaction against terrorism, transnational crime and drug trafficking.

By 2018, Russia suffered with its conventional forces suffered in comparison to the corresponding military power of NATO. However, it remains a major nuclear power, with a very strong destructive potential, but, for Moscow, in the today's globalized society, national security seemed clearly reduce compared with the real and virtual danger potentialities and its idea of a Great military power. The American withdrawal from the ABM Treaty reduced its international power. However, Moscow plays an international role, with its right of veto in the UN Security Council, its criticisms against military operations sponsored by Western countries, its campaigns of disinformation, notably during western elections, and its direct or indirect operations in "cyber attacks" against international actors.

Russia must find new allies, not only in the area of the former Soviet Union, in a context where the relative weakness of its economy. It contests this anarchic world order, which leaves too little room for emerging countries and in particular the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). However, this last organization, although very active in having its rights to participate in the architecture of a new economic and financial order recognized, suffers from the political difficulties of its members and from divergent interests that are sometimes irreconcilable in practice. For Europe, Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine do not obey international laws and reduce European security. However, some countries, such as Hungary, a member of the European Union, or Moldova try to restore more privileged relations with Russia.

In 2014, the United States accused Moscow of deploying new cruise missiles, contrary to the INF Treaty, which Russia denied. The increase in Russian military capabilities raises questions and concerns in the Western world; it must also be assumed that public opinion and citizens are being manipulated to justify Washington's desire to maintain its own military spending at a very high level. When Barack Obama wanted to strengthen his involvement in Eastern Europe by installing heavy weapons there, Vladimir Putin retaliated by announcing plans to build 40 intercontinental missiles and modernize nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. The United States government, by denouncing the ABM Treaty, has directly encouraged Russia to embark on a new arms race, with incomparably reduced means. Instead of embarking on the dubious effectiveness of a nuclear umbrella, Moscow prefers to have weapons capable of piercing the nuclear shield, which should be much less costly and probably just as effective in terms of deterrence.

Since 1991, the United States and Russia have negotiated and established Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaties, which have often been challenged by either side. In 2002, the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) called for both countries to have no more than 2,200 nuclear warheads. In 2010, the so-called New START treaty replaced the PSO treaty, with very little result in terms of effective disarmament. Russia was very reluctant to reduce its nuclear weapons, given its relative qualitative weakness and especially its technological backwardness in many other important military fields. Moreover, the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) control was challenged by the development of new missiles. Washington has repeatedly accused Russia of violating the treaty because of its tactical missile modernization. For its part, Russia accuses the United States of deploying universal launch systems for ABM systems in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the negotiations Russia wanted to include strategic non-nuclear weapons, space-based weapons, high-precision non-nuclear devices, missile defences and even conventional armies. However, Russia is now determined to challenge arms control agreements that it believes no longer correspond to its national security interests. In November 2017, Russia finalized the 2018-2027 State Armaments Program with a strengthened requirement regarding the reduction of unit costs of equipment, at constant quality. Vladimir Putin has set three priorities: first,

the arms industries must modernize their production lines, increase mass production to reduce costs and strengthen the potential for "import substitution" as a priority objective; second, technological improvements to the weapons themselves and the creation of new weapons systems must be carried out; third, the modernization of the nuclear forces remains the top priority, with the acquisition of air defence systems, high-precision and long-range weapons and the introduction of new generation systems. This would mean re-launching a nuclear arms race, which Donald Trump is prepared to consider.

In 2018, for NATO, Russia is still perceived as the main geopolitical enemy, with China. There are three reasons for this fear.

- The former "allies" of the USSR, now members of the European Union, remain deeply suspicious of the power of the Russian army and the political and ideological ambition of its rulers.
- Moreover, the issue of Crimea and the nagging issue of Donbas suggest that Russia wishes to pursue an aggressive policy towards newly independent states that do not accept being in its zone of influence.
- Russia's major annual military exercise Zapad resembles a simulation of a major war.

Military force has lost its "aura" and daily violence today only questions terrorist states, claimed as such. The security of a state is no longer assured in the light of the new threats, such as cyber attacks and a strong economic and social development.

Economically, Russia has lost much ground to the United States, Europe and China. Its power exists mainly in the military field, for its nuclear arsenal. In this context, Moscow is not willing to engage in new agreements on national security issues, while it feels deeply threatened by NATO and its geostrategic encirclement.

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