

By Simon Serfaty.

Europe and the US must not be afraid to take a firm line with Russia as it returns to full strength.

Ten years ago Russia was a mess. What was feared most was a final collapse that might resemble that of the former Yugoslavia – but worse. Conditions have changed since then.

Now, as Russia is back, the vexed question is how to reveal the limits of its self image and national ambitions, which the Russian state never could sustain, and the West cannot tolerate any more now than it did before.

These limits are known. Russia's bid for renewed primacy is running out of support, out of resources, and even out of space – and, therefore, out of time too.

On the demographic front the one-two punch of low fertility and declining longevity means that Russia is literally dying. With regard to resources, oil output is said to have peaked already, and funds are lacking for the maintenance of a worn-out pipeline network and the development of new gas and oil fields. Even the nation itself is shrinking, because the enlargement of the EU and NATO denies Russia the weak neighbours upon which it used to assert its imperial power.

Consultation priority

Predictably, even as Russia acknowledges its need for co-operation with the West, it will continue to exploit every opportunity to widen the strategic distance between the US and Europe, as well as within.

A Janus-like face that smiles at some and scowls at others cannot work, because a scowling Russia is cause for alarm for all, while a smiling Russia is unlikely to bring lasting contentment for any. A priority, therefore, is for consultation among Europeans, and between Europeans and Americans, to prevent differences among them ever becoming larger than between any of them and Russia.

Working out a common EU and EU-US strategy is difficult for historical and geographical reasons, and because of unequal dependence on energy and related trade links. Yet a consensus within the EU and with the US about Russia can still emerge out of common positions on specific issues of interest to Russia, including Kosovo, missile defence, NATO and EU enlargement, and energy.

In 2007, the EU overcame differences among its members and endorsed the US-backed imperative of Kosovo's independence as the best available option. To reach that agreement, close diplomatic consultation between the EU and the US created a co-operative model that Russia, although closely consulted too, tried unsuccessfully to derail. As independence was

nonetheless declared in February this year, firmness paid off.

### Reaching out

Enlargement for the EU and NATO is strongly linked to the broader range of issues with Russia. A key challenge for NATO and the EU is to extend security further east and south. For NATO this means reaching out to new democracies in Georgia and Ukraine, reinforcing the Euro-Atlantic instincts of Croatia and Albania, and agreeing on the deployment of missile defences in Poland and the Czech Republic. As for the EU, it needs to keep Serbia on a Western course, hold the door open for the Balkans, and continue to negotiate with Turkey.

A common EU or EU-US grand strategy on energy is unlikely. What can be agreed is that Russia's geopolitical manipulation of oil and gas supplies and prices within and beyond the former Soviet empire is unacceptable. The EU has many economic tools at its disposal to enforce this common sense assumption, and NATO, through its Article 5, has numerous military tools available as well.

On any such issues, all 32 members of the EU and NATO have complementary capabilities that enable them to give Moscow a right of consultation when desirable, but insist on their own right of enforcement where necessary.

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