The Phantom Menace

Strength/Weakness Dialectics of Russo-Western Relations in the 20th Century

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Abstract
This article examines the evolution of Russo-Western relations in the 20th century and the transformation of international perceptions of Russia. Russia was a significant and recognized part of the European system since the late 18th century but lost that status after WWI, when the Russian state and society encountered deep socio-economic problems. Transformed perceptions of Russian strength/weakness after WWII and after 1991 are also analyzed and found to be based on ideas fundamental to Western countries' self-identification. This explains the limited results of Moscow's attempts to change the West's attitude towards Russia, starting with President Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 and ending with the conflict in Ukraine.

Keywords: Russo-Western relations, Western perceptions, strength, weakness, World War I, World War II, Cold War, diplomacy,

In 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama called Russia "a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbors, not out of strength but out of weakness" (Reuters, 2014). The Russian public understood these words as just more propaganda following events in Crimea and the Donbass. However, Obama was not saying anything fundamentally new but only repeating a view that had circulated for decades in the American intellectual space. In fact, it was stated by George Kennan in his famous "Long Telegram" in 1946. The telegram's key point was not an analysis of the "Russian threat" per se, but its supposed production by historical weakness: the "traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity" and "fear of [the] more competent, more powerful, more highly organized" West. Kennan explained the Soviet Union's "secretiveness about internal matters" by its desire to hide its vulnerabilities. "Gauged against [the] Western World as a whole, [the] Soviets are still by far the weaker force," he concluded (Kennan, 1946).

These thoughts hark back to when Kennan served as third secretary of the American mission in Moscow, ten years earlier. In March 1936, while preparing a report for Ambassador William Bullitt, he put together snippets of messages sent by an earlier U.S. ambassador to Russia, Neill Brown, in 1850–1853. According to Kennan, nothing had changed in Russia's attitude towards the West in more than 80 years: "All they have is borrowed, except their miserable climate… They fight their battles on borrowed capital, and make loans to build their railways. Their best vessels are built in England and the United States. And all their arts and pursuits, though cultivated and pressed, with commendable diligence and a good degree of success, are the products of foreign genius, and duplicates of inventions and discoveries of a people wiser than themselves" (Bullitt, 1936). In Kennan's view, Soviet understanding of the West's superiority led to insecurity, power-worship, and aggression. Similarly, in his 1946 Fulton Speech, Winston Churchill said "there is nothing [that the Russians] admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than for weakness" (Churchill, 1946).

While Obama's statement can be explained by the obvious disparity in Russian and Western power and influence at the beginning of the

21st century, Kennan's reasoning—which was by no means unique (Pechatnov, 2020, pp. 14-15)—raises questions. Leaving aside the questionable parallel between Emperor Nicholas's Russia and Stalin's USSR, it is puzzling that even the Second World War, and the USSR's transformation into a superpower, did not change Kennan's opinion, given that it had formed in completely different—and now superseded—circumstances. Following WWII, U.S. economic superiority was obvious, but the balance of power between the two blocs remained questionable: China had joined the Soviet camp, Communism's popularity was rapidly growing in the West, and expectations of another Great Depression were widespread (Kolko, 1969, pp. 244-246, 485).

Perhaps subjective Western assessments of Russian strength and weakness were never a matter of actual power. The question appears important given current Russo-Western relations, but it can be interrogated only by taking the thorny path of historical analogies.

AN EMPIRE OF STRENGTH OR WEAKNESS?

For 200 years, the Russian Empire was a classical great power, an essential member of every iteration of the international system since the late 18th century. No one doubted its membership in the European family, given its participation in the Concert of Nations, won through painful internal transformations and impressive foreign policy achievements (Boer, 1995, pp. 43-44). The peaceful settlement adopted at the Congress of Vienna consolidated Russia's permanent presence in Europe. In the first half of the 19th century, St. Petersburg was the cornerstone of a new order based on "a stable network of rules and relationships between states" (Schroeder, 2004, pp. 121-133). It had abandoned the role of hegemon in favor of full membership in the club of European nations (Roberts, 2026).

Russia was ruled by people who felt like Europeans and were Europeans: "The Russian bureaucracy, including those in charge of foreign policy, mainly consisted of Baltic Germans who were well-versed in the generally accepted practice of diplomacy. Russian diplomats spoke the same language, literally and figuratively, as

their colleagues from European cabinets" (Degoyev, 2004, p. 111). The 18th-century injection of Western European culture exceeded all expectations in its results. "Drawing inspiration from all the strands of European culture and speaking many languages, the Russian intelligentsia's culture was in some respects genuinely broader than the more national perspective common in the individual cultures of Western Europe" (Lieven, 2002, p. 276). In the 19th century, the Russian nobility became Westernized and closely integrated into the institutional and personal networks of the European aristocracy (Becker, 2004, pp. 8-10; Confino, 1993).

For a long time, Europeans' perception of Russia had limited influence on foreign policy and grand strategy. However, the situation began to change in the second half of the 19th century, as nationalism, modernization, and globalization gathered pace. European identity, which had formed in the first half of the century, now began to entail belonging to a higher civilization.

Despite Europe's many fault lines, its identity was based on an awareness of common cultural roots and the similar construction of its various nations (Said, 1994, p. 17; Ferguson, 2004, pp. 221-293). Russia did not keep pace with this process. 'Russianness' was only incipient and vague (Miller, 2006, pp. 68-70). Russia began modernization late and with great difficulty, while position in the international hierarchy was increasingly determined by the level of public institutions' development (Bayly, 2004, p. 234). Russia's elite could still easily communicate with and understand Europe's, but rising nations in the West perceived Russia as a 'significant Other,' rather than as a place where their values were shared and realized (Neumann, 2003, pp. 61-94).

Europeans' feelings towards their eastern neighbor were increasingly dominated by extremes: fear of an unknown yet obviously alien and constantly growing power; enthusiasm regarding a young nation with great potential but in need of guidance (Lieven, 2015, p. 29; CœUré, 2017, pp. 20-21). But both views agreed that Russia was not up to playing an independent role in Weltpolitik as Europe and Western culture expanded globally. Russia was thought to have two options: 1) Reinvention of its Europeanness through the adoption of

the latest Western practices and institutions, with the help of a leading state. 2) Archaization. Both options entailed a diminution of Russia's international position.

However, in the early 20th century, these suppositions did not go beyond intellectual discussions to form a political agenda. In the early 1910s, French diplomacy was preparing to dramatically escalate versus Germany, and it saw Russia as a fully-fledged ally in reshaping Europe's balance of influence (Soutou, 2015, pp. 36-38). The First World War was expected to confirm that Russia's capabilities matched its great-power ambitions.

The realities of industrial warfare instead revealed Russia's structural weaknesses. The West had to reconsider its perceptions. French President Raymond Poincaré expressed the Franco-British elite's bewilderment when, in September 1915, he wrote in his diary: "So the Russian colossus really is a colossus with feet of clay?" (Poincaré, 2002, p. 86). The Russian 'steamroller' turned out to be an image for propaganda, supported by ephemeral ideas about a "young nation" (Cœuré, 2017, pp. 16-22). An underdeveloped country, with incomplete social consolidation around the national core, was unprepared for industrial war. The German army's successes on the Eastern Front were seen as a proof of civilization's advantages over archaism. Russia had lost the competition with modernized European societies and was quickly becoming a junior partner of its allies. The latter's condescending attitude became especially evident by the end of 1916, after the establishment of the Franco-British strategic tandem and as the U.S.'s entry became increasingly likely (Soutou, 2015, pp. 65-88).

The Entente gradually developed a passive or 'negative' program for Russia: it was to be propped up enough to distract as many German forces as possible. Entente military missions accomplished their practical tasks but were, in the words of a member of one such mission, fully aware of "universal French superiority over universal Russian mismanagement," reproaching the Russians foremost for not being French (Pascal, 1975, pp. 14, 53). In his 1916-1917 diaries, the French ambassador reflected on the cultural backwardness of the anarchic Slavic soul, incapable of long-term disciplined effort (Paléologue, 1991, p. 27).

The Entente anticipated and initially even welcomed the February Revolution, cautiously comparing it to the French Revolution. But this quickly gave way to awareness of an impending and inevitable military collapse, and to a (baseless) fear of the new government betraying them. The more pragmatic British went from "benevolent observation" to "distrust tinged with annoyance" to "complete disappointment and exasperation" (Nabokov, 1921, p. 97), while the French became totally convinced of the vices inherent in Russian culture, which had entirely lost the right to count itself among the European nations. The expanding revolutionary anarchy was seen as a sign of Russia's barbarization and return to Asia, where it had been prior to Peter the Great's reforms. The West had to decide whether it was ready to carry out a civilizing mission in the vastness of Northern Eurasia. It was a common view that Russia needed a "new Rurik" (Galkina, 2020, p. 209). In this context, German voices were paradoxically moderate, as they still had some idea of Russia's potential (Lannik, 2025).

THE MOMENT OF SINGULARITY

The Bolshevik takeover broke the image of a strong Russia. While the British bade their time (Sergeev, 2019, pp. 11-53), the French were quite outspoken. Ambassador Paul Cambon in London frankly noted: "I can't tell you that the Russians surprised me. No, I never believed in their brains, full of dreams and incapable of rational action, in their ideas worthy of eight-year-old children, in their servile souls that can only be organized with the help of a stick... The Chinese are much superior to them" (Cambon, 1946, p. 230). The publication of secret international treaties, the arrests of foreign diplomats, the default on foreign debts, and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk utterly delegitimized Russia not only as a great power but also as a systemic player. A year after the October coup, the French Foreign Ministry stated: "Since the revolution of November 1917, there has been neither a state nor a government in Russia, and any law there has been abolished" (Cœuré, 2017, p. 30).

In late 1917, information channels connecting Russia with the outside world started closing, one after another. The sociopolitical

upheavals of the Civil War and mass migration severed personal ties between the Russian and European elites. Former allies of the Russian Empire, having supported the Whites, were essentially unable to communicate with the Reds. And were not eager to do so, anyway. Western societies and elites saw the Bolsheviks not as a political force or social movement but rather as chaos incarnate, for which they initially lacked even a stable terminology. Sketchy information about events in Russia added to the general picture of triumphant barbarism that had abolished natural rights and basic values. The 'civilized world' saw protection of itself as right and proper. The notion of a *'cordon sanitaire,'* coined in 1918, expressed the West's attitude towards the Bolshevik regime much better than its reactive, half-hearted, unsuccessful intervention (Pavlov, 2021, pp. 7-54).

The 1910s and 1920s were a moment of 'absolute singularity' in Western attitudes towards Russia, which seemed to have lost all the characteristics that it had acquired over the two hundred years spent in Europe's normative and symbolic space. The Russian Empire had already begun to slip out of that space in the second half of the 19th century. The First World War accelerated this process by elevating the United States—a non-European country of Western culture that not only fit into the process of modernization but in many ways led it. American economic power and Wilsonian liberalism became fundamental to the world as globalized by the West (Wallerstein, 1995, pp. 93-107; Ikenberry, 2020, pp. 101-102). The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing Civil War turned Russia into an empty space on Europeans' mental maps, a space that had to be developed anew.

This period was best described by Winston Churchill: "Russia… had changed her identity. An apparition with countenance different from any yet seen on earth stood in the place of the old Ally. We saw a state without a nation, an army without a country, a religion without a God" (Churchill, 1929, p. 61). The future prime minister was wrong about only one thing: the "apparition" reflected fundamental processes unfolding in the West itself, and this made it even more threatening. Soviet ideology was threatening not in its alienness to Western values but in its close connection to them. The supranational nature of 19th-

century Russian intelligentsia culture produced an ideology consonant with the most pressing demands of Western societies. The 'revolt of the masses' provoked a deep identity crisis among the old European elites. The Bolsheviks, who had accumulated the energy of the 'dangerous classes' in their country, embodied all of Europeans' main fears (Mayer, 1981, pp. 304-305; Hobsbawm, 1995, pp. 56-57).

THE PARADOX OF THE SOVIET PROJECT

It was a paradoxical situation. Geopolitically, Russia was considered so weakened that it was boldly sidelined from the post-war world order. Although the *cordon sanitaire* was lifted, the USSR found itself isolated on the eastern periphery of the Old World, separated from political and economic centers by a buffer of new states. Soviet-German cooperation was all that worried the West.

Yet, in sharp contrast, Soviet ideology was visibly present in the West in daily life. And apocalyptic premonitions, stirred by local Communist parties guided from Moscow, were only one factor. The West's own intelligentsia, plunged by the war into doubts about the future of the Enlightenment civilizational project, viewed the Soviet Union as a laboratory for realizing new ideas (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 190). The Soviet experiment touched the deepest fibers of European intellectuals' identity, which did not lend itself to a sober view of the experiment.

This dualism was a source of constant concern for Western elites. The Soviet threat was clearly felt and even observed, but not defined in understandable geopolitical terms. Russia had ceased to be Europe, but it had not become Asia (contrary to the most pessimistic writings during the Russian Revolution). Europeans' mental map placed Moscow and Leningrad on Europe's far fringes, but Soviets, including numerous cultural figures and artists, could be seen in London, Paris, and Berlin. The USSR had no intention of retreating to Asia, but it did challenge the colonial powers there. In 1922, a Foreign Office employee expressed the general doubts of his colleagues as follows: "In the consideration of Russia's problems this country can employ neither wisdom drawn from long kinship to other members of the European

family, nor experience acquired in relations with savage and tutelary peoples" (Steiner, 2005, pp. 557-558).

The fading of revolutionary fervor in the 1920s fueled hopes that the USSR would begin to change internally and, to gain access to Western resources needed for modernization, would gradually accede to the postwar order. It was not clear how exactly this would happen, but it certainly would not involve Moscow's return as a great power. Instead, Moscow would be integrated into the established configuration, in which the emerging Franco-German tandem led Europe, Britain remained the global arbiter, and the U.S. drove economic, scientific, and technological development (D'Agostino, 2012, pp. 190-214; Tooze, 2015, pp. 462-486).

If this plan had succeeded, it would have helped to stabilize the entire international system, but the West had no leverage with which to force Soviet acceptance. Yet the USSR, having lost significant military, political, and economic power in the course of its upheavals, could not build a rival order, or even just force a reconsideration of the present one. All it could do was reject the conditions dictated to it. Even during its greatest geopolitical weakness, it used its ideology to pressure the West and its vast territory to project power globally (Steiner, 2005, pp. 553-558; Sergeev, 2024, pp. 123-187).

In 1925, renowned British diplomat Harold Nicolson succinctly formulated the Western elite's perception of the threat: "The Russian problem, that incessant, though shapeless menace, can be stated only as a problem; it is impossible as yet to forecast what effect the development of Russia will have on the future stability of Europe. It is true, on the one hand, that the feeling of uncertainty which is sapping the health of Western Europe is caused to no small extent by the disappearance of Russia as a Power accountable in the European concert. On the other hand, the Russian problem is for the moment Asiatic rather than European; to-morrow Russia may again figure decisively in the balance of continental power; but to-day she hangs as a storm-cloud upon the Eastern horizon of Europe—impending, imponderable, but, for the present, detached. Russia is not, therefore in any sense a factor of stability; she is indeed the most menacing of all our uncertainties" (Haslam, 2021, p. 79).

The Soviet attitude towards the West was also ambivalent. The Bolshevik ideology, which crystallized in the 1930s as Marxism-Leninism, was essentially universalistic, having grown out of Russian intellectuals' awareness of Russia's civilizational backwardness vis-à-vis Europe. Those who took power in 1917 were often personally and even socially disconnected from the previous governing elite. They considered political reality not in practical (and sobering) but in theoretical terms, which were strongly influenced by 19th-century Russian philosophy (Besançon, 1998, pp. 83-126). Russia's typical Petrine path, entailing the duplication of Western institutions, was now opposed by a holistic approach that proposed to reinterpret (and solve) the problem dialectically.

COGNITIVE MIRRORS

Characterizing the essence of Lenin's worldview, Mikhail Gefter named its key ideas: "Russia opposes all attempts to liberate and emancipate it. The idea is not to superficially liberate it from the tsarist system. For people of the 19th century, the point is to liberate Russia from itself… that Russia would cease to be an obstacle for European humanity only if liberated from within" (Gefter, 2017, p. 80). In other words, integration into "European humanity," i.e., the modernized West, required not copying it but creating a new universal value framework in which Russia would play a key role.

This produced a syllogism that underlay the Soviet worldview: the West embodied a worthy civilizational horizon, but was itself inherently limited in ways that prevented the achievement of that horizon; these limitations could be removed only by steering Russia back onto the high road of European history. Thus, overcoming Russia's backwardness was a project of global significance. In 1920, Vladimir Lenin wrote: "…soon after the victory of the proletarian revolution in at least one of the advanced countries, a sharp change will probably come about: Russia will cease to be the model and will once again become a backward country (in the 'Soviet' and the socialist sense)" (Lenin, 1982, pp. 3-4). Russia's special role, therefore, was to initiate a world revolution that would unify humanity on the basis of new and

higher values. Until then, the Soviet state was the flagship of global development. The prospects for a 'global October Revolution' were gradually fading, but this special mission penetrated deep into the minds of the elite and the identity of the masses.

The West was a mirror for Soviet hopes and fears. The attitudes described in 1929 Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Poems about the Soviet Passport* are characteristic of the time. "Spatially, pre-war Soviet culture was almost entirely focused on the Soviet country" (Dobrenko, 2020, p. 13). Soviet intellectuals were actively rethinking their attitude towards the West, rejecting the customary view of Soviet culture as secondary, while also expanding foreign ties through which texts, images, and ideas came pouring into the USSR. These were joined, with the start of industrialization in the early 1930s, by technologies and skills brought by thousands of American, British, and German engineers. The Soviet 'great leap forward' visibly contrasted with the Great Depression in the world's leading industrial powers. The pilgrimage of European and American writers and thinkers to the Soviet Union was seen as a recognition of its superiority (Clark, 2011, pp. 136-168; Golubev and Nevezhin, 2016, pp. 57-126).

These developments were seen as testifying to the country's transformation into a leading center of global development that was accumulating the West's potential and qualitatively remolding it. This process, which Australian historian and cultural critic Katerina Clark called the 'Great Appropriation' (Clark, 2011, pp. 16-18), had a direct political impact. It generated the foreign policy imperative to everywhere and always maintain the great-power status that rapidly changing Russia had reimagined for itself. Above all else, Moscow desired de jure and de facto equality with the world's heavyweights.

Questions of diplomatic prestige were of special importance for the USSR, as clearly evidenced by every pre-war crisis. Its foreign representatives were under no circumstances to accept a loss of face, give the impression of weakness, or imply that the USSR needed an agreement—better to abandon negotiations altogether. Isolation was preferable to unequal dialogue (Carley, 2023, pp. 625-732).

Analyzing Soviet behavior during the Cold War, British historian Sergey Radchenko describes the Soviet leadership as gripped by 'Raskolnikov's obsession,' a need for international recognition of their special position in world affairs (Radchenko, 2024, p. 7; Pechatnov, 2025). This attitude likely developed in the first two decades after the October Revolution, as the clash between Soviet expectations and Western views became clear.

Western views of the USSR clearly demonstrated "cognitive closure" as described by Robert Jervis (2017, pp. 187-191). These views were born out of Western nations' own self-perception: the institutions and values of the Western-created international order required—and were underlined by—the USSR's marginalization. Otherwise, the immense territory and universalistic ideology of the USSR would suggest its agency and even great-power status, and thereby cast discomforting doubt upon the decades-old criteria for supremacy in the international hierarchy.

INFORMAL RELATIONS

The Western consciousness stubbornly clung to the idea of the Soviet Union's military, economic, and political weakness, allegedly inherited from the Russian Empire. While European intellectuals viewed the USSR as a source of the Old World's cultural renewal, politicians and officers spoke of an incapable regime sustained only by repression, and of how the Red Army—though well-equipped—was incapable of waging an intense and lengthy war (Alexander, 1992, pp. 282-286). Disparaging comments about Slavic culture were reproduced in diplomatic and military documents, ignoring the obvious successes of Soviet industrialization (Vershinin, 2023, pp. 99-101). In the Winter War, when Finland almost collapsed and lost 11.8% of its population in combat (versus 0.15% for the USSR) (Baryshnikov, 2023, pp. 403-405), this was predictably interpreted as confirming the USSR as a "colossus with feet of clay" (Churchill, 1985, p. 488). Doubts about its ability to resist the German onslaught, voiced by British and American observers in the summer of 1941, were deep rooted.

European unwillingness to satisfy Soviet demands for equality led to an acute crisis in relations before World War II. Barely established

Soviet-American ties quickly slid into a vortex of misunderstanding: the sense of global superiority inherent in U.S. foreign policy culture almost immediately clashed with Moscow's firm rejection of any hint at dominance. The Western elite's few champions of rapprochement with the USSR struggled to overcome the fundamental clash of worldviews. Finding the USSR unwilling to accept others' rules of the game, those initially sympathetic to it lost interest or—more often—became its ardent opponents (Carley, 2023, pp. 83-132; Denechere, 2003, pp. 113-192).

Thus, the Great Depression and the challenge of fascism completely undermined Western societies' self-confidence: the Soviet project became a factor in European states' domestic politics and thus inevitably affected their foreign policies. It took another world war, bigger and more destructive than the first, for the USSR and the West to reach mutually acceptable perceptions of each other. But the old stereotypes remained. For example, in a dialogue with Joseph Stalin, Franklin Roosevelt admitted that his main goal was to "make Russia less barbaric" (Pechatnov, 2013, p. 30). However, Germany's defeat on the Eastern Front signified a historic shift. British historian Adam Tooze explains: "Barbarossa was a belated and perverse outgrowth of a European tradition of colonial conquest and settlement, a tradition that was not yet fully aware of its own obsolescence. The ignorant condescension shown by all sides, not just by the Germans, but by the British and Americans as well, towards the fighting power of the Red Army is indicative of this. But, as the Wehrmacht found to its cost, the Soviet Union was not an object that could be operated on in the manner of Edwardian imperialism. What Germany encountered in Soviet Russia in 1941 was not 'Slavic primitivism', but the first and most dramatic example of a successful developmental dictatorship" (Tooze, 2006, p. 511).

By force of arms, the USSR brought itself into the league of great powers, vindicating its model of development, which at the level of total war could be matched only by the leading powers of the West. Soviet ideology took on the Russian national spirit as a new dimension. "The USSR acquire[d] a universally recognized history, unrelated to the dictatorship of the proletariat and world revolution, and the Soviet

people [were] constituted as a superethnos, receiving (including from the world community) a secondary national identity" (Ryklin, 2002, p. 98). The Soviet political system not only survived but through tremendous mobilization of resources also dispelled all doubt about its viability.

The West could not turn a blind eye to reality. The de facto recognition of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe was a forced departure from Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and a globalized world with a single set of values and rules. The Soviet Union's triumph instilled a sense of insecurity in Western minds. The main reason for the Cold War was arguably "Western belief, absurd in retrospect but natural enough in the aftermath of the Second World War, that the Age of Catastrophe was by no means at an end; that the future of world capitalism and liberal society was far from assured" (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 230). The institutionalization and stability of inter-bloc confrontation also necessitated "moral anesthesia:" "Mutual Assured Destruction could only be defended if one considered hostage-taking on a massive scale—deliberately placing civilian populations at risk for nuclear annihilation—to be a human act" (Gaddis, 2005, pp. 180-181).

Hence the Soviet project's collapse, which heralded the unipolar moment of American hegemony, was interpreted from the very beginning in idealistic terms, which seemed even more attractive given the West's surprisingly quick and convincing victory (Safranchuk and Lukyanov, 2021, pp. 59-63). The continuity of the world's universalization in line with the Western development model, interrupted in 1917 and 1945, seemed to have been restored. The 'Russian problem' had been solved by the very course of history. The Cold War's winners "did not set out deliberately to humiliate and marginalize [Russia], but there was no place for [it] in the new order" (Sakwa, 2023, p. 327). Russia did not fit into the Western format—being neither strong enough to transform the international system in its interests, nor weak enough to be included in the system as a junior partner, as Germany was in the mid-20th century. So, Russia was left in geopolitical limbo with an unclear future.

However, in the late 2010s, a new chapter of history began. Russia, having been unable to fit into unipolarity, now proved strong enough to act independently on the world stage (though still not reaching superpower status) (Stoner, 2021; Tsygankov, 2021). Paradoxically, the situation of almost a century ago is now repeating itself, except Russia no longer has a universalistic ideology that is dangerously akin to the Western value system. Yet this difference has not legitimized Moscow, in the eyes of the West, as an independent actor. To the contrary, the USSR's global ambitions—as the leader of the world revolution and then the center of the socialist camp—could not be ignored. Whereas Russia's visions of multipolarity and security mechanisms, resembling spheres of influence, are perceived by Western governments as illusions divorced from reality and as an outrageous dissent.

This reproduces "cognitive closure." The view of Russia as a weak power was prompted by events of the 1980s and the 1990s, fundamental to the West's modern identity, which hark back to the 'beautiful era' at the beginning of the 20th century. The West chose to view the world wars and the Cold War as a historical aberration, and to marginalize the country whose special international position had for decades embodied contemporary problems and been considered their primary source. It is not easy to abandon such an attitude, and so it persists, offering consistent explanations for the steps that Moscow has taken since the late 2000s to change the unequal nature of post-1991 Russo-Western relations.

Vladimir Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, which marked the beginning of Moscow's new course, was met with bewilderment and irritation (TASS, 2016). "Russia wants to be taken seriously," German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said, but his statement seemed to express condescending understanding for a former empire's 'phantom pain' more than it indicated an actual willingness to engage in constructive dialogue.

As the world was rethinking the nature of force as a factor in international relations and advancing its 'soft power' discourse, Russia's traditional emphasis on hard power looked like an anachronism associated with inherent weakness. Russia's use of force in the 2008

Georgia War provoked the West's open protest, yet it fully fit the image of a weak country unable to influence its neighbors more effectively. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice remarked, use of force is "the one tool that [Russia] has always used when it wanted to deliver a message" (New York Times, 2008). The same idea was articulated by some IR experts (Krastev, 2008). Obama's statement of Russia as a weak regional power was used in 2014 to explain Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Moscow's sharp pivot in late 2021–early 2022 was seemingly meant to finally change things. One can speculate about how events would have developed if Russia had achieved quick success in Ukraine. However, the conflict's transformation into a protracted confrontation has once again revived the topic of Russia's weakness and served as a key justification for Western military, economic, and political mobilization. The prospect of exhausting Moscow's already limited capabilities strengthens the resolve of its opponents. The stakes have been raised most by the EU, seeking political and strategic agency in the unfolding struggle (Fabrichnikov, 2025). Defeat in Ukraine would be a painful blow to the West, but it would hardly force it to reconsider its attitude towards Russia, which is based on ideas critical to Western countries' self-identification.

As for Russia, it should obviously do away with its 'Raskolnikov obsession.' The consolidation of national self-awareness—***beyond a dichotomy of strength-weakness in which Russia is always catching up***—would be a great reward for the country's 20th- and 21st-century trials.

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