

Punching Above Its Weight? Russia and Power

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No single day is passing by without Russia making the headlines for interfering into the domestic affairs of other states: hacking elections, links with the Trump campaign, cyber attacks, airstrikes in Syria, financing radical right parties ... For a researcher these daily reports are no doubt a source of frustration: there is fairly little conclusive evidence in this war of words. Yet, it is hard to ignore the fuss. In this post I will not add further speculation to all the allegations made, but daily news items form a good opportunity to reflect on Russia's effective power today.

The images of an omnipresent and omnipotent Russia that can influence election outcomes anywhere around the globe, contrast strongly with Russia's 'real' relative power position in the world. If we look at a number of indicators, Russia is not scoring very high in the power charts. Despite its role as energy giant, its GDP is roughly the size of that of Italy. A comparison between 1992 (the first post-communist year) and 20 years later, reveals that Russia's share in the world economy has declined from 4 to 3 % (based on IMF data). Compare this to the US and the EU, who saw their share go down from roughly one quarter of the world economy to one fifth each. But compare most of all with China, which saw its economy grow from 4 % of the global economy (the same position as Russia) to 15 % over the same period. Look at military expenditure, where Russia finds itself in the same broad category as the UK and France. Of the 100 USD spent on military affairs in 2015, 4 % is spent by Russia, versus 36 % by the US (SIPRI data). The Russian military spending is roughly one fifteenth of what NATO member states spend jointly. The number of Russian nuclear warheads is of course kept at strategic parity with the US. This does translate into status, but not necessarily into a useful instrument for day-to-day diplomatic relations. On top of that, Russia is relatively isolated. It is nowhere near the position of its predecessor, the Soviet Union, as leader of an important military and economic bloc.

So, is Russia punching above its weight? Stating the obvious, we have to add some nuance. Russia may be a weak player when we compare its capabilities on a global scale. Its relative weight is of course profoundly different when we look at its position regionally, vis-à-vis other former Soviet states.

It is equally important to distinguish between strategy and tactics. Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia's strategic goal has been to regain the status of great power. But it had to do so against many odds: limited capabilities and complicated – often inimical – relations with some of its neighbours. To regain this great power status it has developed tactics of small, activist steps on different fronts at the same time: diplomatic, military, intelligence, cyber, economic and increasingly ideological. Misleadingly this has been referred to as hybrid warfare. Even more misleadingly, this has been presented as a new and uniquely Russian invention. I rather see this as diverging ad hoc steps on many different fronts, reactive and challenging hegemonic western power rather than serving one clearly designed master plan. The annexation of Crimea was a reaction to the unwelcome regime change in Kyiv, following from Russia's geopolitical reading of events as the 'loss' of Ukraine to the West. Both in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, Russia followed tactics of what Roy Allison called 'deniable intervention'. In Syria, on the other hand, Moscow opted for a very open and mediated intervention.

The purpose of Russia's displaying power on all fronts is to appear more powerful than it actually is. Power is not just about actual capabilities. It is also about the will to use capabilities. Ultimately it is also about perception: whether the rest of the world thinks that

Russia has the will to use its capabilities. If key actors believe that Russia is very powerful, it will de facto be powerful. This is what the tactics seek to contribute to. Do the tactics pay off? It is far too early to say. In the case of the Syria intervention, Russia has clearly been a game changer. It has conquered a place at the negotiation table and even seized the initiative. Arguably it has upped its status in international affairs. In the Ukraine crisis the control over Crimea is a fait accompli and no diplomat expects the clock to be turned back. In a geostrategic mindset these may seem important gains. But there is a flipside to the coin. Russia's actions also imply it has burnt bridges with Ukraine for a long time to come. Relations with the West have soured and there is little chance of a quick recovery. The lack of mutual trust will take many years to overcome. Russia's tactics have also hurt its economy and damaged its reputation as a reliable economic partner. On this point it is good to remind that Putin's foreign policy in his early years as president was characterised by 'economisation': turning Russia into a great power by making strategic use of its natural resources and economic strengths. With its geopolitically coloured tactics and with an economy weakened to support those tactics, Russia may very well have shot itself in the foot.