**LIVING WITH PUTIN’S RUSSIA**

Opening Address by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC FASSA FAIIA, Chancellor of The Australian National University, to ANU Humanities Research Centre Conference on *Putin’s Russia in the Wake of the Cold War*, Canberra, 24 August 2016

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

One of my more memorable encounters with senior Russian officials, though I didn’t fully appreciate it at the time, came in November 1991 when as Minister for Foreign Affairs I led a delegation to explore and develop both diplomatic and trade links with the new post-Soviet Russia. A great deal of effort had gone into setting up one particular meeting – a large and extremely expensive luncheon in St Petersburg with that city’s Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, who was seen as – and indeed was – an extremely influential player on the national as well as local stage. So when the news came through, ten minutes before the lunch was due to begin, that the mayor had been summonsed to Moscow to see President Yeltsin and was sending his deputy instead, you will appreciate that I and my group of senior officials and businessmen were more than a little underwhelmed.

Particularly when it became clear that the deputy in question – a young, blonde-haired gentleman with high cheekbones and steely-blue eyes – had minimal interest in Australia or anything any of us had to say, and was manifestly even keener than we rapidly became to bring the whole utterly unproductive event to a conclusion. But of course diplomatic niceties had to prevail, so it was with completely appropriate grace that I concluded proceedings by saying “What an absolute pleasure it has been for us to have you with us today, Mr Putin”…

Of course over the years I have had many other encounters with senior Russian diplomatic, political and business figures across a fair spread of the ideological spectrum – not quite at the level that Vladimir Putin subsequently reached, but men like Eduard Shevardnadze, Andrey Kozyrev, Vladimir Lukin, Yegor Gaidar, Grigory Yavlinsky, Boris Nemtsov, Yevgeny Primakov, Igor Ivanov, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and, in the current administration, Vitaly Churkin and Sergey Lavrov: nearly all of them pieces-of-work of some consequence, but for the most part very much more engaged, and engaging, than I found the young Mr Putin to be. But – whatever the more accommodating and sophisticated instincts that some of those still in senior positions might seem to possess – it is with Mr Putin, and the combative, uncompromising Russia that he has moulded around him, that the rest of the world now has to deal.

And dealing with him has manifestly not been easy. We have a man whose instincts are authoritarian, grievance-driven and confrontational; whose domestic political support base seems to grow stronger rather than weaker the more he runs with those instincts; and whose international behaviour – built on those foundations – has been ringing an increasing number of alarm bells. Among them:

* The invasion of Georgia in 2008 in utterly spurious reliance on the ‘responsibility to protect’ principle
* The shameless annexation of Crimea in 2014
* The incursion into Eastern Ukraine later that year, and associated shooting down by Russian proxy forces of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, compounded in both cases by denials of involvement
* Multiple statements since 2012, in language reminiscent of the height of the Cold War, placing renewed emphasis on Russia’s nuclear arsenal, committing to making it stronger, implying a willingness to use it if necessary, ruling out any agreement on tactical nuclear weapons, and showing no interest in further agreement with the US on strategic weapons reduction
* The walking away in 2013 from longstanding cooperative nuclear threat reduction arrangements, and boycotting the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit
* The playing of a central role in blocking effective Security Council response to the crisis in Syria, starting in 2011 when it may have been manageable, and continuing to support militarily the Assad regime in ways that have not helped peace efforts
* The tolerance, if not encouragement, of Russian hackers recently penetrating the computer systems of the Democratic National Committee in the US in a way which impacted on the presidential election campaign
* The intended participation next month (September 2016) in a joint naval exercise with China in the South China Sea, with the potential to significantly raise tensions in a region on edge in the aftermath of the recent Permanent Court of Arbitration decision.

The consistent themes running through all this have been intense hostility to the US, a desire to see the collapse of NATO and the political weakening of the EU, and an overt commitment to restoring a Russian sphere of influence not only embracing Ukraine and Crimea, Belarus and Moldova, and the former Central Asian republics, but the Baltic countries as well – all of which has seriously spooked a number of members of the transatlantic Western alliance. And Moscow’s significantly increased coziness with an also increasingly-assertive China has been beginning to spook a number of countries in our own region, not to mention analysts with a congenitally pessimistic disposition like Paul Dibb.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Not a bad few years’ work, when you think about it, for a country with a population one-third that of the European Union and much less than half that of the US, and a struggling economy with a GDP only just bigger than Australia’s and not much more than one-third that of Germany!

But Russia has parlayed such assets as it has to the maximum. This is a country which does occupy a huge swathe of territory, and a veto-wielding seat on the Security Council. It is one with an army that remains large and powerful in regional terms. And it is one which retains an immense stockpile of nuclear weapons (some 7,300 of them, as compared with 7,000 for the US and around 1000 for the rest of the world put together), which arsenal it is now rapidly modernizing. Whether or not those weapons are ever rationally useable, all this does tend to concentrate minds.

What is driving Mr Putin in all of this is fairly self-evident. This is a man with a lumberyard of chips on his shoulder. He is a Brezhnev-era KGB officer, still smarting over the Soviet Union’s defeat in Afghanistan, still believing that Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and the breakup of the Union was a disaster, and who, as Kyle Wilson has described it, still “smoulders over perceived offences against him personally, against the empire he served and against the Great Power that he leads”.

There is no doubt that Putin’s aggressive reassertion of national pride, manifested above all in his seizure of Crimea, won him immense and continuing popularity, reflected not only in internal polling but a personality cult ever more visibly pervasive on T-shirts and in souvenir stalls and bookshops, and he seems likely to be around for a long time yet. There *is* a real question mark about the popularity of his support party, United Russia, as distinct from the President himself, and notwithstanding the continuing weakness and division of the reformist opposition, Putin’s absence from the ballot in next month’s Duma election, in an environment where there is a good deal of unhappiness with the state of the economy, means that a substantial majority for his party is anything but a foregone conclusion. But so long as the oil price can hold up around $50 a barrel, the economic situation will be manageable, and nobody seems to be in much doubt about the inevitability of Putin’s re-election to another six-year term as President in 2018.

All of which makes the question of how to respond to him not at all easy, given that head-on military confrontation is not a course that anyone wants to take for fear of the consequences careering horrifically out of control – and no one *will* take other than in the wholly unlikely event of a direct invasion by Russia of a NATO ally in the Baltic or elsewhere.

The beginning of wisdom in managing international relations of this kind has always been to understand where your opponent is coming from, and to identify whatever common ground there might be on which to lay the foundations for more cooperative action. It doesn’t hurt in these situations – though it is like pulling teeth for most leaders to do this – to acknowledge where appropriate that at least some of your opponent’s grievances may have some factual foundation, And in the present context, it really is crucial for Western leaders to fully understand – even if they are never very likely to publicly acknowledge it – the intense sense of humiliation that undoubtedly accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union, made worse by the triumphalism in which many Western leaders and commentators indulged during the first post-Cold War decade.

I have always believed that one of the tragedies of the immediate post-Cold War years was the failure to fully embrace the concept of “common security” developed by the Palme Commission in the early 1980s, the core idea of which is that you best achieve security with others, not against them. Although they toyed with the idea of reconceptualising NATO as a new cooperative mechanism to prevent and settle conflict in the post bi-polar era, the US and its European allies (and it’s fair to say, to some extent, Russia itself) simply could not ultimately manage, intellectually or emotionally, to embrace the idea of Russia actually becoming a member of the organization. From this perspective the problem with NATO’s expansion was not so much that it extended to Russia's borders: it was that it *stopped* there. To continue to regard Russia, as so many in the West manifestly did, as the beast from the east, whose aggressive resurgence, unless properly contained, would be only a matter of time, was from the outset manifestly a very self-fulfilling enterprise, and so it has proved to be. One of those advocating at the time for NATO to include Russia was ANU’s very own Coral Bell, by no means a wild-eyed radical in her approach to international relations: it might have saved us all a lot of trouble with Mr Putin if her advice had been accepted.

In terms of understanding why Putin’s Russia is acting as it is, it would also be helpful to give more weight than we usually do to Russia’s stated concerns about the United States’s nuclear posture, in particular Washington’s continued determination to develop anti-ballistic missile capability, and more recent toying with the concept of prompt global conventional strike capability, both of which are seen by Moscow – not without foundation – as potentially neutralising its nuclear retaliatory capability, and as such deeply destabilizing. While these arguments have been around since Ronald Reagan’s Star War days, they are now much heard from China as well as reasons for modernizing and extending their nuclear arsenal, and deserve to be taken more seriously by those who genuinely want to move to a safer and saner world, free of the spectre of nuclear annihilation.

In terms of laying the foundations for a more cooperative and less confrontational relationship between Russia and the West, it is also important not to focus relentlessly on the negatives but to acknowledge and build on such positives as there have been. And by no means all the news has been bleak: cooperation on the Iran nuclear deal was exemplary, as it was on the removal of chemical weapons from Syria’s armoury. And for all the difficulty, since Ukraine, of taking forward any new nuclear arms reduction negotiations, implementation of the New START treaty, negotiated in 2010 and intended to run until 2021, and providing for a significant reduction in the number of deployed strategic weapons, has remained on track.

I think it is also worth acknowledging that, in an area close to my heart, the acceptance and implementation of the principle of states responsibility to protect (R2P) peoples from genocide and other mass atrocity crimes, Russia’s record has by no means been all bad. It did not oppose the initial embrace of the doctrine by the UN General Assembly in 2005, nor its application to support the initial military intervention in Libya in 2011, nor references to it in over 40 resolutions since then. When its explicit reliance on R2P to justify its own military invasion of Georgia in 2008 did not pass the international laugh test, it did not – notwithstanding many expectations to the contrary – invoke it to support its interventions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. And while Russia has been the main blocker of any effective R2P-based resolution in Syria, it is not to be assumed that this will presage a similar response to other R2P-relevant situations in the future. Russia’s stated objections to R2P in recent years have not been to its normative content, so much as the way in which the doctrine was seen as being misused in Libya, when a civilian protection mandate was taken by the NATO-led coalition to extend to regime change. And Sergei Lavrov and other senior officials have to my knowledge shown serious interest in exploring formulae, in particular one proposed by Brazil, for re-establishing broader Security Council consensus on the issue.

The truth of the matter is that there are a great many international issues, problems and threats in the contemporary world – among the most obvious of them terrorism, health pandemics, unregulated population flows, climate change and non-proliferation – where national interests in finding solutions do converge, and where cooperation is both necessary and demonstrably possible. The trick, in the relationship between Russia and the West (as Kevin Rudd has argued for the China-US relationship) is to focus – globally, regionally, and bilaterally- on those issues where it is manifestly in both sides’ interest to focus on finding constructive common ground, and for those issues which are going to remain intractable for the foreseeable future, to concentrate on managing them in a way that avoids dangerous confrontation.

I don’t want to sound naively idealistic in any of this. There is much to be appalled about in Russia’s recent behaviour, and when a country defies every principle of a rule-based international order - as Russia has in Ukraine – there is no alternative but to engage in the kind of pushback involved in the sanctions regime which continues to so infuriate Moscow. But it is overwhelmingly in everyone’s interest to manage international relations on a cooperative rather than confrontational basis, and not beyond hope that the lessons of what has gone wrong in the relationship between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War will be learned by both sides, and step by step a fully mutually respectful working relationship restored.

No doubt all the issues I have raised, and many others as well, will be explored over the next two days in this very important and timely conference, for which Dorothy Horsfield, with the support of the ANU Humanities Research Centre and the office of the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brian Schmidt, has assembled a really outstanding cast of participants from both home and abroad. I wish you every success in your deliberations, which I hope and expect will be both stimulating and productive.

*GE21viii16*

1. ‘Wedged West Faces Violent Geopolitical Threats on Emerging Fronts”, *The Australian,* 10 August 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)