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**Russia and the West (1853-2016): A
permanent conflict?***Leonardo Frisani*
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The current diplomatic and military crisis over Ukraine has led many commentators to talk about a new Cold War (Lucas, 2014). This essay, analysing the diplomatic relations and geo-political struggle between Russian and the West from the Crimean War onwards, will try to show that the present conflict, far from being caused by contingent reasons, has its enduring roots in the historical tensions over strategic areas of common Western and Russian interest, not least in Crimea itself.

In order to explain the significance of the Crimean War (1853-56), it is useful to point out that, after the Napoleonic Wars, Britain and Russia were the only world powers (Lambert 1994: 37). Moreover, the failure of the European revolutions in 1848 and Russia's role as anti-revolutionary stronghold increased Russian prestige and fostered the idea of Russian preponderance in continental Europe. The other Powers, therefore, could not allow Russia to freely pursue its strategic aims. For this reasons, the Crimean peninsula and the Black Sea, whose control was regarded crucial both in the Mediterranean and Middle East perspectives, were a likely battlefield for the confrontation between Russia and the Western Powers. The weakness of the Ottoman Empire precipitated the situation.

The diplomatic conflict that eventually led to the war was with Napoleon III's France. This was provoked by the dispute over the Holy Place between Greek and Latin Christians, backed respectively by Russia and France. France's interest in the area was due to Napoleon III's will to redraw Europe's map; as long as Russia was considered the major power in continental Europe and the 'bastion of reaction', France had to go until the root of the problem challenging Russia, whose defeat was "the necessary prelude to the re-assertion of French influence

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in Europe” (Gildea 2003: 171-2).

The dispute had important consequences, changing Tsar Nicholas I's attitude towards Turkey. Indeed, Russia was interested in maintaining the Ottoman Empire as a buffer state securing the Black Sea but “the essential condition of this policy was that Turkey should fear Russia more than any other power” (Taylor 1954: 49). The fact that France won the religious dispute put this approach into question and, therefore, Nicholas decided to turn to more straightforward measures. Therefore, he sent a diplomatic mission to Constantinople in order to reassert Russian predominance (Seton-Watson 1988: 317). This attempt failed both for the Russian intransigence and for the British pressure on the Turks. After having broken diplomatic relations, the Russians occupied the Danubian Principalities (Moldava and Walachia) in May 1853. This made Turkey declare war to Russia in October 1853.

The Russian move in the Principalities introduced “an element of overt military coercion” (Anderson 1968: 131) in an already difficult context. Russia's aggressive attitude towards the Porte was problematic for British interests; the Ottoman Empire was considered “as a buffer against Russian expansion” (Gildea 2003: 171) and it had to remain so to avoid

Russia becoming a Mediterranean power (Seton-Watson 1988: 321). Moreover, the interests at stake were not only strategic-military but also economic and commercial; indeed, Russian trade was growing fast, being characterized by the export of grain from the Black Sea ports and the import of manufactured goods (Aibrecht-Carrié 1965: 86). Another feature that led to the outbreak of the war between Russia and Britain was the anti-Russian British press campaign (Anderson 1968: 128); the French public opinion was also hostile to Russia for ideological reasons (Seton-Watson: 321).

Further economic and strategic issues were also a matter of concern for the Austrian Empire. This is explained by Taylor (1954) who stated that “Austria, mainly dependent on the Danube for her trade with the outer world, could not tolerate the Russians in the Principalities” (p. 56). The Austrian diplomatic offensive reached its primary objective in August 1854: the Russian evacuated the Principalities after the Austrian demand (June 1854). However, Austria never entered the war because it would have been a direct target of a Russian attack (Taylor 1954: 62).

The cause of the Allied intervention against Russia was the Russian naval victory at

Sinope; in fact, at this point, the threat of the Black Sea being a Russian lake was concrete. For this reason, the evacuation of the Principalities was not enough for the Franco-British. Their targets were the Straits and the Black Sea; this is demonstrated even by the fact that the first Franco-British flotillas were sent in the area even before the war broke off (Longley 2000: 300-302). Indeed, the real aim of the British was “the ending of Russian dominance in the Black Sea” (Anderson 1968: 136); the object of the war, in fact, was to place some barrier to Russian expansion (Lambert 1994: 349).

The British also considered the option of a major struggle against Russia in order to jeopardise its control over the Baltic region, the mouth of the Danube, Crimea, Caucasus and Poland (Lambert 1994: 116). Napoleon III also thought about the establishment of an independent Poland (Anderson 1968: 138). These options were never implemented for practical reasons but British geostrategic objectives were made clear by its action in the Baltic, aimed to halt the Russian expansion (Lambert 1994: 116) in the region. At the same time, the British dealt with their main area of concern, the Black Sea, invading Crimea and destroying Sevastopol, already a major naval base, together with the French. From these evidences, it is therefore clear that Britain's

actions were aimed against Russian geostrategic aims.

Austria had a similar agenda. A common supervision over Serbia and the Principalities, instead of the Russian one, was agreed together with the free navigation of the Danube. Austria therefore saved its interests in the Western Balkans and on the Danube but lost the well-established Russian friendship. This proved to be decisive during the Franco-Austrian War in Italy (1859) when Napoleon III reaped the benefits of his Crimean strategy, devised after the Austro-Russian clash of interests. Indeed, for Napoleon III, “the Crimean War had to be fought in order to bring Nicholas I to see that the Holy Alliance no longer existed” (Taylor 1954: 60).

The Treaty of Paris (1856) brought Russia considerable restrictions such as the military neutralization of the Black Sea, along with the Aland Islands in the Baltic Sea. It has to be noticed that “compulsory disarmament had never been imposed upon a Great Power, except by Napoleon I on Prussia in 1807” (Taylor 1954: 85). The treaties were a strategic triumph for Great Britain and left Russia as “a pale shadow of its former self” (Gildea 2003: 175). Indeed, “the war

shattered both the myth and the reality of Russian power”, a result accomplished by “an invasion of Russia by the West” (Taylor 1954: 82), a relevant precedent as we shall see later on. The Crimean War, together with its prelude, therefore shows ideological and geo-political tensions which are very close in their nature to those we are witnessing these days. Russia, in fact, was seen as the bastion of absolutism (similarly, nowadays the West criticizes the authoritarianism of its President, Vladimir Putin) in contraposition with liberal United Kingdom and “revolutionary” France. From the geopolitical point of view, we have seen that the principal matters of contention were Crimea (and therefore the Black Sea) and the Straits, providing access to the Mediterranean Sea. These regions are also important nowadays. Apart from Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, the access to the Mediterranean Sea is regarded as one of the causes for Russian support to Assad’s regime in Syria, where Moscow holds a naval base, in Tartus. Moreover, the regions of the Danubian Principalities (take Transnistria, the breakaway region of Moldava, as an example) and of the Baltic Sea (Barnes Et Marson 2016) are also theatre of present tensions between the West and Russia.

The subsequent years were characterized by

diplomatic cooperation between the emerging Western Power, Prussia, and Russia; Prussia, in fact, supported the Russian repression of the Polish revolt, highly criticized by Austria, France and Britain. Moreover, Russia maintained a benevolent neutrality during the Franco-German War while Bismarck supported Russia’s repudiation of the neutralization of the Black Sea, notably overcoming Austria’s scepticism. This agreement gave rise to a new Holy Alliance (League of the Three Emperors, October 1873) (Gildea, 229-230).

Bismarck’s success in temporarily reconciling Austria and Russia was an important diplomatic achievement. Indeed, Austrian and Russian interests were in conflict in the Balkans, a region seen by Russia as an important means of spreading its influence over the Straits. Austria’s interests, on the other hand, had their roots in its defeat by Prussia (1866). This had forced the Habsburgs to abandon Central European interests to focus on a unstable region characterized by the Slav demand for equality with the two dominant nationalities of the Empire: the Germans and the Magyars (Aibrecht-Carrié 1965: 167-8). The Russo-Austrian entente, therefore, was not destined to last long.

The first period of tension in regards to the Balkans occurred just after some years. Indeed, after the Russo-Turkish War (1877-8), Russia pursued its interests in the region creating Bulgaria. This was a breach of the Russo-Austrian convention (1877) (Aibrecht-Carrié 1965: 172). The advantages gained by Russia alarmed the other Powers that organized the Congress of Berlin in order to restore the balance of power. This aim was achieved by partitioning Bulgaria and allowing Austria to occupy Bosnia, Herzegovina and the strip of land between Serbia and Montenegro, a result “reached only through a Russian defeat” (Aibrecht-Carrié 1965: 175). Russian protests against Bismarck’s mediation were a contributing factor in forming an Austro-German alliance that had, even though in defensive terms, an anti-Russian aim securing the Austrian position. This was to be the cornerstone of the two Empires’ foreign policy until 1914 (Aibrecht-Carrié 1965, 178); this diplomatic relationship, out of Bismarck’s hands, proved to be dangerous.

Russia was isolated once again. On account of its uncomfortable relationship with France and the fear of a British intervention in the Straits (due to their rivalry in Central Asia), Moscow approached the Central Powers once again. This led to the signature of the second *Dreikaiserbund*

(1881) that divided the Balkans into two areas of interests; an Austrian and a Russian one. However, the tensions between the two powers were not eliminated; the Austrians, for example, saw the treaty as a means to block Russia (Taylor 1954: 268). Indeed, during the Bulgarian crisis (1885-6), the threat of a Russian invasion of Bulgaria, which was in its area of interest, was matched by Austria-Hungary (Roberts 1989: 102), discreetly backed by Germany and Britain (Taylor 1954: 321). The influence that Russia used to wield in Balkan affairs had now passed decisively to Austria (Gildea 2003: 332).

William II’s rise to the German throne (1888) caused both Bismarck’s fall and the consequent break with Russia (Taylor 1954: 325-9; Albrecht-Carrié 1965: 205-6). This meant an even closer relationship with Austria and a more direct pursuit of German interests in the Near East (Taylor 1954: 327). As a consequence, France and Russia, the two isolated Powers, came to political (1891) and military agreements (1894); the latter was a “weapon loaded only against Germany” (Taylor 1954: 345).

However, since the focus of Russian foreign policy had shifted towards the Far East, manoeuvres in the Balkans were stalled, as

the Austro-Russian agreement (1897) demonstrates (Taylor 1954: 372).

This was just a temporary situation; Balkan tensions were soon to emerge once again. After all, this geopolitical conflict seemed somehow permanent and had to be addressed. Indeed, tensions between Austria and Russia emerged again when the Habsburgs decided to officially annex Bosnia and Herzegovina (1908). Russia accepted but asked to open the Straits for its warships and called for an international conference over the Balkans. Serbia, ruled by a pro-Russian and pan-Slav king since 1903, also asked for compensations. The two Slav states, however, met with Germany's strong support of Austria, had to surrender (Seton-Watson 1988: 689-91). The Germans arrived at the point of threatening Russia with war. This attitude can be explained by the fact that the Kaiser's interests were spreading towards the Near East, therefore clashing with Russia's, as the Berlin-Baghdad railway project shows (Roberts 1989: 274). Russian fears were decisive in concluding the Anglo-Russian convention (1907) concerning the Middle East. The old and new tensions with Austria and Germany concerning the Balkans and the Near East had therefore decisively shaped the foreign policy of Russia, forcing it to completely change its alliances over the course

of fifteen years.

Between October 1912 and May 1913, a coalition formed by Montenegro, Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia defeated the Ottoman Empire. However, Serbia could not achieve its main aim, an Adriatic port, because of Austrian opposition. Serbia, and Russia with her, had to surrender another time to Austrian demands (Seton-Watson 1988:693). However, a 'big Serbia' emerged from a second Balkan War (June-August 1913). Now Austria had to deal with 'a Piedmont of the South Slavs' (Roberts, 1989: 272) and Russia, after the two humiliations of 1909 and 1913, was eager to defend it.

Russian determination was strengthened by the appointment of a German officer as a chief of Constantinople's military basis. Russia, regarding it as a vital threat, vehemently protested and arrived to an agreement with Germany. However, in this way, "a new direct clash of interest" (Roberts 1989: 273) emerged. In William II's words, "Russo-Prussian relations are dead once for all! We have become enemies!" (Aibrecht-Carrié, 1965: 293). Some even foresaw a clash of cultures and ethnicities. Friedrich von Bernhardt, in Germany and the next war, claimed that Germany had to beat the Slavs to

preserve German and European civilisation (Gildea 2003: 415) while the Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg in 1913 foresaw “a European conflagration which will line up Slavs against Teutons” (Gildea 2003: 412). The ethno-cultural aspect, destined to have a great effect also over WWII, was therefore added to the geo-strategic reasons for the tension between the Germany and Russia.

As we have seen before, the Near East is a region where Western and Russian still tragically clash. We can also look at the Balkans in this perspective. This region, as we shall see later, has been a theatre of tensions between Moscow and the West during and after the Cold War. Even more significantly, strains are present also nowadays (Cerzek 2016). After the murder of Francis Ferdinand, Austria declared war on Serbia. Russia could not avoid intervening and therefore Germany also entered the war against Russia. The German war aim was the expansion in the East (Roberts 1989: 305) but also “a racial victory against the Slav” (Roberts, 1989: 278). Even the American general House and the Polish Pilduski saw the conflict essentially between Russia and Germany.

The destiny of Russian war effort, but also of the Russian Empire itself (Taylor 1954: 535), was decided by the Turkish alliance with the Central

Powers. The Straits were blocked and the Russians therefore found huge difficulties in importing supplies for their army. This also provoked hardships for the civil population, creating the conditions for the two revolutions in 1917. The Bolshevik Revolution put the basis for the end of WWI on the Eastern front. In March 1918, the Germans and the Bolsheviks signed the treaty of peace at Brest-Litovsk. Even though temporarily, Germany achieved its aim creating an independent Poland and vassal states in Ukraine and in the Baltic region. The pivotal role of Turkey’s alliance with the Austro-Germans in these happenings further demonstrates the strategic relevance of the Near East and the Black Sea for Moscow.

The treaty did not bring peace in Russia. In fact, the Russian Civil War broke out in 1918. The struggle of the tsarist and nationalist armies against the Bolshevik Red army was aided by the Western powers; this gave an ideological perspective to the conflict between Russia and the West. Between March and August 1918 Franco-British troops occupied the ports of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk, previously controlled by the Reds. Lenin saw a link between these operations, motivated by anti-German strategic aims, and the others led

in Transcaucasia by the French and in Vladivostok by British, American and Japanese forces. Moreover, the British gave fundamental logistic support to the anti-Bolshevik Kolchak's offensive (Mawdskey 1987: 1 43) while the White recovery of March 1919 was "due almost entirely by British assistance" (Mawdskey 1987: 267). It is therefore understandable why Taylor regarded these operations as a further invasion of Russia by the West (Taylor 1954: 82).

After 1921, after having lost part of its immense territory in WWI but having survived the Civil War, Soviet Russia focused on domestic politics. The reasons for this were not only ideological but also geographical. The collapse of the Central Empires resulted, in fact, in the creation of a number of states acting as buffers between the Soviet Union and Western Europe. In the context of this cordon sanitaire, Poland was regarded as crucial (Taylor 1961:37).

In Eastern Europe, French influence was predominant; this was a matter of concern among Soviet leaders who were aware of French hostility. This led to a re-approach with Germany (Treaty of Rapallo, April 1922). However, the spirit of European reconciliation enhanced by the Treaty of Locarno (October-December, 1925) and the above-mentioned focus on domestic policy, led to nothing more than a

hostile indifference on the part of the West towards Russia. The Soviets, having abandoned their plans for international revolution, were asking nothing more than this.

In this context, Hitler's rise turned the table once more. His strident anti-Communism was a matter of concern in Moscow. This feeling was strengthened by the Four Power Pact (June-July 1933) between liberal France (whose Parliament, however, did not ratify the treaty) and Britain, fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Fearing the prospect of an anti-Soviet alliance, Stalin decided to shift from an anti-French to an anti-German attitude, turning from the denunciation of Versailles as a 'slave treaty' to nominal defence of international order (Taylor 1961: 78). This ultimately led to a Franco-Soviet pact of mutual assistance with anti-German aims (Aibrecht-Carrié 1965: 480): it was a breach of the Locarno Treaty and was consequently used as a pretext by Hitler in order to justify the re-militarisation of Rhineland (Aibrecht-Carrié 1965: 492).

Italo-German aid to the fascist uprising in Spain (July 1936) against the Socio-Communist elected government brought important consequences. A fascist victory in

Spain would have weakened Western resistance to Hitler who, consequently, could have the opportunity to focus on the East (Kennan 1960: 86-7). The Soviets therefore intervened with the minimum objective of keeping Italo-German resources occupied in Spain. Franco-British neutrality had even more important consequences. If not the proof of a sympathetic attitude towards fascism, it was at least the empirical demonstration of the failure of the collective security policy shown by the missed intervention in regards to Rhineland and, now, Spain. What after Spain? Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland, Stalin thought. Russia had therefore to be the last, logical step (Keenan 1960: 91-3).

After the Anschluss (April 1938), the German annexation of Sudetenland was agreed at the Conference of Monaco with Britain, France and Italy. The agreement implied that this should have been the last German enlargement but the fact that Soviet Union was not invited aroused Stalin's suspicion of an anti-Soviet agreement (Albrecht-Carrié 1965: 528). He therefore tried to secure agreements with the Nazi. The German occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia led to Franco-British promises of aid to Poland in case of a German aggression. This made Hitler eager to reach an agreement with Stalin.

On 23rd August 1939, the two sides reached a non-aggression agreement, also envisaging a division of Eastern Europe into two spheres of influence. On 1st September 1939 Germany attacked Poland, which was then invaded by the Soviets later that month. On the 3rd September France and Britain declared war on Germany while in April 1940 Germany attacked and defeated France in six weeks. The Western land front was over and Hitler was free to focus on the East. Stalin acknowledged the peril and ordered his troops to occupy not only the Baltic countries and Romanian Bessarabia but also Northern Bukovina. This last region was not included in the Soviet sphere of influence; the Soviet occupation, therefore, provoked serious tensions with Germany and at that time, according to Albrecht-Carrié, the operation Barbarossa was taken into consideration (p. 552). When, in November 1940, Germans and Russians failed to reach an agreement because of different views regarding the Baltic, the Middle East and especially the Balkans, Hitler took his final decision. The Operation Barbarossa begun on 22nd June 1941.

The struggle between Germany and Soviet Union was gigantic. The Russians, after having suffered initial, grave defeats, won the

battle for their own survival. They received financial aid from the Americans, who entered the war in 1941. However, the cause for the Soviet success has to be traced primarily in the huge effort of the Soviets, who suffered millions of deaths but entered Berlin in April 1945.

The post-war division of Europe into two spheres of influence was already decided (Calvocoressi 2001: 4-5) but there were renewed fears about Russian domination all over Europe, due to the weakness of the Western European Powers. Moreover, Italy and France had strong communist parties that participated the government until 1947. In the meanwhile, USSR strengthened its political control over Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary through coups and manipulated elections. This caused American irritation, especially because Stalin had previously agreed to hold democratic election in Eastern Europe.

However, this was a *fait accompli*. Now the Anglo-Americans had to resist the Soviet bid for influence and territorial gains in the Near and Middle East. Stalin had, in fact, already accepted British control over Greece (Friedman 2000: 45). In the Near East the USSR inherited tsarist policy, especially on the Straits (Aibrecht-Carrié 1965: 607). Indeed, this area was the object of a Russian proposal of joint control. The

Americans, now definitely established as the major Western Power, sent their fleet in the area and Turkey resisted Soviet pressures (Friedman 2000: 68). The USA also provided military aid to Iran, another object of Russian expansionism as a way to control the Persian Gulf. The Americans therefore implemented the Truman Doctrine, based on containment (or encirclement, from the Soviet point of view).

The Marshall Plan for European economic recovery can be seen as a part of this policy. Indeed, it offered enormous funds to strengthen European economies in order to prevent the rise of the communists to power in Western Europe. Economic assistance was also offered to USSR and its satellites but Stalin refused on the base of the fear of "dollar imperialism". The Soviets answer was therefore the organization of Cominform, constituted by USSR and its satellites.

The hostility between USA and USSR was evident in Germany, divided in four zones of occupation by the Allies. The same scheme was used for Berlin that, however, was in the midst of the Soviet zone. The parts could not reach agreements not only on the economic policy of the occupation and on the future structure and political attachments of the

German state (Calvocoressi 2000: 15-6) but also on the Soviet proposal for the internationalization of the Ruhr. After the failure of the conference of London (February 1948), the Russians tried to turn over the situation blocking Berlin. This action not only caused huge tensions but also the definitive creation of the Cold War Western alliance, NATO, (Calvocoressi 2000: 19) and the creation of the two Germanies. The mounting tension derived by conflicts elsewhere led to the rearmament of West Germany and its entrance in NATO (1955). This was highly displeasing to the Russians (Aibrecht-Carrié 1965: 634-5).

NATO, being a Western military alliance, it was “an affirmation of the dissolution of the wartime alliance” (Calvocoressi 2000: 19). It was intended as an instrument to contain the USSR, in accordance with the Truman Doctrine. Indeed, Turkey and Greece entered NATO in 1952 not only to halt Russian expansion in the Mediterranean and the Near East but also to pose a threat from the South. The Soviet response took the form of the Warsaw Pact, signed by the USSR and its satellites five days after Western Germany had entered NATO. The economic and politico-military division between the blocks therefore demonstrated how the confrontation was not between two states but

rather between two systems and civilisations (Calvocoressi 2001: 13; Friedman 2001: 58); the Berlin Wall (1961) was the concrete representation of this situation.

The rivalry assumed global dimensions. Ancillary organisations to NATO were created in Oceania (ANZUS, 1951), South East Asia (SEATO, 1954) and the Middle East (METO, 1955). Soviet and American interests were also conflicting in Africa (Calvocoressi 2000: 739-48). However, it was the Cuban crisis that almost led to open war between the two major powers. When the Americans discovered Russian missiles in Cuba, tensions rose high. At the end, Soviet weaponry was removed from Cuba, as well as the American one, which was posing an enormous threat to Russia, from Turkey. Another cause of tension was the anti-Communist American intervention in Vietnam (1965-72), even if the Russians did not intervene. Similarly, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-89) did not see American opposition. However, the Americans financed Sunni fundamentalists because the Soviet invasion was threatening Iran and the Gulf (Calvocoressi 2000: 573-4). These conflicts made even more bitter the ideological and strategic confrontation between the two super-powers. In the end, the

Soviets had to withdraw from Afghanistan; this had a strong symbolic meaning.

Indeed, the same year saw the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Soviet Empire was collapsing under its social and political contradictions. Between 1989 and 1991 Communist regimes fell, to be replaced by liberal governments; this process was politically and economically aided by some European governments and the USA (Calvocoressi, p. 321-5). The USSR collapsed with its empire; fifteen new states emerged.

Some of newly independent states turned out to be bitterly anti-Russian; Latvia and Estonia, for example, excluded the majority of Russians from citizenship (Calvocoressi, p. 78). They entered NATO in 2004 along with Lithuania. The expansion of NATO eastwards, despite Russian opposition, is one of the most striking aspects of the post-Soviet era. Between 1999 and 2004, not only the Baltic states but also Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia (all former members of the Warsaw Pact) entered NATO. This was the effect of the US victory over USSR; an event that even led Francis Fukuyama to announce “the end of history” but that, in reality did not halt the geopolitical confrontation between West and Russia. It just meant a very serious setback for Russia whose one-time allies (or satellites) fell in

the Western orbit.

The new Russian Federation, under Boris Yeltsin’s leadership, was under strain. The economy was in serious difficulty and even the territorial integrity of the Federation was at risk. The Muslim region of Daghestan and Chechnya declared independence. The latter also fought two wars against the Russians (1994-6; 1999-2000); in this context, an Islamist fringe of the separatists also enjoyed economic aids from Saudi Arabia and Osama bin Laden (Calvocoressi 2000: 86).

The Russians also had to suffer setbacks in the international arena. The Bosnian and Kosovo Wars against Milosevic’s Serbia saw NATO-led operations (1995; 1999). In the first case, Russia and NATO backed different belligerents; the Russians opposed anti-Russian NATO intervention but could not stop it. This was seen as a humiliation to Russia (Calvocoressi 2000: 347-8). Moreover, in the context of the Kosovo War Russia could not enjoy an equal status during peace negotiations and the enforcement of peace terms. Indeed, the Cold War was over, Russia had lost and was therefore treated as a failed superpower (Calvocoressi 2000: 353) and could not avoid succumbing to Western influence in regions like the Balkans and

Eastern Europe, traditionally objects of Russian power that was also in retreat in the Near East. Indeed, in this region the USA favoured agreements envisaging oil and gas pipelines serving Europe but also bypassing Russia.

The Russian retreat, however, was bound not to last long. Indeed, after the election of Vladimir Putin and the subsequent attempts to come to terms with EU and NATO, Russia began to firmly assert its regional role, strengthening its influence on countries of the “Near Abroad” and denouncing NATO enlargements as threats to its national security. An example of this new assertive policy can be traced in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (2001) between Russia, China, and the other Central Asian states. This treaty can be seen as a counterbalance to NATO (Saivetz 2012) in the new post-Cold War Eurasian “Great Game” between Russia and the West for the influence over Eastern Europe, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and Central Asia (Berryman 2010: 232). Another actor in this confrontation is the Collective Security Treaty Organisation which, at the present day, includes Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. However, Russia has not used only military policy to affirm its regional dominant role. The Eurasian Customs Union and the subsequent Eurasian Economic

Union between Russia, Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan, which is the result of a process begun in 2000, can be regarded as an attempt to counterbalance EU’s economic penetration in post-Soviet space (Haukkala 2015). To achieve this purpose, Russia has also used its powerful role as energy provider to persuade (or to force) ex-Soviet countries not to join the Western side (Oidberg 2010: 50- 5).

The Russian assertiveness is well explained in President Medvedev’s 2008 Foreign Policy Concept. In this document it is claimed that post-Soviet space is a “zone of privileged influence” (Saivetz 2012) and that NATO enlargement is a “threat to Russian security” (Oidberg 2010: 32). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand the reasons underpinning Russia’s attack on NATO-backed Georgia (August 2008) when the latter tried to impose its rule over the Russian-backed secessionist region of South Ossetia. This was the first Russian major intervention abroad after the Cold War and was a challenge to the New World Order and to US foreign policy (Mouritzen et Wivel 2012: 2). Indeed, its main result was not the de facto independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia but the halting of NATO’s enlargement in the ex-Soviet area (Berryman 2010: 236). It was,

in fact, a proxy war between Russia and the USA (Berryman 2010: 234). This Russian demonstration of force led the US to agree with Poland the construction of an anti-ballistic system and to lead military exercises in the Baltic region, just a few hundred kilometres from Russian borders; Russia saw it as a growing threat (Oidberg 2010: 44).

Another episode in this renewed confrontation is taking place once more in Ukraine. When Russian-backed President Yanukovich declared that he would not sign an association agreement with the EU (November 2013) huge Western-backed protests erupted. These, after serious violences perpetrated both by the police and the demonstrators, led to his downfall and replacement by a pro-Western and bitterly anti-Russian government. The media and diplomatic tensions between Russia and the West became even more bitter after the Russian annexation of Crimea, theatre of major battles during the Crimean War and WWII, which took place after a popular referendum. This region, where the majority of the population is Russian, is of fundamental strategic importance because it hosts the Black Sea Russian fleet. Western sanctions and Russian countersanctions followed this episode. Moreover, the Russian-backed popular uprisings in Eastern Ukraine met with

strong military reaction by the Western-backed Kiev government. Despite the various attempts to reach an agreement (September 2014; February 2015), the conflict has provoked thousands of casualties and is still on going. It can be seen not only as the last episode in the Western attempt to enlarge its influence but also as the proof of a new Russian imperialist policy. However, it seems to be another proxy conflict between Russia and the West and the materialization of a more bipolar setting in the post-Soviet area (Haukkala 2015).

The latest conflict showing the permanence of certain geopolitical tensions between the West and Russia is the Syrian one where Moscow is supporting the government of Bashar al-Asad while the West is supporting the rebels fighting against the army of the Syrian President. In order to comprehend the Russian stance over Syria, an old-time ally of the Soviet Union and then of the Russian Federation, we may consider the geographical position of Syria itself: Damascus is extremely relevant from the geostrategic point of view. The support of Bashar al-Assad's regime is therefore coherent with Russia's "traditional and present interests in the Middle East" (Kreutz 2010: 22). Indeed, it is arguable

to say that “Syria is Russia’s most important foothold in the region bordering the Mediterranean, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq” (Borshchevskaya 2015). A friendly Syria would ensure the security of Russian Southern flank. Moreover, Russia, as previously mentioned, needs a direct access to the Mediterranean opening the way to the Atlantic Ocean and, through the Suez Canal, to the Indian Ocean (Kreutz *ibid.*, p. 5). Russian understanding of this is showed by the fact that between 2008 and 2010 the naval cooperation between the two countries increased, together with the development of the Tartus naval facility (whose military importance, however, remains little); the importance given to the strategic meaning of Tartus has been also clearly signalled by the visit of the flagship of the Russian Northern Fleet (April 2010) (Kreutz *ibid.*: 21). This is even clearer if we consider Putin’s plans to expand the Black Sea fleet (Kucera 2014) and the relevance of the Black Sea as a base to maintain strategic influence and project power (Biank *ibid.*). The recent military build-up and intervention, together with the diplomatic confrontation with the United States, can be therefore seen as a means to protect and enhance Russian interests in the Black Sea/Eastern Mediterranean area but also in the

broader Middle East, as the presence of Russian weapon trainers and military advisors not only in Tartus but also in Latakia and Baniyas (Shaikh and Rosenbaum 2015) may signify. Indeed, the expansion of Moscow’s bases may result in a “permanent Russian footprint in the region giving ability to project power in the Arab world” (Kainikara *ibid.*). History, in the end, is not finished.

In conclusion, it is noticeable how geographical areas like Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Straits and the Near East and, above all, Crimea have often been at the centre of the clash of interests between Russia and countries like Britain, France, Austria, Germany and the USA that somehow have represented “the West” in the past two centuries. Ethnic and ideological tensions, especially during WWII and the Cold War, have been added to the previous, long-lasting geo-political confrontation involving Russia and its regional and global opponents. Therefore, it seems that the current tension between Russia and the West is not the expression of a new Cold War but a chapter of a permanent conflict that has strongly characterized the European and world scenario, at least during the period of time considered in this essay. In this context, it is

useful to point out that this essay has been written strictly using an historical approach which, however, is not the only one possible; the theory of the international relations could provide other interesting perspectives looking at Russian stance on the world stage through the lenses of “the theory of Russia’s authoritarian expansionism” (Tsyngankov 2012) or using a realist or a constructivist approach. Further research is needed on this.

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