

Who Can Guarantee Russian Security?

And What Makes Putin Insecure?



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President Macron's observation early this month that once the war is over Russia will need to be offered security guarantees was greeted with incredulity. Russia is the country attempting to conquer another, not the other way round. It is the aggressor not the aggrieved. Because of past Macron statements, such as last June's urging that Russia not be 'humiliated', he has fuelled suspicions among the more hawkish NATO states, as well as Kyiv, that he is inclined to be far too conciliatory to Moscow. To be fair to Macron in the same speech he made it clear that he fully understands that Kyiv has to take the lead in any peace negotiations. On 13 December he again stated that 'It is up to Ukraine, a victim of this aggression, to decide on the conditions for a just and lasting peace.'

There is an issue to be addressed about how relations with Russia are to be managed in the future. Macron is not alone in worrying that Russia is too large and powerful a

country to be ignored. German Chancellor Scholz has also spoken of the need to restore cooperative relations, to go back to the prewar 'peace order' even though this may not be possible with Putin in charge. In the unlikely event that Putin renounces armed aggression and accepts that on the other side of its borders 'there are open-minded societies, open societies, democracies', then, suggests Scholz, 'all questions of common security' could be resolved. There are some big 'ifs' here.

Security Guarantees and Alliances

In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War great effort went into developing what was commonly described as a 'security architecture'. It began in late 1990 with a big conference in Paris, and involved a number of institutional innovations. The loftiest principles of international order were reaffirmed along with the warmest aspirations for cordial and harmonious relations. Thereafter there was no shortage of opportunities to talk and resolve disputes.

From the Russian perspective the big issue was what to do about NATO, especially as it attracted its erstwhile allies from the Warsaw Pact and even some former Soviet republics. From the NATO perspective the big issue was Russia, and whether it could be reconciled to its reduced international standing. To manage the inevitable tensions in 1997 NATO and Russia signed what was described as the 'Founding Act' to govern their future relationships. It oozes with optimism and good will, so makes for painful reading now.

'NATO and Russia do not consider each other as adversaries. They share the goal of overcoming the vestiges of earlier confrontation and competition and of strengthening mutual trust and cooperation. The present Act reaffirms the determination of NATO and Russia to give concrete substance to their shared commitment to build a stable, peaceful and undivided Europe, whole and free, to the benefit of all its peoples.'

To this end they promised to refrain 'from the threat or use of force against each other as well as against any other state, its sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence.' The Founding Act has not yet been repudiated, although some have argued that it should be.

Similar language can be employed in the future but recent experience will provide few grounds for taking it seriously. There is no point in solemn undertakings not to aggress. They have already been made – for example in the Charter of the United Nations, and their regular reaffirmation has not prevented their neglect.

It is precisely because of the difficulty of relying on such such undertakings that the issues of security guarantees arises. Security guarantees are best understood as insurance policies for small powers. They are promises by a large power, or group of powers, to come to the aid of small powers if attacked. They are at the heart of any alliance – an attack on one will be treated as an attack on all. Like all insurance policies and guarantees, however, there are let-out clauses. If the small power has been unduly provocative, or attacked first, then the guarantee might be invalidated. There might be other extenuating circumstances, for example another ongoing military conflict, that makes it hard to honour the commitment. A security guarantee is therefore a second best policy, better than nothing but not as good as building up national defences to cope with all eventualities.

It is second best because there is always the suspicion that the guarantor will renege. After all, promising to go to war even if your country has not been attacked directly is a big step. It requires confidence and trust, based on shared values and interests and long relationships. It requires more than treaty signature. Ukraine is conscious of these issues, not only because it is suffering because it is not part of NATO, but because it was promised security in 1994 when it agreed to hand back to Russia the nuclear missiles that had been based on its territory during the Soviet years. It is worth noting the language of the Budapest memorandum. In it the US, UK and Russia:

‘reaffirm their obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self-defence or otherwise in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations;’

And

‘reaffirm their commitment to seek immediate United Nations Security Council action to provide assistance to Ukraine, as a non-nuclear-weapon State party to the

Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, if Ukraine should become a victim of an act of aggression or an object of a threat of aggression in which nuclear weapons are used.’

The first of these is the stronger, leaving little wiggle room, and a commitment that has been crudely violated by Russia (justified by Moscow on the grounds of the illegitimacy of the government in Kyiv). The second is more of a ‘security guarantee’ and as such quite weak. It required taking the issue of aggression to the UN, which of course the US and UK did, only to be faced with a Russian veto. The ultimate failure of this agreement lies in reports that cruise missiles handed over to Russia have been used (minus their nuclear warheads) in the attacks on Ukraine’s critical infrastructure.

This is the backdrop to regular demands from Kyiv that it be offered serious security guarantees in the future to give it some confidence that its current ordeal will not be repeated. These will have to come either directly from the US and other NATO members, or through full membership of the alliance. NATO provides the gold standard for security guarantees. There is no alliance to compare. It has 30 member states, and two more (Finland and Sweden) going through the process of joining. The advantage can be seen by comparing Russia’s readiness to aggress against neighbouring Georgia and Ukraine with its caution in comparable disputes with the Baltic states. NATO has seventy years of experience and working practices, an integrated military command with a permanent headquarters, the backing of the world’s strongest power, and an active secretariat and regular summits.

It offers, in its Article V, this security guarantee:

‘if a NATO Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked.’

But note that while there is a presumption that action will be taken there is no automaticity. Members states have the option of deeming it necessary to do nothing at all. Other alliances have their own get-out clauses or requirements to do little more than deliberate about next steps. There are no cast iron security guarantees.

While NATO can repeat past promises – still honoured – not to invade Russia it is not going to offer Russia a security guarantee as traditionally understood. At any rate, in principle Russia already has security guarantees through its own alliance - the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). This attempts to replicate for the supposedly more Russophile parts of the former Soviet Union what NATO does for Europe. Its members are Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The CSTO's Article 4 is even equivalent to NATO's Article V, by which an aggression against one signatory would be perceived as an aggression against all.

The only collective action ever taken, which was brief, came at start of this year to help Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev put down anti-government riots. After Armenia's war with Azerbaijan in 2022, Russia contributed in 2020 a peace-keeping mission, which was removed earlier this year when Azerbaijan launched a new offensive (using weapons purchased from other CSTO members), as Russian forces were needed in Ukraine. Azerbaijan, along with Georgia and Uzbekistan, was once a member of the CSTO but has left.

Although member states are expected to refrain from attacking each other, they do. There were armed clashes last September because of a border dispute between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This was why the ironically-named *Indestructible Brotherhood-2022* exercises, which were scheduled to begin in Kyrgyzstan on 10 October, involving Serbia, Syria, and Uzbekistan in addition to the six members, were cancelled. After an awkward CSTO summit from 10 to 14 October in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, there was another even more awkward meeting in Yerevan, Armenia's capital, early in November. When Putin arrived he was greeted with protestors demanding that Armenia leave the CSTO because of Russia's failure to come to the country's aid. Armenia refused to sign the final communique for this reason.

None of the CSTO's members get evident benefits from the organisation. Other than Belarus, which has become a client state of Russia, Putin gained no support for his war. Despite the help provided at the start of the year, Tokayev told Putin directly this June that he would not recognise the Russian-sponsored Donetsk and Luhansk 'Peoples Republics' in Ukraine, as a result of which Putin halted oil exports to Kazakhstan and suspended transit via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium - until Moscow saw that Tokayev was seeking help from the US. Meanwhile the Kazakh leader has been

welcoming international companies squeezed out of Russia because of sanctions, and most recently Russian men escaping mobilisation. The Central Asians are now looking more to China for support, while the United States and France is stepping up their activity in the region. Early in November Macron met with Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and then late in the month he hosted Tokayev, fresh from his 81.3% victory in a snap election.

One of the highlights of the CSTO October summit was provided by Emomali Rahmon, dictator of Tajikistan. As his fellow Central Asian leaders looked on, Rahmon berated Putin for the arrogant way that Russia treated its small neighbours, exploiting their natural resources without giving much in return:

‘We host your military bases, we do everything you ask for, we really try to be what you pretend to be to us “strategic partners.” But we are never being treated like strategic partners! No offence, but we want to be respected!

So not only are there security guarantees and security guarantees, there are also alliances and alliances. If Russia does not get much additional security out of its own alliance, can NATO be reasonably be expected to provide more?

What is Security?

This leads on to a further, more philosophical, question. What exactly is the ‘security’ being guaranteed? ‘Security’ is one of those concepts that is used casually, assuming an agreed meaning, yet once unpacked some fundamental issues soon appear. The classical ‘realist’ view of security, the one that informs most discussions of alliances and security guarantees, starts with a view of the international system that is inherently anarchic. Because the system has no supreme authority capable of enforcing its laws individual states must take responsibility for their own security. As they do so they invariably threaten others, not because they intend to do so but because the capabilities necessary to protect their security make others feel vulnerable.

This is captured by the idea of the ‘security dilemma’, which points to states acting defensively yet still appearing offensive to others, and so on to misapprehensions about each other’s strategies leading to a vicious cycle, with arms racing and mutual

insecurity. In this ways, wars might be caused not only by genuine conflicts of interest over territory or resources but because an underlying conflict has been aggravated by each party preparing for the worst.

This framework for thinking about security is very influential. The risk of a vicious cycle encourages calls for high-level summits, improved diplomatic communications, and arms control agreements. It was reflected in many of the moves made to ease NATO-Russia relations during the 1990s, including the 1997 Founding Act. Unfortunately, as tensions rose these mechanisms for managing conflict gradually fell away or were disregarded.

NATO enlargement has been presented as a classic example of the security dilemma at work, and features in many explanations for the origins of the war. On this view it was NATO's gradual accumulation of members after 1991 that caused alarm in Moscow. The prospect of Ukrainian membership was the last straw. The beneficiaries of enlargement obviously do not think this was some geopolitical error. Given Russia's behaviour it is not hard to understand why states wanted to join NATO. At any rate, what has bothered Russia most has not been so much NATO acquiring new members (it professed itself indifferent to Finland and Sweden joining) but specifically Ukrainian membership, even though since 2008 has largely been no more than a theoretical possibility.

Of course whether or not we believe that NATO poses an objective threat, Russia might nonetheless feel threatened. Security combines a physical condition with a state of mind. Dictionary definitions of security refer on the one hand to being 'the activities involved in protecting a country, building or person against attack, danger, etc.' and on the other to 'the state of feeling happy and safe from danger or worry'. Threats to a state are interpreted by those in charge and they decide how happy and safe a country should feel. The more authoritarian the system the more the issue becomes one of what makes the supreme leader insecure, which might be anything that threatens their personal position. If supreme leaders are paranoid, as they often are, this adds to what might prompt a feeling of insecurity. The desire of dictators to be left alone to do their dictating as they wish is why they cling to the principle of 'non-interference in internal affairs' as a vital principle in international affairs.

Putin's Paranoia

What would it take to make Putin feel secure? I was recently reminded by a friend of one of the best essays about Putinism published last March in Foreign Policy by the liberal theorist Paul Berman. Berman sees in Putin the latest attempt to create a resilient Russian state, following precedents set by the Tsars and the Soviets. He describes a view which amounts 'to a species of climate paranoia':

'This is a fear that warm principles of liberal philosophy and republican practices from the West, drifting eastward, will collide with the icy clouds of the Russian winter, and violent storms will break out, and nothing will survive. It is, in short, a belief that dangers to the Russian state are external and ideological, instead of internal and structural.'

According to Berman, Putin's problem, compared with his predecessors, is a lack of language to describe the threat. The Tsars had their 'mystical and Orthodox royalism' while the Soviets had the principles of communism, 'majestic and universal' pointing the way to human progress for the entire world. By contrast Putinism lacks a philosophical doctrine, making 'do with whatever ideas are floating about, grabbing one idea and another and tying them with a knot.' Thus from communism he draws on anti-Nazism, but the neo-Nazi manifestations in Ukraine have been too miniscule for his purposes. He mainly goes back to more ancient traditions and the orthodox church. He wants this to be a holy war, one between the forces of light and darkness. As Bruno Tertrais has observed this leads back to 19th Century Nihilism, in which the violence is redemptive and purifying.

Here is Putin in full flow on 30 September speaking of the 'dictatorship of the Western elites' and how the 'complete renunciation of what it means to be human, the overthrow of faith and traditional values, and the suppression of freedom are coming to resemble a "religion in reverse" – pure Satanism.' Invocations of Satanism are now routine. Former President Medvedev, who admittedly has gone increasingly batty, spoke in November of a sacred fight against Satanism. The aim of the war was to 'stop the supreme ruler of Hell, whatever name he uses - Satan, Lucifer or Iblis,' [Iblis is the Islamic counterpart of Satan] adding that the fight was against 'crazy Nazi drug addicts' in Ukraine backed by Westerners who had 'saliva running down their chins from degeneracy.'

Russian media has stories of ‘misanthropic cults, who make sacrifices and commit ritual murders’ and Ukrainian soldiers in occult goat masks. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, picking up a common theme, links Satanism with gay marriage: ‘Satanic democracy is when children are taken from traditional families and transferred to same-sex families... I see degradation and Satanism in this.’ In his latest substack, Nick Cohen, considers a new homophobic law, enacted by Putin on 5 December, that makes it an offence for Russians to promote or ‘praise’ LGBTQ+ relationships, or suggest that they are ‘normal.’

Trying to find a way to turn guarantees to be protected against Satanism into treaty language would obviously be something of a stretch. It is also difficult to know how serious the Putinists take this (although it’s the sort of thing that could get a sympathetic hearing on Fox News). The point, however, is not the content of the ideological message as much as the fact that political and social trends in other countries can be presented as a security threat. Even if Russia’s ideological compass was being set at something less mediaeval the issue would still be there. Ukraine threatened Russia because of the potential contagion effect of the ‘Orange’ revolution of 2004 and the EuroMaidan movement of 2014. To understand the sources of conflict these factors cannot be ignored.

All this illuminates the limitations of ‘realism’, at least in its most reductive form as a theory of international relations, as an aid to understanding the origins of this conflict and what to do about it. Because realism concentrates on power relations between states, the only aspect of Putin’s tergiversations that are considered relevant by realists are those that complain about NATO’s enlargement. All the rest are disregarded. But not only is the threat of a full-scale invasion across the border already dealt with by existing commitments and past assurances, the security threats that might matter most to Russia go well beyond this

It does no harm to start thinking about a post-war security order but not if this thinking is wishful and assumes a possible return to the status quo ante bellum. Perhaps we can imagine a forward-looking grand peace conference like the 1815 Congress of Vienna, or 1919 Versailles Conference, or the post- Cold-War Paris summit of 1990 coming at some point after a cease-fire. We might also imagine a post-Putin leadership willing and able to mend fences with the West. But a lot of imagination is required here.

Consider Dmitri Trenin, once tasked with explaining Russian policy to the West, who now finds solace in the possibility that the war can overcome 'primitive materialism and lack of faith.' Sam Greene, in his [substack](#), quotes Trenin's latest offering:

'There is no way back. To be fair, there is in theory a road to capitulation, but even that would not return Russia to the 20th of February, or even to 2013. That would be a route to national catastrophe, to the likelihood of chaos and the unconditional loss of sovereignty. If we want not only to avoid that kind of scenario, but to arrive at a qualitatively better level of interaction with the outside world, then our common direction of motion can only be forward. The immutable condition of success is the resolution of the Ukraine problem.'

Either way the future is grim - the chaos following defeat or the wanton destruction envisaged in the forward March of Putin's Russia. But Trenin now assumes 'a fundamental break between the West and Russia, eviscerating any genuine Western constituency for cooperation with Russia and mobilizing Western states and societies to ensure that Russia's ability to threaten its neighbors is removed.'

Sam is unsure how much other members of the Russian elite are prepared to embrace this grim prospect, but even if it is rejected it is a reminder of what a bitter legacy this war will leave. The West will expect Russia to come to terms with what it has done to Ukraine, which will be painful, if there is to be any return to 'normal' relations, to accept that this war was its choice and that it must respond positively to demands for reparations and war crimes trials. If they do not, and these issues stay unresolved, sanctions will continue and resentments will linger.

Putin's insecurity might start with anxiety about his personal future, but he has extended this into a vision for Russia that involves a permanent struggle with the West and its liberalism. There is little NATO can do about this vision except to ensure Russia's defeat in Ukraine. Trenin's bleak logic works both ways. There is no turning back for either side. Putin's future and that of his inner circle is a matter for the Russian elite. The fragmentation of the Russian Federation is not, despite allegations, desired by Western governments in that this would be a source of yet more upset and instability. By and large they would prefer that Russia held together - but again this is not up to them. Moscow's decision to use outlying regions as a source of military recruits to pursue a

catastrophic war means that it will have to cope with the consequences. Whether or not an alternative liberal and democratic vision for Russia can develop in the future, upon which any more stable European security order depends, will also be up to Russians. The West can help if there is something to work with for the consequences of continued chaos and anger will be dire, but the first requirement will be a different sort of leader in the Kremlin, with a strong enough political base to confront the harsh reality of Russia's situation. In the end the biggest threats to Russian security do not lie outside its borders but inside its capital.

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Michael Wild 2 hr ago

This is an eminently sensible and grim read. There clearly can be no lasting peace and security while Putin is in power and his successor would need to do a lot before s/he could gain the trust of Russia's near abroad. On present indications there is no reason at all to expect such a leader won't share the same world view or in any case would lack the desire to face the ugly reality that it will never have another empire in the foreseeable future. The only good news is that Russia's war machine has proven vastly less competent than thought, it has sustained grievous losses and its economy looks unlikely to allow it to be built into anything like what it was in Feb 2022.

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Bill Gilmour 27 min ago

To quote you, "The West will expect Russia to come to terms with what it has done to Ukraine, which will be painful, if there is to be any return to 'normal' relations, to accept that this war was its choice and that it must respond positively to demands for reparations and war crimes trials."

It is very hard to see any Russian Government and/or a majority of the people agreeing to pay to replace the buildings and infrastructure that are being destroyed or for the personal injury and loss of life, they are now inflicting or allowing any Russians to be tried for war crimes, either within Russia or abroad.

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