
“Great Powers Don’t Bluff”

Description

by Elena Chernenko interview with Dmitry Trenin via: Kommersant

“Russia’s foreign policy—both under Yeltsin and Putin, including the Medvedev presidency—rested on the shoulders of Gorbachev’s policies. In one way or another, Russia continued integrating into the West, finding its place there, searching for a certain balance of interests in relations with the United States and other Western countries, with an emphasis on cooperation.”

—ARE WE ON THE BRINK OF AN ACTUAL MILITARY CONFLICT?

In the immediate future, say, the coming month, I think the answer is no. As for the longer term, I have questions for both sides.

A question for the West: Could the government in Kyiv—its constituent parts or some elements it doesn’t fully control, acting in concert with some shadow players—stage a provocation to draw Russia in? The answer to this question is likely negative. This scenario won’t do much good for those standing behind Kyiv. Any such provocation is certain to end with the defeat of Ukrainian forces.

The scale of this defeat for Ukraine may vary. And however high the cost of victory would be for Russia, that wouldn’t make up for the colossal reputational losses the Joe Biden administration would sustain, particularly on the domestic arena. After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, losing another prominent regional ally would be extremely dangerous for the administration, especially in the domestic political context. In addition, there is the NATO context and the factor of U.S. international prestige. After all, countries like China and Iran have been monitoring the situation closely.

—IN OTHER WORDS, YOU BELIEVE THE GEORGIAN SCENARIO TO BE UNLIKELY?

Yes. I believe that the Americans have sufficient control over the Ukrainian government and other elements active in Ukraine [to make a provocation unlikely].

—AND WHAT’S YOUR QUESTION FOR RUSSIA?

I have many questions for Russia. I think everything comes down to how the commander-in-chief, the president of the Russian Federation appraises what’s happening right before our eyes. I am talking about all of the latest diplomatic efforts supplemented with military moves and allusions to measures in the military and military technology realm. Indeed, there are many questions here, since we can’t know what exactly is on Vladimir Putin’s mind. What’s his plan? What’s his strategy? What options does he see for various situational scenarios? It’s very hard to judge from the outside.

What’s clear is that the demands that Russia has advanced and describes as imperative cannot be met by the West, at least not as they were framed. And since that’s obvious to everyone, the president certainly knows it too. The question is what his answer will be to the rejection of those demands.

-SO YOU ARE RULING OUT THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ALLIES COULD IN SOME FORM AGREE TO RUSSIA'S DEMAND TO GUARANTEE NATO NON-EXPANSION?

There will be no legally binding agreement on non-expansion. Nor will there be written political guarantees—as Russia insists—that Ukraine and Georgia will “never ever” be admitted to NATO. The question is how Russia will act when it becomes completely clear that the demands that Russian officials have frequently described as an “absolute imperative” will be rejected by Western states.

—WHAT DO YOU SEE AS POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR HOW THE SITUATION MIGHT DEVELOP?

The first scenario is ostensibly a logical one. It will be announced that we actually didn't expect them to agree to that. We are sensible people and understand everything perfectly, but we had to break the impasse, shake up the Western political and diplomatic scene, especially in Washington, and demonstrate our seriousness to them. And we managed to get something out of it. First, they didn't reject our proposals outright, but started responding. Moreover, they agreed to submit a written response to our proposals, which is a major step. This means that they effectively recognize the seriousness of our concerns and demands.

Second, they agreed to discuss important subjects that they previously ignored, for instance, our proposals for a moratorium on the deployment of INF-range missiles. They previously wouldn't even hear of it, but now they themselves propose to negotiate. They are also prepared to discuss limitations on military exercises in close proximity to our borders: all those naval and air force training exercises, including the ones imitating nuclear missile launches. We have proposed mutual restraint in this sphere numerous times, but they have only taken heed now. There have been responses to some other Russian initiatives as well.

Russia presented its demands in such a decisive fashion to induce Western powers, primarily the United States, to take action that benefits us from the security standpoint. It was important for us not just to diffuse the situation on our Western borders but, above all, to force the West to finally negotiate with us on issues of European security.

This has already happened: a dialogue is underway. For the first time since talks on German reunification, the West has agreed to discuss European security with Russia. From 1999 to 2021, European security hinged on the goodwill—or its opposite—of the United States, which relied on NATO as its main instrument. Now, just as at the times of the Yalta and Helsinki summits, the United States and NATO have been negotiating European security with Russia, so the security rests on two pillars rather than one.

—UNDER THIS SCENARIO, SHOULD WE EXPECT THE WEST AND PRIMARILY THE UNITED STATES TO PUT MEANINGFUL PRESSURE ON UKRAINE TO COMPLY WITH THE MINSK AGREEMENTS [AIMED AT ENDING THE CONFLICT IN EASTERN UKRAINE]?

I really hope so but wouldn't count on it at this time. The Minsk Agreements are a Russian diplomatic victory that followed on from the military victory that the Donbas militia and its supporters scored against the Ukrainian military in February 2015. I am not sure that the United States realizes that the key to diffusing the situation around Ukraine is complying with the Minsk Agreements, although this is

certainly the case.

Essentially, these agreements can still be implemented. Donbas can return to Ukraine under the terms of the Minsk Agreements, which would guarantee the rights of those living in the area and preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity within Russia-recognized borders. But for the time being, I don't see willingness from Washington to pressure Kyiv into complying with the Minsk Agreements.

The lack of resolution in the Donbas conflict is the best formal pretext for continuing to put pressure on Moscow. In recent years, U.S. policies have been aimed at intensifying pressure on Russia, and Ukraine is but one element of that. If I understand the Western strategy correctly, this pressure will peak when the transfer of power in Russia gets underway. Amid its confrontation with China, the United States needs a more compliant Russia. But that's a long-term goal.

—OKAY, THAT'S THE FIRST SCENARIO. WE'VE SHAKEN THINGS UP, AND WE SETTLE FOR WHAT THEY GIVE US.

Yes. In this regard, we could also remember that politics is the art of the possible, as well as a host of other arguments in support of this scenario.

As for the second scenario, it assumes that things have actually gotten way too serious, and we've reached the point when new politics have come to replace the old ones in Russia. In my book *The New Balance of Forces*, I wrote that Russia's foreign policy—both under Yeltsin and Putin, including the Medvedev presidency—rested on the shoulders of Gorbachev's policies. In one way or another, Russia continued integrating into the West, finding its place there, searching for a certain balance of interests in relations with the United States and other Western countries, with an emphasis on cooperation.

But what if this course is being radically overhauled now? This relates not only to foreign policy, but Russia's general direction. What if we are distancing ourselves from the period in which the main goal was to integrate into the world at large, albeit on our own terms? What's more, what if the severance from the West that President Putin talked about in response to the prospects of U.S. "sanctions from hell" becomes reality? What if Russia eventually embarks on a completely different foreign and domestic policy course, which would also include the economic, social, and ideological spheres?

Perhaps a separate "Russian project" is already being constructed, and it no longer anticipates integration into the world where the West still plays a leading, though not dominant, role. Given its rupture with the West, Russia may establish much closer and even de facto allied relations with key non-Western states, primarily with China, as well as Iran and U.S. adversaries in the Western hemisphere: Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. Under this scenario, Russia may conduct a significantly more active foreign policy. Moscow may start doing the very thing that the West has so often accused it of doing.

—ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT CREATING SPHERES OF INFLUENCE?

Both spheres of influence and the right to use force to overthrow unwanted regimes. For instance, the United States overthrew a dictatorial regime in Iraq. True, they found no weapons of mass destruction there, but, on the whole, the West believes that it did a good thing by eliminating a dictator.

I've noticed now that Russian diplomats and the foreign minister have been increasingly using the term "regime," especially when talking about the Ukrainian government. Regime is something illegitimate, at least from a moral standpoint. And if the government is illegitimate, why not help the forces of good to overthrow it?

I have a feeling that Russia has been looking for a new starting point around which to reassemble territories in the post-Soviet space. A variety of options could be employed here. For instance, Russia could expand on the concept of the Union State [which currently consists of Russia and Belarus] by incorporating new territories into it. Loosely speaking, if the Russian authorities come to the conclusion that it's impossible to get the Minsk Agreements implemented, they may recognize the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics as one or two states and incorporate them into the Union State of Russia and Belarus. Hypothetically, that entity may also include Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

This will happen if Russia decides to destroy what it dislikes and use force since it can't get what it wants nicely. The United States most likely won't be able to do much about it. It won't engage in a direct confrontation with Russia.

—YOU HAVE DESCRIBED TWO VERY DIFFERENT SCENARIOS. TO DRAW A CHESS ANALOGY, THE FIRST ONE IS ? SHREWD GAME WITH DELIBERATE MOVES AND CALCULATED RISKS. IN THE SECOND, ONE OF THE PLAYERS SIMPLY OVERTURNS THE CHESSBOARD AND ALL THE PIECES ON IT. SO WHICH OF THE SCENARIOS IS BEING IMPLEMENTED NOW?

I don't know. Only one person in our country can answer this question. It's impossible to figure out his answer from the outside. Russia has the capabilities to implement both scenarios. The Russian state and its armed forces will be prepared to accomplish any task assigned to them.

Both scenarios come at a certain cost and involve known risks. In the first case, we are talking about reputational losses, both internationally and domestically. If Russia abandons its demands, which it declared to be an "absolute imperative," it may be accused of bluffing. Great powers don't bluff. If Russia is bluffing, it's descending to some other level in terms of its global status. But even if some sections of the population view this negatively, it's no big deal overall. The government's position at home is quite strong. It will be more of a blow to its international reputation: Russia may be taken less seriously in the future. But we can live with this too.

The second scenario, which entails the use of force, calls for a very serious rupture in relations, including within Russia itself. It would destroy the hopes of a small but influential part of the Russian elite that still hopes that relations with the West will be normalized someday. In the radical form described by some Western think tanks—the "Ukraine occupation" scenario—it would also test broader segments of the Russian population.

—THIS WILL HAPPEN IF RUSSIA GOES BEYOND RECOGNIZING THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE DONETSK AND LUHANSK PEOPLE'S REPUBLICS?

Yes, if the Russian authorities decide that the only guarantee of Ukraine not joining NATO and not having American missile bases on its territory is Russia's direct control over Ukraine or establishing a friendly regime in Kyiv. In any event, the use of force scenario won't be similar to what happened in Crimea, where not a single shot was fired, and there were no casualties.

—DO YOU BELIEVE THIS USE OF FORCE SCENARIO TO BE AT ALL PROBABLE?

I think it's unlikely. It's fraught with many negative consequences, and great human and financial losses.

—IS IT THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO?

It all depends on your preferences and interests. For some, it's the best-case scenario, for others, it's the worst. In my view, it would entail a tremendous risk for Russia itself.

—FROM YOUR BOOK I CONCLUDED THAT, IN YOUR VIEW, NATO EXPANSION DOESN'T POSE SUCH A BIG THREAT TO RUSSIA. IS THAT SO?

No degree of NATO expansion, including to incorporate Ukraine, will threaten the military balance and deterrence stability. The United States won't gain a serious strategic advantage over the Russian Federation by deploying missiles close to Kharkov.

—WHAT ABOUT ALL THE STATEMENTS ABOUT SHORTENED FLIGHT TIME: 5–7 MINUTES FOR A MISSILE TO REACH MOSCOW?

They don't contradict what I have said. Because what's going to happen in that situation? Russia will deploy its hypersonic missiles—say, Zirkon—on its submarines that will cruise along the U.S. coast, thereby ensuring the same flight time to reach the most important American targets. [It's much more expensive to have missiles on subs and you can never reach the same mass. Also they can be sunk especially if they're being taxied off the US coast and not in heavily-protected bastion seas off the coast of Russia as is the Russian-Soviet missile sub doctrine.] Deterrence will be preserved, albeit at a higher and more dangerous level. Nor can a U.S. army brigade in Poland or a NATO battalion in the Baltics seriously diminish Russia's security. The only aspect that could be of serious concern to Russia is the missile defense elements in Romania and Poland. Nothing else poses a significant threat.

Therefore, in terms of military security, it's correct to say I don't see NATO expansion as such a terrible threat.

But there is another factor: a country that becomes a NATO member undergoes profound reformatting, which touches upon all walks of life. The country transforms politically and ideologically. While Ukraine is outside of NATO, it's still possible that the entire country or some part of it may decide that the Slavic identity, the "Russian world," and other things matter, and this may lead to a normalization of relations with Russia, and even closer relations with it. At least, from Moscow's vantage point, such a possibility remains. But if a country joins NATO, that's it: that ship has sailed. In this sense, yes, there is a threat but not a military one; rather, it's geopolitical and geocultural. Then again, judging by the articles published, the commander-in-chief and the country's military and political establishment have completely different ideas on this subject, and that must be taken seriously too.

—RUSSIA HAS THREATENED THE WEST WITH A "MILITARY TECHNOLOGY RESPONSE" IF ITS DEMANDS ARE NOT MET. BESIDES THE THINGS YOU ALREADY MENTIONED, WHAT MIGHT THAT BE?

If the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics follows the Abkhazia scenario, Russian troops and military bases may be deployed there. But I think that the bulk of the "military technology response" will have to do with deploying some weapons systems to new locations.

—FOR EXAMPLE?

For a long time, the conventional wisdom was that if Russia was unhappy about some military components in Europe, it might deploy additional missiles in Kaliningrad. The Kaliningrad region was seen as a frontline base of operations. From there Russia could threaten all kinds of enemies. But Kaliningrad is physically separated from the rest of Russian territory. It's hard to deliver things there and maintain communication lines, especially amid antagonism with the West. It's possible, but not easy. It's much easier to deploy something on the territory of friendly Belarus: an ally that hasn't hosted any Russian military bases or missiles, never mind nuclear missiles, so far. Especially since the Belarusian president himself...

—...IS INVITING RUSSIA TO DO SO?

Yes. He has great political acumen and is willing to provide such an opportunity to Russia for an unstated but easily discernible price. That's one possibility.

There are other, more global options, for instance, close cooperation with China, close coordination between Moscow and Beijing in the military sphere, more active cooperation on military technology. Closer ties on military issues with countries like Iran are also possible. Finally, in the midst of the Ukrainian crisis, the Russian president has had phone conversations with the leaders of Venezuela and Cuba.

—SO RUSSIA MAY ACT AS A SPOILER IN A SITUATION WHERE THE UNITED STATES EXPECTS IT TO REMAIN QUIET AND STAY OUT OF ITS CONFRONTATION WITH CHINA?

That's a possibility, of course. And this would be normal practice. Countries that are hostile to each other, like Russia and the United States today, influence each other through force. That's the reality. They don't use reason and persuasion; they resort to force—not necessarily military force. Apart from its military capabilities, the United States possesses economic and financial strength, and increasingly

uses this instrument against Russia. For its part, Russia's strength lies in geopolitics, the energy sector, the military, and military technology.

—THERE HAS BEEN SPECULATION THAT RUSSIA MAY DEPLOY MISSILES TO VENEZUELA OR CUBA.

I don't think that South or Central America are being seriously considered as possible Russian missile bases. Essentially, there is no need for that. In fact, if Russia starts making efforts in this regard, it will create the exact threat it's trying to avoid. If Moscow begins to bother the United States in Latin America, Washington will respond in Europe, where a number of countries would gladly host INF-range missiles on their territory. Why would Russia need that?

—WHAT HAS HAPPENED THAT WE ARE SUDDENLY TALKING ABOUT SUCH DISTURBING SCENARIOS? WHERE IS THE WORLD HEADED?

It's moving along a very dangerous trajectory, but I don't know where it's heading. However, if we look back at history, it's obvious that if, after any large-scale confrontation—be it "hot" or "cold"—the losing side is not included in the new security arrangement on conditions it finds acceptable, its pride will be wounded and it will not be prepared to give up on its sovereignty. Then, having gained strength 20–30 years down the line, it will demand respect for its national interests.

—AND NOW THAT TIME HAS COME?

Yes, I think that time has come. It took thirty years to reach this juncture. The Cold War victors initially believed that Russia had lost its prior significance; they were no longer interested in it, and no one really wanted to engage with the difficult task of integrating it into the Western world.

Moreover, such integration would require Western powers—primarily the United States—to agree to substantial limitations on their own influence, to granting Russia the right to cast the deciding vote. The United States wasn't ready for that. It wasn't ready to share its influence, even with its closest allies. Washington always had to have the final say. So Russia chose not to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic on the terms of uneven partnership offered by the West. No one particularly regretted that back then: it was believed that Russia had a weak economy, bad demographics, and a fragile political system that may collapse a few more times. So there was no real need...

—...TO CARE MUCH?

Yes. Attitudes toward Russia started to change after the annexation of Crimea, and especially after the beginning of the military operation in Syria. You remember that Barack Obama called Russia a "regional power." Then everyone saw that not only had it come back as an actor on the international stage, but also that it can act far beyond its own borders.

But here Moscow's actions diverged from the interests of the West. Russia came to be seen as an adversary that must be punished and put in its place through pressure, especially through sanctions. Conciliatory gestures or concessions to Russia came to be viewed as appeasing an aggressor. Feeling its weakness, the West has generally become much less amenable to compromise, less willing to sit down with other competing and even hostile regimes, and to negotiate with them on equal terms. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West has not negotiated with anyone on equal terms,

not even with China.

You can understand the West, too. It's going through tough times; we really are talking about the twilight of Western dominance and eventual end of its global leadership. It's hard for them. I think we are moving toward a serious crisis in international relations. We can probably gain some degree of clarity after serious tests of strength in different regions and domains. Not all issues will be resolved at the negotiating table, but the outcomes can be formalized. That's how the new world order is going to emerge.