



Russia's 'red lines': Don't dismiss as bluff or bluster

By Rachel Douglas

4 May—The words of the leaders of major powers should be taken seriously, especially at a time of rising international tensions. That is the case with the foreign policy part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's annual Message to the Federal Assembly, delivered 21 April, and a 29 April interview of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

One week after Washington announced new economic sanctions against Russia, this time aimed to disrupt the market for its government bonds, Putin charged that "everyone in the world seems to be used to the practice of politically motivated, illegal economic sanctions and to certain actors' brutal attempts to impose their will on others by force." Now, he added, "this practice is degenerating into something even more dangerous": coups and assassination attempts. Citing a recently uncovered plot against Belarusian President Lukashenka, Putin said that one may dislike Lukashenka's policies or those of former President Yanukovich of Ukraine (overthrown in 2014), "But the practice of staging coups d'états and planning political assassinations, including those of high-ranking officials—well, this goes too far."

Russia is constantly the target of "unfriendly moves", he went on, to which "often, we prefer not to respond at all". He cautioned, however, that "if someone does not want to conduct a dialogue and chooses a selfish and arrogant tone with us, Russia will always find a way to defend its position.... We really want to maintain good relations with all those engaged in international communication, including ... those with whom we have not been getting along lately, to put it mildly. We really do not want to burn bridges. But if someone mistakes our good intentions for indifference or weakness and intends to burn or even blow up these bridges, they must know that Russia's response will be asymmetrical, swift and tough. Those behind provocations that threaten the core interests of our security will regret what they have done in a way they have not regretted anything for a long time...."

"We have enough patience, responsibility, professionalism, self-confidence and certainty in our cause, as well as common sense, when making a decision of any kind. But I hope that no one will think about crossing a 'red line' with regard to Russia. We ourselves will determine in each specific case where it will be drawn."

The government news agency Segodnya asked Lavrov if Russian-American relations—with the two ambassadors each recalled to his home country for an indefinite time—were now worse than during the Cold War. Lavrov outlined the conditions under which Russia is prepared to resume bilateral diplomacy: "[When] the United States ... accepts the futility of any attempts... to create an architecture where all Western countries would be subordinate to the United States and the Western camp would work together to 'rally' other countries across the world against China and Russia, admits that there was a reason why the UN Charter enshrined such principles as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and sovereign equality of states, and simply honours its commitments and starts talking with us... on the basis of respect for each other and for a balance of interests".

Otherwise, Lavrov warned, "We will be living in conditions of a Cold War, or even worse.... Tension did run high

during the Cold War and there were numerous high-risk conflict situations, but there was also mutual respect. I believe that this is lacking now."

April escalations

Military activity. Visiting the Russian Navy's Northern Fleet headquarters on 14 April, Defence Minister Gen. Sergei Shoigu pointed out that NATO's Defender Europe 21 exercises, which began in March and run into June, are the largest of the last 30 years. Their 28,000 troops and 15,000 units of weapons and equipment are "concentrated in the Black Sea region and the Baltic region ... near our territory", he said. On 28 April, addressing defence ministers of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Shoigu summarised: "The USA and NATO actions in the European region, to increase the combat readiness of troops and strengthen their forward presence, contribute to the growth of the military threat".

On 5 April the Russian Foreign Ministry denounced US-UK plans for joint deployment of short- and medium-range land-based missiles in Europe, weapons banned under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty until the USA withdrew from it under President Donald Trump. Their presence, said the ministry, will make it harder to "prevent a serious escalation in the missile sphere".

Hostile strategy enunciated. On 23 April the UK's Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) issued an article co-authored by Keir Giles, who was also a writer on Chatham House's 2015 *The Russian Challenge*, a militant blueprint for forcing Russia to follow the "rules-based" order as defined by the Anglo-Americans. The latest document is titled "Europe Must Admit Russia Is Waging War", by such actions as Russia's military exercises on its own territory near Ukraine and allegedly blowing up munitions dumps in Eastern Europe.

In mid-April the Czech Republic expelled 18 Russian diplomats as punishment for alleged Russian involvement in a 2014 weapons depot explosion, though even Czech President Milos Zeman said evidence was lacking. The accusations apparently originated with Bellingcat, the UK sleuthing organisation which the UK government- and NATO-funded Integrity Initiative describes as its "partner organisation".

Aggressive sanctions. On 15 April the White House issued a "fact sheet" titled "Imposing Costs for Harmful Foreign Activities by the Russian Government". In response not to any single alleged misdeed, but to "the full scope of Russia's harmful foreign activities" (none proven and some demonstrably false), it rolled out a package of economic sanctions that included blacklisting several dozen Russian technology and other entities and individuals, and barring American financial institutions from the primary market for all Russian government bonds, including ruble-denominated ones, after 14 June 2021.

This declaration of economic warfare, prepared long in advance, is coherent with the strategy set forth by Chatham House back in 2015: "[t]he effectiveness of sanctions against Russia depends on their duration as well as severity".

US Naval War College analyst Lyle Goldstein, in an article posted 28 April, urged rethinking all these measures: "Americans should ask the uncomfortable question: why do the USA and its allies appear to be encroaching upon so many different Russian red lines in so many 'situations' simultaneously?"