

The Security of the Pontic-Baltic Region and Russia's Great Power Status

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Abstract: *Russia became a great power fighting for supremacy in the area between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea; the USSR met its objectives at the end of WW2; post-Cold War Russia looked initially as a normal state, but started to act aggressively after 2000; Russia did so neglecting its obligations in accordance with the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act; Moscow's 2022 aggression on Ukraine calls into question even Russia's great power status.*

Russia's interests and the fragility of state structures in the Pontic-Baltic region.

The Pontic-Baltic Isthmus - a form of buffer zone between two great centres of power, the German and the Russian ones - has been the target of Russian expansionism throughout the modern times. Having escaped Tatar-Mongolian domination, the Tsarist Empire was practically born with its eyes on the West, and the first obstacle for it to overcome was the region linking the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. This strategic orientation was persistently followed

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by the Russian state leadership regardless the type of political regime existing in St Petersburg or Moscow.

Having made steady territorial acquisitions on its western frontier in the 18th-19th centuries², the Russian Empire had a troubled history in the 20th century, but this strategic objective was still pursued with perseverance. During World War II, the USSR leadership followed two lines of action to achieve this goal:

- the first, by securing its neighbourhood with Soviet-ruled states (the so-called *glacis*);
- the second, by creating a security belt on its western border, initially through mutual assistance pacts and the installation of military bases, and then through territorial annexations³.

Moscow did so despite the fact that its participation in the United Nations coalition implied taking over, through adherence to the January 1st, 1942 *United Nations Declaration*, the set of principles contained in the *Atlantic Charter* (14 August 1941). That is why, despite the fact that the Atlantic Charter repudiated the idea of territorial acquisition by force, the USSR retained in 1945 the territorial acquisitions (half of Poland, all three Baltic States, and Bessarabia) it had obtained during its collaboration with Nazi Germany under the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact (23 August 1939). As a result, Moscow's lines of action had been fully implemented by the end of the Second World War.⁴

² In few decades, the Czarist Empire occupied Crimea (1783), participated in the division of Poland (1795) and forced the Sublime Porte to cede Bessarabia (through the treaty of Bucharest, 1812).

³ Florin Constantiniu, *Doi ori doi fac şaisprezece. A început Războiul Rece în România? [Two times two is sixteen. Has the Cold War started in Romania?]*, Eurosong & Book, 1997, p. 27.

⁴ Idem, *De la Carta Atlanticului la «Brâul de securitate» al URSS [From the Atlantic Charter to the USSR's «Security Belt»]*, in „Revista istorică”, VIII, 3-4, March-April 1997, p. 189.

Post-Soviet Russia and the temptation of „abnormality“.

After the end of the Cold War, and especially after the collapse of the USSR, the new post-communist Russia seemed to accept what the other major players in the international scene expected of it: that it should behave normally, according to the rules of the international system to which the Russian state was and still is a party.

These rules - which made the post-1945 international system unique in history – have been based on the principles enshrined in the *United Nations Charter*, and were reinforced, specifically for the European area, in the *Helsinki Final Act* of the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

In fact, the initial signals from Moscow have raised hopes that the Soviet/Russian leaders were adopting a normal behaviour in international relations. On the one hand, the Gorbachev government supported the authorization of the use of force in the first Gulf War (by the UNSC Resolution 678 of 29 November 1990) and agreed to the unification of Germany (by the *Treaty on the final settlement with respect to Germany*, signed in Moscow on 12 September 1990).

On the other hand, the post-1991 Yeltsin government accepted the withdrawal of Russian (formerly Soviet) troops from the Baltic states (in 1993 from Lithuania, and in 1994 from Estonia and Latvia), and accommodated itself to a certain extent to NATO's eastward expansion against the background of the development of an institutionalised relationship with the North Atlantic Alliance (Russia participated since 1991 in the work of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, and after 1994 in the Partnership for Peace initiative).

Furthermore, Russia joined the Council of Europe (in 1996) and began a partnership with the European Union (in 1997). In particular, Russia was a party – together with Ukraine, the US, and the UK – to the agreement (*Budapest Memorandum*, December 5th, 1994) that paved the way for Ukraine's transformation into a non-nuclear state, an agreement that guaranteed „the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine”⁵.

However, Russia's normal behavior was only an illusion. From the time of Boris Yeltsyn's rule (1991-1999), Russian decision-makers did not hesitate to develop concepts that reverted to the logic of Tsarist/Soviet expansionism by denying the set of commitments and principles to which the Russian state had subscribed. The most relevant case in point is the formulation of the theory of Russia's special interests within what Moscow defined as its „Near Abroad”⁶.

This formula, which was launched as early as 1992, was intended to designate the states that had been previously part of the USSR since the entire geopolitical space of the former Soviet Union was defined as a sphere of vital interests for Russia. Clearly, from a territorial point of view, *Near Abroad* was mainly aimed at the Pontic-Baltic isthmus. It might be useful to add that one of the promoters of this theory, Sergei Karaganov, then Deputy Director of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, considered that the aim of Russia's *Near Abroad* policy was to protect ethnic Russians by any means, including by force („we must restore the role of force as a settlement instrument”)⁷.

⁵ *Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, A/49/765, S/1994/1399, 19 December 1994.

⁶ Valentin Stan, *Rusia între „străinătatea apropiată” și politica mondială [Russia: Near Abroad and World Policy]*, in „Sfera Politicii”, no. 25, February 1995, p. 20-21.

⁷ „Nous devons rétablir le rôle de la force en tant qu'instrument de règlement”, apud Gerhard

After the resignation of President Yeltsin in December 1999, and the rise to power of his last prime minister, Vladimir Putin, Moscow's approach has become increasingly rigid. The framework the post-Soviet Russia had accepted during the Yeltsin Era in the CSCE (and since 1995 in the OSCE), in terms of respecting all the organisation's commitments and principles, began to be denied by the new leadership, with the Russian side practically blocking the activity of that organization. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first OSCE Ministerial Council meeting that ended without the adoption of a general policy document was held in Vienna in November 2000, the first year of Putin's leadership. The reason for that behaviour? Russia was no more ready to accept decisions on regional conflicts on the OSCE agenda that would confirm Moscow's non-compliance with earlier decisions, in particular the decisions of the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit.

Furthermore, Russia's participation in cooperation mechanisms with NATO, based on the 1997 *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation*, and the 2002 Rome Declaration on *NATO-Russia relations: a new quality*, gradually lost its consistency, initially after the 1999 Kosovo crisis and especially after the 2008 Georgia war. These forms of Russia-NATO dialogue were almost completely blocked in the second decade of the new millennium⁸.

Perhaps significantly, after the illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014, Russia began a process of abandoning international treaties that provided for

Simon, *La Russie: une hégémonie eurasiennne?*, in „Politique étrangère”, 59^e année, n°1, 1994, p. 38.

⁸ NATO suspended all practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia in April 2014, while keeping open channels of political and military communication. See NATO website, „Relations with Russia”, 14 July 2022 (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50090.htm).

arms control and ensured the transparency of their use, those treaties being the foundations of European stability through the confidence and security-building measures they promoted. That was the case of Russia's 2015 decision to suspend its participation in the „*Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty*“, an agreement concluded in November 1990 in Paris, in force since 1992, and further adapted at the Istanbul OSCE Summit in November 1999⁹. Similarly, the „*Open Skies Treaty*“, concluded in 1992 within the OSCE, with the aim of ensuring transparency regarding the possession and positioning of military forces by European states on their national territory, was abandoned by Russia in 2021¹⁰.

Without fear of being wrong, one can even credit the idea that in doing so Russia wanted to have its hands free of any international commitments when settling by any means its strategic objectives on its western border. However, even by removing the obligations arising from the various international security treaties, Moscow can only proceed in the sense of protecting the security of other states, including the states of the Pontic-Baltic isthmus, since such an obligation derives from the treaty that Russia has not left - and is not interested in leaving - namely the *United Nations Charter*. The military aggression implemented in 2022 against Ukraine, no matter how this military aggression is called by Moscow, is in total contradiction with Russia's status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

The challenges deriving from Russia's post-World War II great power status.

⁹ Ian Anthony, *Death of the CFE Treaty: The need to move arms control back to the centre of security policy*, SIPRI, 12 March 2015.

¹⁰ Hollis Rammer, *Russia Officially Leaves Open Skies Treaty*, Arms Control Association, July/August 2021.

In fact, Russia's actions under Putin benefit from the fact that Moscow's empire has a great power status enshrined in the very founding document of the post-war political order, *i.e.* the United Nations Charter. Whereas of all the elements that could contribute to justifying Russia's aspiration to great power status („population, the extent of territory, industrial resources, social organisation, historical tradition and will to greatness“, for just quoting the list advanced time ago by Martin Wight¹¹), the most consistent Russian great power feature is given by the fact that this country is a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Since 1992, the Russian Federation has occupied the place originally allocated to the USSR, through a tacit recognition within the world organisation that the Russian state is the successor to the Soviet state in the UN hierarchy of power, although there is no formal decision by the Security Council or the General Assembly on this matter.

In fact, the UN Charter enshrines the essential role of the permanent members in the work of the organisation, and therefore they are vested with exceptional prerogative. Thus, Article 24 states that *„In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its Members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, and agree that in carrying out its duties under this responsibility the Security Council acts on their behalf“*¹². Within the Security Council, decision-making power is vested in the permanent members, as stated in Article 27: *„Decisions of the Security Council on all other matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of nine members including the*

¹¹ Cf. Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, Royal Institute of International Affairs/Continuum, New York and London, 2004, p. 49.

¹² *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of International Court of Justice*, San Francisco, 1945, Art. 24.

*concurring votes of the permanent members...*¹³. Simply put, a permanent member has the power to decide the course of the UN action in a given crisis situation, as Russia did on 24 February 2022 when, by voting against it, it prevented the Security Council from acting on the situation in Ukraine.

It is interesting that there is no provision in the UN Charter that explicitly states what obligations are incumbent on States that are permanent members of the Security Council, obligations that should be commensurate with their privileged status. However, the absence of an explicit provision on the obligations of permanent members should not entail the discretionary use of the veto power¹⁴.

More than that, the permanent members of the Security Council have an obligation to ensure the functioning of this institution, not to block its work, as they are expected to behave in a mature, rational, and responsible manner. This is the conclusion that derives from Article 1 of the UN Charter itself, which states that the primary purpose of the United Nations is *„To maintain international peace and security and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace...”*¹⁵.

¹³ *Ibidem*, Art. 27.

¹⁴ An account of the 1944-1945 debates relating to the use of veto power, in *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, General, Volume I*, Washington, 1966, doc. 419-510, și *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, General, Volume 1*, Washington, 1967, doc. 1-320. See as well, Constantin Bușe, Nicoale Dascălu, *Diplomație în vreme de război. De la Carta Atlanticului la Carta O.N.U. [Wartime diplomacy. From the Atlantic Charter to the United Nations Charter]*, București, 1995, p. 126-130, 143-146, 153-155, 181-183.

¹⁵ *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of International Court of Justice*, San Francisco, 1945, Art. 1.

The UN Charter practically prohibits the use of offensive force, as long as Article 2 states that *„All Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered”,* and that *„All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations”*¹⁶.

In accordance with the UN Charter, force may be used only for defensive purposes and in a limited and conditional form, as this is clearly enshrined in Article 51: *„Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security”*.

Not only the UN Charter prohibits the use of force. In the same spirit, the *Helsinki Final Act* (1975), includes in the *„Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States”* (or briefly the *„Helsinki Decalogue”*), equally strong formulations on refraining from the threat or use of force, inviolability of borders, territorial integrity of states or peaceful settlement of disputes. Specifically, in the first principle of the *„Decalogue”,* which refers to *„Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty”,* it is stressed that *„Within the framework of international law, all the participating States have equal rights and duties. They will*

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, Art. 2.

*respect each other's right to define and conduct as it wishes its relations with other States in accordance with international law and in the spirit of the present Declaration. They consider that their frontiers can be changed, in accordance with international law, by peaceful means, and by agreement. They also have the right to belong or not to belong to international organizations, to be or not to be a party to bilateral or multilateral treaties including the right to be or not to be a party to treaties of alliance; they also have the right to neutrality"*¹⁷.

A simple reading of this principle is able to highlight an essential feature of the contemporary international system, namely that no state can develop its security policies by preventing other states from exercising their inherent sovereign rights. Moreover, it is easy to see that both the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the war Russia started against Ukraine in February 2022 are in contradiction with Russia's freely assumed obligations.

Regardless the way the provisions of the UN Charter or the Helsinki Final Act may be read and interpreted, it is by nature obvious that by its actions the Russian Federation has done exactly the opposite of what it was obliged to do in the current international system. Acting in that manner, Russia generated mistrust and insecurity. The Russian side has not only undermined the functioning of both the World organisation and the Pan-European forum but has also undermined its own position in the process, calling into question its own status in the international community and consequently its status as a great power.

¹⁷ *Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Final Act, Helsinki, 1975.*