Russia’s foreign policy under Vladimir Putin has met with contradictory reactions around the world. To some, it is a failure that is leading Russia to a dead end; to others, it is a notably successful and effective project.

Russia is allegedly an economically backward and demographically declining power, its role on the global stage is small and its prospects are bleak. But its military-political significance has increased to the extent that the Russian factor is almost equivalent to the Soviet threat in the past. Russia has no idea or vision of the future, but its influence on people’s minds and the information space is assuming dangerous proportions. Putin is a bad strategist who does not understand the modern world and yet he is the only one who has a strategy to pursue in the Middle East, Europe and the post-Soviet space. Finally, Putin is recreating the Soviet Union, restoring the Russian Empire and destroying the West and western democracy.

Putin has been demonized and mystified to the point where the rational ends and the impulsive begins. Let us try to reverse this process. Putin has been in office for more than 17 years; it has been a very eventful period and there is enough material from which to draw some conclusions. So let’s go through it point by point.

What has happened to Russia over the quarter of a century since the disintegration of the Soviet Union? The country experienced an unprecedented decline of its international status, having turned literally overnight from one of the two pillars of the world order into a recipient of humanitarian aid from its former antagonists, without ever suffering a military defeat. The 1990s were a time when the state was struggling for survival, as were its citizens. The 2000s saw the beginning of recovery – in terms of public governance, the economy and geopolitics. The 2010s were a time of mounting international tensions in all areas and these exposed the fragility of Russia’s development in the face of external threats. This led Russia to take strong countermeasures in a bid to avert at least some of these threats and to expand its international influence, while being fully aware of its limits.

What is the purpose of this policy? For all the differences between Russian presidents (there have been two and a half of them – Boris Yeltsin, Putin, and to some extent Dmitry Medvedev), all sought to regain Russia’s status as a leading global power. The means they used varied in different periods but the goal remained the same. Throughout his term in office Putin has tried several of them, from carrying on Yeltsin’s policy of integration to attempting to forcibly set the rules of international life and draw ‘red lines’. Analysis of whether each of those attempts succeeded or failed should be the subject of a separate study. What matters is that everything that could be achieved in terms of restoring the influence lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union has been achieved, including the recovery of a small portion of territory ceded in 1991, the Crimea. Attempts to raise Russia’s status further have been inhibited by its limited capabilities, primarily economic ones, as well as by fundamental changes in the international environment. The global agenda formed after the end of the Cold War no longer has international relevance, and the main driver of Russia’s policy – which is essentially the desire to take revenge – has almost run out of steam. What intellectual and political tradition does Putin follow? He received a Soviet
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upbringing, and not just any Soviet upbringing but one you could only get in an organization that waged the Cold War. He learnt how to survive at a time of state disintegration and government dysfunction when he worked in St Petersburg during the worst years of economic collapse and raging crime. The demise of a superpower and its consequences are the main event in the biography of Putin and his generation.

He is a conservative and a traditionalist, and like all conservatives he values and understands the past. In the case of Russia, its past is mixed and controversial: the idea of a great power incorporates both Soviet and non-Soviet experiences, which previously were mutually exclusive but now have been combined in the drive for restoration.

Putin belongs to the realist camp of international relations: he believes in the balance of power and the inviolability of sovereignty as a guarantee of peace. What the West sees as Putin’s ‘hybrid war’ is in fact an attempt by a classical realist to find a way to deal with the intricacies of an integrated world where the notion of ‘power’ has become much more complex, and its use produces non-linear effects because of increased interdependence.

Russia is trying to use whatever military-political methods it can muster in order to counter the external influences where the West has an overwhelming advantage. These are global information dominance, ideological monopoly, attractive development prospects – together these constitute ‘soft power’ – control of global financial and economic institutions and a technological lead.

Essentially, after the end of the Cold War an ideological battle was launched for the ‘proper’ understanding of sovereignty. Putin is a man of Westphalia, believing in the sovereignty of states, while progressive political thinking since the end of the 20th century has been based on the assumption that sovereignty – previously construed as formal equality of states and their legal immunity – no longer exists.

Moreover, this type of thinking holds, a narrow understanding of sovereignty is a hindrance to the successful development of individual countries and the world as a whole. For some reason, this did not apply to the United States as a hegemon, but all others were encouraged to accept the new dogma.

The dramatic paradox is that the idea of defending the inviolability of sovereignty led Moscow to break it militarily in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014. These actions were undertaken in response to what was generally viewed in Russia as systematic and effective political, ideological or maybe even military interference by western states in other countries’ affairs.

How should Russia’s involvement in the West’s internal affairs be understood? The guiding spirit could be expressed this way: ‘You should feel as vulnerable as we did during your expansion and the impertinent advance of your model. And if you don’t like it, then you should not do this to other countries under the pretext of spreading democracy.’

Judging from the hysterical reaction in the United States and Europe to the Kremlin’s possible interference in their internal processes and from the Cyclopean scale of their response, the West was not strong enough psychologically to cope with this feeling of vulnerability.

A classical realist in an irreversibly disintegrating reality – this is the role Putin is destined to play. And this largely explains his attempts to restore what is left of this reality to its previous shape.

It has nothing to do with re-building the Russian or Soviet Empire or engaging in a systemic confrontation with the West and challenging democracy, as Europe and America presumably think. It is an attempt to regain control of political and social processes that are becoming ungovernable due to changes in communications and technology brought about by globalization and by shifts in the political behaviour of many countries.

Putin believes that the West’s arrogance, thoughtlessness and irresponsible behaviour rocked the foundations of global stability, bringing it to point of inevitable collapse, and sowed the chaos that is now spreading around the world.

The West most often accuses Putin of seeking a new Yalta agreement – a deal with the United States on spheres of influence. In Russian expert discussion nowadays, however, the Yalta Conference is not recalled as often as the Congress of Vienna. It was a moment of geopolitical triumph for the Russian monarchy: Russian troops had entered Paris and Alexander I was the most powerful emperor in Europe.

The second peak came at the end of the Second World War. The Yalta and Potsdam conferences of 1945 laid the groundwork for a bipolar world, but that is not relevant any more. By contrast, the Congress of Vienna produced the Concert of Nations, that is, joint management of a multipolar world through constant regulation of the balance of power.

Putin is a man of Vienna, not Yalta. It is not accidental that it was the Congress of Vienna that brought back to life many European regimes threatened by forces unleashed by the French revolution. That was the time of the big Restoration.

Putin’s main problem is that, like many conservatives, he knows and sees the past much better than the future. Or, more accurately, he sees the future as a continuation of the past, its reincarnation on a new historical level. This did not always work in the past, and it may not work at all now because too many customary ties and connections have been broken.

The era of restoration is over; it is time to start building a new world. And this is where a vision of the future appears to be much more important than an understanding of the past. If there is no vision, it will take ever more effort and investment to defend the past, but the result will be ever less palpable.

Fyodor Lukyanov is Editor-in-Chief, ‘Russia in Global Affairs’, and a Research Professor at the Higher School of Economics, Moscow