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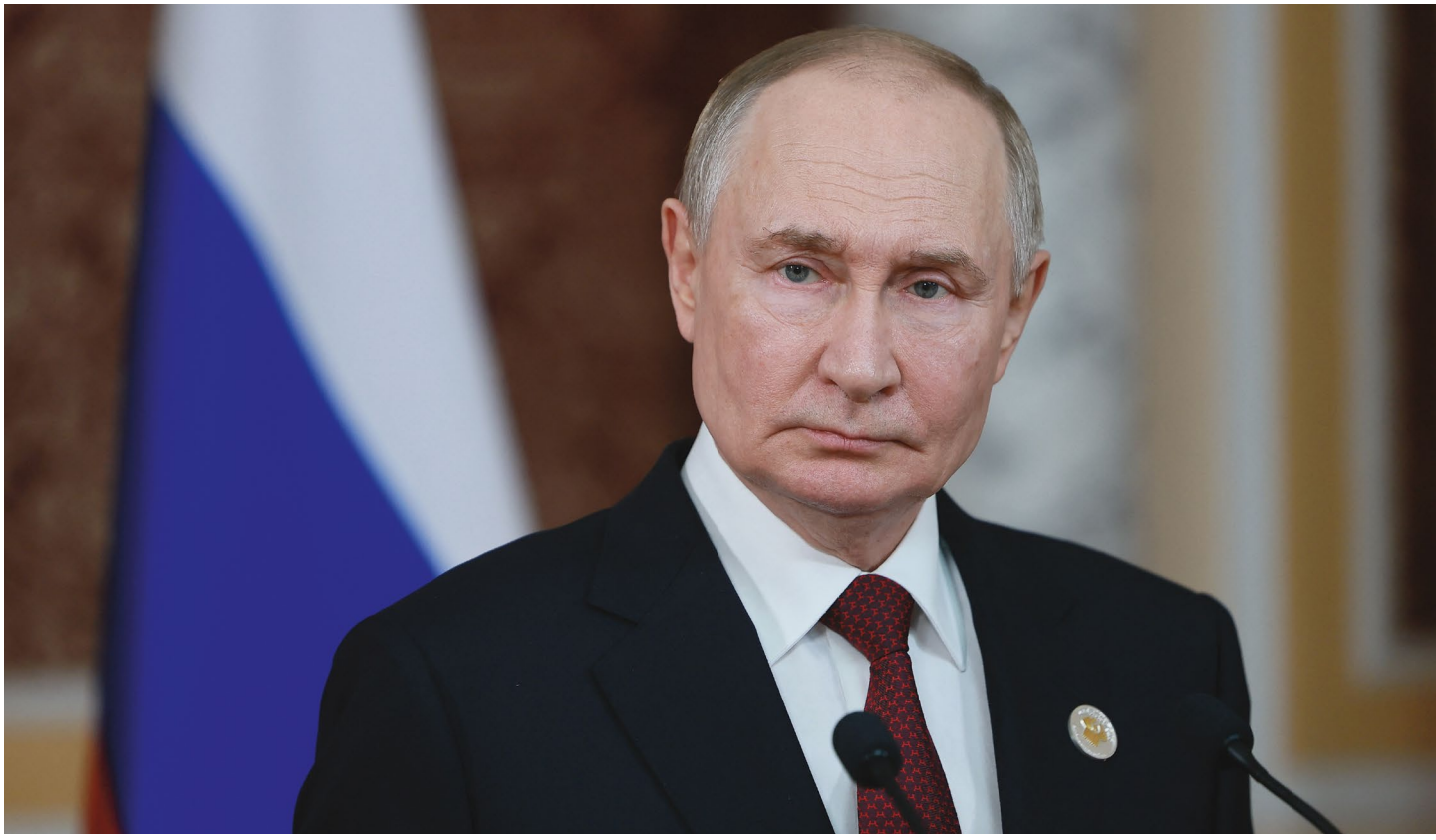
Russian negotiating style. When does the West learn?

Carsten Søndergaard



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carsten Søndergaard is the former Danish ambassador to Moscow and a fellow at Nordic Humanities Centre.

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Executive Summary

Russia's negotiating style is rooted in power, patience and prestige, not compromise. Russia has consistently approached diplomacy as an extension of conflict rather than a means to resolve it. Understanding this mindset is vital if Europe and its allies are to deter, rather than accommodate, Moscow.

This paper identifies seven enduring traits of Russian statecraft that continue to shape its diplomacy:

1. **GREAT-POWER BY RIGHT** – the belief that no major international question should be settled without Russia's participation;
2. **BORDERS AND BOUNDLESSNESS** – an ambiguous relationship with borders that keeps neighbours uncertain;
3. **INSTRUMENTALISED IDENTITY** – the political use of identity, particularly "Russians abroad", as a tool of influence;
4. **RUSSIA SHOULD BE FEARED** – projecting power through intimidation, with respect earned by fear rather than trust;
5. **HONOUR AND INFLUENCE** – insisting on parity with the United States and China, favouring bilateralism and equating dignity with strength;
6. **ZERO-SUM LOGIC** – viewing global politics as a contest in which one side's gain is another's loss;
7. **EXPERIENCE AND DECEPTION** – combining skilled diplomacy with *maskirovka* and hybrid warfare to mislead the West.

For the West, effective engagement requires realism, deterrence and unity, not misplaced faith in goodwill negotiations.

Introduction: The logic of power in Russian diplomacy

"You act as if Russia and not Japan won the war." The Japanese foreign minister is said to have made this remark to Russian Prime Minister Sergej Witte when the two were negotiating a peace treaty in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, after the Russo-Japanese War in 1905.

The background to the comment was that Sergej Witte made demands and conditions on Japan as if Russia had won – which of course it had not. This remark says much about Russia's negotiating style. Russia understands hard power, and in international affairs, the leadership in the Kremlin only yields when it recognises that the battle cannot be won.

To confront Russia effectively, the West must understand how Russia negotiates and situate itself accordingly. But let us begin at the beginning: the Russian assault on Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

It has now been almost four years since Russia launched its full-scale invasion. The consequences have been enormous, and the course of events should prompt serious reflection in the West. Why did many in the West not see it coming, given that it already began in 2014? And most importantly: Are we about to repeat some of the same mistakes?

The course of events also shows how difficult it remains for the West to grasp Russia's negotiating style and draw the necessary conclusions from it. Too many still believe that one merely has to sit down at a table, find a solution, and move on to the next issue. But that is not how Russia operates.

Before examining what lessons the West can learn from history, this paper presents the key elements of Russia's negotiating style – how they evolved, and what they reveal about the Kremlin's underlying foreign policy logic.

Seven elements of Russia's negotiation style

1. GREAT POWER BY RIGHT

The Kremlin's point of departure is that Russia is a large country. This applies not only geographically, but also to the self-conception of Russian decision-makers. President Vladimir Putin and the elite hold a firm belief that Russia should be a country that other states cannot bypass.

Long-serving Soviet Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko formulated this belief clearly: *no international problem should be settled without the participation of the Soviet Union*.[1] Today's Russia still insists that its voice be heard in each major international issue.

That role can be exercised either positively or negatively. Russia's status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council gives the country a platform that can be used to solve crises or perpetuate them.

Reflecting on Gromyko's statement helps to explain why Russia has often negotiated the way it has. The goal is not to reach agreement, but to assert influence. It does not negotiate to find solutions that everyone can live with, contrary to what many in the West believe. To Moscow, international affairs are about conflict. The notion of international harmony is absent from Russian foreign policy debate.

2. BORDERS AND BOUNDLESSNESS

Second, Russian politicians and diplomats think geopolitically.

This is not unexpected given the size of the country. But from this, the understanding also follows that there will always be one or another problem along the country's borders. Problems are part of the world, but problems are like storms. They come and they go, and there is therefore no reason for panic. Russia will survive them. Sometimes, problems can be solved. Other times, one has an interest in their not being solved.

Furthermore, there is the question of where Russia ends, as it asked on large posters in Moscow. From a historical perspective, Russia's territorial reach has been extraordinary – not only up to and including Alaska, but even with Russian settlements in North America once extending as far as north of San Francisco.

The sense of vastness has shaped the Russian psyche. It is often captured in the familiar phrase, "our boundless country" – a conviction that Russia's interests aren't confined to its current borders.

Russia's borders have moved through the years. Today, the border with China has been clarified and regulated. This is not the case with every other border. This stems from the fact that Russia wishes partly to have a sphere of influence, and partly to create uncertainty in neighbouring countries.

It is troubling that in some places Russia has removed border markings with Estonia. The message is clear. Insofar as problems arise, Russia's point of departure is: "What's mine is mine, what's yours is negotiable".[2]

After the latest amendment, the Russian constitution states that the government guarantees the security of Russians outside of Russia.[3] The constitution does not, however, say how that protection should be applied. The message to neighbouring countries with Russian populations – especially in the Baltic States – is unmistakable.

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3. INSTRUMENTALISING IDENTITY

But who counts as Russian, and who decides? Ultimately, this is a political question, and a tool for Russian foreign policy. Official Russia may claim to defend Russian compatriots, but many Russians in Ukraine do not share its vision.

The invasion of Ukraine exposed a total misreading of national identity. Putin and his circle believed that not only could Russia overturn the leadership in Kyiv, but that Russians in Donbas and other regions would support Moscow's advance. They did not. Many Russians in Ukraine consider themselves Ukrainian Russians.

The lesson is clear: national identity does not follow language. One can be a Russian-speaking Ukrainian and despise Russia. A little more directly: A lot of English is spoken in Dublin, but that does not make the Irish English. National identity and language go together in some countries, but things can be different in other countries.

4. RUSSIA SHOULD BE FEARED

The attitude in the Kremlin is that Russia should be feared, particularly by its neighbours.

A good example of this is a conversation at the end of the 1990s that then-German State Secretary Wolfgang Ischinger held with his Russian colleague, Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Mamedov. Ischinger remarked that Russian policy caused neighbouring countries to fear Russia – with the implication that this could hardly be in Russia's interest. Would a more harmonious relationship not be better for Russia?

Mamedov smiled and said that it was correct – and it was good they feared Russia.[4]

The anecdote is a good example of the Western misreading of Russia. Russia simply has other values than we have in the West. In Russia, power and influence trump economics.

5. HONOUR AND INFLUENCE

Honour also plays a big role for the Russian leadership. Russia considers itself on the same level as the United States and China and insists that other countries also treat it as such. This has come out clearly during the process of negotiations about Ukraine. From the Russian perspective, insisting that the central forum for Ukraine's future is an American-Russian process has been successful.

President Putin will simply not negotiate with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whom he does not respect. Unfortunately, US President Donald Trump has accepted this approach, as we witnessed in Alaska in August.[5]

It is also important to be aware that patience is a virtue in Russian diplomacy. The Kremlin rarely initiates dialogue with European leaders. A review of conversations with Putin prior to the invasion shows that the initiative for such dialogue almost always came from the European side.

The point is that Europeans must acknowledge that Russia does not see the EU as a significant interlocutor. The EU, in Russian eyes, has no real power base, stemming from the fact that the Union cannot seriously make use of hard power.

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Russia therefore wishes to "bilateralise" its westward relationships. Washington is number one on the list. Next comes Berlin. The order after that depends on circumstances. Neither Great Britain nor France is as influential as they believe.

It is worth noting that when Sergej Witte negotiated the peace treaty with Japan in 1905, there was a categorical Russian refusal to pay compensation for war damages. This was beneath Russia's dignity.

6. ZERO-SUM THINKING

The sixth aspect I will mention is the principle that "your loss is my win – and the reverse". In other words, Russia views international politics as a zero-sum game. This attitude is far removed from the win-win logic on which the European Union is built.

In the EU, we see diplomacy as a means to find solutions that allow all sides to benefit. In Moscow, the same process is seen as a competition for advantage.

There are, of course, exceptions to the picture I have painted above. The arms-control negotiations during the Nixon-Brezhnev era are a good example. The US and Soviet Union began by negotiating a ceiling on strategic weapons but discovered during the process that they had overlapping interests in other areas. Other arms-control agreements followed.

Unfortunately, the situation today is different. There is a fundamental difference between Brezhnev's Soviet Union and Putin's Russia. Under Brezhnev, the Soviet Union was a status-quo power, whereas Putin's Russia largely revisionist.

After the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas in 2014, Putin gave a major speech at the Valdai Conference in Sochi.[6] The title of the conference was "The World Order: New Rules or A Game Without Rules."

7. EXPERIENCE AND THE ART OF DECEPTION

Experience and insight play a large role when Russia engages in international diplomacy. Moscow always sends experienced and professional diplomats onto the field.

An example of this is the meeting in Riyadh in February 2025 between the US and Russia, where the US was represented by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, then-National Security Advisor Mike Waltz and Special Russia Envoy Steven Witkoff. The Russian side was represented by Foreign Minister Sergej Lavrov and President Putin's diplomatic advisor Yuri Ushakov. Both have more than five decades of diplomatic experience.

One must never underestimate the quality of Russian diplomats. They are generally very skilled and always well-prepared for meetings.

From the Russian side, there is always a clear goal when entering negotiations – but it is hidden, which is why one not rarely finds references to the related military concept *maskirovka* – the art of deception. Russian negotiators pose many questions during talks, giving opportunities to pocket openings that appear along the way.

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Western negotiators, in their impatience for an agreement, can inadvertently reveal valuable information, which Moscow then uses to its advantage.

Russia wants a new world order, the Russian toolbox is significant, and many tools are used. Work goes on in many dimensions.

Propaganda has always been an important tool in Soviet and Russian foreign policy. The goal is to influence public opinion in Western countries by exploiting democratic freedoms and open media.

Russia is conducting hybrid warfare against the West through multiple instruments, including influencing elections, spreading misinformation, launching cyberattacks, jamming GPS signals and even assassinating critics on Western soil. The list could be extended.

The most important point is that Moscow will never admit responsibility for such measures. If accused, the propaganda apparatus always assumes an offended tone: *Nothing is proven, and doubt must benefit everyone.*

In recent years, the Kremlin has revealed a growing readiness to take risks. Drones have been sent over Poland and spotted over Danish and German airports,[7] and Estonia's airspace has been violated by three MIG fighters.[8] Escalation is carried out conspicuously: partly to make Western countries tremble, and partly to weaken their will to think strategically about Ukraine. The aim is to strengthen the voices in the West who argue that reacting would itself constitute escalation.

Conclusion: What Russia wants – and what the West gets wrong

Recent developments must now convince most observers that this is a conflict which, from Russia's perspective, extends beyond Ukraine. Russia wants Ukraine under its wings and seeks a buffer zone of neutral countries that would weaken both the EU and NATO.

Seen from Moscow, the ideal scenario is a process that significantly diminishes Western unity and influence. The West is considered decadent – with principles and borders, yes, but unwilling to stand up for them.

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The central question is whether Russia, with its style of negotiations, gains more from the West than the West from Russia. The answer must be: not necessarily.

There are two principal reasons. First, mistakes are made – from time-to-time big mistakes – within the Russian system. The system is extremely authoritarian, and it takes courage to tell the leadership that reality is different from what they want to hear. There is a powerful ideological filter. Consider what a misjudgment it was to invade Ukraine. Moscow simply did not understand how much Ukrainian identity has developed over 30 years.

Second, we in the West also make big mistakes. Many people seem to struggle even to spell the word deterrence. When the West adopts measures, leaders often rush to declare what will not be done. There must be smiles in the Kremlin when such statements are made – it is of course nice to know.

The reaction to the violation of Poland's airspace was thought-provoking. While Western leaders condemned it as completely unacceptable,[9] what was actually done? Very little. The Kremlin likely concluded that this behaviour was tolerated.

Appetite grows by eating. Russia's assertiveness is further strengthened by the actions of an American president who does not like to challenge Russia and appears devoid of a coherent foreign policy agenda.

Unfortunately, much indicates that the situation in and around Ukraine will worsen. It is therefore important that the West understands how Russia pursues its foreign policy goals. We must become more realistic and less illusory in our approach. The currency is hard power – and it is hard power alone that can change Russian behaviour.

There are risks in making decisions, but there are also risks in not making decisions.

[1] "EXCERPTS FROM SPEECH BY GROMYKO TO THE U.N.," *The New York Times*, Section A, p. 14, 23 September 1981.

[2] Kennedy, John F., "Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Berlin Crisis", The White House, July 25, 1961, via John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

[3] Constitution of the Russian Federation art. 61 (1993, 2022).

[4] Ischinger, Wolfgang, and Cornelsen, Claudia (2018), *Welt in Gefahr: Deutschland und Europa in Unsicheren Zeiten [World in Danger: Germany and Europe in an Uncertain Time]*, Berlin: Econ, p. 125.

[5] Majcin, Juraj et al, "Framing the August 15 Trump-Putin Summit in Alaska", The European Policy Centre, 13 August 2025.

[6] President of Russia, "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", 24 October 2014.

[7] Starcevic, Seb, "With Europe on edge, wave of drone sightings across Denmark disrupts air travel", *POLITICO*, 25 September 2025.

[8] Sytas, Andrius and Slattery, Gram, "Russian jets enter Estonia's airspace in latest test for NATO", *Reuters*, 20 September 2025.

[9] NATO, "Statement by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte on the violation of Polish airspace by Russian drones", *Speeches and transcripts*, 10 September 2025.

NOTES

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