



Russia's Foreign Policy in the Current Period: Continuation or a New Shift?

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Recent years have witnessed substantive changes in the implementation of Russia's foreign policy, while keeping intact the basic essence of being a great power. Russia has viewed 'realist' and 'neo-realist' state-centric power politics as the dominant paradigm in international politics. Based on this prevailing understanding of realism, Russia's foreign policy has undergone transition since the late 1980's from 'new thinking' to 'pro-American' shift to 'Eurasianism'. The objectives of the policy have remained same while remaining within the international system without unbalancing the 'new world order'.

The prudence observed in Russian foreign policy is because of profound changes the geopolitical landscape of power is witnessing, largely provoked or accelerated by the global financial and economic crisis. Amidst this confusion, a new multipolar world has evolved where new powers are seeking position in the international arena. Many countries in North Africa and West Asia are witnessing regime changes.

With the emergence of new powers and regime changes, Russia is attempting to manoeuvre its way to have more influence in the international arena. These new developments and changes have affected the formulation of Russia's foreign policy. With Vladimir Putin taking over the

second Presidency in 2012, the foreign policy document published in February 2013 showcases a continuation of the earlier foreign policy, albeit few additions.

Essence of Russian Foreign Policy

The main premise of Russia under any government has been based on a realistic assessment of the country's interests. After the end of the Cold War, Russia lost its geostrategic, economic, military, political and ideological edge. It was forced to accept a 'second class status' in the international system. Russia was unable to reconcile to this new position and tried to find a footing by investing in upgrading its international standing.¹ This was done by adopting a 'multi-vector' foreign policy. Russian policy makers understood that in order to reap benefits of the domestic developments² and to regain its power, it was necessary to have a diversified approach towards every country in terms of bilateral and economic relations. Russia realises that bloc-based approach to address international issues is being gradually replaced by 'network diplomacy' based on flexible participation in multilateral mechanisms aimed at finding effective solutions to common challenges.³

Russia under Gorbachev (1990-1991) and Yeltsin (1991-1999)

Russia under President Mikhail Gorbachev's (1990-1991) coined the 'new thinking' policy, based on shared global principles of justice to solve universal problems. He exercised political influence through enhancement of diplomatic relations and economic cooperation rather than military power, paving the way for conciliatory policies towards the West, including the US. An appeasing phase between Russia and the US culminated in the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) in 1987 (at that time Gorbachev was serving as a General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 until 1991) and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) in 1991. The effects of these treaties resulted in improving relations between Russia and Europe.⁴

Under President Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), Russia adopted a conciliatory approach towards the West and coined the term 'pro-American' or 'Atlanticist' policy. The primary reason was to create a non-threatening external environment that would be most conducive to Russia's internal economic and political development. This focus on domestic development reflected a foreign policy of 'accommodation', 'retrenchment', and 'risk-avoidance'.⁵ This led to the signing of the START II in 1993. Yeltsin's readiness to share information on the US Prisoners' of War or Missing in Action (POW/MIA) since 1945 and Moscow's acknowledgment of shooting down of the Korean Airlines Flight (KAL 007) by a Soviet interceptor was appreciated in the West. Also, Russia wanted

support from the US in its fight against Chechen rebels and Islamic terrorism emanating from the former Muslim countries of the Soviet bloc.

Yeltsin's foreign policy centred on the promotion of human rights and the universal values of global economic, environmental, and nuclear security, which was to be realised through a community of democratic states. Under this policy, Russia hoped to avoid the temptations of assuming a leading role in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and avoided slowing the pace of market-oriented reforms in Russia. It did not want to jeopardise its integration plans with Atlantic and European economic institutions. However, this idea was not appreciated among Russian nationalists, who felt that Russia's policy was drifting towards 'liberal Westernization'. The nationalists felt that Russia should concentrate on 'near abroad.'⁶

The new multi-dimensional foreign policy led to diversification of Russia's interest, resulting in strengthening of relations with every region, including the Asia-Pacific. In this region, Russia was keen on building ties with China rather than normalizing relations with Japan. It expressed concern over the threat of nuclear proliferation in the Korean peninsula. However, in the Russian foreign policy of 1993, Central and South America, Africa and Australia were not given much priority. The top priority and fundamental importance were the countries of the former Soviet space.⁷

From 1994-1999, Russia witnessed a number of problems such as economic crisis with huge foreign debt, military invasion of Chechnya, domination by the oligarchs etc, which tarnished Russia's image in the West.

Russia under Vladimir Putin, First Two Terms: (2000-2008)

In this backdrop, Vladimir Putin became Russia's President in 2000. He continued with his predecessors' policies though with modification. The three main thrust of Putin's foreign policy were modernizing Russia's economy; reforming the structure of power; and a new international role.⁸ However, during that time there was chaos in the international system, created by the US's invasion of Iraq in 2003. Putin rejected the western-style democracy and the relationship between Russia and US received a setback. With a remarkable economic recovery witnessed by Russia, a new assertiveness in Russian foreign policy was observed.⁹

Putin with his assertive and defiant foreign policy set out to regain Russia's 'great power' status. He invested in diversification of relationships and started demonstrating force and provocations towards the West. His vision of an 'autonomous great power' gave birth to the 'multipolar'¹⁰ concept in Russia.¹¹ Carrying forward the assertiveness, in 2007, Putin condemned the US for its policies of unilateralism, the use of force, and deployment of anti-missile shield system in Eastern Europe. He showed his displeasure towards the European Union's (EU) policy of the eastern enlargement. He also tried to improve Russia's economic competitiveness in the international system.¹²

Nonetheless, despite an assertive foreign policy, Putin tried to balance Russia's image by establishing proactive cooperation with the international system. Russia focused on a balanced foreign policy, a policy between Eurasia and Transatlantic. During his first term in office, he upgraded the national security, military and foreign policy concepts to ensure Russia's progress towards a multidimensional, balanced and pragmatic external strategy. In his second term (2004-2008), he continued with this approach and focussed on comprehensive development and modernisation of Russia.¹³

At the regional level, Russia tried hard to push the US influence aside, and promoted regional groupings such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) and OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), etc.¹⁴ In order to contain Western influence and preserve its influence in the former Soviet region, Russia adopted various approaches like diplomatic activity in Belarus, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, subversion in Ukraine and the Baltic States, and the use of force in Georgia and Chechnya.¹⁵

Russia under Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012)

In 2009, US's 'reset policy' seemed to ease the underlying tension between the US and Russia, at least temporarily and this marked a new period of romance between the US and Russia. The signing of the START on 8 April 2010 boosted Russia's image as an indispensable player in the global security and stability dynamics.

Russia's foreign policy under Medvedev was similar to his predecessor with a vision to pursue an 'open', 'foreseeable' and 'pragmatic' foreign policy. However, Medvedev's policy of democratization differed slightly from Putin's policy. Medvedev aimed to set up a democratic

global process, to resolve global problems collectively by relying on the rule of international law, develop friendly relations with neighbouring countries, and eliminate or prevent the emergence of tensions. Like Putin, he saw unilateralism as a security threat. Medvedev also expanded Russia's interests towards Asia and bolstered its relations with China and India.¹⁶

Like his predecessors, Medvedev stressed on the element of *realpolitik* in foreign policy, focusing on national interests. The focus was on geostrategic concerns, leading to self-assertion, especially in the case of Chechnya and Georgia and engagement with international economy. However, to allay Russia's image, Medvedev adopted a softer approach in dealing with other countries with which it had differences, including boundary disputes,¹⁷ nuclear weapons, missile defences, gas supplies, etc.¹⁸

Russia's Current Approach to Foreign Policy

Since taking over Russia's presidency again in 2012, Vladimir Putin has continued with his earlier policies with no drastic changes. The document named Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (2013) focuses its priorities with a vision till the period of 2020 through a convergence between Russia's foreign policy and national security policy. It rejects the notion of unilateralism by any country.¹⁹ The basic principle of the policy is towards finding an appropriate means through which Russia can deal with the unstable and rapidly changing world, which is due to multipolarity. Russia feels that countries are interdependent and any kind of threat will have ramifications across the world. Hence, it wants to take prompt and 'multi-vector' actions.²⁰ The new concept document shows its pro-active approach through collective actions of the international community, namely the United Nations, to solve global issues.²¹

Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, in March 2013 stated that the updated Concept of Foreign Policy is a continuation of the basic approaches of the document approved by Vladimir Putin in 2000 and in 2008. In fact, it has similarities to a large extent with the policies Gorbachev and Yeltsin era. Like the preceding policies, the current foreign policy is based on pragmatism, openness, multi-vector approach and confrontation-free advancement of Russian national interests. The essence of the policy is to acquire a 'universal nature'²² of 'global collective values' for political and economic security, which was also in Yeltsin's foreign policy. Russia aims to uphold human rights, while recognising history, culture and national peculiarities of individual states,²³ which is similar to Yeltsin's foreign policy.

Nonetheless, additional priorities based on national interests are observed in the new foreign policy. Russia wants stronger relationship with Europe with a special focus on Germany, Italy, France and the Netherlands, due to their successful cooperation in the field of natural gas sales. Russia is accordingly giving priority to EU, and seeking a visa-free travel regime. The other priority countries and institutions outlined in the document are OSCE, NATO, Northern European countries, Baltic States and the Balkans.²⁴

With regards to Russia-US relationship, a continuing dilemma is observed such as the announcement by Putin in 2012 about no significant cuts in Russia's nuclear arsenal. Putin still opposes the installation of the anti-missile defence system in Eastern and Central Europe. Russia's apprehension is mainly because it considers Poland, Czech Republic and Caucasus as a part of its 'natural sphere of influence.' There are fears that US may run the systems, threatening Russia's interest in the region. Russia also feels that the system will significantly degrade effectiveness of its strategic nuclear forces.²⁵ Nonetheless, understanding Russia's strategic role in the international system, Obama is attempting to engage Putin in a constructive manner. For instance, on 16 March 2013, the US announced scrapping of the fourth stage of the missile defense system, which can shoot down some of the Russian Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles.²⁶

As for China and India, the updated Concept of Foreign Policy has described them as friendly countries and underscores the need to bolster relations but is circumspect about its relationship with China. Russia neither wants a close alliance with China nor become a member of an anti-China alliance. With India, Russia wants to engage more actively and strengthen its bilateral ties.²⁷

In the policy document, Russia has declared the Asia-Pacific region as the 'most dynamically developing geopolitical space' and has dubbed it as the future centre of global economy and politics. Therefore, under these circumstances, Russia assumes the balancing role in international relations. The present foreign policy discourse of Moscow aims towards achieving this objective. This draft document clearly attests Russia's aspirations of becoming a superpower.²⁸ The strengthening of Russia's relationship with China, West Asia and Korean Peninsula is a continuation of Yeltsin's foreign policy. However, new paradigm is attached to Russia's current foreign policy, such as Asia-Pacific becoming the central focus of Russia and also improvising its relationship with Japan.

Modifications in Russia's foreign policy are also seen over issues like the position of the UN. Russia wants the UN to be a unique instrument, having capability to prevent interference in domestic affairs of countries under various pretexts. The updated Concept of Foreign Policy also expresses danger looming over the information domain and growing ideological differences dominating international relations, which could affect global stability. In the economic sector, Russia wants to assist in the building of a system based on fairer principles of democracy and justice, economy, trade and a sound monetary system.²⁹

To achieve these objectives, the foreign policy document sheds light on the methods to be adopted by Russia. For the first time, Moscow has articulated the notion of 'soft power' in its official document and is hoping to shape a 'positive image'. Russia also hopes to explore vast potential of the information technologies (IT) and that of the Russian Diaspora. Meanwhile, integration with the post-Soviet countries is identified as an imperative for Russia's foreign policy,³⁰ a continuation of Yeltsin's policy especially after the 'nationalist' shift of his foreign policy.

Conclusion

The significant feature of Russia's foreign policy is to regain great power status. At least till 2018 when next election takes place, Russia's foreign policy will be 'multi-dimensional'/'multi-vector'. Russia will continue with a cautious, pragmatic, independent yet constructive foreign policy. It will endure to keep its uniqueness, yet blend with the world on common concerns and issues that suit its national interests.

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Endnotes

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