

Change and Continuity in Russia's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Since its emergence as an independent centralized state, Russia has followed three distinct foreign policy trajectories. It frequently sided with a coalition of Western states against those whom it viewed as threatening its interests and values. The second trajectory was that of defensiveness or balancing through domestic revival and flexible international alliances. Finally, Russia has historically resorted to assertiveness or unilateral promotion of its foreign policy objectives abroad. The paper reviews the central forces behind Russia's policy and its fluctuations after the Soviet breakup.

The Formation of Russia's Foreign Policy

Focusing on power, security and prestige is only partially helpful in determining why Russia has historically acted in the ways that it has. Even though Russia's policy makers frequently invoked those objectives to justify their state actions, the broader context for their behavior has been that of values or ideology of national interest.

In different eras the state acted on different ideologies of national interest. Each varying ideology provided the state with the sense of purpose, ethical principles and meaningful context in which to act. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the dominant ideology was that of a Christian autocracy. Soviet ideology fundamentally transformed the national values, replacing Christianity and autocracy with beliefs in communism and single party rule. The new post-Soviet ideology is still in the process of being formed and currently includes values of Russianness (*Rossiyanse*) and a strong state (*derzhava*).

The Russians have not defined their system of values as anti-Western and, indeed, view the West's recognition as a critical component of such a system. That explains the multiple historical cases of Russia's cooperation with Western nations. However, when Russia's significant other (i.e. the West) challenges its actions and values, Russia is likely to turn away from cooperative behavior. Whether Russia will turn to defensive or assertive foreign policy for sustaining its values depends on the perceived level of domestic confidence. If Russia is internally weak, the state typically concentrates on defending the prestige of great power. When Russia enters periods of growing confidence, it may turn to a more assertive promotion of its values. The West's failure to accept such values is likely to encourage Russia to act alone.

The 1990s: Cooperation to Defensiveness

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia initially pursued a policy of a far-reaching cooperation with Western states. In the aftermath of the failed coup of August 1991, Boris Yeltsin had first formulated and pursued the idea of Westernization as a matter of inter-

national strategy. The idea included radical economic reform, the so-called "shock therapy," gaining a full-scale status in transatlantic economic and security institutions, such as the European Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, International Monetary Fund, and G-7, and separating the new Russia from the former Soviet republics economically, politically, and culturally. This 'Westernist' vision shaped the new foreign policy concept prepared in late 1992 and signed into law in April 1993.

The new Russia's leaders saw their country as an organic part of the Western civilization, whose "genuine" Western identity was hijacked by the Bolsheviks and the Soviet system. In the new leaderships' perspective, during the Cold War Russia had acted against its own national identity and interests, and now it finally had an opportunity to become a "normal" Western country. This vision was a clear product of a long tradition of Russia's Westernist thinking which insisted that the country would develop in the same direction as the West and go through the same stages of development. Externally, Yeltsin and his first Foreign Minister, Andrei Kozyrev, drew their inspiration from the West's growing criticism of Mikhail Gorbachev's socialist reform and encouragements to build a pro-Western system of market democracy.

But the Westernist vision was soon met with a formidable opposition, which advanced a defensive vision of national interest. Led by presidential advisor, Sergei Stankevich, and then the Chief of Foreign Intelligence, Yevgeni Primakov, the new coalition included military industrialists, the army, and the security services, and it advocated the notion of Russia as an independent great power. Without implying confrontation with the West, the new group sought to defend the image of Russia as a strong state striving to preserve its distinctness in the world. Yeltsin's appointment of Primakov as Foreign Minister signified the victory of the new vision. Thus, in the mid-1990s, Russian foreign policy changed. The key priorities included improving relations with non-Western countries and integrating the former Soviet region

under a tighter control from Moscow. Statists wanted to pursue “multi-vector” policies, aiming to preserve what they saw as Russia’s independence and develop more balanced relations with the West. They also warned against Russia unequivocally siding with Europe or the United States at the expense of relationships with China, India, and the Islamic world. The country’s National Security Concept of 1997 recommended that Russia maintain equal distancing in relations to the “global European and Asian economic and political actors” and presented a positive program for the integration of CIS efforts in the security area.

This defensive foreign policy was the result of Western states’ unwillingness to accommodate Russia’s ambition of “joining” the West and the Kremlin’s inability to initiate a unilateral response. The Western nations did not provide the rapid and massive assistance that the Russian leadership had expected in response to its new pro-Western vision. Rather, the West decided to expand NATO eastward while excluding Russia from the process. The decision strengthened the sense of Russia not being accepted by the West as its one of its own, and it provided the Statist coalition with the required ammunition for questioning the objectives of the pro-Western government and constructing an image of external threat.

But the new domestic context of growing disorder, corruption, and poverty that had resulted from the Yeltsin government’s reforms was not conducive to an assertive direction. The Soviet disintegration led to the emergence of a whole series of new conflicts in the Russian periphery. Russia lost one sixth of its territory, its economy shrank by some 50% and the state was divided by powerful individuals, with the Kremlin practically losing the ability to govern. The Western states expected Russia to follow their political and economic recommendations, yet programs of Western assistance served mostly to encourage the destruction of the previous economic system and to build relationships within a narrow and corrupt ruling elite.

The 2000s: Cooperation to Assertiveness

The arrival of Vladimir Putin as the new president in March 2000 marked yet another change in Russia’s foreign policy and a renewed interest to engaging the West. This departure from Primakov’s defensiveness had more to do with the new vision promoted by the president, than with changes in Russia’s structural position. Putin endorsed the values of preserving great power status, while embracing the vision of Russia as a part of the West. He also emphasized the European dimension in his foreign policy. Russia wanted to start fresh and re-engage the Western nations into a project of common

importance. After September 11, 2001 Putin was among the first to call President George W. Bush to express his support and pledge important resources to help America in its fight against terrorism. Putin also emphasized Russia as a reliable alternative to traditional Middle Eastern sources of oil and natural gas. Russia proposed a new framework of strategic interaction with the United States and chose a mute response to the U.S. decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty. In partial reflection of Russia’s European priorities, Russia did not support the United States’ military intervention in Iraq, but joined the France and Germany-led coalition of those opposing the unilateral American war.

However, in the mid-2000s, Russia’s policy shifted in a more assertive direction. The Kremlin challenged the United States’ global policy of regime change as “unilateral” and disrespectful of international law. In response to Washington’s decision to deploy elements of a missile defense system (MDS) in Europe, Putin announced his decision to declare a Russian moratorium on implementing the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, which would allow Russia to freely move its conventional forces within its territory. Russia also sought to strengthen its energy position in world markets by building pipelines in all geographic directions, purchasing shares abroad, raising energy prices for its oil and gas-dependent neighbors, moving to control transportation networks in the former USSR and coordinating its activities with other energy-producers. A new foreign policy consensus emerged that an assertive style of achieving the objectives of development, stability and security suited Russia well at that moment in time.

The shift toward assertiveness reflected both the Kremlin’s dissatisfaction with the West’s policies and Russia’s new domestic confidence. The Kremlin saw Western policies as disrespectful of Russia’s sovereignty and independence. Soon after the invasion of Iraq, the United States pushed the entire former Soviet region toward transforming its political institutions and was now working on extending membership in the alliance to former Soviet states, such as Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. Russia also recovered economically, which allowed its leadership to pursue an assertive foreign policy. By 2007 the economy had recovered to its 1990 level and until the global financial crisis hit economic growth continued at about 7 percent per year. As global energy demand has risen, Russian oil and gas reserves proved a key foreign policy resource.

The 2010s: Cooperation to a New Defensiveness?

Around the Fall of 2009, Russia’s foreign policy began to depart from the assertive course that had culminated

in the war with Georgia in August 2008. In response to the global financial crisis and the United States' attempts to "reset" relations with Russia, the Kremlin revived an emphasis on cooperation. Under Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, the country adopted a more nuanced approach to the outside world—one which was dictated by need to modernize the domestic economy. The new approach stressed the importance for the country to build "modernization alliances" across the world, especially with those nations that could offer investments and technologies for economic development. Having re-established itself as a major power, Russia was now turning to domestic modernization and inviting the outside world to contribute to it. This approach may or may not survive depending on Russia's internal changes and the West's willingness to recognize Russia as a partner.

From Russia's perspective, the Western recognition of the Kremlin's objectives is not sufficient. Russia remains critical of the U.S. proposal to develop the MDS jointly with the Europeans but separately from Russia. At the end of 2010, Moscow shelved its initiative to negotiate a new security treaty with European nations after not getting any support from NATO officials and the United States. The Western nations remained rhetorically supportive of the former Soviet states' bid for NATO membership, whereas Russia maintained its right to protect its interests in Georgia and elsewhere in the former Soviet region. The Kremlin was also unhappy with the West's handling of the Middle Eastern crisis and its involvement in fostering regime change in Libya and Syria, as well as Western criticisms of Russia's own centralized

political system. Even on Afghanistan, the Kremlin's calls to develop a joint strategy did not elicit a serious response from Western countries despite their appreciation for Russia's cooperation.

However, a full renewal of assertiveness is unlikely. Russia must address a number of serious internal issues. Among these issues is the unfavorable demographic balance across regions and in the country as a whole, excessive dependence of the economy on energy exports, declining social infrastructure and an administratively weak state. The latter makes it impossible to make decisions independent from the pressures of special interests and address the country's demographic and institutional problems. Russia's political structure is also excessively dependent on personalities and needs to be reformed further to establish a more reliable mechanism for the transfer of power. Furthermore, Russia is dependent on the West for its economic modernization and preservation of political independence. Western investments are critical for the country's economic modernization. Russia also needs the West's political support, given the fast growth of China and the risk of Moscow becoming a junior partner of Beijing.

This combination of the lacking external recognition and internal vulnerability means that Russia will continue to mix assertiveness with elements of cooperation in its foreign policy. There is also a possibility that Russia may develop some form of a defensive foreign policy. The latter would require articulation of a new coherent vision of national interest.

About the Author

Andrei P. Tsygankov is a Professor at San Francisco State University. He is the author of a forthcoming book entitled "Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations" (Cambridge University Press, 2012), and has previously published numerous books including "Russophobia: Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy" (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and "Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity" (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2nd edition, 2010).

Further Reading

- Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2nd edition, 2010)
- Mankoff, J. *Russian Foreign Policy: the Return of Great Power Politics*, 2nd ed. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.
- Trenin, D. *Post-Imperium: A Eurasia Story*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011.