

Russia's Foreign Policy: An Overview of 25 Years of Transition

International Studies
53(3–4) 210–226
© 2018 Jawaharlal Nehru University
SAGE Publications
sagepub.in/home.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0020881717745961
<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/isq>



Rajan Kumar¹

Abstract

This article provides a broad overview of Russian foreign policy in the last three decades. It has divided this period into three broad categories—neoliberalism and the West-centric policy (1991–1995); Eurasianism and the search for multipolarity (1996–2006); and crossing the Rubicon (2007–2015)—marked by external interventions. Taking domestic factors into account, it analyses how Russian foreign policy took a radical turn from being a West-centric to a complete break with the West. Russian interventions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria have revived the spectre of the beginning of a new Cold War. Towards the end, it discusses how Russia has developed a close economic and strategic partnership with China, especially after the sanctions from the West.

Keywords

Foreign policy, Russia, Yeltsin, Putin, Kozyrev, neoliberalism, eurasianism, crossing the Rubicon, NATO, BRICS, Crimea, Syria, EU

Russia's foreign policy underwent three distinct phases of transition in the last 25 years. In the first phase (1991–1995), the main thrust was to substitute the decaying socialist institutions with a capitalist and liberal democratic form of governance. This was the phase of rapid economic privatization initiated by shock therapy and loans-for-shares schemes and political reforms characterized by a new constitution and the emerging super-presidential system. The *kamikaze* crew consisted of Boris Yeltsin, Yegor Gaidar, Andrei Kozyrev and Anatoly Chubais (Desai, 2006). The success of the transition was contingent upon the financial, technological and ideological support from the capitalist countries of the West.

¹ Associate Professor, Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India.

Corresponding author:

Rajan Kumar, Associate Professor, Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India.
E-mail: rajan75jnu@gmail.com

In this phase, Russia tried to appease the West and be recognized as a 'normal' member of Europe. The second phase (1996–2006) witnessed a gradual shift in its policy from a West-centric approach to a more pragmatic and balanced foreign policy. This departure was institutionalized by Yevgeny Primakov who replaced Kozyrev as the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He advocated multipolarity as an alternative to American hegemony and gave priority to Russian interests in CIS and in Asia. He tried to balance the West by forging partnerships in the East and the near abroad. Finally, the third phase of protestation and intervention (2007–2017) began with Putin's speech at Munich in 2007 (Shanker & Landler, 2007). This marked a radical departure from the earlier policy of being cautious and guarded towards the West. Russia dropped the pretence of being diplomatic and civil, and categorically blamed the US and NATO for provoking an arms race, creating instability in West Asia and bypassing international institutions. This was followed by three major interventions in the neighbourhood and beyond. The West was clueless and surprised by each intervention. It had no strategy except economic sanctions to tame Russia. The amount of risk increased with each subsequent intervention. Russia was willing to take risks, while the West was reluctant to commit military on the ground. Russia re-emerged as an indispensable and indomitable actor in the international system. Some scholars declared it as the beginning of a new Cold War (Cohen, 2017; Lucas, 2014).

Historical Context

History may not be the perfect guide for making inferences about the contemporary policies of Russia but a broader pattern does throw some light on the general behaviour of the State. Historians have empirically shown that some aspects of Russia's foreign policy are rooted in the past. Following elements are indispensable to understanding the foreign policy of Russia.

'Orthodoxy', 'autocracy' and 'nationalism' were the main constituents of ideology during the Tsarist times (Kissinger, 1994). Russia was never a part of the so-called 'progressive' West. Even during the nineteenth century, Russia took the side of conservative Germany and Austria rather than progressive France (Tsygankov, 2010). Peter the Great was hugely influenced by scientific achievements and technological advances of the West, but he rejected the notion of popular sovereignty. Russia remained the backwater of political reforms in Europe.

Russia gives priority to state over people and centralization over diffusion of power. Tsarist rulers were autocratic. They rejected the idea of sharing power with people in parliament. A number of political reforms related to power-sharing were introduced in 1905, but they were too little and too late. Tsars promoted the cause of state patriotism over popular nationalism (Tsygankov, 2010). The present regime is also opposed to the idea of sharing power.

Religion renders a unique identity to Russia, but it also isolates Russia from the neighbouring countries in the West which are predominantly catholic or protestant. The sense of Russian exceptionalism is based on its religious and linguistic exclusivity. But the state in Russia has a secular character. Orthodox Christianity

was always subordinated to the state, and it lost its autonomy of action because of its dependence on the state (Baskan, 2014, p. 113).

Geopolitics and empire-building is considered integral to Russia's foreign policy (Donaldson & Noguee, 2005, p. 31; Kissinger, 1994, pp. 172–173). Russia is a unique country in terms of its geography endowed with large land mass, resources and tradition. Historically, it has been surrounded by such powerful empires as Mongol, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and British. It is geographically vulnerable to invasion from all sides except the north. Napoleonic invasion in the nineteenth century was followed by Hitler's attack in the twentieth century. Instability at borders directly impacted Russia and maintaining a buffer state became a necessity as well as a liability during the Tsarist and the Soviet times. In the post-Soviet times, the expansion of NATO and instabilities in the neighbourhood pose a constant threat to Russia's security. The territory inherited by post-Soviet Russia is smaller and more vulnerable compared to the Tsarist and Soviet times.

The vast landmass of Russia could not be protected without a powerful military and a well-developed transport network. Given its focus on security, military became an important instrument of Russia's foreign policy. It needed a large military to protect its borders. Tsarist as well as Soviet rulers focused heavily on modernization of Russian military (Kissinger, 1994). It is estimated that Soviet military expenditure reached one-fifth of its GNP during the peak of the Cold War (Rowen, Wolf, & Tayler, 1990, p. 15). Russian military industrial complex is considered one of the most advanced in the world. But this process of militarization started from the time of Peter the Great and continued during the Soviet and post-Soviet times. Russia has the most sophisticated nuclear and other weapons. It is the top supplier of arms and weapons to the Third World countries, rivaled only by the US. The militarization of state led to the securitization of its foreign policy. The security and intelligence forces are integral to decision-making in Russia (Illarionov, 2009; Kryshatanovskaya & White, 2003). The Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB) was a very powerful intelligence agency during the Soviet period, and President Putin comes from this background. In the post-Soviet period, *silovikis*, the decision-makers from the security background, play decisive roles (Petrov, 2005).

Access to warm-water port is essential for Russia's trade and security. But Russia has a very limited access to such ports. The rulers of Russia made special efforts to acquire such ports from neighbouring empires (Donaldson & Noguee, 2005). Peter the Great fought wars with the Swedish empire to gain access to the Baltic Sea (Shelley, 2013, p. 130). It fought with the Persian Empire for the Caspian Sea. Russia's incorporation of Crimea also shows the importance of the Black Sea in the Russian security strategy. Sevastopol in Crimea has been home to Russian Black Sea Fleet.

Formidable enemies on the Western borders pushed Russia to the East. But Russia was not safe in the East either. It fought wars with China and Japan in the early twentieth century. Afghanistan has been a serious security concern for Russia during the Tsarist and the Soviet period. Instabilities in these regions had profound impact on the stability of Russia. It has been observed that whenever Russia is sidelined by the West, it seeks to find partners in the East. In the Soviet period,

it developed a close relationship with China, but very soon ideological and strategic rifts appeared between the two states. Russia's relationship with China can be summarized as both competitive and cooperative.

How far does the sense of history, as outlined earlier, influence the contemporary policy of Russia can be a matter of debate. But some continuities with the past are certainly discernible. Russia is a civilizational state and such states tend to draw the justifications of their present action from the historical memory, albeit selective and highly subjective. The following section discusses the three stages of Russia's contemporary foreign policy.

Neoliberalism and the West-centric Policy (1991-1995)

The seeds of pro-Western foreign policy were laid by 'New Thinking' of Gorbachev. It was an idealist model which sought to transform the conflictual nature of international politics into a consensual one. New Thinking had a very high moral content with stress on universal values of peace, justice, social order and humanism. Gorbachev believed that with right efforts, peace and harmony can be established in the international system. He wanted to end the hostilities of the Cold War period by negotiating and cooperating with the West. He signed a number of arms deals with the US President Ronald Reagan to stop arms race between the two blocs. The division of the world into two blocs had threatened the very existence of humanity. Several political and ecological problems required international collaboration, and they could not be resolved without mutual dialogue between the two ideological blocs. He dreamt of a 'common European home'. He wanted to emulate the social democracy with strong contents of social welfare as practiced in the Scandinavian countries (Hay, 1989). His attempts of 'perestroika' and 'glasnost' were aimed at infusing democratic elements in socialism.

One of the most important achievements of New Thinking was the signing of a number of arms reduction treaties between the US and the Soviet Union (Tsygankov, 2010, p. 42). The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty was signed in December 1987 wherein both the countries agreed to eliminate 1,600 intermediate-range missiles. The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (The CFE Treaty) was signed in November 1990 between NATO and Warsaw Pact members. This treaty prohibited the deployment of conventional weapons in Europe. The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), signed in July 1991, limited the number of long-range ballistic missiles to 1,600. Eduard Shevardnadze, the foreign minister of that period, justified demilitarization and disarmament on the grounds of cutting down military expenditure which was exceptionally high at 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the Soviet GNP. This model of development was unsustainable. Gorbachev believed that nuclear weapons were unusable and should be gradually eliminated. At the Reykjavik Summit in 1986, Gorbachev floated the proposal of eliminating all the nuclear weapons by the end of the century, but this was rejected by the US as unrealistic (Ullman, 1986).

The Cold War ended before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev played key role in transforming the nature of international politics. The unification of Germany and the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan and Eastern Europe became possible due to New Thinking of Gorbachev. He became a hero in the West, but neither radical reformers nor the conservative communists of Russia were happy with his reforms. The conservatives resisted the unilateral concessions given to the West on disarmament and demilitarization. They treated it as surrender before the West. Yegor Ligachev, a key figure who controlled ideology and propaganda, vehemently opposed Gorbachev's capitulation before the West. His close allies such as Alexander Yakovlev and Eduard Shevardnadze also turned critical when New Thinking yielded little expected outcomes (Fein, 1991). On the other hand, the leader of Russia Boris Yeltsin stoked nationalist passions against the Soviet regime. Gorbachev could not keep the house in order, and his bitter rivalry with Yeltsin contributed to the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Chenoy & Kumar, 2017; Cohen, 2009; Ploky, 2014).

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, liberals in Russia advocated sweeping political and economic reforms. The socialist model of governance had lost its sheen and people were in search of a viable alternative. They dreamt of developing Russia like a European state. There was a general consensus on the exigency of reforms, but elites were divided on the nature and pace of these reforms. Radicals, led by Yeltsin, wanted to transform Russia into a market economy at a blitzkrieg speed (Desai, 2006). The gradualists advocated slow and cautious transition, while the communists were opposed to neoliberal agenda and pro-Western foreign policy.

The first few years of Yeltsin were chaotic for Russia. The economy was in shambles and a number of republics had stopped taking orders from Moscow. Chechnya and Tartarstan refused to sign federation treaties. Yeltsin and his team's survival depended on the success of neoliberal reforms, which in turn were contingent upon the support from the West. Free market, free trade, investment and financial aid depended on the goodwill of the West. The support of the West was also imperative for political reason. There was a real possibility that in a free and fair election, the Communist Party might come back to power (Chenoy, 2001; Desai, 2006). These vulnerabilities made Yeltsin dependent on the West.

Yeltsin sold the idea of making Russia prosperous like a Western nation in a very short period of time. As the economy was resisting any revival, the time was running out for Yeltsin and his team (Desai, 2006; Sachs, 2012). The legislature dominated by the communists, hyper-nationalists and gradualists was in direct confrontation with the president. There was no agreement on the adoption of the draft constitution. The presidential draft assigned immense power to the president, but the draft from the legislature limited his powers. The conflict between the two institutions was so intense that Yeltsin had to bomb the parliament to oust the legislators. In short, the Yeltsin regime was vulnerable to pulls and pressures from inside and outside. The West was pivotal to Russia's political and economic transformations. The expectations were very high that the US would come to its rescue as it did in Germany and the rest of Europe after the Second World War

through the Marshall Plan. But that never happened in the case of Russia. The US lost a rare opportunity to bring Russia to the Western fold.

Yeltsin headed a team of radical reformers. Their primary goal was to grab power and displace the old elite. Yeltsin's team consisted of Gennadi Burbulis, Boris Nemtsov, Yegor Gaidar, Andrei Kozyrev and Anatoly Chubais. Yegor Gaidar is known for his controversial 'shock therapy' programme, while Anatoly Chubais is popularly known as the architect of privatization in Russia. This team wanted a radical transformation of Russia at a lightening pace. These reformers feared that in the event of reform being delayed, the communists and other opposition forces might regroup. Hence, they began dismantling the socialist economy by selling out the state enterprises to private players (Desai, 2006).

Reformers had little experience and knowledge about the functioning of a capitalist democracy. They were heavily dependent upon Western experts for economic and political transition. In the first few years, a number of experts from Harvard University served as advisors to the government. They advised deregulation of prices, free trade and close cooperation with the West (Sachs, 2012; Shleifer & Treisman, 2005). Russian economy was opened up for the international market.

Internally, Yeltsin feared the backlash of the communist. The Communist Party was the only party which had networks all over Russia, and it was very powerful in the parliament. Yeltsin wanted to create a super-presidential system to overpower the communist dominated Duma. It is widely believed that but for manipulations at various levels, the communists were likely to come back to power in the presidential election of 1996. Yeltsin and his team wanted to erode the base of the communist by privatizing the industry and trade. The state-controlled industries were sold at a very cheap price and no attempt was made to revive the industry by infusing new capital and technology. Yeltsin anticipated the support of the West in the event of a clash with the communists in Russia. Hence, a closer cooperation with the West became imperative for political as well as economic reasons.

Kozyrev was the foreign minister of Russia until 1996. He wanted to have a close cooperation with the West through bilateral and multilateral engagements. He had worked in the Directorate of International Organisation at the Soviet Foreign Ministry. The US and Europe were projected as natural partners of Russia. In the early years, Russia also considered the possibility of becoming a member of NATO (Associated Press, 2001). Russia joined several international organizations. It became a member of the IMF and the World Bank in June 1992 and the G-7 in July 1992. Kozyrev's primary role was to mobilize economic and political support from the West.

Russia distanced itself from Asia. Russia's military ties with China, India and other countries suffered during this period. Due to US pressure, Russia refused to supply cryogenic rocket engines to India which were to be used for space programmes. Russia also neglected its neighbours. It supported US intervention in Iraq (1990–1991), but very soon realized that it might lose billions of dollars that Iraq was to repay to Russia. The interests of Russia were sidelined at regional and international forums. Russia was treated as a regional power with a limited global reach. It was humiliated and ignored at will (Cohen, 2009; Roxburgh, 2014).

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the expansion of NATO and plans to set up missile defence systems in Eastern Europe infuriated Russia. The West lost a rare opportunity of bringing Russia into its own geostrategic ambit.

Internally, Russia was struggling to remain stable as a state. At the federal centre, the struggle between the radical reformers and the communists, and the president and the legislature marred any prospect of consensus in the foreign policy decision-making. The conflict in Chechnya (1994–1996) proved disastrous. Russian army could not defeat the separatist forces. Separatist movements also occurred in Ingushetia, Dagestan and Tartarstan. The governors of several other republics behaved as de facto independent rulers and refused to take orders from Moscow (Hahn, 2003).

The US continued to rely on NATO for security in Europe. NATO enlargement was the prime security agenda of Bill Clinton's administration in Europe. But NATO's enlargement meant containment for Russia. To assuage Russian fears, the US initiated Partnership for Peace (1994), NATO-Russia Dialogue and the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security (1997). The West constantly rejected the Russian proposal of subordinating NATO and creating an over-arching security architecture under the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Russia was too weak to protest beyond verbal criticisms. US diplomats learnt the trick of handling the whimsical Yeltsin. Strobe Talbott, who was the US official coordinating NATO's policies with Russia, said,

You have to think in terms of playing a game of chess—but one where you are playing both sides of the chessboard. After you make your move, you run over to the other side of the board and tell your opponent who is really your partner in this game: 'Move your piece there'. That's the only way we are going to get things done. (Asmus, 2002, p. 204)

This shows how Russia relied on the US, and how it lacked an autonomous assessment of its own interests. But very soon, we witness a gradual shift in Russia's policy towards the West.

Eurasianism and the Search for Multipolarity (1996–2006)

One can discern two important historical trajectories in Russia since early eighteenth century—emulating the West and search for Russia's unique identity which distinguished it from the West as a counter-narrative. Russia's complex relationship with the West has been succinctly summed up by Isaiah Berlin (1994, p. 118) as,

[O]n the one hand, intellectual respect, envy, admiration, desire to emulate and excel; on the other, emotional hostility, suspicion and contempt, a sense of clumsy, *de trop*, of being outsiders; leading as a result to an alternation between excessive self-prostration before, and aggressive flouting of Western values.

This captures the ambivalence of Russia's relationship with the West.

The Slavophiles were opposed to the idea of imitating the West which was identified with materialism, individualism and rationalism. The Westernizers were represented by P. Chaadaev, T. N. Granovsky, V. G. Belinsky, A. I. Herzen, N. P. Ogarev, K. D. Kavelin and Slavophiles by I. Kirievsky, A. Khomyakov, the Aksakov brothers, Yu. Samarin, N. Danilevsky and K. Leontev (Chebankova, 2017). Slavophiles stressed on the Slavic identity based on unique history, Slavic language and religion. They considered Orthodox Christianity as separate from Catholic and Protestant branches. The concept of 'fatherland', love for nation and specificities of culture were prime focus of Slavophiles. Nicholas Danilevsky's *Russia and Europe* published in 1871 was a classic historical text of Slavophiles (Tsygankov, 2010, p. 2). Some Slavophile elements can be found in Eurasianism. But Slavophiles concentrate on cultural and imaginative space rather than geopolitics which is the focus of Eurasianism. Famous writer Dostoevsky argued that it is better to be a master in Asia than slaves in Europe (Sakwa, 2008, p. 379). Dugin (2015) contends that Russia should look beyond its existing borders as in civilizational terms Russia is much greater than its existing boundaries. It extends to all the countries of Eurasia.

The neoliberal disaster of the early 1990s paved the way for the rise of new Eurasianism. Neoliberals were accused of capitulating before the West and ignoring the interests of Russia. The kind of support that was expected from the West never came through and people started doubting the initial euphoria created by Yeltsin–Kozyrev team and Westernizing elites. The West turned critical of Russian offensive in Chechnya. The Communist Party emerged as the dominant party in the parliamentary election of 1995. There was an intense pressure on the Russian leadership to change the course of its pro-Western foreign policy. Kozyrev was removed from the office. He was replaced by Yevgeny Primakov who was an Orientalist and specialized on Middle East/West Asia and had worked in *Pravda*. He was a Eurasianist who initiated changes in Russia's foreign policy (Tsygankov, 2007). He visited Tehran in 1996 and signed deals with Iran. In 1997, Russia and China signed the 'Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New International Order'. He also proposed the idea of triangular cooperation among Russia–India–China (RIC) to counter the hegemony of the West. The RIC in some ways can be taken as precursor to the BRICS (Cooper, 2016).

Eurasianism is a geopolitical identity which blends together a number of discrete elements. First, it refers to its geographical location between Europe and Asia. It extends the logic of preserving the 'Heartland' as the 'geopolitical pivot of history' as suggested by Halford Mackinder (Mackinder, 1962, p. 241). Second, it maintains that Russia has a unique history characterized by absolutism of the Tsarist empire. Third, the proletarian revolution gave a new identity to Russia. While it failed as an experiment, it has left several positive and negative impacts on the contemporary Russian politics. Fourth, Russia played a unique role in protecting the West from the East and the East from the West. It saved the West from the possibility of Mongol attacks by working as a buffer. In the same vein, it protected the East from the Fascism and Nazism of the West. The fact that Russians defeated Napoleon and Hitler has generated a feeling among Russians as a great Eurasian

nation. In the words of Trenin (2016), Russia has drifted away from the European choice and identifies itself with its own cultural and historical tradition often referred to as Eurasianism.

Eurasianism is critical of Russia's fascination with the West. At times, it is also taken as a bridge between the West and the East. Eurasianism assigns Russia the goal of ensuring peace and harmony in the Eurasian region. It is an ideational construction to counter the influence of the West in Eurasia. Its geopolitical content is derived from the realist theories of international politics. Eurasianism seeks to restore the great power status of Russia. It has following priorities: (a) restoring the pride of Russia, (b) economic integration of the former Soviet space, (c) countering the Western attempt to regime change in the neighbourhood, (d) departure from the West-centric policy and search for partners in Asia, (e) protecting the Russian diaspora in the former Soviet space and (f) close cooperation with China.

Neighbourhood becomes important in the Eurasian perspective. Russia has nearly 25 million Russian diaspora in the former Soviet states. This is an emotive and sensitive issue for Russia, and no Russian leadership can afford to ignore this. The policies of nationalizing states have not been very inclusive towards the Russian minorities. Majority of Russians living in Estonia are stateless, and there has been a large migration of Russians from the Central Asian states. After the crisis in Ukraine, Russian minority feels discriminated by the reactionary government in Ukraine. Instability at borders poses a serious problem for the security of Russia.

The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2000) stressed the significance of former Soviet space for Russia. It was critical of NATO expansion in the CIS and advocated multipolarity in the international system. Search for multipolarity became an important goal of Russian foreign policy after this. All the subsequent foreign policy concepts (2008, 2013 and 2016) emphasized the importance of this goal. Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, in a speech to state Duma, stressed on creating just, polycentric and stable world order (Lavrov, 2015). The concept of multipolarity is based on several assumptions. First, Russia believes that it can play an important role in the international system only when the world is multipolar. In a unipolar world order, it does not have the potential to counter the US. Putin criticized the US for bypassing the United Nations on the pretext of 'humanitarian intervention' and the right to protect. Russia's multipolarity recognizes the plurality of the world system and culture, and believes that the interests of the people would be better served in a multipolar rather than a unipolar world. Second, Russian multipolarity seeks to enhance the geopolitical interests of Russia. It does not carry any altruistic goal of promoting the interests of weaker states in the international system. But it does believe that the weaker states will have more leverages in a multipolar world. The purpose is to seek redistribution of power which recognizes the interests of Russia. Third, Russia knows its limitations, and it believes that a multipolar world can be created only when powerful countries in the system such as China, India and Brazil counter the unipolarity. Hence, it seeks to strengthen partnership with these states. Fourth, Russia has created and promoted a number of multilateral organizations. Many of them seek to promote Russian interests in the region and beyond. Russia was the

founding member of the BRICS and the SCO. It also created Eurasian Union for keeping neighbours in its fold. Multilateralism is a convenient route to multipolarity for Russia. The Russian concept of multipolarity is a 'code word in effect for the perpetuation of the Cold War and global bloc conflict by other means' (Sakwa, 2008, p. 377). Fifth, alliance with China is considered crucial to the success of Russian search for multipolarity. The economic and political crises in the US and the European Union have affirmed the Russian belief that the world is moving towards a multipolar world. Brexit is the beginning of multipolarity in Europe.

The promotion of democracy by West is detested in Russia. There is a general consensus that on the pretext of democracy promotion, the US and its allies in the West tend to promote their own national and geopolitical interests in the region which were erstwhile under the influence of the Soviet Union. Attempts of the US and the European Union to change regimes in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine resulted in catastrophe. The primary reason for conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine was the attempt to change the democratically elected regimes with the support of local opposition parties and the West-funded civil societies. Russia is opposed to any interference from outside in the name of democracy either in Russia or in its neighbourhood. The memory of humiliation and surrender of sovereignty to foreign governments and institutions is still afresh in the minds of people and policymakers. They want to overcome that memory of capitulation and surrender. They seek full autonomy in the domestic and external policymaking. They clearly diagnose that the interests of Russia and the US are incompatible and cannot be reconciled easily.

Russia rightly believes that unless the social context is ready, it would be futile to mechanically transplant the liberal and democratic institutions on Russia (Chenoy & Kumar, 2017). The West supported Yeltsin even when he violated the constitution in 1993, bombed the parliament in 1993 and rigged the election in 1996. The oligarchs who were hated in Russia for amassing wealth through corrupt and illegal means became poster boys of democratic capitalism in the West. As a consequence, Western discourses and preachings on democracy have lost their credibility in Russia. After the victory of Donald Trump in the US, the idea of promotion of democracy by the US has little value.

Russia has developed the concept of 'sovereign democracy' as an antidote to the Western policy of regime change through colour revolutions. The essence of this concept is that it acknowledges the salience of democratic form of governance, but qualifies that with the notion of sovereignty. A democracy has to evolve from within and cannot be artificially imposed from outside. It is not anti-Western, but is opposed to the Western policy of intervention and regime change in the name of democracy. Russian concept of 'sovereign democracy' is a direct response to 'democracy-promotion crusade' of the West (Cohen, 2009, p. 175). It is an attempt at the 'restoration of the personality of the Russian state' (Migranyan, 2015, p. 16). The IMF, the World Bank and other institutions had converted Russia into a state with 'limited sovereignty' in the 1990s (Migranyan, 2015, p. 17). Russia did not stand up against the Western interventions in Yugoslavia and Balkans, and remained silent on the issue of NATO expansion in the post-Soviet space. This has been reversed by Putin. Russia actively pursues

its geopolitical interests in the neighbourhood and is willing to take risks to confront the West. Russian interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014) and Syria (2015) marked an upward elevation of Russia's ability to take risk against the West. The level of risk and the possibility of escalation of conflict were higher in each subsequent intervention.

Crossing the Rubicon (2007–2015): Interventions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria

Vladimir Putin's anti-American speech at Munich (2007) signalled an official departure from an earlier decorative and ostensibly reassuring language of cordiality. The tension has been building up for a number of years, but Russia's top leadership avoided bitterness in its speeches. At Munich, Putin squarely blamed the US for undermining international institutions, arms race and conflicts in West Asia. After the military intervention in Georgia a year later, the ties between Russia and the US hit rock bottom—a point of no return. The hostility between the two intensified with each subsequent conflict. Russia was truculent and combative.

Russia was at loggerheads with the US on all major conflicts in the world. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria, they were on the opposite sides. A number of scholars proclaimed the commencement of a new Cold War, more dangerous than the previous one (Cohen, 2009, 2017). NATO's eastward expansion proposed installation of US missile defence system in Europe and Iran's nuclear programme were other issues of contention between the West and Russia.

The West treated Russia as a second-rate power which could have no interests beyond its borders. The US can have security interests in Georgia and Ukraine, but Russia cannot have the same in its neighbourhood. Putin was unwilling to subscribe to this hypocrisy. According to Mearsheimer (2014), Putin is a master strategist who should be feared and respected by anyone challenging him on foreign policy. There is an overwhelming consensus among the Western writers and policymakers that the Putin's authoritarianism and his neoimperialism in the neighbourhood destroyed the possibility rapprochement between the West and Russia (Cohen, 2009). But this is a flawed and politically motivated analysis. The West humiliated Russia and squandered the opportunity to bring it in its fold (Cohen, 2009). If the West takes the credit for ending the Cold War, it should share the blame for re-inventing the new Cold War.

The US policy towards Russia is influenced by the Cold War mindset of containing and limiting its influence. The best example is the expansion of NATO. This was a Cold War military alliance which should have either been dismantled or redesigned for responding to a humanitarian crisis. But NATO has become an instrument of the US for flexing its muscles in Europe and Asia. The expansion of NATO has been a major source of tension between the US and Russia. It has incorporated a number of post-Soviet states. Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined in 1999; Estonia, Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Lithuania in 2004; Albania and Croatia in 2009; and Montenegro in 2016. But for

Russian resistance, Georgia and Ukraine were likely to become the members of NATO. US policy is to stop the emergence of Russia as a potential threat to the US. Russia's National Security Strategy for 2016 categorically underlines that the US is trying to contain Russia, and NATO is a threat to its security (Russia Today, 2016).

Negotiations on arms control and disarmament suffered due to high levels of hostility between Russia and US. Earlier they had signed INF Agreement, CFE and START. In their elusive search for parity, both the states had developed stock-piles of more than 10,000 nuclear warheads each. But a positive development in the post-Cold War period was that the two states realized the futility of arms race, and decided to cut down their nuclear and other weapons. In continuation of the START Treaty in 1991, the two states signed the New START Treaty in 2011 which limited the nuclear warheads to 1,550 and also cut down the intercontinental ballistic missiles. But no further disarmament measures are possible in the current atmosphere of hostility and suspicion.

The expansion of the European Union was an annoying development for Russia, but it avoided confrontation. Russia's relationship with Europe is influenced by historical, identity and economic factors. A majority of the people in Russia would naturally identify themselves with Europe. But politics of Europe has kept Russia away from it. The EU–Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement formed the basis of institutional relationship between the EU and Russia. They signed a new agreement in December 2011, which included four common spaces: the common economic space; common space for security, freedom and justice; common space for security; and common space for scientific and cultural interactions. Energy cooperation between Russia and the EU is guided by the Lisbon Treaty of 2009. This allowed the EU members to deal multilaterally with Russia. Russia prefers bilateral negotiations with the EU countries. The Foreign Policy Concept (2016) considers Germany, France and Italy crucial for Russia's economic and political interests in Europe. The EU is divided when it comes to dealing with Russia. Germany, France and Italy have supported Russia on a number of issues. They fear that alienation of Russia might turn it more hostile towards Europe and render it impossible to resolve conflicts in Europe and Asia.

The Eastern European Partnership Programme of the EU (2009) has been a contentious issue between the EU and Russia. Through this programme, the EU wants to foster closer partnership with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. But this policy clashes with the Russian policy of Eurasianism and the near abroad. Russia believes that it is losing its traditional areas of influence which were in the zone of Russian influence. This EU programme was at the core of crisis in Ukraine (2013–2014). Russia vehemently opposed EU's involvement in Ukraine. It is widely believed that protests at Euromaidan which led to the change of regime in Ukraine were supported by the EU and the US. Civil war started in Ukraine with many of the provinces in Eastern Ukraine fighting against the army of Ukraine. Russia could not have remained neutral in the case of Ukraine. Russia intervened and re-assimilated Crimea (March 2014). This was an unexpected move by Russia. The West never anticipated that Russia would go to the extent of assimilating a territory which had become a part of a separate international legal entity. Russia did it primarily for

the strategic and ethnic regions. Crimea has predominantly ethnic Russian population, and it was originally a part of Russia gifted to Ukraine in 1954. But more than historical reasons, Crimea's location is of geostrategic importance to Russia. Russia's Black Sea Fleet is also based in Sevastapol. All of this made Crimea crucial for Russia. The West called it 'annexation', while Russia calls it a 're-incorporation' of its old territory. No regime in Russia would have survived if Ukraine were allowed to become part of the Western alliance.

Russia's assertiveness in Ukraine is an extension of the policy that started in Georgia. In Georgia too, the regime of Saakashvili had the tacit support of the US and the EU. It began attacks in rebel provinces of South Ossetia. Russia intervened militarily in Georgia and pushed the Georgian forces back. Georgia's policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia has been criticized for recklessness and adventurism. Russia supported the cause of the rebel provinces, but never incorporated any territory therein. It recognized the de facto independence of these two republics. But in Ukraine, it not only supported the rebels in the eastern provinces of Ukraine but also incorporated Crimea. Ukrainian and a lot of people in the West believed that the US and the EU will take drastic military steps to restore the status quo. But the West responded by selective sanctions. As the policy of sanctions has failed earlier in majority of the cases, it is unlikely to have any real impact on Russia. It did somewhat worsen the ongoing economic crisis, but failed to break the resolve of the Russian leadership. Russia intervened in Syria soon.

The intervention in Syria was the first case of post-Soviet Russia intervening beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. Soviet forces had intervened in Afghanistan in 1979. Russia had sent forces in Tajikistan, Georgia and Ukraine. It was understandable that Russia would react aggressively in Ukraine, but the West never thought that Russia had the willpower and resources to intervene in Syria. Russia had become a regional power for the West (Borger, 2014). In an utter surprise, Russia sent its military to Syria in September 2015. The main reasons were to weaken the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and save the Bashar al-Assad regime. Syria is an important ally of Russia in West Asia. Russia has a key naval base at Tartous and an air base at Latakia. If Syria were to come under the influence of the US or IS, that would mean the end of Russian influence in the region. Moscow also feared that nearly 2,000 jihadists, who were fighting with the IS, were from Caucasia and Central Asia. If they were to come back to these regions after the cessation of the conflict, they would pose a serious security threat to Russia and Central Asia (Hahn, 2013). Russia believes that the Western support to the rebel forces in Syria has emboldened the IS in Syria and Iraq. If the regime of Assad fell down, the IS will become the most powerful force in West Asia. Russia with the help of Iran saved the Assad regime and the Syrian state. Russia used cruise missiles Kh-555 and Kh-101 from the far away Caspian Sea. Russia stood firm behind Assad regime in international forums and also committed military on the ground. This changed the fate of conflict in Syria. It has also made Iran a significant player in West Asia. The influence of the US and Saudi Arabia has weakened with the Russian intervention. In April 2017, the US for the first time directly attacked the Syrian regime in response to the alleged chemical attack by the Syrian regime in Idlib. The Syrian government and Russia denied any use of

chemical weapons, and they blamed rebels for this attack. But this gave the US a moral pretext to recover some ground in Syria. It also marked a change in the policy of Trump who had openly criticized Obama's policy of pushing the US in the West Asian quagmire (Chenoy, 2017). The US bombing carried little military value, but it offered Trump a chance to showcase its detractors in Washington that he is willing to confront the Russian supported Syrian regime. At times, NATO and Russia came face-to-face in this conflict. Earlier a Russian fighter aircraft was shot down by Turkey raising the spectre of confrontation between NATO and Russia (Fraser & Akkoc, 2015). But both the states avoided any further escalation of hostilities. Russia withdrew some of its troops in March 2016, yet it is a key player in Syria. Any resolution in Syria is unlikely without inviting Russia on the table.

There is a remarkable change in the self and external perception of Russia. Russia considers itself to be an indispensable regional and systemic player in a system which is witnessing a tectonic shift. The US is a declining power and the European Union is in crisis (Cooper, 2016; Wallerstein, 2015; Zakaria, 2008). The geopolitical balance of power is shifting from Europe to Asia-Pacific. The rise of China is coupled with the shrinking influence of the US. Sergei Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, called it a dawn of 'post-West' era in global politics (Trenin, 2017). In this speech at Valdai Discussion Club (27 October 2016), Putin underlined that tensions are emerging due to shifts in distribution of economic and political influence. The globalization project is in crisis. He further argued that winners of the Cold War failed to create universally acceptable institutions, and instead tried to impose its own norms and rules. The West 'created and armed terrorist groups, whose cruel actions have sent millions of civilian into flight, made millions of displaced persons and immigrants, and plunged entire region into chaos' (Putin, 2016). These harsh statements are testimony to a chasm that has emerged between Russia and the West. Russia was also accused of hacking computers and providing crucial information to Donald Trump against Hillary Clinton. Such allegations are, however, far-fetched and highly exaggerated. In short, the relationship between the US and Russia has hit rock bottom.

Conclusion

Russia has emerged from the shadow of humiliation of the 1990s. It is defiant, aggressive and combative in protecting its geopolitical interests. It is willing to cooperate, but reluctant to surrender. Increasingly, assertive behaviour of Russia has put the West on the backfoot. They have no clear strategy on how to deal with Russia. Obama wanted to reset the button, but ended up compromising on Crimea, Iran and Assad. Trump started with a chord melody, but was soon overpowered by the conservative establishment in Washington. There are far more strategic divergences than convergences between Russia and the US.

The break-up with the West pushed Russia to find partners in Asia. It has developed close economic and strategic ties with China. It also maintains a good relation with India and Iran. China has backed Russia in international institutions, and they cooperate through multilateral institutions such as the BRICS, the SCO

and the Eurasian Union. There is a plan to link the Eurasian Union with the ‘One Belt One Road’ (OBOR) project of China. Russia signed a historic and unprecedented \$400 billion agreement to export gas to China in May 2014. They also intensified political and security cooperation on global issues. On the issues of Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria and NATO, they have similar views. Their visions of creating a multipolar world converge. They are still short of any military alliance, but that cannot be ruled out if Russia is pushed any further.

References

- Asmus, R. (2002). *Opening NATO's door: How the alliance remade itself for a new era*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Associated Press. (2001, July 18). Putin wants NATO to let Russia join. Retrieved 12 June 2017, from <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/853851/Putin-wants-NATO-to-let-Russia-join.html>
- Baskan, B. (2014). *From religious empires to secular states: State secularisation in Turkey, Iran, and Russia*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Berlin, I. (1994). *Russian thinkers*. London: Penguin Books.
- Borger, J. (2014, March 25). Russia is a regional power showing weakness over Ukraine. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 13 June 2017, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/25/barack-obama-russia-regional-power-ukraine-weakness>
- Chebankova, E. (2017, February 23). Russia's idea of the multipolar world order: Origins and main dimensions. *Post-Soviet Affairs*. Retrieved 28 March 2017, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313903868_Russia's_idea_of_the_multipolar_world_order_origins_and_main_dimensions
- Chenoy, A. M. (2001). *The making of new Russia*. Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.
- . (2017, April 9). Russia face-off: Chemical attack not by Assad. *The Citizen*. Retrieved 5 July 2017, from <http://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/NewsDetail/index/1/10368/Russia-US-Face-Off-Chemical-Attack-Not-By-Assad>
- Chenoy, A. M., & Kumar, R. (2017). *Re-emerging Russia: Structures, institutions and processes*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cohen, S. (2009). *Soviet fates and lost alternatives: From Stalinism to the new Cold War*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- . (2017, April 19). Why the new Cold War is more dangerous than the preceding one. *The Nation*. Retrieved 12 June 2017, from <https://www.thenation.com/article/why-the-new-cold-war-is-more-dangerous-than-the-preceding-one/>
- Cooper, A. (2016). *The BRICS: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Desai, P. (2006). *Conversations on Russia: Reforms from Yeltsin to Putin*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Donaldson, Robert H., & Noguee, Joseph, L. (2005). *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests* (p. 31). New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Dugin, A. (2015). *Last war of the world island: The geopolitics of contemporary Russia*. London: Arkatos.
- Fein, E. B. (1991, July 4). Gorbachev says hard-liners risk communist demise. *The New York Times*. Retrieved 9 July 2017, from <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/04/world/gorbachev-says-hard-liners-risk-communist-demise.html>
- Fraser, I., & Akkoc, R. (2015, November 26). Turkey shooting down plane was ‘planned provocation’ says Russia, as rescued pilot claims he had no warning—latest. Retrieved 11 February 2017, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/12015465/Turkey-shoots-down-Russia-jet-live.html>

- Hahn, G. M. (2003). The past, present and future of the Russian federal state. *Demokratizatsiya*, 11(3), 343–362.
- . (2013, September 26). Chechen extremists force Putin's Syria stance. *The Moscow Times*. Retrieved 9 July 2016, from <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/chechen-extremists-force-putins-syria-stance-28054>
- Hay, S. (1989, November 9). How we can help Gorbachev and ourselves. *The New York Times*. Retrieved 11 January 2017, from <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/09/opinion/1-how-we-can-help-gorbachev-and-ourselves-410789.html>
- Illarionov, A. (2009). The Siloviki in charge. *Journal of Democracy*, 20(2), 69–72.
- Kissinger, H. (1994). *Diplomacy*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Kryshchanovskaya, O., & White, S. (2003). Putin's militocracy. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 19(4), 289–306.
- Lavrov, Sergei. (2015). Sergey Lavrov's Address and Annual News Conference on Russia's Diplomatic Performance in 2014. Retrieved 12 September 2017, from http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/sergey_lavrov_s_address_and_annual_news_conference_on_russia_s_diplomatic_performance_in_2014/
- Lucas, E. (2014). *The new Cold War: Putin's threat to Russia and the West*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mackinder, H. J. (1962). The geographical pivot of history. In Anthony J. Pearce (Ed.), *Democratic ideals and reality* (pp. 209–264). New York, NY: Norton and Company.
- Mearsheimer, John J. (2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved 13 September 2017, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>
- Migranyan, A. (2015). Peculiarities of Russian politics. In A. Przeworski (Ed.), *Democracy in a Russian mirror* (pp. 7–29). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Petrov N. (2005). Siloviki in Russian regions: New dogs, old tricks. *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, (2). Retrieved 14 July 2017, from www.pipss.org/document331.html
- Plokhy, S. (2014). *The last empire: The final days of the Soviet Union*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Putin, Vladimir. (2016). *Putin's Speech at Valdai Discussion Club*. Retrieved 12 June 2017, from <https://www.sott.net/article/332371-Putin-2016-speech-at-Valdai-Discussion-Club>
- Rowen, H. S., Wolf, C., Jr., & Tayler, J. (1990). *The Soviet Union as military giant and economic weakling*. Hoover Institution, Stanford University, California, USA.
- Roxburgh, A. (2014, March 27). Russia's revenge: Why the west will never understand Kremlin. *New Statesman*. Retrieved 15 July 2017, from <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/03/russias-revenge-why-west-will-never-understand-kremlin>
- Russia Today. (2016, January 1). Russia's national security strategy for 2016 in 9 key points. Retrieved 11 January 2017, from <https://www.rt.com/news/327608-russia-national-security-strategy/>
- Sachs, J. (2012, March 14). *What I did in Russia*. Retrieved 15 July 2016, from <http://jeffsachs.org/2012/03/what-i-did-in-russia/>
- Sakwa, R. (2008). *Russian politics and society*. London: Routledge.
- Shanker, T., & Landler, M. (2007, February 11). Putin says U.S. is undermining global security. *The New York Times*. Retrieved 15 July 2016, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/world/europe/11munich.html>
- Shelley, F. M. (2013). *Nation shapes: The story behind the world's borders*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC.
- Shleifer, A., & Treisman, D. (2005, Winter). A normal country: Russia after communism. *Journal of Economic Perspective*, 19(1), 151–174.

- The foreign policy concept of the Russian federation. (2000). Retrieved 23 July 2017, from <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm>
- . (2008). Retrieved 23 July 2017, from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/786>
- . (2013). Retrieved 23 July 2017, from http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186
- . (2016). Retrieved 23 July 2017, from http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248
- Trenin, D. (2016, March 18). A five year outlook for Russian foreign policy: Demands, drivers and influences. In *Task force on U.S. policy towards Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia project*. Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center. Retrieved 20 May 2016, from <http://carnegie.ru/2016/03/18/five-year-outlook-for-russian-foreign-policy-demands-drivers-and-influences/ivkm>
- . (2017, February 22). New triangular diplomacy emerges amid changing global political landscape. *Global Times*. Retrieved 18 June 2017, from <http://carnegie.ru>
- Tsygankov, A. (2007). Finding a civilizational idea: ‘West’, ‘Eurasia’ and ‘Euro-East’ in Russia’s foreign policy. *Geopolitics*, 12(3), 375–399.
- . (2010). *Russia’s foreign policy: Changes and continuities in national identity*. New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Ullman, R. H. (1986, November 16). Nuclear arms: How big a cut. *The New York Times*. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/11/16/magazine/nuclear-arms-how-big-a-cut.html?pagewanted=all>
- Wallerstein, I. (2015). Whose interests are served by BRICS? In P. Bond & A. Garcia (Eds), *BRICS: An anti-capitalist critique* (pp. 269–273). London: Pluto Press.
- Zakaria, F. (2008). *The post-American world*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company.