



NIAS-Europe Studies Brief

Russia and Europe: Understanding Moscow's strategies

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Introduction

Foreign policy decisions, like domestic policy ones, are made in the name of the public interest to accrue legitimacy in the eyes of the general population.* While describing foreign policy objectives, Hans Morgenthau proposed three objectives sought after by countries: imperialism, status quo, and prestige. In international politics, there is a constant conflict between ideal and material power interests. This implies that states can say or do anything, but their conduct can be understood most effectively by analysing their power interests expressed through ideas and worldviews. A nation's worldview serves as a measure that reaffirms the role certain interests play. Russia has developed three schools of self- and other-centred thought over various historical epochs: Westernist, Statist, and Civilizationist. Idealists from these three schools of thought have worked for centuries to present Russia's international choices in ways that are consistent with their previously established views of the country and the outside world.¹

This paper explores the possibility that the current Russian (and previously the Soviet Union's) foreign policy is determined more by the idea of power than ideology. Secondly, Russia (just like the Soviet Union) wants to expand its influence in its neighbourhood because of its geographical location and its fascination with the West. Thirdly, Russian aggression is strongly motivated by its perception of the threat to its national security due to NATO expansion. This paper also unpacks the historical narrative of the Soviet legacy having an impact on the current decisions of the Russian leadership, which affect foreign policy, Europe, and the world order.

Background

The idea of geography as destiny probably explains its influence on Russian foreign policy better. For instance, Russia is the largest republic of the former USSR, with a harsh and cold climate and an expansive territory of 6.6 million square miles, making it the world's largest country and almost twice as large as Canada, the second-largest country. From east to west, it covers more than 6,000 miles and eleven time zones, and from north to south, it measures about 2,800 miles. However, the majority of this country cannot be inhabited. Roughly 50 percent of the country is in the permafrost zone; the land and most of Russia's significant ports and streams are frozen. The harsh climate, hostile terrain, and absence of natural barriers make it difficult for Russia to defend its borders, making them vulnerable to foreign invasions. The Tsars of imperial Russia began their search for warm-water ports because the Russian navy needed ports that were functional all year. Petroleum, natural gas, coal, gold, bauxite, and iron ore are just a few of Russia's abundant natural resources that cannot be tapped due to the extreme weather. In addition to having a significant impact on labourers, the extreme cold makes it difficult to operate equipment and makes transportation extremely challenging. Russia

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¹ Oliker, Olga, Christopher S. Chivvis, Keith Crane, Olesya Tkacheva, and Scott Boston. 2014. "Perspective Expert Insights on a Timely Policy Issue: Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context: A Reassessment." https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE144/RAND_PE144.pdf

won numerous wars with neighbouring states under Peter the Great to protect its territory from being invaded and occupied. For the same reason, many of his successors pursued an imperialist foreign policy.

Fascination of the West

Balancing Russian foreign policy interests in Asia and Europe has become one of the most important goals in the course of the last century. Often, these conversations turned into ideological debates. The main question was whether or not to support the values of Western civilization. Westernizers emphasised Russia's similarity with Western nations and viewed the West as the most viable and progressive civilization in the world. According to Bruce Porter, "there was not only the liberal west of the Enlightenment, which many Russian 'westerners' love, but they were also influenced by the other west militarised regimented armies of Charles XII, Frederick the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Kaiser Wilhelm." Since the time of Peter the Great, it is clear that Russia's diplomacy focused on Europe primarily, and after defeating Napoleon, they became a full member of the 'European Concert.'²

The attempts of Russia to become Westernised met with challenges that threatened internal stability and put state power at risk. A review of the foreign policy of imperial Russia shows that the Tsar allowed Pan-Slavism to reveal itself when it echoed his policy and turned it off when it became aggressive. Russian diplomacy has always been practical, based on its own needs. Post-Soviet liberal Westernizers argued for their nation's "natural" affinity with the West based on common ideas like democracy, human rights, and a free market. Liberal Westernizers like Boris Yeltsin and Andrei Kozyrev insisted that Russia could only confront its threats and advance from its economic and political backwardness by creating Western liberal institutions and joining the alliance of what was frequently referred to as the community of "Western civilised nations."³

Fall of the Soviet Union and Russian Foreign Policy

Since 1991, Russian society has changed significantly, and new theories of international relations have been a sign of this. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, its "Marxist" social science was no longer supported by the government, and Russian scholars have been making intellectual progress in adjusting to the new world. How does Russia's new government see its place in the world? After the USSR broke up in December 1991, Russian foreign policy changed. International collaboration to advance political stability, economic progress, environmental protection, and civil values was the subject of greater discussions and initiatives, but traditional political and strategic rivalry did not seem to be going away anytime soon.

After December 1991, the other former Soviet republics, referred to as the "near abroad" in Russia, were the most important foreign policy interests for Russia. The Russian Federation had immense political and military power in many of the former Soviet republics, especially where there were civil or ethnic wars. During the civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997, Russian troops went in to help the Tajik government fight against rebel forces. They stayed after the war ended to protect the Tajik-Afghan border and prevent potential attacks by the Taliban. In April

² Project, Gatis Pelnēns. 2010. "The 'Humanitarian Dimension' of Russian Foreign Policy Toward Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the Baltic States." <http://www.icgs.ge/publications/The-humanitarian-dimension-of-Russian.pdf>

³ Bateman, Aaron. 2014. "The Political Influence of the Russian Security Services." *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27 (3). Routledge: 380–403. doi:10.1080/13518046.2014.932626. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264200569_The_Political_Influence_of_the_Russian_Security_Services/citations#fullTextFileContent

1996, Russia signed an agreement with Belarus that created the "Community of Russia and Belarus." The agreement allowed the countries to work together on their foreign and defence policies and keeps their economies closely linked.

The fall of the USSR also caused several other problems for Russia. The most important among them was the large number of Russian-speaking people in the new neighbouring states. Russia had given protection guarantees to these people. With over 25 million Russians residing in each of the successor republics, the likelihood of violence increased. This was evidenced by open conflicts in Moldova and simmering disputes over the predominantly Russian-populated Crimea with the Baltic States and Ukraine. At the same time, the Russian economy was in poor health, requiring assistance from other nations. Many of the significant foreign policy objectives of the Gorbachev era were driven by economic principles. Agreements for friendship and cooperation were negotiated with Poland (in October 1990), Mongolia (in February 1991), and Czechoslovakia (in May 1991). Numerous agreements were also reached with the federal entities of Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The second component of Russian foreign policy from 1996 to 1999 was the policy of alternatives. It started when Evgeniy Primakov was chosen to be the foreign minister of the Russian Federation. The Liberal Democratic Party of Zhironovsky won the election at the start of 1994. Because of how popular his extreme nationalist ideas were, Zhironovsky won, and Kozyrev had to quit because of it. Zhironovsky and the leaders of the Communist Party called for a policy of isolation. This section of the Russian political elite believed that the United States and other Western nations were Russia's unbeatable foes. The other members of the political elite shared this opinion but were less vocal about it.

Even the small percentage of the elite that still cared about the West had to start referring to the West as a "partner" rather than "allies." It is crucial to remember that anti-Western sentiment was not as prevalent as it was during the Soviet era. The West and China continued to cooperate, and significant actions were taken. For instance, in 1997, Russia and NATO agreed on a pact. Russia joined the group of seven nations and continued to request loans from the IMF. However, studies show that just 13 per cent of the populace was open to the values of Western democracy, while more than 50 per cent declared their opposition to the West.⁴

Dynamic foreign policy under Putin

Boris Yeltsin appointed Putin as Russia's interim president on December 31, 1999. In just one year, he rose through the ranks from being the director of the Federal Security Bureau, or FSB, to prime minister, acting president, and finally elected president, who won the March 2000 presidential election on the first ballot. During his tenure as acting president and prime minister, Putin vigorously promoted a single goal: the continuation of the Russian campaign against Chechen separatists. His "New Foreign Doctrine" argued that Russia should adopt a pragmatic foreign policy that upholds its own national interests and fosters economic growth. In an effort to improve ties with European countries, Russia met with the foreign ministers of Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and France to discuss bilateral ties and soften their position on Chechnya.

On March 2, 2000, Tony Blair travelled to Russia and met with Vladimir Putin at a conference in St. Petersburg. Putin broke precedence on April 1 by travelling to Britain the day before taking office as president and meeting with Blair and prominent businessmen there. This

⁴ Lo, Bobo. 2002. *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*,. Palgrave Macmillan UK. August 2002. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403920058>

demonstrated the flexibility of Russian diplomacy and Putin's practical, economically motivated style of diplomacy. Putin upheld important tenets of Primakov's foreign policy strategy, which called for strengthening a Russia that is independent and firmly rooted in its own historical traditions, starting a rebuilding process, and focusing its strength on defending its own national interests.

In the 1990s, Russia's influence in international politics declined significantly. The Eastern European nations that had been a part of the Warsaw Pact eventually joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which was formed to counter Soviet expansionism. Although the facts are inconclusive, Gorbachev was assured that NATO would not expand to include these countries; nonetheless, this is what transpired. From Russia's perspective, the expansion of NATO could serve no other function but to contain Russia.

During Putin's presidency, the Russian government and Putin himself observed a rise in Western threats. Putin viewed the West, particularly the United States, as disruptive and subversive for supporting multiple coups against authoritarian regimes, such as Ukraine. Russia's opposition to NATO expansion has not changed. The existing political and military positions of NATO do not, in a number of respects, align with the security interests of the Russian Federation. For instance, the clauses in the NATO Strategic Concept do not prohibit initiating military actions without UN Security Council approval beyond the Washington Treaty's zone of responsibility.

In actuality, the Kosovo War and NATO's eastward expansion had really hardened the views of the Russian political elite on geopolitics. The NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia led to a rise in the number of militant nationalists in the Russian political establishment. These actions, in their eyes, demonstrated that the West was an aggressive, egotistical foe of Russia. Particularly when it came to Kosovo, the West did not have any consideration for Russia, the UN, or international law. As a result, relations between Russia and the West are far worse than they were immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

At the Munich Security Conference in 2022, Putin questioned NATO's eastward expansion and attacked the United States for forging a unipolar world with "one master and one sovereign." He also questioned the post-Cold War order in Europe⁵. The Primakov⁶ doctrine is where the current aggression's origins may be found. According to Primakov, Russia should work for a multipolar world governed by a coalition of powerful nations that can balance out US unilateralism. Russia should adamantly maintain its supremacy in the post-Soviet space and take the lead on regional integration. Russia must fight the expansion of NATO⁷. Russian policy changed from a largely passive rejection of Western initiatives to a more active form of resistance as the Russian economy developed and the Kremlin amassed more resources to implement the doctrine. Eventually, it transformed into an activist foreign policy with an ambitious geographic scope.

Threat to national security

Statists have linked the idea of a strong, independent state with that of Russia and have emphasized the state's ability to manage and uphold social and political order. As a key element of Russia's security, they introduced the idea of an external danger. Josef Stalin, the Soviet

⁵ Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy", 10 February 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/copy/24034>

⁶ Yevgeny Primakov, Russian Foreign minister, 1996-1998, Prime Minister 1998-1999.

⁷ Eugene Rumer, The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action, June 05, 2019 Paper, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>

Union's then-state leader, is renowned for framing his argument for rapid industrialization as a response to serious external threats. According to Stalin, because of its backwardness, Russia's ancient history was one of constant defeats by the Mongol Khans, Swedish, Polish, and Lithuanian feudal lords, English and French businessmen, and Japanese barons. This was the reason, according to Stalin that Russia lagged behind developed nations by 100 years and this gap needed to be closed in ten years. "We will be destroyed unless we act now."

To uphold political order and fend against "capitalist" external threats, the socialist Statists emphasized the importance of the Communist Party's tight control over society. While some Statists favoured relative Western accommodation, others favoured balanced measures. A favourable plan was presented for the integration of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) security operations in the 1997 National Security Concept, which referred to Russia as an "influential European and Asian force" and encouraged it to keep an equal distance from "global European and Asian economic and political actors." The Russian Federation was described as "a great power with a responsibility for ensuring global and regional security" in the government's official Foreign Policy Concept of 2000. The concept also foresaw a new threat from "a unipolar world structure dominated by the United States economically and militarily."

Historical Background of the Ukraine War

The armed conflict in Ukraine began when Russia invaded and occupied the Ukrainian territory of Crimea in 2014. Ukraine and Russia have been engaged in a continuous struggle over the past eight years, with daily shelling and skirmishes occurring along the eastern Russian and Ukrainian borders. Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, throwing the entire country into conflict and sending shockwaves around the globe. With increasing casualties and more than one million Ukrainians fleeing the nation, discussion and de-escalation have never been more important.

In the first 15 years of both Soviet eras, Ukraine existed as a transitional zone in which West Ukrainians had distinct political commitments, histories, and economic interests from East Ukrainians. And Ukraine was not economically developed.

Politically, Ukraine represented a sort of consensus between East and West Ukrainians. The elected presidents alternated between the West and the East, each representing a different population and pursuing different policies. For instance, the president who was elected from the West made Bandera, a guerrilla leader who fought against the Russians during World War II, a national hero. And when President Yanukovich was elected from the East, Bandera was no longer a national hero. Presidents elected from the West made it illegal to deny that the great famine of the 1930s was a deliberate attempt by the Soviet Union to punish the Ukrainians. However, when Yanukovich became president from the East, he nullified this historical revisionism. Therefore, it is fair to argue that Ukraine was a compromise, and the political Ukraine that served as a buffer between the West and East Ukrainians was acceptable from Russia's perspective. In short, Ukraine was a state, a sovereign entity, but not a nation. It was understood that being a Ukrainian nationalist primarily meant being viscerally hostile towards Russia. Following that, a pivotal historical moment occurred when Yanukovich struck a deal with Western Europe under which he would obtain credit in exchange for enacting anti-corruption reforms or improving the Ukrainian economy. The Putin administration saw this as a threat because it challenged the economic links between Russia and Ukraine. To convince Yanukovich to break his agreement with the West, Putin's response was to offer a bailout plan where Russia contributed \$15 billion to Ukraine's public debt and lowered the amount that

Naftogaz, the country's energy firm, pays for Russian gas by approximately a third.⁸ An adversarial Ukraine on its western border poses a significant security risk to Russia. Ukraine ensured that Russia's agreement to rent the Sevastopol naval facility, the only Russian military base in the Black Sea, could not be extended in 2017. In retaliation, Russia seized control of Crimea. Since the Ukrainian community in Crimea was actually rather small, this operation was relatively straightforward. The Tatar minority, which was more anti-Russian than anti-Ukrainian, was the source of any opposition that existed. It must be remembered that Crimea was only gifted to Ukraine in 1954, when Khrushchev wanted to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Ukraine's accession to the Russian Empire. As long as the Soviet Union existed, this was a completely harmless and meaningless concession that was merely a formality. Therefore, Crimea has never been ethnically Ukrainian, not then nor afterwards. Putin's decision to annex Crimea was primarily triggered by the threat to the naval station in Sevastopol, a historically Russian city.

Russian Motivations in Ukraine and Beyond

Putin considered Russia a great power on par with the United States and the European Union. In addition, Putin's policy also viewed former Soviet Union-affiliated neighbouring regions surrounding Russia as spheres of influence. He perhaps aimed for a protective ring of friendly countries surrounding Russia that would operate as a buffer against any country that might attempt to invade.⁹

However, the countries along the western border, such as the Baltic nations and Poland in particular, are vehemently anti-Russian. There are historical justifications for their hostile attitude towards Russia. However, when these countries receive Western help in the form of Western armaments, Russians, not just Putin, view the supply as a threat to their national security. The very act of obtaining such support renders the region insecure and unstable. Whenever Polish and Baltic politicians highlighted to the West the expansionist intentions and the real threat posed by Russia under President Vladimir Putin, the Europeans were dismissive. Even after the Russian invasion of Crimea, the West pursued commercial and political accommodation with Putin.¹⁰

Russian interest in being a regional power is one of the motivating factors for the war against Ukraine. However, the war has only succeeded in alienating Russia from Europe more than before because it has violated international law, including the UN Charter, with this aggression. Thus far, the United States and NATO countries have extensively armed and equipped the Ukrainians and provided effective resistance to Russia. They have made it clear that they do not wish to place boots on the ground and will not send soldiers into Ukraine but will continue to help the country. Article five of the NATO treaty states, an attack against one is an attack against all.' Therefore, an assault in the neighbourhood of NATO member states, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, would constitute an attack on NATO, and the aggressor would face retaliation. Though Putin may not be interested in striking a NATO

⁸ Elizabeth Piper, Special Report, Why Ukraine spurned the EU and embraced Russia, December 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-russia-deal-idINDEE9BI08D20131219>

⁹ Andrew Roth, 'Putin Compares Himself to Peter the Great in Quest to Take Back Russian Lands', The Guardian, 10 June 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/10/putin-compares-himself-to-peter-the-great-in-quest-to-take-back-russian-lands>

¹⁰ Kasymov, Shavkat. 2012. "Statism in Russia: The Implications for US-Russian Relations." Journal of Eurasian Studies 3 (1): 58–68 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233238381_Statism_in_Russia_The_Implications_for_US-Russian_Relations

country directly, Article 5 can still provide scope for NATO to retaliate against Russia for its war in Ukraine.

After Ukraine, the most defenceless countries in Russia's neighbourhood may be those that are unprotected and alone, such as Georgia and Moldova, both of whom were part of the Soviet Union, along with Bosnia and Kosovo in the Balkans. In addition, analysts have cautioned that even NATO nations near Russia, such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Montenegro, may be at risk of either direct military action from Moscow or political destabilisation strategies. The degree to which Russia has galvanised NATO due to the Ukraine war is unparalleled. Finland and Sweden have abandoned their long-held neutrality to join the US-led military alliance. All NATO members, except Turkey and Hungary, have ratified their membership. In response, Putin has tried to split the EU or NATO members by fuelling diverging interests among the member states and institutions. Further, Moscow has projected itself to be the object of the West's "total hybrid war" and indicated it would weather sanctions by building closer ties with China, India, Arab nations, and others. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov reaffirmed that the flurry of sanctions imposed by the West had cast Russia as a victim of aggression rather than an aggressor.

The Donbas has been declared a constituent republic of Russia by the Russians. There are two possible ways to end the war: Ukraine's military victory with the support of the US and the EU, or Ukraine accepting the conditions laid down by Russia to satisfy their power quest. There are some concessions that Ukraine could make, such as granting the Donbas region autonomy in terms of language proficiency and cultural linkages. There is always the potential to bargain disagreements away to identify shared interests. Neither Russia nor the NATO nations, including the United States, want to engage in an all-out war that could escalate.

Further, it will become difficult for many European governments to justify their sustained financial, military, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine in the face of large-scale internal unrest. However, within the EU, member states such as Estonia, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania (in that order) that are most committed to aiding Ukraine will not buckle under pressure as it is an existential battle for them. Consequently, there will be a divide among the EU member states that has to be carefully addressed. The issue is not one of mistrust among EU member states but rather of future domestic consensus. The EU has decided to simultaneously push back, constrain, and engage with Russia based on a strong shared understanding of Russia's aims and an approach of principled pragmatism.

The United States provided Ukraine with over \$19 billion in security assistance between February and November 2022. On the battlefield, the Russian army has performed poorly, and its men have struggled with low morale, ineffective execution of combined arms, and corruption. The Russian air force has been unable to establish air superiority and is running out of precision munitions. Putin may assume that by manipulating the West's dependency on Russian energy, he can dismantle the alliance this winter and eliminate the majority of sanctions.

Russia's views of Ukraine are consistent with its historical behaviour of using "buffer states" to border itself. In the past, Russians tended to think of Ukraine as inherently having a Russian culture and history. Further, Russia's actions in Ukraine prove it puts its economic interests last. Therefore, partial economic restrictions may not be enough to end the conflict.

The US policy in the current crisis should continue providing essential economic and energy aid to prevent a gas shortage in Europe from causing the alliance to fracture. The US government

and American corporations have already taken a step in this direction. Over 60 per cent of American liquefied natural gas (LNG) is currently exported to Europe, up from 20 per cent a year before. Long-term strategic planning and a more firmly expressed commitment while supporting dialogue with Russia could provide a solution to this conundrum.

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