SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY (1945-1985)

Soviet diplomacy after the Second World War was grounded in a number of assumptions dating back to Leninist doctrine. First, it was taken for granted that capitalism is doomed and should be replaced by the communist system as the incarnation of social progress. Second, the class-based theory of world revolution was believed to be universally valid. Third, the Soviet Union was considered to be the vanguard of what was dubbed “progressive mankind”. Fourth, since wars were believed to be brought about by the imperial powers, peace could be achievable only with a systemic demolition of imperialism. In the meantime, the Soviet rulers drew a distinction between “unjust wars” provoked by capitalist countries, and “just wars” of national liberation that Moscow pledged to support by all means for the sake of “world revolutionary progress”.

As the direct outcome of World War Two, the Soviet Union became one of most politically influential countries of the world. Yet it still lacked economic power comparable to the West. Hence, in the first post-war months the Soviet leadership sought to portray the USSR as a peaceful nation ready to compromise with its partners from the West. Yet the anti-fascist coalition soon fell apart, and the Soviet Union started to seek predominance in Eastern Europe. Accordingly, the United States were declared – first unofficially, then publicly – Russia’s main challenger and contender. Taking into account the growing enmity between Moscow and Washington, the Soviet leadership started investing resources in putting an end to the nuclear monopoly of the United States and going ahead with the Soviet atomic bomb project which, after its successful implementation, gave rise to the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States.

In 1953, with the death of Stalin, Soviet foreign policy underwent sweeping changes. The new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev declared the policy of peaceful co-existence between two types of countries (socialist and capitalist) and questioned the feasibility of “exporting the revolution” abroad. Khrushchev also acknowledged the multiplicity of transitory pathways from capitalism to socialism, and called for a more tolerant and flexible attitude towards the experience of European social democracy. Peaceful coexistence was equivalent to the repudiation of war as a means of solving political conflicts and recognition of the endurance of the capitalist system. The arms race, according to the new logic of Soviet foreign policy, was considered to be dangerous and wasteful.

In 1964 the new Secretary General, Leonid Brezhnev, came to power in the Kremlin. Under his rule, the Soviet Union strengthened the policy of “socialist internationalism” which, in practice, meant expansion of the USSR-controlled geopolitical sphere, as well as enhanced assistance to the Third World national liberation movements. The Brezhnev doctrine was interpreted in the West as a declaration of “limited sovereignty” in relations between socialist countries that are destined to “help each other” in solving their domestic problems. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was justified by this doctrine, which prevented the Soviet allies from making domestic policy changes and blocked transformation in the Soviet-imposed model of socialism.

In relations with the West, Brezhnev supported the policies of detente which, in his view, did not challenge the primacy of the class-struggle approach to world politics. Soviet-American relations at the time were characterised by the policy of nuclear deterrence and the conflict arising from by the Soviet Army’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1982.


Gorbachev drastically changed the previous approach to foreign policy, which was based on the Marxist-Leninist concept of irreconcilable conflict between capitalism and communism. He proclaimed that foreign policy must be based on cooperation instead of a military balancing act. In the spirit of a policy of “New Thinking”, Gorbachev made a number of concessions in the resolution of regional conflicts and arms negotiations that would have been unimaginable during the Soviet era. In 1987, the Soviet Union agreed to eliminate its intermediate- and short-range missiles in Europe, and secured this obligation in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty signed by Reagan and Gorbachev at the Washington Summit. In February 1989 the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan.

Gorbachev’s conciliatory policy brought an end to the Cold War, but also led to results his administration had not foreseen: the communist governments in Eastern Europe were overthrown during 1989-1990. This came about as a result of Gorbachev’s rejection of the Brezhnev Doctrine and his proclaiming the principle of “the sovereign right of each people to choose their own social system”, which he mentioned for the first time in his speech to the Council of Europe. In keeping with this principle, the Soviet Union did not attempt to restore communist rule in Eastern Europe and neither did
it stand in the way of reunification in Germany. Moreover, by the middle of 1990, Gorbachev and Chancellor Helmut Kohl had worked out an agreement by which the Soviet Union consented to the NATO membership of a unified Germany.

In the beginning of the 1990s, Soviet-controlled international organisations in Eastern Europe were disbanded. In January 1991, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance was dissolved, although member states agreed to recast their multilateral ties. In July 1991 the Warsaw Pact followed suit. Soviet troops were withdrawn from Eastern and Central Europe over the next four years, from Czechoslovakia and Hungary by mid-1991 and from Poland in 1993.

The United States-Soviet relations were steadily improving. At a summit in Malta in the end 1989, Gorbachev and President George H. W. Bush declared an end to the Cold War. In August 1990, the Soviet Union joined the United States in condemning the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and supported United Nations resolutions to restore Kuwait's sovereignty. By 1991, the United States-Soviet relationship showed even more significant signs of improvement, when Bush and Gorbachev signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I). Under START, large numbers of intercontinental ballistic missiles were to be eliminated: the parties agreed on a reduction of approximately 35 per cent in the United States of ballistic missile warheads and about 50 per cent of Soviet ballistic missile warheads within the following seven years. In November 1990, the United States, the Soviet Union, and most of the European states signed the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE Treaty), agreeing to reductions in battle tanks, armoured combat vehicles, artillery, and fighter aircraft.

Within the framework of Gorbachev's New Thinking policy, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Israel. Gorbachev considered that one of the country's top priorities was to develop closer relations with China. The Soviet Union resolved a number of problems which were stumbling blocks for Sino-Soviet relations: it rolled back Soviet support for the Vietnamese military presence in Cambodia, withdrew troops from Afghanistan and significantly reduced the number of Soviet troops and weapons deployed along China's northern border. As a result, the Chinese government agreed to hold a summit with Gorbachev in Beijing in 1989, which was the first meeting between Soviet and Chinese leaders since the 1950s.


After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, Russia was recognised by states around the world and international organisations as the Soviet Union's successor. As an independent state it now had to work out a new foreign policy strategy. This process was rather controversial due to the lack of clarity in Russia's new identity, which had to replace communism and Cold War ideology. Nevertheless, from the first days of Russia's independence, the West was defined as its political ally, a prototype for Russia's economic and political development, and, finally, as a potential source of financial assistance which was desperately needed for economic reforms. This type of worldview was especially widespread in the immediate aftermath of perestroika and the demise of the Soviet Union, and exemplified by the so-called Kozyrev diplomacy, an explicitly pro-Western stage in Russian foreign policy associated with Russia's first Foreign Minister. It is at this time that the ideas of Russia's eventual membership in NATO were aired. Andrei Kozyrev's avowed interest in strategic partnership with the West was based upon a number of shared premises, first of all, the desirability of bolstering multilateral institutions and support of universal human values as distinct from narrow national interests. Kozyrev's worldview was grounded in recognition of the "centrality of the United States as the only truly global power ... It is around the United States that a core of international society is formed, which shares basic values and common interests" (Trenin, 2000). Seen from this perspective, it was believed that a unipolar international society would be the best-equipped system for facilitating the thrust of globalisation and fostering unification of the world. Yet the unipolarity accepted by Kozyrev was seen not as Pax Americana but rather as a joint leadership of a group of Western nations (Bogaturov, 2003). Kozyrev's vision represented a sort of "soft unipolarity" where American superiority was mediated by a number of institutional filters and constraints that Washington had to respect. In other words, America's leadership was broadly accepted, but not in its capacity as the sole "superpower".

However, the pro-Western policies of the beginning of 1992 began to falter in 1993 over such issues as the war in Yugoslavia and NATO expansion. Critics started pushing for a more self-reliant and independent foreign policy in Russia. A number of other events, including the intensified NATO bombardment of Bosnian Serb targets in September 1995, unleashed harsh criticism of the Kozyrev brand of diplomacy from both the nationalist camp and President Yeltsin himself. Kozyrev's resignation was announced by Yeltsin in January 1996. His successor, Yevgeniy Primakov, came up with a different foreign policy philosophy grounded in the idea of multipolarity.

In the minds of many Russian politicians, the NATO intervention in the Balkans presented a perfect example of the drawbacks of unipolarity. Primakov voiced strong objections to the policies of NATO expansion, reminding the alliance of its alleged promise given to Gorbachev not to move into the spheres of Moscow's interests. Under Primakov, Moscow's new worldview came very close to resembling a "balance of power" concept that assumed Russia's ability to consolidate in the post-Soviet area and challenge the global hegemony of the United States.

RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY DURING THE PRESIDENCY OF VLADIMIR PUTIN (2000-2008)

The Idea of Russia's resurgence

Fast recovery of Russia's economy in Putin's first presidential term reduced Russia's dependence on foreign economic...
assistance, allowing Russian leaders to offer more vigorous resistance to Western policies that failed to meet Russia's expectations. The 1990s were assessed by his administration as the period of Russia's subjugation to the West. The feeling that Russia's interests were being disregarded was fuel for more assertive and aggressive behaviour from Russia in the international arena. Putin turned reaffirmation of Russia as a great power into the mainstay of his foreign policy, while pragmatism and pursuit of Russia's national interest became its key guiding principles. The five-day war in Georgia in August 2008 was one climax in Russia's international self-assertion in post-Soviet space as well as in Europe. It is worth mentioning that many analysts attribute the aggressive tone of Putin's foreign policy discourse to his domestic strategy of exploiting Russian patriotism for gaining support to his leadership and unifying the nation by promoting the idea of a perpetual external threat.

**Russia's resistance to US hegemony and multipolarity discourse**

Russia under Vladimir Putin increasingly identified itself as being in opposition to US hegemony, as a result of which Putin's foreign policy is usually described as rather confrontational. In the beginning of Putin's presidency there was great hope for US-Russian cooperation, based on the change of administration in both countries. The disagreements of the Yeltsin-Clinton era were expected to be overcome by new leaders. From the first days in office, Putin was inclined towards building stronger ties with the United States. In April 2000, he convinced the Duma to ratify START II. This treaty provided for a significant reduction in strategic nuclear warheads for both the United States and Russia by 2007. The next opportunity to reach new levels of cooperation with the United States came with the appearance of the counter-terrorism coalition. After 11 September 2001, Putin expressed his willingness to join efforts in the "war on terrorism" declared by the United States. It seemed that the counter-terrorism strategy could hold out a good opportunity for expanding general cooperation between Russia and the United States. Indeed, Russia supported the NATO operation in Afghanistan and stepped up cooperation on disarmament. During the US-Russia Summit in May 2002 in Moscow, the presidents of both countries, Vladimir Putin and George Bush, signed a Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, pledging to cut down their nuclear arsenals by two-thirds, bringing the number of warheads to about 2,000 each. However, less than a month later the Bush administration withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Missile Treaty claiming that it was detrimental to US protection against possible terrorist or "rogue-state" ballistic missile attacks. Russia saw this step as the intention of the United States to build up military supremacy at the expense of other states' security, and retaliated by withdrawing from the nuclear arms reduction treaty START II.

When the United States' intention to attack Iraq became clear, Putin faced a choice of either remaining neutral on the issue, thus implicitly supporting the Americans, or siding with "old Europe" in their protest against the US-led Iraq invasion. Putin chose the second option and, during his visit to Paris in February 2003, he and President Chirac officially announced their intention to block the US draft of a new UN resolution that would authorise the war in Iraq. Joined by the German leader Gerhard Schröder, they confirmed adherence to the principles of counter-terrorism but insisted that the war in Iraq was not an appropriate response to the terrorist threat.

Joining the "global war on terror" fitted in with Russia's interests as it gave justification and legitimacy to its policy in Chechnya. In other respects, Russia's contribution to the war on terrorism was not as expansive as the United States expected it to be. Russia contributed to the NATO operation in Afghanistan but never sent its own troops to this country. Moreover, as a counterweight to American presence in Central Asia, Russia built up its own military contingent in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Again, Russia never sacrificed anti-terrorism goals its partnership with Iran and Syria in the arms trade, despite the fact that both states were accused by the United States of supporting terrorism. Neither did Russia suspend construction work at a nuclear plant in Bushehr, which is being built on the basis of the Iran-Russia inter-governmental agreements dating from 1992. The United States was extremely dissatisfied with Russia for supplying these countries with arms and refusing to support sanctions against Iran. In Latin America, Russia was building ties with Venezuela, led by the anti-American president Hugo Chavez. Striving to further diversify its foreign policy, Russia declared as one of its top priorities partnership with India, China and Brazil (BRIC).

Consistently undermining the international relations system based on United States unilateralism, Russia put forward its own idea of the optimal world order, which was the multipolar world. The concept of multipolarity was not new to Russia's foreign policy discourse, but after Sergei Lavrov was appointed Foreign Minister in 2004, this idea prevailed. Putin eagerly promoted the idea of "democratic multipolarity". In his speech at the Munich Security Conference of 2007 he accused the United States of seeking global domination and lambasted the American concept of the unipolar world as being premised upon "one single centre of power" and "one single master, one sovereign", a situation that arguably "has nothing to do with democracy". In the Kremlin worldview, multipolarity fits with the idea of democracy which, in this reading, is void of political meanings and is basically reduced to a mere multiplicity of sovereign states, regardless of the nature of their political regimes. It is worth mentioning that Russia employs the concept of "democratic multipolarity" mainly in communication with countries like China, Belarus, Iran, Venezuela, India, Cuba and others, all of them lacking a convincing record of democratic rule. By the same token, the multipolarity discourse does not seem to be employed in Russia's communications with the EU. Instead Russia prefers to use the concepts of "common Euro-Atlantic space" and "larger Europe".

The Kremlin's concept of multipolarity had been criticised by many Russian experts, who point out that it may foster
conflicts among competing poles and thus lead to further destabilisation of international society, the specific consequences of which may be escalation of the conflict in the Middle East, the strengthening of Iran, the military advancement of China and North Korea, and so on.

Russia as a regional power

From the start of Putin’s presidency, Russia turned its attention to the CIS region and declared post-Soviet space a sphere of special interest. Russia was striving for deeper economic and security integration with the CIS states within the framework of existing CIS institutions and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The main sphere of cooperation between Russia and its eastern neighbours was energy transportation. A number of inter-governmental agreements with Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were signed, deepening cooperation in the oil and gas sector. The countries were also working to reduce customs tariffs on other categories of the goods and to intensify trade.

The “Rose Revolution” in Georgia in November 2003 was the first significant blow to Russia’s policy of strengthening its influence across the former Soviet space. This event, along with the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in late 2004, when the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko came to power, were deemed in Russia to be the result of US-led western interference in the Georgian and Ukrainian presidential elections, and the United States’ attempt to exert its influence over the countries allegedly located in the sphere of Moscow’s strategic interest. Despite the fact that Russia itself was using every available instrument to influence those elections, the fiasco of the pro-Russian candidates was followed by a stepping up of Moscow’s defensive anti-American rhetoric. The Kremlin also reacted extremely negatively to NATO’s decision to offer Georgia and Ukraine the prospect of membership in the alliance.

Throughout Vladimir Putin’s second term the relations with the new Ukrainian government led by Viktor Yushchenko were somewhat complicated. As for Russian-Georgian relations, the tensions were escalating into open hostility. Disputes with Georgia arose in the beginning of the 1990s when both Russia and Georgia became independent countries. Separatist tendencies which were accelerating in post-Soviet space made Georgia face the prospect of secession of two of its republics, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In order to prevent this, the Georgian government embarked on armed attacks in 1991 and 1992, which led the South Ossetian and Abkhazian governments to appeal to Russia for protection. Russia mediated the ceasefire and, as a result of the Sochi Peace Agreement, established a peacekeeping mission in these republics. Since then the Georgian government has redoubled its efforts to maintain a distance from Moscow. After Mikhail Saakashvili came to power in 2004, Georgia intensified its demands for a withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping corps from the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia’s main accusation against Russia was its increasing political cooperation with these two republics, and the extensive financial support it was giving them, thus encouraging breakaway tendencies in both territories. In 2005-2006 tensions flared. Moscow claimed that Chechen rebels were hiding in Georgian territory (in the Pankisi gorge). Georgia arrested five Russian officers on spying charges in September 2008 and imposed visa requirements on Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia. In response, Russia introduced a visa regime for Georgia and imposed an embargo on the importation of Georgian goods. A number of Russian officials publicly warned Georgia against joining NATO. Under the pretext of a possible military invasion by Georgia of Abkhazia, Russia announced a build-up of its peacekeeping corps in the latter republic. In the ongoing bellicose rhetoric, Georgia recalled its ambassador from Moscow.

As for Ukraine, two main points of discord between Moscow and Kyiv have been the Russian gas transit to Europe and the Russian naval presence in the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. Both sides have been engaged in a long-running argument over the naval base in Sevastopol, which is currently leased by Russia from Ukraine. The Ukrainian government insists that it will not renew the lease which expires in 2017, whereas for Russia this naval base is of top strategic priority. If the lease is not to be extended, Russia has to start preparing for the relocation of its naval base, which is a time-consuming and expensive matter.

Gas conflicts started in 2005 and periodically flared up until mid-2009. The disputes revolved around the price of natural gas sold to Ukraine and passing through Ukrainian territory to the European Union countries, which became the hostages in this conflict. In 2005, Russia announced that it was going to sell gas to Ukraine at the international market price instead of continuing with the former preferential tariffs. In addition, Russia was trying to recover an enormous debt that Ukraine owed to Gazprom for its gas purchases. As a result, Russia cut off gas supplies to Ukraine in January 2006. In response, Ukraine withheld some Russian gas being transported to Europe, which became an additional source of discord. Several days later, Ukraine and Russia reached a preliminary agreement, but the Ukrainian debt kept growing. Almost identical situations recurred in 2007, 2008 and 2009, each time resulting in the cutting-off of supplies to European consumers. Russia described its motives as purely rational, based on market logic, whereas Ukraine accused Russia of politically-motivated energy diplomacy. During 2009 Prime Minister Putin engaged in negotiations with his Ukrainian counterpart Yulia Timoshenko and the parties reached a mutually acceptable agreement according to which Russia establishes market gas prices for Ukraine, but Ukraine raises the gas transit price by 60%.

By the end of Putin’s presidency Russia had strained relations with both its closest neighbours (Georgia, Ukraine, Byelorussia and the Baltic States) and its strategic allies (European Union and the United States), which gave ground for pessimistic projections of Russia’s isolation and consequent marginalisation from world politics. The next Russian President Dmitry Medvedev faced the challenge of breaking this trend.
Russia as an energy superpower

Extremely favourable oil and gas prices have had an effect not only on Russia’s economic development, but also on its political self-identification. This is when the term “energy superpower” became current, mostly due to the fact that the Russia government considered its energy supply as one of its most important sources of international competitive advantage. Nevertheless, it was precisely the period of Putin’s presidency when Russia chose to switch its energy policy towards a more technocratic and pragmatic one. During his tenure Vladimir Putin presented Russia’s energy strategy as being based on “technical-economic thinking”, which gave rise to numerous discussions about Russia’s implicit intentions with this transformation, including accusations of using energy as a political instrument to influence both transit and consuming countries.

In order to understand properly the controversy raging around this issue, one should recall that Russia traditionally practised a politicised approach to energy supplies, offering exceptional conditions of gas and oil delivery to a limited number of countries considered to be its most loyal allies. The pricing policy of Russia was never governed by the logic of “market prices”. On the contrary, at the core of Russian energy diplomacy was a series of politically motivated exceptions extended to a number of “special partners”. In 2005, Gazprom with the support of the Putin administration announced that it was unifying its pricing policy and setting same-level prices for all its consumers, including Ukraine and (later) Byelorussia. Considering Russia’s negative reaction to the Ukrainian “Orange Revolution” of 2005, the new strategy was perceived as a “political move”. Russian officials kept insisting that this strategy could be explained by purely economic reasoning. Many analysts came to the conclusion that this was indeed true: Russia’s self-positioning as the “energy superpower” was driven not “by the desire to restore the empire […] but to boost profits earned by ‘Gazprom’, ‘Rosneft’ and other major corporations close to the Kremlin […]. The logic of pragmatism and profit are indeed replacing imperialism as the major factor determining the development of Russia’s foreign policy” (Morozov, 2007). In this context, the Russian government’s determination to charge Russia’s neighbours for gas supplies at non-preferential market prices could be regarded as a victory of “Gazprom” over the more traditional Kremlin approaches, or, in other words, as a preponderance of business logic over the (geo)political one.

Nevertheless, Russia’s transition from the rather traditionalist exception-based policy in the oil and gas sector attracted accusations that it was using energy as a manipulative tool. In the domestic sphere, the concept of the energy superpower is criticised because of the critical imbalance of Russian exports and its being heavily dependent on raw materials, which became especially evident after the world financial and economic crisis erupted. At the end of 2008 the Minister for Economic Development of Russia, Elvira Nabiullina, admitted that the model of a Russian economy based on oil and gas exports had been substantially faulty (Elvira Nabiullina, 2008).


Russia’s foreign policy priorities under the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev

The gist of Dmitry Medvedev’s foreign policy is Russia’s integration into the international community on an equal footing with the EU and NATO, but without shedding the pragmatic approach to international politics based on the pursuit of Russia’s national interests. This is reflected in foreign policy documents issued by the Medvedev administration: the new Russian Foreign Policy Concept, approved in July 2008 and the Russian National Security Strategy until 2020, released in May 2009. Both documents replace older versions adopted during Putin’s presidency. They mostly reproduce the same content stating that Moscow is seeking to establish a world order based on collective decision-making, security indivisibility, the primacy of international law while, at the same time, Russia safeguards its sphere of “privileged interests”, preventing any unfriendly interference therein. The difference between these documents and their older versions is in Russia’s self-positioning as a fully-fledged, influential international actor. Along with this idea both documents imply that Russia’s interests in the international arena are not taken into proper consideration. In other words, Russia’s international status does not match its real potential. On the practical level, this controversy is reflected in the main issue of Russia’s international policy for the year 2009 – the dispute over the American anti-missile system in Europe. On the one hand, Medvedev does not want to confront the West and start a new arms race but, on the other hand, Russia cannot tolerate NATO’s attempts to bring its anti-missile defence system close to its borders and thus increase its influence in the spheres of Russia’s strategic interest. Russia’s proposal of new Euro-Atlantic security architecture has the purpose of preventing this system from being deployed.

Medvedev’s proposal on the New European Security Architecture

Dmitry Medvedev often claims that “in international affairs as well as in domestic affairs we will first and foremost insist on the supremacy of law” (Medvedev, 2008b). The proposal of developing a new European Security Treaty follows from Medvedev’s aspiration to form a broad legal basis for international cooperation in the sphere of security. The practical demand for this treaty, as Medvedev states, comes, first, from Georgia’s arbitrary and irresponsible actions towards South Ossetia in August 2008 and, second, from NATO’s plans of boosting its security at the expense of Russia’s security. To avoid similar clashes in the future, Medvedev suggests signing a security treaty based on the primacy of the principles of international law; a multi-polar world; a non-confrontational approach to international relations; peaceful conflict resolution; and avoidance of alliances and blocs in the sphere of security. Soon after his inauguration, during his visit to Berlin in June 2008, Medvedev called on European countries to start work-
ing out a new all-European security treaty “which would finally clarify the role of the power factor in relations within the Euro-Atlantic community” (Medvedev, 2008a). He expanded on his vision of the new European security architecture at the World Policy Conference in Evian on October 8, 2008, where he blamed the United States for “creating dividing lines in international relations” by its “series of unilateral actions” (Medvedev, 2008b). Medvedev emphasised the importance of the indivisibility of security by suggesting “building an integrated and solid system of comprehensive security” where “no development and expansion of military alliances at the expense of other parties” is to be allowed. He insisted on the necessity of a new security treaty for the entire Euro-Atlantic space. By the end of November 2009, these suggestions had taken the form of the Draft Treaty on European Security (2009) that the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov presented in Athens during the OSCE ministerial council in December 2009.

The European leaders were not very enthusiastic about the treaty. Dmitry Medvedev’s proposal was criticised mainly for its lack of substance, since the chief principles of his project are already fixed in the Helsinki Final Act and the UN Charter. This proposed treaty is said to be purely reactive, created in response to further potential NATO enlargement and USA missile defence negotiations with Eastern European countries. The critics also say that by means of this treaty Moscow is attempting to gain more authority in European international relations, because the implicit demand of the Medvedev’s security concept is that Europe must take into consideration Russia’s interests and security concerns.

Another critique of Russia’s initiative is that Medvedev’s strategy is rather inconsistent and that many of his appeals are pure rhetoric. Thus, although in his proposal Medvedev continues to develop the concept of multipolarity, he also rather easily drops multipolarity discourse in favour of unilateral decision-making: “As far as our military contingent (in South Ossetia) is concerned, I should like to draw your attention to the fact that not a single document, including our joint plan with President Sarkozy, envisages that this contingent would abide by any rules … It is up to us to define what troops we need there, where they will be based and what kind of military bases will be deployed over there” (Medvedev, 2008c). In Russia’s Foreign Policy concept, this inclination to unilateralism is veiled by the wording, “Should our partners be unprepared for joint efforts, Russia, in order to protect its national interests, will have to act unilaterally, but always on the basis of international law” (“The Foreign Policy…”, 2008).

Summarising Russia’s foreign policy in one of his interviews in 2009, Sergei Lavrov said that Russia was going to keep promoting Dmitry Medvedev’s initiative even if it had not received the proper response from the European community (“Russia to promote…”, 2009).

The significance of Medvedev’s proposal is evident in at least one aspect of this issue – Russia is more determined than ever to establish an institutional partnership with the EU and NATO. During Putin’s presidency Russia’s priority was bilateral relations with individual European countries instead of cooperation with the EU institutions. Putin’s administration doubted the political subjectivity of the European Union and sought to establish relations with actual decision-makers, who were, from Moscow’s point of view, Germany, Italy and France. Medvedev, by suggesting a Euro-Atlantic security treaty, shifted towards recognition of the EU as a fully-fledged and trustworthy partner.

The improvement of EU-Russia relations throughout 2009 was substantiated by the EU-Russia summit held in Stockholm in November 2009. It was acknowledged as the most successful to be held in the past few years. The European Union agreed to start negotiations on abolishing the visa regime between Russia and the EU and to accelerate the work on the New Basic Agreement which is to replace the Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation (which expired in December 2007 and is automatically extended every year). Moreover, the European Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso, the Swedish Prime Minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, and the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev have agreed to launch a bilateral programme “Partnership for Modernisation”, designed to assist Russia in remedying the fact of its lagging behind in technological matters. Again, the issue of Russia’s joining the WTO was duly discussed. Jose Manuel Barroso stressed the importance of Russia’s membership in this organisation (European Parliament, 2009).

NATO as a primary external rival of Russia

The sphere of Russia-NATO relations is one where the legacy of the Cold War was the most difficult to shake off. Russian opposition to NATO has been premised on two mutually exclusive arguments. On the one hand, NATO is said to be a dangerously strong (even omnipotent) and unfriendly military bloc that threatens Russian interests. On the other hand, it is said to be a relic of the Cold War, incapable of providing security in today’s completely altered international environment in which security challenges are not bound to specific territories. For both Putin and Medvedev, “bloc thinking” and, accordingly, territorial expansion are not the right remedies for non-territorial threats.

To discredit the idea of Ukraine’s and Georgia’s joining NATO, Russia is wielding normative links between democracy and security. It argues that Ukraine should not join NATO since most Ukrainians are against membership in the alliance. In Georgia’s case, where popular support for NATO is unquestioned, Russia pushes the democratic dimension by asserting that Georgia does not meet Western standards of democracy and should therefore be unwelcome as a NATO member. When tensions were especially heated, some officials resorted to an aggressive tone. Dmitri Rogozin, Russia’s representative to NATO, said that it was unlikely that Ukraine would be able to maintain its current borders if it joined the alliance. The same argument was made – well before the August 2008 war - with regard to Georgia: since neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia support NATO membership, they have the right to refrain from going into NATO with Georgia. In both cases Russia was not threatening the governments of these countries, but implying that it would
support breakaway tendencies when it came to the issue of joining NATO. With this belligerent rhetoric Russia was trying to force Kyiv and Tbilisi to make a choice between territorial integrity and NATO membership, which is certainly a rather controversial strategy in the light of Russia’s continued opposition to Kosovo’s independence. In many contexts of Russia’s foreign policy discourse NATO is mentioned as an unfriendly actor undermining Russia’s security and provoking distrust and irritation. Nevertheless, NATO can hardly be considered to be a real enemy to Russia. Rogozin says that nobody in the Russian political establishment believes in the possibility of armed conflict with NATO: “Both NATO and Moscow understand that real threat can emerge only in the South” (Zygar’, 2009).

War in Georgia and its impact on Russia’s relations with Euro-Atlantic community

The armed conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, when Moscow intervened in the territory of Georgia to protect South Ossetia after an armed attack was launched against it, became the most important issue of Russia’s defence discussions with the EU, the United States and NATO. On 26 August, Russia officially recognised the breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, which thereafter constituted a thorny issue for Russia’s relations with Europe. The resolution of the conflict in these republics had been achieved with the active participation of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy acting on behalf of the European Union. Medvedev and Sarkozy charted a plan for overcoming the Caucasus crisis, which was later signed by the Abkhazian and South Ossetian presidents and amended and signed by the Georgian president. The plan included such terms as non-renewal of the use of force, free access to humanitarian assistance, international monitoring procedures backed by observers from the OSCE and the EU, withdrawal of Russian forces to a line that precedes the zone of military conflict, and the beginning of international discussions on the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The latter issue provided the basis for numerous rounds of Geneva talks throughout the end of 2008-2009. During these negotiations Georgia gained international support in demanding that South Ossetia and Abkhazia must be recognised as an integral part of Georgia, whereas Moscow had consistently insisted on the signing of legally-binding non-aggression treaty between Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, arguing that both republics must be made secure from Georgia’s attempts to preserve its territorial integrity by the use of military force.

In June 2009, Russia vetoed a plan to extend the UN peacekeeping mission in Georgia, because the UN resolution on extending this mission was based on the premise of Georgia’s territorial integrity. Russia labelled the argument of its opponents on the inviolability of frontiers as “politicised and ideologised formulas”. This position was perceived as somewhat debatable because, in the case of Kosovo, Russia refers precisely to the principle of territorial integrity when condemning the “illegal unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo” (O pozitsii Rossii … 2009). It claims that the secession of Kosovo is a dangerous international precedent. Besides, the independence of this territory “did not contribute in any way to addressing the key problems of Kosovo”. Despite the evident inconsistency of Russia’s argument, it kept insisting on a new peacekeeping mandate, which would be void of any assertion of Georgia’s territorial integrity. Due to Russia’s veto the mission was not extended and the UN peacemakers withdrew from Georgia.

September 2009 saw the publication of a report prepared by the EU commission chaired by the Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini. It gave an account of the causes of the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, accused Georgia of starting the hostilities and Russia of overreacting and breaking the territorial integrity of Georgia, thus violating international law.

“Reset” in Russia’s relations with the United States

The Obama Administration changed its policy towards Russia in favour of improving bilateral relations with Moscow. In March 2009 the Secretary of the State Hillary Clinton visited Moscow and offered to “reset” relations between the two countries. The offer was willingly accepted by her counterpart Sergei Lavrov. The most significant decision in the framework of “resetting” the relations concerned anti-missile systems in Eastern Europe. Since 2006 the United States’ plans on deployment of ballistic missile defence in Poland and the Czech Republic have been a source of irritation for Moscow. The turning point of this issue came in 2009. In September that year the Obama Administration announced the cancellation of plans to deploy the missile defence system in these two countries. The United States explained the decision by referring to a change of strategic priorities but was apparently expecting Russia to reciprocate this step by supporting more rigid sanctions against Iran and discontinuing sales of S-300 air-defence missiles to Teheran. Nevertheless, neither the Russian President nor the Russian Foreign Ministry made any move in this direction. In his interview with CNN on 20 September 2009 Dmitry Medvedev mentioned that Russia did not feel obliged to make reciprocal concessions and stated that selling arms to Iran did not contravene international law. These events gave grounds for questioning the success of the much-vaunted “reset” as neither with the case of Iran nor with that of Georgia was there any alleviation of tensions. In addition, by the end of 2009, the two sides still had to overcome a lot of disagreements over the terms of the treaty on reduction of strategic nuclear arsenals.

An overview of basic foreign policy documents of the Medvedev Administration

Under the presidency of Medvedev, the conceptual framework for foreign policy has been renewed. A number of basic strategic documents, such as Foreign Policy Concept, Military Doctrine and The Russian National Security Strategy, have been revised and updated. Most of them were worked out in the Security Council of Russia.
Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation

The Foreign Policy Concept was issued on 12 in July 2008. The document states that Russia “has now acquired a fully-fledged role in global affairs” and “exerts a substantial influence on the development of a new architecture of international relations”. One of the key objectives of Russian foreign policy is exerting influence in “global processes to ensure the formation of a just and democratic world order” based on cooperation and supremacy of international law.

According to the Concept, Russian foreign policy is based on “its national interests”, which coincide with the interests of international community when it comes to “terrorism, drug trafficking, organised crime, spread of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, demographic problems, global poverty, illegal migration and climate change”. To combat these threats, the “architecture of international relations ought to be based on recognition by the international community of the principles of indivisibility of security”.

The interests of Russia are directly related to the globalisation of world economy, multilateral diplomacy, integration processes, etcetera. In order to stimulate further development of these positive trends, Russia suggests joining efforts towards the “emergence of a stable system of international relations based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and cooperation as well as international law”. The document is critical of arbitrary interpretation of legal norms, especially when related to the use of force, and “the attempts to portray violations of international law as its ‘creative’ application”. It criticises unilateralism, especially the application of military force bypassing the Security Council. Yet, in the meantime, the Concept reserves for Russia the right to act unilaterally in cases when its partners are “unprepared for joint efforts”.

The priority strand in Russia’s foreign policy remains cooperation with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. The European question is next in Russia’s priorities and, here, Russia’s main objective is creating a transparent and democratic system of collective security “ensuring the unity of the Euro-Atlantic region [...] in such a way as not to allow any new fragmentation and reproduction of bloc-based approaches”. The expansion of NATO is considered to be a serious obstacle to building such a system, since it hinders further enhancement of good-neighbour principles, trust and cooperation. Russia views NATO’s intentions of bringing its military infrastructure closer to Russian borders as a violation of the principle of indivisible security. Russia is ready to cooperate with NATO in order to ensure predictability and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region, but such cooperation depends on “the degree of the Alliance’s readiness for equal partnership”. The Concept suggests using the OSCE instead of NATO as a “forum for equitable dialogue between the OSCE member states for collective consensus decision-making” in the security sphere.

The Concept also stresses the importance of developing mutually advantageous bilateral relationships with Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Finland and other European states. Russia’s relations with Great Britain and Baltic states are mentioned as lacking deep-rooted cooperation, but it is declared that Russia is willing to establish strong ties on the basis of reciprocal consideration of interests.

Bibliographical references


