

# Interplay of Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy of Russia Under Vladimir Putin: A Conceptual Framework

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## Abstract

Over the last three decades, the foreign policy of Russia has undergone major transformations, at least on three occasions. Right from being over dependent on the West in the early 1990s to becoming self-sufficient in the economic field and pragmatic in foreign affairs in the first decade of the present century and finally turning into an aggressive and assertive mode, Russia has travelled a long path. The present paper aims to give an overview of the transition of Russian foreign policy during the course of last three decades with special emphasis on the theoretical linkages between domestic politics and foreign policy, particularly during the tenure of Vladimir Putin. Finally, the paper focuses on research findings along with the subjective views of the author with in the neo-realist framework.

**Keywords:** Russia; Foreign Policy; Domestic Politics; Vladimir Putin; Putinization.

## INTRODUCTION

Russia emerged as an independent sovereign Republic in 1991 from the ashes of the Soviet Union. Even then geographically it is the largest country in the world covering around 17 million square kilometres. It encompasses about one

eighth of earth's inhabited land area where about 15 million people reside. By virtue of Soviet legacy, Russia became the official inheritor of all liabilities and assets left by the former Soviet Union. As a result, Russia is a recognised nuclear weapon state, possessing the world's largest stockpile of nuclear weapons; and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Despite these added features in its favour, Russia in the post-Soviet years had to struggle to prove itself as a world power of consequence.

Over the last two decades, the international community has witnessed the gradual and steady resurgence of Russia on the world stage under the able leadership of Vladimir Putin. Russia has successfully managed get out of its domestic economic constraints and many other challenges

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during last two decades which has a direct bearing on its foreign policy. On the foreign policy front, Russia today has become highly assertive, calculative and pragmatic to advance its national interests. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation - duly approved by Vladimir Putin in June 2000 - provided a clear roadmap for the future of the country (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation "Approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin 2000). One of the important objectives of this Foreign Policy Concept (2000) had been to create favourable external conditions for improving Russia's economy, improving living standard of its people, successfully carrying out internal democratic transformations, and thereby strengthening the basis of constitutional system. This roadmap clearly reflects a direct linkage between the domestic politics and foreign policy of Russia in the Post-Soviet years, particularly since the arrival of Vladimir Putin on the Russian political stage in 1999.

In the above stated backdrop, the present paper aims to test the hypothesis that there has been a direct theoretical linkage between the domestic politics and foreign policy of Russia under Vladimir Putin. In order to test this hypothesis, the paper attempts to find out answer of the following questions: (a) What has been the consequences of domestic political and economic reforms introduced by Russia on its foreign policy? Were there any differences among the policy makers in Russia over the path to be convenient to take the country forward? What were the domestic factors that enabled Vladimir Putin to adopt aggressive foreign policy behaviour? This apart, the present paper gives an overview of the transition of the Russian policy over the period of last three decades. Finally, the paper discusses how Russia has emerged stronger economically over the years that enabled it to become more assertive and aggressive in the arena of international affairs. The study has been conducted on the basis of primary and secondary sources available on the subject with in the neo-realist framework.

In order to understand the trends and directions of Russian foreign policy during the span of last three decades, Rajan Kumar has very rightly classified the developments into three distinct phases (Kumar 2018, 210-211). Phase One from 1991-1995; Phase Two from 1996-2006; and phase three from 2007 to till date. Conceptually, one can divide the developments in respect of Russia's foreign policy into three parts, as follows: Part one - the formative phase; part two - the phase of pragmatism; and part three - the assertive/aggressive phase.

## PHASE ONE (1991-1995)

Phase one could be termed as the formative phase since Russia emerged as an independent sovereign country after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the first phase, the key focus of Russia was to promote capitalist and liberal democratic form governance in place of the earlier socialist order. There was the tacit understanding between the US and Russia, whereby Washington was to extend guidelines and necessary technical and economic support to Moscow towards this new path. This was the time of rapid economic privatisation and large-scale political reforms. The very success of this phase was to a large extent contingent upon the financial and ideological support from the West (Kumar 2018, 210). In other words, the first phase has been marked by the application of neo-liberal principles and the West-centric policy that resulted in the absence of strategic and geopolitical competition between Russia and the West.

The most important step undertaken by the Yelstin administration in the early 1990s was to favour a policy of integration with West on the basis of shared values and common interests. The objective behind such move was to support promotion of a wider community of democratic states (Zagorski 2019, 462). This was in line with the idea of a pluralistic security community<sup>1</sup> as conceptualised by Karl W. Deutsch in the 1950s (Constopoulos 1995). During this phase, Russia had tacitly supported the policies of NATO. The first military doctrine published by Moscow in 1992 and subsequently officially approved on November 2, 1993, categorically mentioned about the absence of any external threat. The Doctrine specifically stated that the Russian Federation "is committed to the principles of peaceful settlement of international disputes, respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, non-interference in their internal affairs, inviolability of state borders and other universally recognised principles of international law" (The Basic Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation n.d.). The Document further stated that Russia would actively support the cessation of nuclear weapons tests and work towards the ultimate goal of achieving a comprehensive ban. Thus, Moscow sent a clear signal to the West and the international community that Russia stood for the cause of international peace and security.

There were however large scale debates in the Russian legislature during the year 1992-93 about what strategies and path would be good for the country in domestic and foreign affairs. Broadly

this debate was represented by three sections: the Leftists/Conservatives, Rightists/Radicals, and the Centrists/Gradualists (Kumar 2018, 214-215). The Leftists/Conservatives were opposed to the neo-liberal agenda and pro-western foreign policy. They resisted any unilateral concessions given to the West on disarmament and demilitarisation. These developments were treated as tantamount to the complete surrender before the West. It, however, needs to be mentioned that towards the middle of 1990s the socialist model of governance had lost its relevance; and consequently, people were in search of alternative. The Liberals/Radicals, in contrast, advocated sweeping political and economic reforms led by Boris Yelstin and his team<sup>2</sup> who advocated implementing the market economy model at a blazing pace. Yelstin wanted to weaken the base of the Communists by privatising the industry and trade. He began selling out state-controlled enterprises to private players at a very cheaper price. In the process, Russia became heavily dependent upon Western specialists/experts<sup>3</sup> for smooth economic and political transition. The Gradualists/Centrists could be located in between the two extremes, who advocated slow and cautious transition towards market economy model. The point to be noted here is that the radical liberals under the leadership of Boris Yelstin emerged champion out of these debates, at least in the first phase.

Russia's foreign policy in the initial years extensively focussed on creating favourable conditions for Moscow at the international level to support the cause of rapid domestic reforms. Andrei Kozyrev was the foreign minister of Russia till 1996 who advocated close cooperation and coordination with the West through bilateral and multilateral engagements. In this context, it needs to be mentioned that the roots of Russia's foreign policy in the initial few years under Boris Yelstin go back to the tenure of Mikhail Gorbachev, first as the General Secretary of the Communist Party and then as the President of the USSR, during 1985 to 1991. Gorbachev's new initiatives in foreign affairs had been termed as the 'new thinking'<sup>4</sup> in foreign affairs (Kothari 1994, 102-132). He argued that with the right kind of approach by the states, peace and tranquillity could be established in the international system. Mikhail Gorbachev in fact played a critical role in transforming the nature of international politics. Following this line, Russia under Boris Yelstin adopted a conciliatory approach towards the West. It became a member of the International Monetary Fund on June 1, 1992; and the World Bank on June 16, 1992 (Oliker, et al. 2015, 9). At

the same time, Moscow also initiated discussions to become member of the WTO. This provided an impetus to boost Russia's economic liberalisation process. However, political uncertainty combined with atrophied economy at home during this period resulted in a disorganised and incoherent approach to Russia's foreign relations. All major decisions were taken entirely on ad-hoc basis. Countries like India and China could not find any suitable place in Russia's foreign policy framework. Interesting enough to add that in 1993, Russia under pressure from the United States had to cancel a deal to supply cryogenic rocket engines with technology transfer<sup>5</sup> to India. (Sinha 2017). On the whole, this was the phase of rapid economic privatisation and heavy dependence upon the West for financial, technological and ideological support; and political reforms were characterised by a new constitution and the presidential system. On international affairs, the foreign policy of Russia was underlined by large scale uncertainties with unpredictable outcomes.

## PHASE TWO (1996-2006)

The neoliberal failure of the early 1990s paved the way for the rise of new Eurasianism. Yelstin's policy of integration into the West did not sustain. Russia confronted numerous challenges: economic collapse, social disorder, and political confusion (Mandelbaum 2021). Neoliberals were accused of surrendering before the West and ignoring the interests of Russia. Meanwhile, the economic assistance as promised earlier by the US and other western powers did not take place. In the process, the Communist party emerged as the dominant political force in the 1995 election. There was intense pressure on the Russian leadership to change the course of its pro-Western foreign policy. Andrei Kozyrev, the then foreign minister, was removed from the office and replaced by Yevgeny Primakov

Primakov was an Eurasianist<sup>6</sup> who initiated radical changes in Russia's foreign policy. Accordingly, it was argued that Russia should focus more on its existing borders as in civilizational terms Russia was much greater that extends to all the countries of Eurasia. In 1997 Russia and China signed the 'Joined Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New International Order'. Primakov also proposed the idea of 'triangular cooperation among Russia-India-China' (RIC) to counter the hegemony of the West. Another important organisation known as BRICS<sup>7</sup> also emerged during this time that focussed on promoting economic cooperation among the important powers in the

developing world namely, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

In fact, the roots Russia's foreign policy under Vladimir Putin (since 1999) goes few years back when Yevgeny Primakov was appointed Russian foreign minister in 1996. Primakov altogether took a new path when he declared that Russia would no longer follow the lead and directions of the United States, but would instead follow an independent path leading to a multipolar world order as an alternative to the US led unipolar system. This became largely known as the Primakov doctrine.<sup>8</sup> Primakov doctrine rests on the following principles of Russian foreign policy (a) Russia should strive toward a multipolar world managed by a concert of major powers to counter the US hegemony; (b) Russia has to focus primarily on the post-Soviet space and lead integration in that region; and (c) Russia should oppose expansion of NATO to secure its territorial integrity and sovereignty (Rumer 2019).

The second phase had been marked by centralisation of political power and fast economic recovery under the stewardship of Vladimir Putin from the year 1999 onwards. The rapid economic recovery had been backed by booming global energy prices. Russian economy grew by 6-7 percent per annum which resulted in huge reserves of foreign currency and no public debt (Pushkin 2015,<sup>23</sup>). Russia became a full member of the G-7 group which later turned into G-8<sup>9</sup> in 1998. Putin gained confidence by way of getting unaccounted support from the elites as well as the common people. In other words, the second phase had been marked by the end of uncertainty in Russia's domestic and foreign policy fields. The period also witnessed a sustained downturn in relations with the United States. Russia became critical towards the expansionist strategy adopted by NATO in the second half of 1990s. NATO's entry into the former Soviet sphere of influence compelled Russian policy makers to term this military association as 'offensive, dangerous and unreliable'. The Western countries announced plans to expand NATO to Central European countries which had earlier been controlled by the Soviet led Warsaw Pact (Mandelbaum 2021). Russian policy makers argued that NATO had destabilized governments and interfered too much into the internal affairs of other states. For long, the United States had been using NATO to weaken Russia and obstructing to further Moscow's national interests (Oliker, et al. 2015, 6-7). The West however argued that NATO's eastward expansion was not directed against Russia.

*Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*<sup>10</sup> 2000 stressed the importance of the former Soviet space for Russia. It clearly defined the future road map for the country. It was critical of NATO's expansion in the CIS, and advocated multipolarity in the international system. It stated that neither Russia should give any unjustified concessions to the West nor the country should indulge in any confrontation with the US, Europe, and Japan. In other words, both the extremes were considered unacceptable and detrimental to Russia's national interests. Russia should focus more on promoting trade and economic relations with the East and West both. Thus, Russia during this phase became pragmatic in domestic and foreign affairs.

Interestingly, 9/11 development was an acid-test for Moscow. Russia adopted a conciliatory approach towards the United States to deal with the threat of international terrorism. Putin increasingly talked about Russia's integration into the world and Europe in particular (Secieru 2006). The whole idea behind this approach was that Russia could revive and successfully develop only as a great power provided it was recognised and respected in the world. This was a tactical move on the part of Russia to gain more leverage across entire former Soviet space to deal with emerging security challenges. According to Stanislav Secieru, by extending support to the US strategy towards 'war on terror', Russia wanted to gain international legitimacy and support for its 'anti-terrorist campaign' in Chechnya and elsewhere.

Michael Mandelbaum in his paper entitled: "Introduction: Russian Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective" has referred to Leon Aron who argues that Russian foreign policy since 1996 focussed on three key factors: (a) Russia should be a dominant player in the former Soviet space; (b) Moscow should be an influential participant in international affairs; and (c) On nuclear matters, it should be equal to that of the United States. In other words, the crux of the argument was that Russia should be more vocal in international and global affairs which became very distinct in the coming years. Russia under Vladimir Putin since 2000 has been pursuing a very pragmatic foreign policy corroborated by well-structured national interests. Through the application of economic, political and military instruments, Putin, in fact, aimed to re-establish Moscow's predominance in the former Soviet space.

### PHASE THREE (2007-TILL DATE)

Vladimir Putin has a very unique style of

functioning, which has been explicitly reflected in this phase. In Russia there exists a strong culture of secrecy systematically enforced over a period of last two decades, after witnessing relative openness in the 1990s during the tenure of Boris Yelstin. A handful of people are only involved in decision making. Vladimir Putin exerts a crucial influence on every single policy that is framed in domestic and foreign affairs (*Pushkin* 2015,<sup>7</sup>). Putin himself determines the trends and directions of Russian foreign policy towards the players like the United States, Europe, China, India etc.

A Paper published in the Foreign Affairs by Timothy Frye has very rightly assessed the outcome of two decades of Russia under Vladimir Putin in the following words:

For two decades, Vladimir Putin has reigned supreme over Russian politics. A skilful manipulator of public opinion, he wields the blunt force of repression against opponents at home and the sharp power of cyber operations and espionage campaigns against enemies abroad. Putin has jailed the closest thing he has to a political rival the opposition leader Alexei Navalny and crushed a wave of protests by Navalny's supporters. Putin's intelligence agencies brazenly hacked the U.S. government, and his troops are gradually eroding U.S. influence everywhere from Libya to Syria to Ukraine (*Frye* 2021).

In his foreign policy framework, James Rosenau has talked about the importance of idiosyncratic variable in a closed political system (*Rosenau* 1966, 27-92). He argues that idiosyncratic personality of selective ruler becomes prominent and thus the importance of other variables like 'governmental', 'systemic', and 'societal' become secondary. Vladimir Putin enjoys all the characteristics of idiosyncratic personality. During last about two decades, there has been radical transformations in the arena of Russia's domestic politics and foreign policy. It was during this period that Russia became more assertive and aggressive in foreign affairs mainly due to the autocratic style of functioning of Vladimir Putin, who in the process has bypassed the role of key institutions in decision making. Putin's idiosyncratic personality has been reflected in dishonouring human rights and civil liberties at home and aggressive policies in foreign affairs.

At the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy on February 10, 2007, Vladimir Putin delivered his famous speech when he squarely blamed the United States and NATO for provoking arms race, creating instability in the West Asia, and by passing international institutions, particularly

the United Nations (*Shanker and Landler* 2007). He accused the United States for initiating a new nuclear arms race by installing ballistic missile defense system, undermining the international institutions, and making the Middle East more unstable. On all major international conflicts - Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Georgia, Ukraine - Russia was at loggerheads with the US. A number of scholars talked about commencement of a new cold war. NATO's eastward expansion, particularly in Moscow's near abroad, became the core issue of conflict between Russia and the US (*Shanker and Landler* 2007). Thus, Vladimir Putin's speech at Munich delivered in 2007 marked the beginning of third phase in Russia's domestic politics and foreign affairs.

Russia's armed interventions in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015 demonstrated the assertive and aggressive foreign policy behaviour on the part of Moscow (*Kumar* 2018, 220-223). Georgia's policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been vigorously criticised by Russia and finally, Moscow intervened militarily and recognised de-facto independence of these two republics. Through military intervention in Ukraine in 2014, Moscow supported the rebel elements and incorporated Crimea within its sovereign jurisdiction. Russia also intervened in Syria too in 2015 and stood firm behind the Assad regime in the international forums and supported military interventions by it. Finally, Russia with the help of Iran saved the Assad regime and the Syrian state.

On the theoretical front, throughout the tenure of Vladimir Putin, there had been a clear linkage between the state of economy and the directions of Russian foreign policy. This was a period of significant reforms and economic growth. Oil prices in the international market had increased sharply during 2004 to 2008 which resulted in earnings of huge foreign currency reserves. Russia repaid its remaining debt in 2006 (*Pushkin* 2015, 27-28). High energy prices and impressive economic growth made Russia assertive and aggressive in foreign affairs in the succeeding years. In other words, Russia's capacity to pursue an independent foreign policy since 2007 has been integral to its domestic economic performance. Economic strength also provided the much needed stability of the political system and consolidated the authority of Vladimir Putin.

Energy apart, Russia has also used several other economic tools to further its national interests. Russian investments in the Baltic states and several central and East European states in banking,

finance, manufacturing and transport have grown significantly during last one decade (*Pushkin* 2015,<sup>28</sup>). Russia has thus emerged as the leading power in the fields of trade and investment in the former Soviet republics. This development has given Russia the opportunity to apply huge political influence in the near abroad.

Pushkin has identified four main sources of domestic influence that have played a decisive role in Putin's foreign policy:

- (a) Individual actors and their personal predilections;
- (b) Political culture shaped by long-term structural factor such as geography and history;
- (c) Concrete political and economic interests; and
- (d) Circumstances and events.

First, Putin's personal influence is felt at every level of domestic and foreign policy. As stated earlier, idiosyncratic variable has got prominence in Russian politics. In other words, Putin has reinforced the model in which individuals, not institutions are paramount. Second, Individuals are the product of their cultural environment which is shaped by geography and history. Third, foreign policy of Russia under Putin has been shaped by its political and economic interests. Fourth, Russia's foreign policy under Putin are the fallout of domestic circumstances and events (*Pushkin* 2015,<sup>35-36</sup>).

Russia's steady economic growth during last two decades, with the exception of recession in 2009, has been an important determinant of Russia's new assertiveness. In other words, political stability apart, economic growth has been a key element of Putin's success (*Oliker, et al.* 2015,<sup>8-9</sup>).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS:

It is an established hypothesis that the influence of domestic factors shapes the conduct of foreign policy of any given state and Russia is no exception. During the first phase, the political system of Russia was resting upon a very fragile foundation due to its blind overdependence upon the West on economic support, technical assistance and political roadmap. Russia struggled to get out of this paradigm and entered into altogether a new era during the second phase. Russia learnt from its past mistakes and focussed on recasting its foreign policy to restore her self-respect and dignity by taking some harsh measures at home that resulted in making U-turn in foreign affairs. It was during this phase that Russia

became pragmatic in the conduct of foreign policy. Russia emerged from the shadow of humiliation it had faced in the early 1990s. Then in the final phase, Russia became very assertive and aggressive in foreign affairs due to some hard policy decisions by Vladimir Putin in domestic politics. The author terms these developments as the phase of Putinization of Russian politics. As Rajan Kumar stated that Russia became defiant, aggressive and combative in protecting its geopolitical interests. This indicates the profile of Russia's foreign policy. Putin himself stated: "foreign policy is both an indicator and a determining factor for the condition of internal state affairs". Putin has thus been pursuing a very well-articulated and structured foreign policy.

Alexander Pushkin very rightly states that 'The current policy landscape is centered on individuals and their networks rather than formal institutions. This is demonstrated above all by President Putin. No single person in the six decades since the death of Stalin has been so intimately identified with power and policy in Russia. Such is his domination that he has engendered his own "ism".' Pushkin further says: "In Russia there is no law. There is a pillar, and on that pillar sits the crown" (*Pushkin* 2015,<sup>7</sup>).

## END NOTES

1. The concept of pluralistic security community is a valuable tool for explaining some features of the global setting like the peaceful long-term coexistence of states at the international level. Pluralistic security community - as conceptualised by Karl Deutsch - is a union in which war is no longer contemplated as a possible way of resolving conflicts among its members. (Costopoulos) The conditions for the emergence of a pluralistic security community are as follows: (i) compatibility of major values; (ii) mutual responsiveness; and (iii) mutual predictability of behaviour.
2. Boris Yelstin's team consisted of Gennadi Burbulis, Yagor Gaidar, Andrei Kozyrev, Anatoly Chubais etc. Yagor Gaidar was known for the shock therapy programme; while Anatoly Chubais was popularly known as the architect of privatization in Russia.
3. A number of experts from Harvard University, who served as advisors to the government, suggested deregulation of prices, free trade and close cooperation with the West. Accordingly, Russian economy was opened

up for the international market.

4. One of the significant outcomes of New Thinking was the signing of a number of treaties between the US and the then USSR that aimed to reduce conventional and nuclear weapons to a reasonable level. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty signed between them in December 1987 wherein they agreed to eliminate 1,600 intermediate-range missiles. The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces was signed in November 1990 between NATO and the Warsaw Pact states which prohibited the deployment of conventional weapons in Europe. This apart, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) was signed between the two countries in July 1991 that limited the number of long-range ballistic missiles to 1,600. (Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Strategic Offensive Reductions) The reunification of Germany and the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and East Europe by 1989 marked the beginning of a new era in the foreign policy of the then USSR. The crux of Gorbachev's argument was that in the nuclear age, neither the US nor the USSR could hope to gain a decisive military advantage over the other.
5. To fast-track the development of next generation launch vehicles, ISRO (Indian Space Research Organisation) had decided to import a few cryogenic rocket engines from Russia. In 1991, ISRO and the Russian space agency, Glavkosmos, had signed an agreement for supply of two cryogenic engines along with transfer of technology so that Indian scientists could build these on their own in the future. Russia succumbed to US pressure and cancelled the deal in 1993. In an alternative arrangement, Russia was allowed to sell cryogenic engines but could not transfer the technology to India. (Sinha)
6. Eurasianism is a geopolitical identity refers to 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. The Eurasian supporters are critical of Russia's fascination with the West. Rather they treat Russia as a bridge between the West and the East. Eurasianism is also an ideational construct to counter the influence of the West in Eurasia.
7. Initially it was named as BRIC, consisting of

Brazil, Russia, India and China. South Africa joined this association little later and thus it was known as BRICS.

8. Primakov doctrine was premised on countering the US unilateral hegemony in the international system that became a reality in the immediate post-Soviet years. It posits that a unipolar world dominated by the United States is unacceptable to Russia.
9. On March 24, 2014, Russia was ejected from the G-8 in response to its annexation of Crimea.
10. The foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation is a system of views on the content and main areas in the foreign policy activities of Russia.

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