

RUSSIA'S INCREASING GLOBAL PROFILE: REWARDS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

*Russia has been restructuring its economy and military to reassert its grand profile in global politics. This article examines Russian efforts in this regard. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, membership of important international organizations transferred to the Russian Federation. Eventually, Moscow regained diplomatic representation that indicated its capabilities were greater than its vulnerabilities. However, this article focuses on insights about Russia's international status, especially as reflected in international organizations such as the EU, Council of Europe and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The article holds that Kremlin is making efforts to position Russia as an influential player. National security appeared as a driving force to achieve protection against external threats. It is highlighted that Russian *modus operandi* resembles other traditional great powers that have arisen over the years.*

Keywords: Russia, Great power, Challenges, Regional hegemony, Resurgence.

Introduction

International diplomatic trends indicate that power is shifting eastward. The southern hemisphere too appears to have awoken from slumber.¹ The US seems overstretched and fatigued. Its eventual retreat could allow Russia to rewire the strategic grid according to its liking.

Currently, Russian efforts are directed to consolidate the post-Soviet space. Thanks to its enormous size, Russia finds itself surrounded by three sensitive zones viz. Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.²

¹ Vidya Nadkarni and Norma C. Noonan, *Emerging Powers in a Comparative Perspective: The Political and Economic Rise of the BRIC Countries* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 3.

² Bertil Nygren, *Putin's Foreign Policy towards the CIS Courtiers* (London: Routledge, 2008), 3.

This article seeks to find reasons behind Russia's resurgence, and whether this occurrence augurs well for the international security architecture. Moreover, it critically examines the use of soft power techniques and the offers of security guarantees. The concluding segment outlines the policy challenges that await. Methodologically, this article adopts the approach of discourse analysis and examines published material on Russian foreign policy. It also scrutinizes governmental documents and political speeches. It covers the period since Vladimir Putin's ascension to the presidency i.e. the last 18 years.

The Russian Resurgence

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the incoming President Boris Yeltsin found himself embroiled in so many domestic crises that any muscle flexing in the diplomatic arena became out of the question. In the 1990s, the Russian economy shrank 50%, and growth almost stalled.³ Nevertheless, the decade of decadence came to an end, and Vladimir Putin succeeded Yeltsin in the presidency in 2000. The new president swiftly stamped his mark on the political scene. The oligarchic mafia, which had been draining Russia's resources, was brought to heel. The system had to be centralized to use oil and gas as strategic assets.

The enormity of its size compels Russia to create buffer zones to keep hostile forces in check. Also, a sizeable population of ethnic Russians in the neighbouring states makes them the 'Near Abroad'.⁴ Hence, Russia constructed the network of regional organizations in the post-Soviet states.

Consolidation of regional structures, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (OSCE), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), tops Moscow regional agenda. The sensitivity Russia attaches with its periphery translated in March 2014 when, as a result of trouble in Ukraine, it annexed Crimea.⁵

³ Celeste A. Wallander, "Global Challenges and Russian Foreign Policy" in Robert Leopold, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2007), 457.

⁴ Lamont Colucci, "Great Power Conflict: Will It Return?", *World Affairs* (January/ February 2015), <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/great-power-conflict-will-it-return>.

⁵ "The Territories of the Russian Federation 2015 edited by Europa Publications" (New York: Routledge, 2017), 43.

Notwithstanding the opposition it faced from its allies like Armenia and Belarus, domestically, the action earned Putin widespread support. The narrative of an asserting regional and global power is crucial for internal cohesion and stability of the Putin regime. On the other hand, the West perceived Russia as a revanchist power.

A consensus has been found in the existing literature that in order to stay dominant, Russia needs popular support, at least at a national level. Kremlin is, therefore, functioning on a normative stance that it is a first-class global power, and it would participate in the restructuring of global politics.

Two distinct features enhance Russia's uniqueness in the world; its natural resources on which most of the European states are still dependent, and its military might second only to the United States.⁶ The arms manufacturing industry enjoys a considerable market. Russian missile technology only enhances its stature in the world.

Economic Reforms

The Soviet Union collapsed because its whole economy was 'securitized', a kind of 'Military First' policy. The Soviet society was mobilized against external opponents, thus engendering self-reliance. Ultimately, this state of affair took its toll, and the state became incapable to pay its people. The citizens stopped working and the economy collapsed.⁷

Despite Boris Yeltsin's efforts to liberalize the economy, Russia could not enjoy sustainable economic growth. The new private sector was not tamed, and inflation remained uncontrollable. Russia was mainly dependent on the drilling and sale of gas and oil with some other raw materials but manufacturing infrastructure had become old. An overhauling took place after 2000. Moscow under the President Putin announced new economic reforms that won plaudits home and abroad. The free market economy was introduced, and the last residues of communism were dismantled. The

⁶ Michael Alexeev and Shlomo Weber eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Russian Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

⁷ Stephen Fortescue, "Can Russia afford to be a great power?" *Lowy Institute* (June 1, 2017), Accessed July 19, 2018. www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/can-russia-afford-be-great-power.

economic minister Gref and the finance minister Kudrin contributed in the fixation of economic damages.

In order to increase the collection of income tax, the new team of Putin prepared an audacious proposal of low-income tax rate for everyone.⁸ Resultantly, inflation fell from 20% in 2000 to 9% in 2006.⁹ Russia's principal exports i.e. oil and gas brought a windfall as crude prices continued their upward march. Russia's foreign debt decreased rapidly. Indeed, the principal source of Russia's economic power was big (gas and oil) companies. Gazprom was the largest company (privatized with 40% share reserved for the state) and the biggest natural gas producer in the world.¹⁰ The competing gas companies of Russia were functioning; however, the Gazprom was responsible for the exploration, extraction and the distribution of gas. Notwithstanding, economic reformers tried to break the monopoly of the gas company by separating production from distribution, but Gazprom eventually became one of President Putin's most efficient tool of power in the realm of economy, media and foreign policy.¹¹ Putin regarded the dissolution of the USSR as catastrophe due to which Russia lost its greatness.¹² Presently, the main economic and trading partners of Russia are the post-Soviet states. Nonetheless, relations with Europe and other Asian states have also been strengthened.

Today, the biggest challenge is the ability of the West to hit Russian economy through sanctions, and threaten to quarantine Russia from the West's financial network.

Russia's Influence in the Post-Soviet States

Russia casts an influence over the post-Soviet states with the promotion of soft power and formation of integration projects/organizations. President Putin came into power with a clear vision of Russia's economic revamping

⁸ Angus Roxburgh, *Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (London: I.B Tauris, 2012), 115.

⁹ Ibid., 118.

¹⁰ Ibid., 121.

¹¹ Arkady Ostrovsky, "Gazprom acts as a lever in Putin's power play" *Financial Times* (March 14, 2006), www.ft.com/content/8c1e9dca-b2cc-11da-ab3e-0000779e2340.

¹² Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's Foreign Policy towards the CIS Countries* (London: Routledge, 2008), 8.

and establishing relations with the Post-Soviet states.¹³ Currently, Putin is trying to increase the influence over the Caucasian states, once part of Soviet Union as all on post-Soviet states, which collectively form the “near abroad” of Russia.¹⁴ However, it is tricky to get the support of Azerbaijan as Russia supports Armenia. Azerbaijan and Armenia have bad relations as they each claim the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Hence, Russia’s relations with Caucasian states are mostly based on gas and oil dealings.

In the case of Ukraine, Russia aggressively intervened to shield its interests. The Russian moves in recent years, including the merger of Crimea in 2014, make it an analogous phenomenon to that of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)’s eastward expansion after 1991. President Putin adopted the stance that since Crimea was ethnically Russian Moscow was morally obliged to come to their aid, a policy that has caused nervousness among the neighbours. A few years back Russia had successfully defended its positions in the breakaway Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The US and the European Union (EU) responded by imposing economic sanctions.¹⁵ The Crimean Peninsula has provided Russia with an opportunity to monitor NATO activity in the region.

As President Putin puts it,

“We have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO’s navy would be right there in this city of Russia’s military glory, and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia.”¹⁶

¹³ Jeanne L. Wilson, “The Russian Pursuit of Regional Hegemony”, *Rising Powers Quarterly*, Volume 2, Issue 1, (2017), 10.

¹⁴ Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)

¹⁵ Philipp Casula, “Russia’s Foreign Policy from the Crimean Crisis to the Middle East: Great Power Gamble or Biopolitics?” *Rising Powers Quarterly*, Volume 2, Issue 1, (2017), 27.

¹⁶ President Putin’s Speech “Putin says Russia will protect the rights of Russians abroad” *The Washington Post* (March 18, 2014).

Despite the severe economic sanctions, Moscow has persisted with the course it deems fit. This development suggests that Kremlin has enough capacity to withstand any western pressure.

Interestingly, sympathy for Russia decreases as one moves westward from eastern Ukraine. Therefore, any military move beyond the eastern part may complicate the matters significantly.

Some of the vulnerable post-Soviet states still prefer alignment with Russia. They have actively participated in Moscow-led regional politico-economic arrangements like the Eurasian Economic Union and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Historical records show that the commitment of the Soviet Union to the international organizations was not only pretentious but it had justified its assumed role of great power through these organizations. Similarly, Russia has been accorded membership of important international organizations. Russia holds the permanent member in the United Nation Security Council (UNSC) and because of its veto, “massacres in the Middle East and North Africa were deterred many times.”¹⁷

The Russian led regional organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), enticed old members of the Soviet Union to gather once again under Moscow’s security umbrella. After 2000, Putin strengthened his influence over the authoritarian leaders of the CIS states. Thus, the conception of the ‘sovereign democracy’ appeared as an epitome for the Eurasian version of democratic development.¹⁸

In order to thwart formidable threat stemming from the EU-NATO nexus, Moscow has prepared its security as well as economic blocs. The economic counterweight organization was formally launched in January 2015 namely, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The economic rationale has provided the basis for trade liberalization among member states, and it has become a conduit between Europe and Asia.¹⁹ For the sake of Russia’s presence in

¹⁷ “Diplomat stresses thanks to UN veto power, Russia repeatedly staved off looming bloodshed”, *Tass* (April 17, 2018), Accessed September 10, 2018, <http://tass.com/politics/999612>.

¹⁸ Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin’s foreign policy towards the CIS countries* (London: Routledge, 2008), 247.

¹⁹ Jeanne L. Wilson, “The Russian Pursuit of Regional Hegemony”, *Rising Powers Quarterly*, 12.

Central Asia (now in South Asia too), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was formed as Moscow's strength resides largely in integration projects.

Russia and Euro-Atlantic Conundrum

The NATO and Europe are moving together to curtail Russia's reemerging influence because of many reasons; firstly, Russia is neither part of the NATO nor the EU, hence, it is being considered a major threat to the West. Secondly, NATO's enlargement is likely to reach to Ukraine whereas Russia has already taken control on strategically important base Sevastopol, now it appears an explicit checkmate to the NATO. Thirdly, Russia holds membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (OSCE),²⁰ which makes it equally important to the US in the region of Europe. Hence, Russia's role in the OSCE and its say in the UN Security Council (UNSC) is being marginalized.²¹ Moreover, Russia's fragile border lies on its Western side because of the direct involvement of the US in the Baltic States, all of whom are members of NATO and pose a formidable risk to Russia's security. The inclusion of the Baltic States in NATO did not go well in Russia. Moscow took it as a hostile move.

Despite all skirmishes and existing fault lines between East and the West, President Trump is quite conscious in taking any step towards Russia, so much so that he has been indifferent to concerns in the US media that Russia influenced the presidential elections. Similarly, in response to the departing US president Obama's dismissal of the 35 Russians from the country on hacking charges, the Russian President did not take retaliatory action. However, after the poisoning of a former Russian double agent in England, Russia retaliated by expelling 60 US diplomats, in March 2018, from St. Petersburg.²²

Russia is lacking support within European countries; therefore, it backs anti-Western forces in Europe as a tit for tat strategy against the West. In

²⁰ A military alliance signed in 1992 with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and Armenia.

²¹ Sergei Smolnikov, "Expanding Europe's Security: Russia's Euro-Atlantic Puzzle", *Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, (Spring 2001), 55.

²² "Spy Poisoning: Russia Expels 60 US diplomats in tit-for-tat measure" *BBC News* (March 30, 2018), Accessed August 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43590933>.

the Russian eyes, the anti-Russian sentiments in Eastern Europe are largely US-sponsored. It was said that leaders of the EU are being drawn into an anti-Russian campaign impelled by the US and UK to cut Moscow from the organization.²³ Although Russia and the West revamped their relations many times in history. There are explicit efforts going on to separate Russia from the rest of the world, EU, NATO and the US are in the direct clash of interests with Russia. The serious threat nowadays to Russia is that it is constricted by the structural realities of its competition with Washington. Moscow cannot change a balance of power that vividly favours Washington. The GDP difference between the two states is remarkable. Washington is allied in Europe, it still has immense influence in the Middle East, and has an indispensable role in Asia-Pacific. The U.S. conventional military superiority is greater than that of the size of Russia.

Russia in Asia

For Russia, Asia is of special relevance. Historical accounts show that Peter the Great clashed with the Ottomans to wrest control of Black Sea.

Throughout history, Cross-border Muslim solidarity in different parts of Asia had been a threat to Russia. The geographical proximity of Russia to West Asia and Central Asia makes it volatile and the susceptible to external influences.²⁴

The Middle Eastern states exhibit different, social, cultural, economic and political characteristics from Europe and Russia. However, the pivotal role of the Middle Eastern states in world politics and great powers' interests in Central, South and East Asia provided a strategic hint to Russian policymakers. Kremlin's interactions with Iran, Turkey, Syria, CARs and Afghanistan (in particular) is developing along the aforementioned lines.

Although Russia has been passing through a tough period of redefining its national interests since the end of the Soviet Union, it is deeply collaborating with Iran and Afghanistan. Interestingly, the attachment of

²³ "Russia says Europe being drawn into Anglo-American anti-Russia campaign" *Reuters* (March 23, 2018), www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-russia-eu-skripal/russia-says-europe-being-drawn-into-anglo-american-anti-russia-campaign-idUSKBN1GZ1BW.

²⁴ Vladimir Baranovsky, "Russia and Asia: Challenges and Opportunities for National and International Security" in Gennady Chufrin ed., *Russia and Asia: The Emerging Security Agenda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 21.

Russia with Asian culture is largely due to the inside-out approach. Russia itself holds the largest Muslim minority in Europe.²⁵ This has caught the attention of the West, however, it's not surprising for Tehran as many in Iran do not trust the US.²⁶ The Asian powers are making new contingency plans to deal with the changing dynamics in the region. Iran has become conscious in its relations with Afghanistan because President Trump is taking a hardline position. Naturally, Tehran is playing a proactive role in Afghanistan and in order to get the attention of the US, it is leaning towards the Taliban.²⁷ On the other hand, Moscow is busy in engaging Taliban in Afghanistan. It is also normalizing its relations with Islamabad.²⁸ Hence, Islamabad, Tehran and Moscow are trying to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan, which has made Washington to involve New Delhi in the picture.

Although, Russia had been out from the Middle East since the 1970's, however, on returning to this area, it got busy in forging ties with Iran and consolidating its support for the Assad regime in Syria. The level of Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis came to the shock of many who considered Russia incapable of wielding power beyond its neighbourhood.²⁹ Two old, Cold war, rivals are once again confronting each other in the Middle East, Central and South Asia.

In order to get a functioning market economy and a viable political system, Moscow is still exercising its power in Central Asia. In this part, Russia has a strange competition in the guise of cooperation with China. Both powers are together on the platform of the SCO. The imperial mindset is still present in Russia's domestic and foreign policy. Currently, unipolarity seems stable and the changeover will take time. Moscow is waiting for the shift in power to happen. China has appeared as a global challenge to the US domination and being a strong partner of Russia, it gives a tough time to the US.

²⁵ Pierre Berthelot, "Russia in the Middle East: A New Dominant Actor?" *Rising Power Quarterly*, 178.

²⁶ Atta Nasib, "Iran, Russia See Opportunity to Encircle the US in Afghanistan" *The Diplomat*, (December 26, 2016), <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/iran-russia-see-opportunity-to-encircle>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Philipp Casula, "Russia's Foreign Policy from the Crimean Crisis to the Middle East: Great Power Gamble or Biopolitics?" *Rising Powers Quarterly*, Volume 2, Issue 1, (2017), 27.

Conclusion

The world has become a contested space where the major contestants are Russia, the US and China. The game is afoot in Asia Europe. Although, the US has been the only superpower, the emergence of the neo-isolationist US President and changing regional alliances in South and Central Asia have opened a pathway for Russia and reduced the presence of the US forces in Afghanistan. It has given leverage to Russia to once again at as an influential state.

The Soviet Union practiced communism and thought it was incumbent upon itself to spread the mission of communism around the World. Although the ideological war is no more, confrontation with the West under different guise continues. It is analogous to the periods of peace of Cold War (particularly détente) when hostility with the US continued for the sake of global dominance. President Putin, so far, has played all the cards efficiently and has made his government an influential actor in the Middle East.

Some features of Russia as a great power are either quickly disappearing or becoming more symbolic. The geopolitical changes have supplemented this process and impacted on Russian priorities. Nevertheless, Russia is a major Eurasian power, and its national interests are very much geopolitical and geo-economic.

Overall, Russia has made good realist moves. It has carved for itself a prominent place in international affairs, and its military has played a significant role in the push to attain a great power status. However, it would be a mistake to call Russia a global hegemon due to certain limitations and economic weaknesses. Suffice it to say that Russia's quest for dominance will be challenged because its goals are incompatible with other centres of power. Russia's power will be fostered with the unity of its people, its energy resources, and its ability to wisely use its technology.