

Circumstances Have Changed Since 1991, but Russia's Core Foreign Policy Goals Have Not

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 560

January 2019

Dmitry Gorenburg¹

CNA; Harvard University

Since the Ukraine crisis, the dominant Western perspective on Russian foreign policy has come to emphasize its increasingly confrontational, even revanchist, nature. Experts have focused on discontinuities in Russian foreign policy either between the ostensibly more pro-Western Yeltsin presidency and the anti-Western Putin presidency or between the more cooperatively inclined early Putin period (2000-2008) and the more confrontational late Putin period (2012-present). In this memo, I argue that Russian foreign policy preferences and activities have been largely continuous since the early 1990s. These preferences have focused on the quest to restore Russia's great power status and maintain a zone of influence in states around its borders as a buffer against potential security threats. Throughout this time, Russian foreign policy has been neither revanchist nor expansionist in nature. Instead, it has been focused on first stopping and then reversing the decline of Russian power in the late 1980s and the 1990s and on ensuring that Russia was protected against encroachment by the Western alliance led by the United States. However, perceptions of Russian foreign policy during the post-Soviet period among other powers and outside observers have changed markedly as a consequence of a gradual increase in the extent of Russian relative power vis-à-vis its neighbors and especially vis-à-vis Western powers.

The Discontinuity Argument

The argument that Russia's foreign policy has changed markedly over time comes in two versions. The first version of the discontinuity argument paints a sharp contrast between the pro-Western foreign policy followed by Russia in the 1990s under President Boris Yeltsin with the anti-Western foreign policy preferred by Vladimir Putin after he took over the presidency. In this reading, Russia under Yeltsin was in the process of

¹ [Dmitry Gorenburg](#) is Senior Research Scientist at CNA Corporation and Associate at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.

transitioning to democracy and generally supportive of Western foreign policy initiatives despite some occasional disagreements. Putin's Russia, on the other hand, has been committed to countering U.S. interests in the world, especially when it comes to the spread of democracy.

This narrative overstates the continuity of Russian foreign policy under Putin while understating continuities between the 1990s and 2000s. In particular, Russian support for the United States' intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, which included putting pressure on Central Asian states to accept U.S. bases on their soil and a 2009 agreement to allow for the transit of military goods and personnel to and from Afghanistan through Russia, is downplayed in favor of a focus on Russian opposition to the U.S. intervention in Iraq. Serious disagreements during the Yeltsin period, particularly regarding Western interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, are seen as aberrations in a [generally pro-Western](#) Russian foreign policy, while Russian involvement in the early 1990s in internal conflicts in neighboring states such as Moldova and Georgia is ignored altogether.

The second version of the discontinuity argument runs counter to the "good Yeltsin, evil Putin" narrative. It focuses on the very aspects of Putin's first two terms as president that the first narrative elides. This narrative highlights differences between Russian foreign policy in 2000-2012 and the period after Putin's return to the presidency. Here, Russia is described as a status quo power until the Ukraine crisis and a [revisionist power](#) thereafter. The episodes of cooperation in the 2000s are contrasted with Russia's confrontational statements and actions after 2012. Meanwhile, the confrontational aspects of Russian foreign policy during Putin's first two terms in office, such as efforts to divide the Euro-Atlantic alliance over the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, to force the United States military out of Central Asia after 2005, and to highlight the consequences of Western recognition of Kosovo independence in 2008, are downplayed. The result is a picture of Russian foreign policy under Putin that gradually slides from cooperation with the United States and Western institutions early in his presidency to all-out confrontation in recent years. While this trajectory is largely accurate in terms of the overall relationship, I argue that it is less the result of changes in Russian foreign policy goals and more a consequence of changes in Russia's relative power in the international system.

The Argument for Consistency in Russian Foreign Policy Goals

While the two readings of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy presented above are at odds with each other, they both overstate the extent of discontinuity. In reality, with the possible exception of the very beginning of the Yeltsin period, Russian foreign policy goals have been largely consistent throughout the post-Soviet period. The main driver of Russian foreign policy both under Yeltsin and under Putin has been the effort to restore respect for Russia as a major power in world affairs. From the Russian point of view, this respect was lost as a result of Russia's political and economic weakness after the collapse

of the Soviet Union. Evidence for this lack of respect in the 1990s included disregard for Russia's opposition to NATO enlargement to Central Europe and NATO's interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo. When NATO chose to admit Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1997, Russian politicians condemned the move as a betrayal of Russian trust and a sign that Western leaders and military planners still perceived Russia as a potential military threat. Russian leaders also felt betrayed and humiliated by the lack of consultation by NATO and Western state officials during the process leading up to the decision to bomb Serbia to stop its ethnic cleansing campaign in Kosovo. They argued that NATO enlargement and the Kosovo War showed that Russia had become so weak that its opinion no longer mattered in determining world reaction to regional crises. Further confirmation of this point of view came in the early 2000s, when Russian opinion was ignored in the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and in the lead-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The response, both in the 1990s and under Putin, was to seek to restore Russia's great power status while maintaining a zone of influence in states on Russia's border as a buffer against potential security threats. As early as 1993, Russia's Security Council promulgated a [foreign policy concept](#) that included "ensuring Russia an active role as a great power" as a key foreign policy goal and asserted a special role for Russia in the former Soviet republics.

Throughout the 1990s, Russian leaders highlighted that although Russia was temporarily weak, it remained worthy of great power status due to its size and history. While this view was regularly expressed in the early 1990s by Yeltsin and his Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, Evgeny Primakov made it a cornerstone of his foreign policy after becoming foreign minister in 1996. Russia's status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council was also highlighted in this period as additional evidence that Russia still deserved a seat at the table when major decisions on international affairs were made. When such consideration was not forthcoming, Russian leaders reminded the world that even though its conventional forces were relatively weak, Russia remained the only state that could compete with the United States in terms of its nuclear arsenal. For example, in 1999, Yeltsin responded to President Bill Clinton's criticism of renewed fighting in Chechnya with the following [statement](#): "Yesterday, Clinton took the liberty of putting pressure on Russia. He obviously must have forgotten for a few seconds, a minute, or half a minute, what Russia is and that Russia possesses a full arsenal of nuclear weapons." Vladimir Putin has highlighted both Russian claims to great power status and its nuclear arsenal on numerous occasions. In his first programmatic statement in 1999, he [stated](#) that "Russia was and will remain a great power, preconditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic, and cultural existence." His recent rhetoric on occasion closely resembles that used by Yeltsin 15-20 years earlier, including references to invincible nuclear weapons.

Russian leaders were also consistent in their efforts to counter Western policy on the former Yugoslavia. In the mid-1990s, Boris Yeltsin expressed opposition to NATO's bombing campaign in Bosnia. He [argued](#) that "Moscow would have to rethink its partnership with NATO if the alliance continued to bomb the Bosnian Serbs" and noted that if the bombing of the Serbs and the dismissal of Russian views continued, "We will have to thoroughly consider our strategy, including our approach to relations with the North Atlantic alliance." He warned Clinton not to use force against Yugoslavia regardless of the outcome of peace talks on Kosovo, [stating](#), "We will not let you touch Kosovo" and [authorized](#) an operation for Russian peacekeepers to occupy Pristina airport ahead of the arrival of NATO troops. Putin similarly [called](#) Kosovo's declaration of independence "a terrible precedent, which will de facto blow apart the whole system of international relations."

Yeltsin was also consistent in opposing NATO enlargement from the start. In December 1994, he argued that NATO was trying to divide Europe and that the United States should not be allowed to dominate the world. He [noted](#), "History demonstrates that it is a dangerous illusion to suppose that the destinies of continents and of the world community in general can somehow be managed from one single capital." A year later, he [said](#) that the expansion of NATO "will mean a conflagration of war throughout Europe, for sure." Putin's rhetorical response to the prospect of NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia was similarly strident, as he called it a direct threat to Russia and [argued](#) that "The emergence of a powerful military bloc at our borders will be seen as a direct threat to Russian security."

These statements show that Russian leaders' foreign policy rhetoric has been largely consistent through most of the post-Soviet period, with the focus on the goals of maintaining Russian influence in its neighborhood and highlighting Russia's continuing significance for the international system.

Relative Power Differential Drives Policy Changes

While Russian foreign policy goals have been relatively consistent over the last 25 years, Russian actions have become far more anti-Western and aggressive in the last decade. This change is primarily the result of a gradual increase in Russia's relative power vis-à-vis the Western alliance and specifically vis-à-vis the United States. During the Yeltsin presidency and in Putin's first two terms in office, because Russia was much weaker than the United States even in its own neighborhood, Russia had to accede to U.S. foreign policy preferences even when it did not agree with them.

Although Russian leaders made statements opposing NATO's interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, they did not take any direct action to counter these actions. Even the unsanctioned movement of forces to Pristina airport was primarily symbolic and was resolved through a negotiation where Russian demands for an exclusive zone

of control were rejected. Similarly, although both Yeltsin and Putin complained repeatedly about NATO enlargement, they took no action to counter the first two rounds of NATO enlargement in 1999 and 2004. The withdrawal of the United States from the ABM Treaty in 2001 also drew a muted reaction, despite Russian concerns that ballistic missile defense would negate Russia's nuclear deterrent.

In the 1990s, Russia was in the throes of a political and economic crisis and financially beholden to Western institutions. While its economy began to revive in 1999 and Putin had cemented his control over the central state by 2004, it took time to pay off all of Russia's debts to Western lenders and to rebuild the military. Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference served as a signal that Russia would no longer unconditionally accept U.S. rules for the international system. A few months after the speech, which openly criticized U.S. dominance in international affairs, Russia suspended its participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty. A few months later, after the Bucharest NATO summit promised eventual membership to Ukraine and Georgia, it went much further and responded to a Georgian attack on South Ossetia with a full-scale intervention that temporarily occupied parts of Georgia that had previously been under Georgian government control. Furthermore, it recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, justifying this recognition by pointing to the Kosovo precedent. These actions were meant to signal that Russia would now take concrete steps to pursue its foreign policy interests, rather than just limit itself to expressions of dismay as it had done for the previous 15 years.

From Russia's point of view, its annexation of Crimea, intervention in eastern Ukraine, and operation in Syria are further efforts to implement its foreign policy goals and counter the hostile actions of the United States. Russian actions in Ukraine are clearly a response to the security threat posed by regime change in a country very much perceived as part of Russia's zone of influence. The operation in Syria is part of a long-term effort to show that Russia is a great power and not a merely regional one by showing that its military is now strong enough to operate outside of Russia's immediate neighborhood. Interference in elections in Western countries, including the United States, further highlights Russia's ability to shape politics throughout the world, long considered a sign of great power status.

In this context, Russia's shift from status quo to revisionist power reflects a change in circumstances much more than a change in goals. Russia's goals have largely remained the same, but its increase in relative power has allowed it to act more forcefully in support of these goals in ways that it could not permit itself to act in the 1990s or 2000s. As a result, while it appeared to be a status quo power until 2014 and a revisionist power thereafter, its policy preferences were actually more aligned with a desire to revise the post-Cold War settlement since the mid-1990s. What inhibited the shift to a revisionist status was primarily the lack of power, not Russia's set of policy preferences.

Russia appears poised to continue to highlight its ability to influence the international system as part of cementing its status as a great power. It is increasingly working with China to limit the ability of the United States to unilaterally shape the international system. In this context, the de-dollarization of the international economy may become a top priority for both countries. Success in this effort would both reduce the ability of the United States to control the international economic system and help Russia limit the impact of Western sanctions on its economy.

PONARS ● NEW APPROACHES
● TO RESEARCH AND
EURASIA ● SECURITY IN EURASIA

**Elliott School of
International Affairs**

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

© PONARS Eurasia 2018. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author. PONARS Eurasia is an international network of scholars advancing new approaches to research on security, politics, economics, and society in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the [Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies \(IERES\)](#) at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. www.ponarseurasia.org