

Working Paper 2006/1

Russia and Europe: National identity, national  
interest, pragmatism, or delusions of empire?

ROBERT F. MILLER

Canberra, May 2006

Published by Department of International Relations

RSPAS

Australian National University

Canberra ACT 0200

Australia

Tel: +61 (2) 6125 2166

Fax: +61 (2) 6125 8010

Email: [intrel@anu.edu.au](mailto:intrel@anu.edu.au)

Web: <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/ir>

Cover by RTM Design.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in Publication entry

Miller, Robert F., 1932- .

Russia and Europe : national identity, national interest,  
pragmatism, or delusions of empire?

ISBN 0 7315 3140 X.

1. National characteristics, Russian. 2. Nationalism -  
Russia (Federation). 3. Russia (Federation) - Politics and  
government - 1991- . 4. Russia (Federation) - Foreign  
relations. I. Title. (Series : Working paper (Australian  
National University. Dept. of International Relations 1983) ;  
2006/1).

947.086

©Robert F. Miller

Department of International Relations

## Working Papers

The Department's Working Paper series provides readers with access to current research on international relations. Reflecting the Department's intellectual profile, the series includes topics on the general theoretical and empirical study of international and global politics, the political dynamics and developments in the Asia-Pacific region, and the intersection between the two.

Publication as a 'Working Paper' does not preclude subsequent publication in scholarly journals or books, indeed it may facilitate publication by providing feedback from readers to authors.

Unless otherwise stated, publications of the Department of International Relations are presented without endorsement as contributions to the public record and debate. Authors are responsible for their own analysis and conclusions.

## Abstract

Russian foreign policy has undergone a gradual, if sometimes sporadic, evolution from the late Soviet period, through the collapse of the USSR and communism, five years of unrequited accommodation with the West and its putative model of free-market capitalism and liberal democracy, to an increasing realisation that Russian national interests required a more assertive stance *vis-à-vis* Washington's perceived unilateralist hegemony. If the Soviet Union and its empire were ostensibly driven by Marxist-Leninist ideology, the Russian Federation explicitly eschewed such motivation, relying instead on an emergent conception of Russian national identity which sometimes bordered on classical imperialism. Throughout the 1990s, Russia had neither the strength nor the resources to implement such a project, but it became increasingly clear under President Vladimir V. Putin and the military and security forces behind him that the revival of Russia as a major international player with its own dominant sphere of influence was the goal. US President George W. Bush's post-11 September war on terrorism provided an opportunity for Putin to pursue this goal in concert with, rather than in opposition to, Washington. However, the sudden jump in petroleum and natural gas revenues, the war in Iraq which largely produced it, and the evident fragmentation of Western unity provided Putin with opportunities to play Washington off against the European Union and to leverage Russia's newly found strategic position against both China and the US to pursue Russia's great power identity and interests, with a primary focus on Europe.

# Russia and Europe: National identity, national interest, pragmatism, or delusions of empire?

ROBERT F. MILLER<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow's weight in international relations underwent a tremendous decline. To appreciate the extent of change in the Russian Federation's (RF) foreign policy since the end of Soviet communism it is worth taking a brief look at the international relations of its predecessor, the USSR. An essential feature of Soviet foreign policy was that it was ideologically driven. Western commentators tended to play down this feature or treat it as mere window dressing for what was really just imperialism 'with a socialist face'. But it was more than that. It gave Soviet policy-makers a sure sense of identity and a guide, however faulty, to national ('international proletarian') interest.

Marxism–Leninism, expressed most relevantly in the concepts of historical-materialism and Lenin's theory of imperialism, had three main effects on Soviet foreign policy: 1) it presented the worldwide victory of socialism as historically inevitable and included an injunction on socialist countries to act in line with the scientifically predicted course of historical change, that is, to be proactive; 2) it presented international relations as a zero-sum-game, that is, any victory for socialism represented an irretrievable loss for capitalism; and 3) it saw the likely arena for the struggle against capitalist imperialism in the Third World, where the chain of imperialism was allegedly weakest. Hence, it was imperative to foment revolutionary change in the former colonial countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the 1960s and 1970s the forces of socialism were seemingly 'on a roll', as pro-Soviet regimes took power in a number of countries, particularly in Africa. The Sino–Soviet split in the 1960s made Asia a less favourable field of action for the USSR, but the victories of

<sup>1</sup> Visiting Fellow, Transformation of Communist Systems Project, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University.

communism in the three Indochinese states seemed to confirm the revolutionary forecast even there, and Soviet influence in Hanoi and Vientiane was certainly significant, as the leasing of the base at Camranh Bay to the USSR illustrated.

The advent of Mikhail S. Gorbachev to the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1985 saw the beginning of change in general Soviet perceptions. His doctrine of 'new political thinking' in 1986, as well as the domestic innovations of 'perestroika' and 'glasnost', represented a fundamental reassessment of official policies. Gorbachev recognised that things could not go on as before. The economy was visibly slowing down, and Moscow could not afford to continue to challenge Washington's new aggressiveness under President Ronald Reagan. Even without 'Star Wars', the US commitment to smart conventional weapons and the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' (RMA) was becoming unbearably costly for the Soviet economy, which, with a GNP roughly one-third, or less, of that of the US, was already spending as much as the US on military procurements. The war in Afghanistan proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back, especially after the US began channelling advanced weapons to the Mujahedeen through the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence agency (ISI).

Gorbachev also questioned the heavy subsidies the USSR was giving to nominally socialist regimes in the Third World and concluded that the ideological basis for the aid was fatuous. As well, he began to question the cost of the special trade privileges the USSR regularly gave her Warsaw Pact and COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) allies and began a process of gradually raising to world market levels the prices of raw materials, energy and manufactured products that Moscow supplied to them.

More generally, under the 'new political thinking', Gorbachev began to question the zero-sum-game assumptions of Soviet foreign policy, arguing that the previously fundamental concept of the 'international class struggle' between capitalism and the international proletariat, led by the USSR, was less imperative than global issues such as the environment, nuclear proliferation and the need to avoid local confrontations that could escalate to nuclear catastrophe.

Gorbachev contended that socialism *could* be saved and brought back to health but only by reforms which raised living standards and earned the full support of the people. He encouraged each of the Bloc-country communist party leaders to follow this same logic and refused to help them out when they either held back from reform or lost control over the reform process. He firmly believed that with rationalisation and the injection of elements of a market economy to replace the existing system of central planning and direct administration, socialism could be revitalised. As we know, circumstances intervened to thwart his efforts to introduce a 'social-market' economy and brought about, instead, the total collapse of the communist system and the Soviet Bloc based upon it.

One of Gorbachev's favourite leitmotifs as he contemplated the changes necessary to rescue socialism in the USSR, and in other countries of the Warsaw Pact as well, if possible, was 'the Common European Home', which an ideologically more flexible Soviet Union had aspirations of entering as a *bona fide* resident. With the foreshadowed expansion and development of the European Community (later, the European Union (EU)), Gorbachev clearly hoped to become part of the European integration process before it became too far advanced politically, economically and institutionally for the USSR to be able to qualify for membership. At first, it seemed that Gorbachev envisaged the possibility of splitting the EC from the US and confronting the transatlantic superpower with a united Europe containing a newly de-ideologised Soviet partner with important military-technological contributions to offer its European landlords. However, Gorbachev soon came to realise that such a major realignment was impossible. The US, through NATO and other transatlantic linkages which it dominated, was effectively the keyholder of the 'Common European Home'. Without Washington's consent, there was virtually no chance of the acceptance by Europe that Gorbachev sought. It is evident that his successors have periodically nurtured similar hopes that Europe could ultimately be detached from the transatlantic connection, with perhaps better chances of success.

The collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, the reduction of Moscow's sphere of control to the territory of the old Russian Federation (RSFSR) and the disappearance of the old Marxist-Leninist ideological compass to guide its foreign policy left Gorbachev's successors with a

serious crisis of identity. Was Russia a Western or an Eastern power? How thoroughly would Russia have to change politically, economically and institutionally to be accepted by the advanced democratic capitalist states? Would it have been better to adopt a Chinese-type developmental strategy, where economic liberalisation would be controlled by an authoritarian political system? These questions have been at the forefront of the debates over foreign and domestic policy since the end of the Soviet system. Russia's search for identity and the emergence of a new conception of national interest in the course of attempting to regain a modicum of its former influence well exemplifies William Y. Elliott's aphorism of a nation's foreign relations as 'the struggle of its spirit with its fate'.<sup>2</sup> In the decade and a half since the end of Soviet communism the definition of Russian national identity and the answers to these orientational questions have finally taken shape, and in ways that neither West nor East had expected.

A major argument of this essay is that despite occasional flurries of rapprochement with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and orientation toward the East, as promoted by the so-called 'Eurasian' school of Russian foreign policy, Moscow's primary aspiration remains directed westward, more specifically, toward Europe. That is, the 'China card', periodically played by Russian leaders, is largely a 'default option', chosen at times when the road to Europe and the West seems temporarily blocked. Partnership with China has, to be sure, intrinsic importance for Russia, especially since she is now seemingly irrevocably in a position of weakness *vis-à-vis* China. However, the preferred orientation is toward Europe, with or without the US. Paradoxically, Russia's vulnerability toward China may have intensified this aspiration. On the other hand, President Vladimir V. Putin's conduct of Russian foreign policy since the Beslan tragedy in early September 2004, his personally orchestrated destruction of the Yukos petroleum conglomerate and especially his heavy-handed interference in the Ukrainian presidential elections in November, have all reflected a growing

<sup>2</sup> The phrase was related to the author by Professor Elliott in a postgraduate reading course on US foreign policy at Harvard University in 1961. This was in essence a paraphrase of Niccolò Machiavelli's famous description of the struggle between the ruler's *virtu* and *fortuna* in *The Prince*. Elliott had been a foreign policy adviser to Vice-President Richard M. Nixon and a mentor of Henry Kissinger when the latter was studying for his PhD at Harvard.

mood of isolation and xenophobic Russo-centrism which have made good relations with Europe—and America—increasingly problematical. The essay will attempt to analyse these recent shifts in Russia's foreign policy orientation in the context of the evolution of Russia's changing self-perceptions and assess the likely long-term impact on Russian relations with Europe and the rest of the world.

### **THE HONEYMOON PERIOD, 1992–1995**

The collapse of communism in Europe and the disintegration of the USSR following the failed 19–21 August 1991 putsch saw great hopes that the end of the Cold War would usher in a new era of cooperation and peace between the former ideological enemies. Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, displayed an almost 'cargo-cult' faith that if they undertook the required measures of international cooperation and internal reform, Western aid would insure that the transition to liberal democracy and free-market prosperity would be swift and relatively painless. By adopting an 'Atlanticist' orientation in foreign policy, that is, lining up with the policies of the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and abandoning some of the less savoury allies that Moscow had previously supported, Kozyrev expected the new Russia to be fully welcomed into the Western club of affluent, civilised nations. By contrast, the 'Eurasian' policy favoured by traditionalist, Russo-centric, anti-Western conservatives and communists, who were still influential in elite foreign policy and security circles, preferred a dogged pursuit of narrowly perceived Russian national interests to Kozyrev's broader internationalist stance and a focus on the East and South, where Russia allegedly had special cultural affinities, as opposed to his and Yeltsin's orientation toward the West.

In some respects, the Eurasians proved to be right. The Atlanticists' expectation that the West would not take advantage of Russia's current weakness and surround the RF, but would, on the contrary, fully consult Moscow on European and broader world security issues proved to be a naive delusion. Instead, what Kozyrev and Yeltsin found was growing neglect of Russia's national interests in regions of special concern to her. Namely, NATO expansion into Central and Eastern Europe; Washington's efforts to push into the oil-rich regions of the Caucasus and to gain special leverage in Central and East Asia, clearly at Russia's expense; and the

exercise of NATO's military power in the Balkans, where Russia had traditionally been a decisive player—all of these aggressive actions completely undermined Kozyrev and his Atlanticist policies and gave a new lease on life to the anti-Western, conservative elements in the Russian decision-making elite.

Added to this was disappointment at the low level of Western direct investment in the Russian economy, compared to other former communist countries, like Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, and trade discrimination in the form of anti-dumping regulations and forced access for Western exports. There were also cases where Western economic consultants took advantage of the laxity of the new Russian market institutions to amass personal fortunes.

### **CHANGE IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY**

The result of these disillusioning experiences was an abrupt change in Russian foreign policy at the end of 1995. In January 1996, Evgenii M. Primakov, the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, was named Foreign Minister. His previous career had been as an academic and intelligence expert on the Middle East. Among his immediate initiatives were the abandonment of Atlanticism in favour of a pragmatic form of Eurasianism; a challenge to unipolar, American-orchestrated globalism by turning toward China and, eventually India, to form a 'strategic triangle' based on the concept of multipolarity, or multilateralism, and regionalism as the first line of attack in the solution of regional conflicts; giving effect to this approach in 1996 by the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), linking the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan, Kyrgyzstan and eventually Uzbekistan, to China and Russia to address regional economic, political and security issues outside the sphere of US influence; renewing the salience of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), where both the RF and the PRC enjoyed a veto, in the solution of problems of the use of force in international relations; and in Europe, trying to split the Western alliance by playing upon evidently increasing European discomfort at American unilateralism.

Even under Kozyrev the RF had attempted to insert Russia into the European decision-making loop. It was under him that the Contact Group of five major states involved in seeking an end to the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia was formed. Moreover, Russian diplomacy played a key role in

interceding with Slobodan Milosevic to bring an end to the war in Bosnia. But it had become increasingly obvious that the Russian hand, however skilfully it was played, was a weak one, illustrated for all to see by the woe-ful performance of the Russian Army in Chechnya. What Primakov's emergence signified was a readiness of Moscow to seek alternatives to reflexive submissiveness to American viewpoints on major world issues, and it reflected a growing anti-Americanism, not only among the foreign and security policy elites in Russia, but in the Russian population at large, devastated by the effects of economic liberalisation and privatisation. Eurasianism had thus come at least partially back into vogue.

The 'strategic triangle' of Russia, China and India was regarded by Primakov as just such an alternative. In a material sense, the idea was bolstered by an upsurge in Russian deliveries of relatively advanced weapons systems to China and India, as well as to some other countries which Washington considered as 'rogue states', such as Iran.

However, Primakov, Jiang Zemin and Indian leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee were at heart pragmatists. None of them desired a direct challenge to the overwhelming power of Washington and its still compliant NATO allies. While India and China together accounted for fully 80 per cent of Russia's growing arms sales, neither had any desire to form a binding alliance with Russia, or, for obvious historical reasons, with each other. Nor did Moscow wish to tie itself down to an alliance with Beijing, which might drag it into a war with the US over Taiwan. Thus, given the desire of each of the three countries to develop its economy—a much higher priority than their commitments to multipolarity—and the lack of capital each possessed for investments in each other's economies, it is not surprising that they showed little inclination to sacrifice their ties to the West.

Indeed, Primakov, faced with the likelihood of NATO expansion to include former Soviet allies Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, and, potentially, others as well, agreed to sign a so-called NATO–Russia Founding Act in July 1997. This agreement purported to establish a formal mechanism—the Permanent Joint Council—to bring Russia into regular consultations with NATO to allay fears that the alliance might plan aggressive actions against Russia and her interests.

The US-led bombing campaign against Serbia and Montenegro over alleged humanitarian rights violations in Kosovo from March to June in 1999 was a low-point in Russo–American relations and threatened to inaugurate an era of conflict. In fact it would have an enduring negative effect on Russian perceptions of US policy and NATO until the events of 11 September 2001.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the US campaign came just days after the inclusion of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in NATO, that Hungary and NATO-aspirants Romania and Bulgaria opened their military and air facilities to NATO in the course of the attacks, and that no attempt was made by the US to obtain UNSC approval for the use of force against a UN member country on questionable legal grounds—all of these considerations convinced Russian foreign policy-makers that their interests were being not only ignored, but brazenly trampled upon by what they saw as an increasingly arrogant and militarily aggressive America. For Russia the world looked suddenly bleak and threatening. Some in Russia expected that similar tactics would inevitably be used against the RF at some time in the future.<sup>4</sup> Given its vulnerability, Russia felt compelled, among other things, to reformulate its military doctrine to countenance the employment of nuclear weapons as a first-use option in case of a major Western conventional attack.<sup>5</sup>

Yeltsin's immediate response to the NATO campaign was to break military ties and to threaten to assist the Yugoslav military with concrete support, including the dispatch of naval forces to the Mediterranean. He and Primakov tried to take advantage of the evident discomfort of many US allies in NATO to impede American strategy and tactics and split the alliance. But when the chips were down, the alliance held. Moscow could offer little to Serbian President Milosevic but diplomatic efforts to extricate him and his devastated population from an unwinnable situation. The Chernomyrdin–Ahtisari mission did not achieve even that much, forcing Milosevic to accept a humiliating defeat, despite the failure of the US air

<sup>3</sup> For a good treatment of the changed Russian attitudes see Alexei G. Arbatov, 'The transformation of Russian military doctrine: Lessons learned from Kosovo and Chechnya', Marshall Center Papers, No. 2 (Garmisch-Partenkirchen, FRG: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix A.

campaign to significantly damage Serbian warfighting capabilities in Kosovo itself. Russia had shown itself to be a proverbial paper tiger. Popular anti-Americanism in Russia and China (the latter over the purportedly mistaken attack on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade) reinforced the Russian (and Chinese) governments' hostility to the US-dominated 'new world order'. But both Moscow and Beijing had clearly set limits on the extent to which their hostility would affect their actual policies.

### **THE PUTIN ERA**

Thus, by the end of 1999, when the ailing Yeltsin suddenly announced the immediate designation of his recently appointed Prime Minister Putin, as his successor as President of the RF, Russian foreign policy was at an impasse. Although many world powers were uncomfortable over aggressive, unilateralist US policies and viewed Kosovo as a dangerous precedent, no-one was willing to take an unequivocal stance against it. That is, except for countries like Serbia and Cuba that were strategically irrelevant or like India and China that had no desire to ally too closely with Russia against the US and its acolytes. Unlike the Cold War days, the RF had few of the USSR's material incentives to make its side attractive.

Because of his KGB background and reputation for toughness, Putin was expected to make relations with the US and NATO more difficult and dangerous than they had been even under Primakov. However, Putin soon demonstrated that he had other priorities: namely, restoring domestic order and economic growth; improving relations with the 'Near Abroad' (the countries of the former USSR); and enhancing relations with Western Europe, especially the UK, France and Germany (where he had made his KGB career and where he felt particular cultural affinities). He also displayed a typical Russian wariness toward China and its presumed expansionist aims.

The second Chechen war, which began in the autumn of 1999, was another of Putin's major preoccupations, but it was also an opportunity to restore Russia's military pride, as well as to cement his own legitimacy and popularity as a tough leader. However, the long, drawn-out character of the war and the brutality of the Russian Army's conduct of operations in civilian areas soon began to encumber Putin's efforts to strengthen relations with Europe.

The threat of further NATO expansion to include the three Baltic states and the increasing cosiness of NATO relations with Ukraine also added to feelings of danger and encirclement among the Russian foreign policy elite. Unlike Yeltsin, however, Putin did not utter inflammatory responses to these challenges. There was a common expectation that the new George W. Bush Administration in Washington would assume a more clear-cut, America-first policy stance and be less inclined than its predecessor to intervene globally behind what Russians believed was a hypocritical humanitarian fig leaf. In short, Putin and his advisers expected to be able to do business with the Bush team and thus did not want to spoil relations ahead of time with hostile rhetoric.

However, the new administration's announced commitment to the National Missile Defence program, which meant abandoning the 1972 ABM Treaty, the cornerstone of East–West arms reduction agreements, plus its endorsement of NATO expansion into Russia's immediate neighbourhood, soon put relations on a downward course again. Nevertheless, Putin resisted demands from his hardline military and foreign policy advisers to openly confront the US and its NATO allies, for example, by deploying tactical nuclear weapons on the shifting borders with NATO. Successful meetings with Chinese leader Jiang Zemin and the expansion of the SCO to include Uzbekistan in 2000 showed Putin's willingness to play 'the China card', although he was clearly unenthusiastic about linking Russia too closely with a country which Washington now saw as the main danger to its international hegemony.

The new National Security and Foreign Policy Concepts and the new Military Doctrine, all issued in 2000, and designed to register Moscow's displeasure with Washington's new world order, reflected a more inward-looking, but tougher line on perceived US unilateralism and the tendency to ignore Russian interests and sensibilities. They reflected the continuing search for a specific Russian identity in the rapidly changing world. Among other things, the new official concepts expressly envisaged first-use of nuclear weapons in response to a major conventional arms attack. They also emphasised the priority of the 'Near Abroad' in Russian foreign policy and the need to strive for the promotion of national sovereignty against US-dominated globalisation. They also gave legitimacy to the sale of weapons and nuclear power installations to states that the US considered militarily threatening and ideologically hostile, such as Iran, China and North Korea.

Thus, if Putin's approach was not directly confrontational at a declaratory level, the conceptual basis for foreign policy which he was endorsing was hardly friendly to US interests. How long he could have pursued this policy line is difficult to judge: from Russia's inherently weak position, the outlook was not promising. An emerging understanding that Russia need not necessarily integrate fully with either the West or the East was beginning to crystallise, but its implications were still far from clear.

### **THE SEA CHANGE OF 11 SEPTEMBER 2001**

Putin's swift pro-American response to the events of 11 September 2001 represented a dramatic change in Russian foreign policy. It was a considerable gamble on his part, but a shrewd one, uttered with an almost audible sigh of relief. Putin was the first foreign leader to call the US President and offer complete support for Bush's war on terrorism. Given Russia's geographical location near the al-Qa'eda headquarters in Afghanistan, its strong influence on the former Soviet Central Asian states bordering on that country and the decade of Soviet experience of combat in Afghanistan, Russia's support was crucial for the US effort against the Taliban and al-Qa'eda. Putin offered intelligence information on Afghanistan and access to the Northern Alliance which had continued the fight against the Taliban, and he convinced the Central Asian leaders to allow US access to land and air corridors into the region. He demonstratively supported the US, as opposed to the less enthusiastic EU commitment to the war on terrorism. Furthermore, he refused to put Russia on side with the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in limiting petroleum output, thus helping to undercut the potential of Islamic and other countries tacitly sympathetic to al-Qa'eda's anti-Western worldview to use the petroleum weapon to blackmail the US. Finally, in December, he suddenly announced that the RF would be withdrawing from its bases in Cuba and at Camranh Bay in Vietnam, which the US had long viewed as potentially threatening. There were sound economic reasons for these withdrawals, but the timing and the hostile reaction to the gesture among Russian hardliners and in Cuba and Vietnam clearly made them appear as a token of genuine friendship by Putin.

What did he expect to get in return for this *volte-face*? Among other things, he hoped for greater 'understanding' of Russian strategy and tactics

in Chechnya, which he portrayed as an integral part of the war against the same brand of international terrorism: Chechen leaders were alleged to be directly linked to al-Qa'eda. Putin also hoped to get greater and more consistent input into decision-making and structural changes in NATO (for example, expansion). He also wished to obtain a revision, rather than a simple abandonment, of the ABM Treaty and to have some influence on the configuration and deployment of any future National Missile Defense (NMD) and Theater Missile Defense (TMD) systems.

Putin's turnabout had placed him in apparent conflict with important elements of the Russian foreign and security policy elite and, increasingly, with the population at large. He obviously wanted it to be known that he was taking considerable political risk by this strategy. The leadership of the Communist Party (CPRF) quickly obliged by playing the 'bad cop' foil to Putin's 'good cop' image by accusing him of betrayal of Russia's vital interests. Putin's new strategy also meant shunting the previous structures and vectors of Russian foreign policy—such as the special relationship with China, the SCO and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) security agreements, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus—to a side track. Moreover, it meant sacrificing aspirations for a special relationship with key EU countries like Germany, the UK and France in favour of a direct relationship with the core of the Western alliance system, the US. Putin's personal meetings with President Bush in Europe and the US seemed to make his strategic choice seem worthwhile and bolstered the atmosphere of cooperation between the two nuclear superpowers.

The unexpectedly rapid conclusion of the immediate military phase of the war against al-Qa'eda and the Taliban in Afghanistan—and, hence, the need for close cooperation with the Russians—had by the beginning of 2002, however, seen a cooling of Washington's ardour in considering Russian interests.<sup>6</sup>

Particularly rankling to Moscow was the Bush Administration's decision to give notice of renouncing the ABM Treaty and push ahead with research

<sup>6</sup> For an example of elite Russian thinking on US perspectives see 'Press Conference with Moscow Carnegie Center Official Adrei Ryabov on Russian Political Trends [Press Development Institute] 12:05 February 6, 2002', Federal News Service, <[www.fednews.ru/](http://www.fednews.ru/)>, in Johnson's Russian List (hereafter JRL) No. 6070, 11 February 2002 [davidjohnson@erols.com], p. 3.

and development of the National Missile Defence project. Putin remained cool in the face of this challenge, dryly explaining that Russia had more than enough means to counter any direct US threat. For the Chinese, on the other hand, the NMD and the likely extension of the proposed TMD system to cover Taiwan were a much more serious proposition, one which could lead Putin eventually to resurrect a version of the previous 'China option'.

Bush's sop to Russia—to reduce the size of the US strategic missile force—was something the Russian military had favoured because of the costs of maintaining the existing huge missile array. However, it was undermined by US reluctance to fix the actual number of decommissioned warheads in a formal treaty. The impression of US reluctance really to disarm was further bolstered by a suggestion that the decommissioned warheads were not to be destroyed but merely stored in locations separate from their missiles.

No less bothersome was Bush's continued enthusiastic support for the expansion of NATO to encompass the three Baltic states. Putin's earlier remark to Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga that every country had the right to choose its own security arrangements, which was interpreted by many in the West to indicate Putin's grudging acceptance of the inevitability of NATO expansion, was speedily repudiated, with tacit threats to adopt appropriate counter measures. These might presumably include targeting the new neighbouring NATO members with short-range and tactical nuclear weapons.

The effects of friendly noises emanating from Washington about enhanced economic cooperation and support for Russian membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO) were attenuated by the meagre amounts of aid on offer and by US refusal to back down on issues such as anti-dumping restrictions on Russian steel and other exports to the US. The resumption of harsh criticism of Russia's conduct of the Chechen campaign also felt in Moscow like rubbing salt in old wounds.

Despite these various disappointments, Putin, unlike many of his colleagues and his predecessor Yeltsin, reacted with considerable restraint. He had shown himself to be a very cool customer. He clearly realised that his hand was still weak and that there was little sense in overplaying it. But his disappointment was, nevertheless, quite evident. He had gone out on a limb

to help Washington in its hour of need but had little to show for it but the lesson of pragmatic national self-interest.

### **THE IRAQI CRISIS: A NEW CHAPTER IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY**

The Chechen hostage crisis in the Moscow Dubrovka theatre in October 2002 had provided another fillip of rapprochement between Moscow and Washington, as Bush expressed full support for Putin's actions in annihilating the Chechen terrorists involved. Also, Bush eventually endorsed Putin's allegations that the Chechens were being supported by Islamicist terrorists linked to al-Qa'eda in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia.

However, the shallowness of the Russo–American partnership and its new status as merely one possible option for Russian policy were soon demonstrated when it suddenly appeared that other, more desirable options were becoming available. The growing animosity of the German and French governments toward Bush and his plans to compel Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to disarm and relinquish power ('regime change') provided Putin with just such an opportunity: namely, to pursue the long-cherished Russian dream of splitting the Atlantic alliance and line up with more traditional and, hence, more comfortable, European cultural and economic partners. The main venue for this important shift in strategic orientation was, of course, the UN and particularly the UNSC. Putin was cautious in his public statements on the shift: he obviously did not wish to get too far out in front of his new allies and preferred to let his Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov make the most abrasive public utterances. But the shift was there for all to see.

What were the real reasons for the change? One important factor was the widespread domestic popular and elite antipathy toward the US. This attitude ran across the political spectrum and was tacitly encouraged by the dominant state-controlled media. For conservatives and nationalists, as well as communists, it is based on nostalgia for the loss of Russia's position as a superpower, the equal of the US. For liberals and intellectuals, it reflects resentment at the tutelary, condescending attitudes of American politicians and economic and political advisers and what they see as the hypocrisy of their message. In public opinion polls, the US headed the list of potential

enemies of Russia and its interests.<sup>7</sup> The year 2003 was an election year for the Russian State Duma (Parliament), so popular and elite attitudes were more important for Putin than usual, since his foreign and domestic programs required the maintenance of a workable parliamentary majority. Ivanov and other members of the foreign policy and security establishments were on record as being much less sanguine than Putin reputedly was over American intentions in Russia's strategic environment.<sup>8</sup>

Another main reason for the shift was Russia's desire to maintain the effectiveness and integrity of the UN, and especially the UNSC, one of the only international security organisations where, with its right of veto, it still enjoyed formally equal status with the US. Beyond that, there was the realisation that UN processes for peaceful conflict resolution remained a reservoir of Russian influence, given that the RF no longer enjoyed the military capability for more assertive modes of preventive diplomacy.

Then there was the psychological desire to join with like-minded others who wished to take the US down a peg or two and to force it to play by what had been generally envisaged as the new rules of international relations in the post-Cold War era. Russia had never been particularly exercised about human and civil rights, but it occasionally adopted the rhetoric of these concerns as well as those of economic justice when the situation suited, such as when it sought to curry favour with important EU countries.

On the specific matter of Iraq, there was also the issue of the latter's debt of some US\$8 billion and of contracts signed for almost three times that amount with Baghdad once UN sanctions had been lifted. Russia feared that

<sup>7</sup> Chechens have recently overtaken the Jews as the second most hated category of non-Russians. The Chinese are somewhat further behind. Vladimir Shlapentokh, 'Islamic extremists versus America and the Jews in Russia's roster of enemies', in JRL No. 7082, 27 February 2003, [davidjohnson@erols.com], pp. 12–23.

<sup>8</sup> See Ivanov's statement in Beijing reported by United Press International. Katherine Arms, 'Russia could use veto power at UN', in JRL No. 7083, 28 February 2003, pp. 1–2; and the predictions by military writer Anatoly Shapovalov, 'US will possibly move its military bases closer to Russia', *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, in JRL No. 7080, 26 February 2003, pp. 7–8.

a military move to unseat Saddam would invalidate these obligations.<sup>9</sup> The sending of Primakov, a long-time friend of Saddam, to Baghdad in February was seemingly designed to play on Russia's alleged special influence to arrange a non-military solution to the Iraqi disarmament dilemma by getting Saddam to resign and thus save Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, there was the mundane possibility that Putin's decision-making was based on just plain bad intelligence. Russian military 'experts' assured Putin that Iraq would put up prolonged, effective resistance to US and UK armed intervention and that Russian assistance would be required to pull Washington out of the quagmire of war on Iraqi soil.<sup>11</sup> One Russian critic contended that Russian intelligence on the conflict was suffering from AIDS (Acute Intellectual Deficiency Syndrome).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it was later revealed that Russian intelligence had actually been assisting Iraq in the runup to the war by providing information on private conversations among Western leaders, including Tony Blair and Silvio Berlusconi, on Washington's intentions.<sup>13</sup> Putin had apparently been playing both ends against the middle for some time. In the long run, it turned out that Russian intelligence about the duration of Iraqi resistance to coalition occupation was actually not that inaccurate, if not necessarily for the right reasons, but Russia was not in a position to benefit from this knowledge.

By early March it was clear that Putin had made his choice to join France and Germany in the UN coalition of the 'unwilling' to block Bush's and Blair's demand for a second resolution leading to the speedy use of force to

<sup>9</sup> On the oil issues involved see David G. Victor and Nadejda M. Victor, 'Debunking the Russian oil myths', *Foreign Affairs* 82(2) 2003, pp. 47–61.

<sup>10</sup> The speculation ranged from pressuring Saddam to disarm fully and speedily to proposals to ease him out of supreme power with promises of immunity from punishment if he agreed to become a figurehead and then retire to one of his palaces in internal exile. See, for example, Atul Aneja, 'Russian plan for Saddam exit', *The Hindu* (India), 27 February 2003, in JRL No. 7080, 26 February 2003, pp. 10–11.

<sup>11</sup> That was still the line as late as 1 April. Vladimir Isachenkov, 'Russian leader: Iraqi army still potent', AP dispatch, 1 April 2003, quoted in JRL No. 7127, 2 April 2003, pp. 1–2.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Pumpyansky, 'Flirting with anti-Americanism', *Novoe Vremya*, posted on 16 May 2003 on *Transitions On Line (TOL Wire)*, 20 May 2003, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> David Harrison, 'Revealed: Russia spied on Blair for Saddam', *The Electronic Telegraph* (UK), in JRL No. 7143, 13 April 2003, pp. 1–3.

compel Saddam to disarm and tacitly to leave the scene. In short, he had again changed 'strategic partners' from the US to Europe. He had obviously concluded that he had more to gain from that quarter than he had from Washington, despite any long-term damage to US–Russian economic, political and strategic relations. The unexpectedly (to Russia) rapid initial victory of the coalition forces in Iraq made Putin's switch look very unwise. By pandering to domestic and international public opinion against war with Iraq, he had put himself in a corner, which limited Russia's ability to have much say on the postwar disposition in Iraq and on broader issues of foreign relations.<sup>14</sup>

### **RUSSIA AND EUROPE: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF RUSSIAN NATIONAL INTEREST**

The intensification of conflict in the North Caucasus, the sudden increase in salience of oil and gas as an element of national power and other challenges have accelerated the evolution of Russia's self-perception and self-assertiveness, if not necessarily self-confidence, as a great power. Arguably the most important arena for acting upon these perceptions was Europe. For Russia, the EU possessed a number of what Soviet policy-makers used to call 'objective' and 'subjective' attractions. First of all was the persistent material and psychological anti-Americanism immanent in EU policy aspirations, as EU power expanded and matured. This tendency was evident over the last decade in the campaign, particularly in France and Germany, for multilateralism, as opposed to the alleged US predisposition toward unilateralism in addressing international security issues. Russia wished to play a major role in formulating multilateral, political settlement of conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and other trouble spots. Other matters where the US found itself at odds with the EU and much of the rest of the international community—for example, over ratification of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and the International Criminal Court—provided Russia with a golden opportunity to line up

<sup>14</sup> Russian military experts, who had advised Saddam on defensive strategies and tactics, had expected a Stalingrad-type siege of Baghdad. They had even suggested that the US and UK would eventually have to seek Russian help in extricating themselves from a costly Iraqi morass. See, for example, Pavel Felgenhauer, 'The elite's feeling the heat', *Moscow Times*, 10 April 2003, in JRL No. 7139, 9 April 2003, pp. 4–6.

with the EU 'on the side of the angels'. Russia continues to be, along with China and France, a strong supporter of the principle of UN Security Council endorsement as obligatory legitimation for any military or security actions outside national boundaries and sometimes even within them. Although this principle has been of diminishing relevance in today's world of internal and trans-border terrorism, Russia, no longer a superpower, has jealously guarded the sanctity of the UNSC veto powers as at least a formal check on US unilateralism.

A further mutual attraction between Russia and the EU has been the energy factor. As the main supplier of natural gas and, increasingly, of petroleum products to Europe, Russia enjoys considerable leverage. This is especially so with respect to smaller, resource and cash-poor EU members and EU-aspirant former Soviet and Soviet Bloc countries. Given the purported shortage of proven, easily accessible hydrocarbon reserves and the accelerating demand by China, India and Japan to lock in reliable suppliers, Russia has been able to attract substantial European interest in investments and supply contracts with Russian producers. The desire of Europe to avoid too great a reliance on unstable Middle East suppliers is an obvious advantage for Russia. At the same time, state-owned Gazprom's recent pressurising of Ukraine for the latter's turn toward the West by cutting off gas supplies has alerted European capitals to the dangers of over-reliance on Russia, too, as an energy supplier. In other trade matters as well, Russia has openly parlayed potential investment deals with the rising Asian powers in order to raise the stakes for Europe, by demonstrating that Moscow has readily available alternatives.

However, a number of negative factors have also come to the surface which have tended to counter-balance some of Russia's advantages. Increasingly intemperate assertions of Russia's own claims of great power status have begun to make the price for accommodating the EU's pretensions to equal the economic and political might of the US seem rather high. Clearly, Moscow no longer wished to be treated as merely another neighbouring state, albeit one with nuclear weapons, which had to accept economic and political integration on the EU's terms. Early evidence of this growing assertiveness, not to say arrogance, even before his inept handling of gas-supply pressure on Ukraine and Moldova, was Putin's postponement, in November 2004, of a visit to Brussels to sign a number of agreements. He was signalling the EU that it must accept that Russia was itself the head

of a bloc of states—a ‘coalition of the willing’ members of the CIS which accept Moscow’s leadership in international relations and not merely an individual, postulant neighbour state.<sup>15</sup> His recalcitrance on withdrawal of Russian military forces from nominally sovereign former Soviet states, namely, from the Abkhaz and South Ossetian regions of Georgia and the Transdnister region of Moldova, despite clear international commitments to do so, was further evidence of Putin’s new imperious, not to say imperial, posture.

That is, of course, also one of the main reasons for Putin’s obsessive determination to secure a pro-Russian outcome in the November/December presidential elections in Ukraine. A victory for Viktor Yushchenko, Putin feared, would call into question the viability of the ‘Common Economic Space’ and collective security institutions he was trying to construct for leveraging Russian influence in Europe. The intensity with which he personally involved himself in the Ukrainian campaigns, the blatant efforts of his minions to falsify the results of both the first and second rounds of the voting and the stridency of his allegations of Western interference did little to bolster his popularity in Europe and the West in general. His threat to block any further action, or even consideration, of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) involvement in the solution of the Georgian and Moldovan sovereignty problems, despite having given a pledge to that organisation back in 1999 to withdraw Russian troops within two to three years, indicated a growing disregard for Western opinion.

Indeed, Putin’s reaction to European criticism of his handling of a number of contentious issues suggested a deterioration in the clarity of his foreign policy perceptions and corresponding behaviour. His use of the Beslan tragedy of September 2004 to justify institutional changes to reduce the scope for popular participation in electing provincial governors and eliminate single-member electorates for parliamentary representatives, his brazen disregard for property laws in the dismantling of the Yukos oil conglomerate—in essence re-nationalising the company’s production

<sup>15</sup> See the remarks of Sergei Yastrzhembsky on Putin’s reaction to the EU’s proposed partnership agreement, which treated Russia as merely one of a number of non-member neighbours. ‘Putin envoy: EU’s partnership formula doesn’t suit Russia’, AP, 9 November 2004, JRL No. 8445, 9 November 2004, pp. 23–4.

capacity—and his openly hostile reaction to Western criticism of these and other moves have uncovered a surprising sensitivity and insecurity in a leader with a previous reputation for responsibility as the head of a nuclear superpower. One of Putin's chief economic advisers, Andrei Illarionov, characterised the Yukos sale as 'the scam of the year'. He further remarked that Russia had changed in 2004, complaining of 'a complete change of the model of economic and social development', as witnessed by the treatment of the best Russian oil company, Yukos. Moreover, he warned of the major change in Russian foreign policy:

Rather than being a potential ally of democratic countries, we have witnessed a cool-down in the relationship with many countries, if not the start of a cold war, which naturally leads to the country's isolation in the world and the worsening of our foreign policy position.<sup>16</sup>

For some time, as we have seen in preceding sections, there has existed in Russia a manifest popular and elite resentment of concessions to the West. Whether in matters of democratic reform, economic liberalisation and privatisation, or US military presence in territories of the former USSR for the fight against international terrorism, many Russians, perhaps a majority, have turned hostile to what is seen as Western tutelage and openly express nostalgia for Soviet power and the fear it inspired abroad (and even at home). In the past, Putin has usually tended to ignore such domestic criticism, happy to play the 'good cop' to the 'bad cop' purportedly represented by his subordinates and echoed by Russian society at large. Now Putin seems to have abandoned the mask of reasonableness, cooperation and good European citizenship. Symptomatically, he was happy to accept Illarionov's resignation as an adviser at the end of 2005, thus eliminating one of the last remaining advocates of economic liberalism and political democracy in his entourage.

The one apparent exception to this inward turn was Russia's ratification in November 2004 of the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, which allowed the Protocol to come into force. However, this concession might be largely explained by Putin's desire to obtain European support for Russia's membership in the WTO. It was probably guided also by the opportunity to

<sup>16</sup> Arkady Ostrovsky, 'Oil sale a scam, Putin's man says', *FT International*, 30 December 2004, reprinted in the *Australian*, 30 December 2004, p. 16.

embarrass the United States, which continued to reject Kyoto. Suffice it to say, the step was also governed by the understanding that ratification placed few real restrictions on Russia's ecological behaviour.<sup>17</sup>

Putin's new negativity has inevitably tended to widen the gap between European and Russian perceptions of appropriate international behaviour and of their mutual relationship. In some ways, the resultant tension is harder to handle for the EU than it is for Russia. For one thing, it has tended to foster a split between 'old' and 'new' Europe, to borrow Donald Rumsfeld's notable phrase. Former Soviet, or Soviet Bloc states like Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, or Poland—all with bad historical memories of Russian domination—tend to be much more sensitive to Putin's heavy-handed methods in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova than are France and Germany. For the latter and their EU acolytes, Russia's aggressive behaviour in the 'Near Abroad' is felt more as an embarrassment than a potential danger to international security. For them, Russian oil and gas supplies and Putin's contribution to multilateralism seem to outweigh the threat of Russian recalcitrance, although Gazprom's New Year's Eve adventure in Ukraine may have been a salutary wake-up call. Time will tell.

Indeed, the United States, despite the allegedly deep personal relations between Bush and Putin, is more likely to take a tough stance on Russian behaviour than are the main EU powers, if only because public opinion and the Congress will apply much greater pressure on the Bush administration than the European public and EU institutions will be willing or able to apply on EU decision-makers, whatever the objections of the Baltic States, Poland, Slovakia or, perhaps Finland.<sup>18</sup> Paradoxically, in his increasingly defensive, solipsistic, foreign policy pronouncements, Putin has been even more aggressive in remarks directed toward America than toward the

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, 'Kyoto Protocol: Russia's position', RIA Novosti, 5 November 2004, where a Russian official is quoted as saying that ratification 'will do no harm'. Elsewhere, he says the Protocol imposes no real commitments and imposes no penalties. in JRL No. 8443, 8 November 2004, pp. 34–5. See, also, Robert Coalson, 'Russia trades hot air for WTO support', RFE/RL Newline, 8 November 2004, in JRL No. 8444, 8 November 2004, pp. 9–10.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the report on US press leaks by Andrey Terekhov, 'Washington prepares for policy change. Yukos affair and Ukrainian elections were last straw for United States', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 December 2004, in JRL No. 8506, 19 December 2004, pp. 14–15.

Europeans. Speaking about Putin's recent statements on Russian missile capabilities and the intentions behind their development, Nikolai Bezborodov, a Russian air force general, who is also a member of the State Duma security committee, said the following:

[Bezborodov] We need a system that can effectively penetrate the United States' National Missile Defence not so much to attack someone as to show that Russia has the force, say, for our Foreign Ministry and our politicians to conduct negotiations abroad effectively, and to show that we are not so weak economically to be unable to create this system.

[correspondent] In this way, Putin's statement is meant to reaffirm Russia's status as a great power and, for that matter, to say that beneath this status lies a strategic justification, which will make it impossible to impose conditions on Moscow in future. This, apparently, was what the president meant when he told the top brass the following:

[Putin] Should we reduce the attention we pay to our defence components such as the nuclear and missile shield, we would face new threats.<sup>19</sup>

Of itself, such commentary is not surprising, except that it reflects an increasingly widely held perception that Russia is surrounded by enemies and must be determined to defend itself aggressively in any way it sees fit, rather than trying to speak softly and explore opportunities to avoid conflict. There had always, as we have seen, been voices, especially in the military and security establishment—the *'siloviki'*—who held such views and looked upon the outside world as inherently hostile to Russia and its interests. Now Putin appears to share such views and no longer feels constrained to conceal the fact. This bluster is likely to be more effective in Europe than it is in the US.

Another side of the coin of turning away from the West in reaction to its perceived malign intent to interfere in Russia's sphere of influence is the reversion, once again, to the 'China card' and some visions of Primakov's Russia–China–India strategic triangle. This is particularly visible in the military sphere, where Russia has been offering programs for joint

<sup>19</sup> BBC Monitoring, 'Russian TV explores technology of Putin's vaunted "state-of-the-art" missiles', Centre TV, Moscow, in Russian 1800 GMT, 4 December 2004, in JRL No. 8489, 8 December 2004, p. 5.

development of advanced weaponry, including fifth generation fighter and attack aircraft, not only with China, but also with India. Iran, despite its potential as a nuclear-armed rogue state, has already become the third largest customer for Russian arms. Even NATO member Turkey has become the target of inducements for military cooperation, not only to enhance sales for the Russian military–industrial complex, but also, in a fairly heavy-handed way, to assure Turkey that it was not without alternatives if integration with the EU proves impossible.

The recent completion of agreements on the final establishment of boundaries on the Russo–Chinese frontier, after many years of haggling and delay, has shown Chinese readiness to make generous concessions to Russia, presumably in return for preferential treatment on long-term petroleum supply contracts. The Russian side was not quite as generous in reciprocating Chinese concessions as the Chinese had evidently hoped, but Putin held out the promise that the necessary transportation infrastructure would eventually be built to supply China. The reasons for the delay had more to do with commercial than political considerations. The traditional fear of the ‘yellow peril’, which has periodically surfaced to perturb Russo–Chinese relations, particularly on the part of some elements among the *siloviki*, seems to have been set aside. Putin has come to a series of at least short and medium-term agreements with Chinese President Hu Jintao.

For the moment, at least, Putin seems to have convinced the *siloviki* that they cannot have it both ways: they cannot fulminate against Western dangers and refuse to countenance a ‘strategic partnership’ with the PRC. Russia is not the USSR, with its Soviet Bloc and Third World alliances: it cannot act in isolation from the entire world. Moreover, for both internal and external policy reasons and with a keen understanding of Putin’s sensibilities—which the PRC leadership probably shares to a large extent—the Chinese have clearly opted to avoid criticism of his actions in the CIS, his roll-back of democratic procedures and his re-establishment of state control over the resource sector (Yukos–Rosneft).

Thus, the ‘new’ (or is it really the ‘old’) Putin seems more comfortable dealing with China and other Asian powers, who tend to be less critical of violations of international and humanitarian law principles, than with Europe and the US. Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe that the shift eastward will be of long duration. Russians are, after all, Europeans; they

would hardly like to revert to being pariahs in the West and always treated with suspicion, as they were in Soviet days. Putin, with his immersion in German culture during his KGB days, probably shares this sentiment down deep. In any case, he does not have the power to compel a return to the Soviet past, even if he wished to do so.

Unlike Marxism–Leninism, the ideology of xenophobic Russian nationalism does not provide a convincing rationale for Russian imperialist expansion, nor does Russia have the power within itself to be able to implement such an imperial project. China and India, let alone Turkey, would hardly be likely to assist in its promotion. The only wise, long-term policy for Putin and his successors would be to pursue an accommodation with emergent realities—in Elliott’s phrase, adapting Russia’s national spirit to its fate in the world. Europe should remain a primary arena for this process, with or without American complicity. The question is how Putin perceives the opportunities and limitations confronting his country in the rapidly changing international environment. That will be the subject of the next section.

## **TOWARDS A NEW CONCEPTION OF RUSSIA’S PLACE IN THE WORLD**

As Putin strove, in the middle of 2005, to strengthen Russia’s place in the world and restore some of its grandeur as a power to be respected, if not feared, and taken into consideration on all major international issues, a number of important changes were taking place in the correlation of forces shaping world events. These were changes which seemingly promised to transform Russia into a maker, rather than a mere taker, of political and economic prices in international exchange. One of the most important of these was a widespread perception of a rapid decline of American supremacy because of the seemingly endless involvement in Iraq and the war on terrorism—the proverbial quagmire effect, which evidently detracted from the US ability to act decisively elsewhere.

Connected with this was the increasing vulnerability of the personal position of Bush and his administration, the principal driving force of assertive American unilateralism and exceptionalism. The evident split in Washington and US society in general—over Iraq, the slow response to Hurricane Katrina, problems of national indebtedness and various scandals

in the higher echelons of the presidential administration and the Republican side of the Congress—were further signs of apparent American weakness.

There were also indications of increasing American isolation, as former allies sought to distance themselves from the US and its policies to defuse popular hostility in their respective domestic political arenas. In short, it was no longer imperative to accommodate Washington's desires on important international issues, such as nuclear developments in Iran and North Korea and US involvement in Central Asia.

The EU was also suddenly a place of opportunities, rather than dangers and challenges to Russian interests. Having attempted earlier to take advantage of growing anti-Americanism in the EU—and failed because of Russia's blatant violations of human rights in the North Caucasus and the EU's refusal to overlook them as a justified element of the war on terrorism—Putin increasingly found that EU itself was largely a paper tiger, especially after the failure of citizens in France and the Netherlands to endorse the centralising EU Constitution. That meant Putin could be sure of a certain amount of success in dealing directly with important individual EU countries, which evidently no longer felt any qualms about pursuing their own agendas without consulting their EU partners and the European Commission in Brussels.

Another important change was in Putin's relations with China. China's President and Party Chief Hu and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao evidently succeeded in convincing Putin of their friendly long-term intentions toward Russia. They stressed the benefits of coordinating foreign policies to achieve their mutual goals of multilateralism, stability and non-interventionism against American hegemony and unwelcome US efforts to democratise domestic politics in Moscow and Beijing and in countries they considered their own zones of influence.<sup>20</sup>

One product of this rapprochement was a change in Putin's assessment of the SCO. Having previously benignly neglected the SCO as a sop to

<sup>20</sup> For a good analysis of Putin's view of democracy see summary of Nikolay Petrov's talk at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 18 October 2005, 'The essence of Putin's managed democracy', in Russia Profile <[www.russiaprofile.org/cdi/article.wbp?](http://www.russiaprofile.org/cdi/article.wbp?)>.

China's desire to have a formal linkage to the Central Asian countries of the CIS and to encourage trade and coordinate anti-terrorist activities in its Xinjiang backyard, Putin suddenly decided in July, probably at Hu's urging, to use the SCO summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, to pressure the US to set a time-limit for the withdrawal from bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>21</sup> The result, in the wake of continuing US pressure on Uzbek President Islam Karimov to allow a full investigation of his crackdown and alleged massacre of protestors in the Uzbek city of Andijon, was the abrupt expulsion of the US from its important 'K-2' airbase and the subsequent signing of an alliance between the RF and Uzbekistan in November 2005.

This sequence of events demonstrated interesting features of Putin's emerging conception and sensitivities about Russian national interests in this important part of the 'Near Abroad'. For one thing, it showed that although he was happy to use the SCO as a forum for legitimising the pursuit of Russian policy objectives, and although he was glad to fashion the Collective Security Treaty Organisation as a counterweight to NATO for selective bargaining purposes, when the chips were down, he much preferred bilateral security arrangements. This was not much different from the Bush administrations's evident preference for dealing with individual countries and 'coalitions of the willing' rather than relying on the cumbersome processes of NATO, where individual countries could effectively veto what Washington considered urgent actions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Russian foreign policy has undergone a prolonged evolution since the end of the Soviet Union. The question is whether it is in danger of coming full circle and reverting to Soviet perceptions and practices. Putin's approach to foreign policy has been quite different from Yeltsin's and Gorbachev's but has manifested elements of both. Like them, he is quite conscious of Russia's fundamental weakness, particularly in terms of the material basis to play the great-power game. Unlike Yeltsin, however, he was previously not inclined to resort to threat and bluster to compensate for these material weaknesses. That may well be changing, as he develops his own

<sup>21</sup> Marat Yermukanov, 'Beijing moves to increase influence in Central Asia', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (Jamestown Foundation) 2(131) 7 July 2005, <[www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2369981](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2369981)>.

conception of Russian national interest and the utility of an aggressive posture in pursuing that interest. His rhetoric has become palpably more abrasive as he reacts to criticism of Russian actions at home, in the CIS and abroad, and he has begun to castigate US and European leaders for what he calls their double standards and their 'pseudo-democratic' 'gift-wrapping' of dictatorships in places like Iraq and Ukraine.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Gorbachev, he has no ideological conviction that the socialist system is basically sound and destined for greatness by the workings of immanent historical processes. He is, however, a strong Russian patriot who is determined to do everything possible to restore the RF to its rightful place among the great powers of Europe and Asia, if not as a world competitor of the US, as the former USSR had been. Indeed, he has elevated Russian nationalism to the status of a state ideology, whose elements are only now being elaborated. Among them is a sensitivity to criticism and interference in Russia's internal affairs and *modi operandi* that frequently borders on xenophobia.

This has meant that the occasionally strong westward, rather than eastward or 'Eurasian', orientation in foreign policy, a position which once distinguished him from Primakov and other Russian conservatives, is now at least temporarily in abeyance. 'Eurasianism' as a distinctive attribute of Russian statehood which makes it culturally and morally immiscible with the West (but also with the social constructs of the Soviet period),<sup>23</sup> once favoured only by the conservatives and the *siloviki* in Putin's entourage, sporadically seems to be shared by him personally, as the latter become increasingly powerful in Russian economic, political and foreign policy establishments.

At the same time, Putin tends to be more realistic than they in his attitudes toward China, Japan and Asia in general. He understands that the Russian Far East is highly vulnerable to Chinese demographic pressures but

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, 'Putin's colorful new lexicon', AFP, 9 December 2004, in JRL No. 8492, 9 December 2004, pp. 14–15.

<sup>23</sup> For a good recent analysis of Eurasianism see O. A. Sergeeva, 'Tsvivilizatsionnaia kontseptsia "evraziitsev" i kritika imi sovetskoi modeli ustroeniia obshchestva', *Vostok: Afro-aziatskie obshchestva: istoriia i sovremennost'*, No. 6 (November–December) 2001, pp. 56–74.

also recognises the eventual need for migrant labour to develop the region. Therefore, good relations with Russia's Asian neighbours are essential. Besides, China and India are the best customers for Russian arms sales, the two countries taking 80 per cent of total sales. Such transactions and sales to other Third World countries like Iran are vital for the financing of Russian military research, development and production, which the current domestic economy simply cannot afford.

Nevertheless, Putin probably understands that the place for Russia is in Europe, as part of Western civilisation. The elaborate ceremonies in St. Petersburg at the end of May 2004 were obviously intended to demonstrate that Peter the Great's purpose in designing the city 300 years ago as a 'Window on the West' was still operative. Also, the campaign against Islamism and Islamic terrorism strikes a particularly strong chord in Russia, with its ongoing struggles in Chechnya and on the borders of its allies in Central Asia. This attitude probably puts him 'objectively' in the Western camp, although there are obvious congruencies with Chinese policies *vis-à-vis* Uighur separatists in the west of the PRC.

The aggressive unilateralism of US security policy post 11 September, especially in Iraq, has provided Putin with a renewed opportunity to play the European card against Washington. He did so, perhaps in a less confrontational manner than France and Germany, but he evidently deemed it timely to change tack in favour of the forces seeking to block the US. This was a momentous shift, which had a serious impact on relations with Washington in the war on terrorism, making Moscow less cooperative and more inclined to try to squeeze the US out of its newly acquired positions along the Southern borders of the RF—in Central Asia and Transcaucasia.<sup>24</sup>

This kind of opportunism, combined with the most recent shifts in Putin's rhetorical stance toward Washington and the EU, will inevitably worsen overall Russian relations with the West; for how long is uncertain, given his past proclivities for making a u-turn when he finds himself in a

<sup>24</sup> There is already evidence of this happening, with recent efforts to stress and possibly expand the Collective Security Treaty Organisation involving the Central Asian states other than Uzbekistan and to establish an airbase in Kyrgyzstan to counter the US presence at Manas in that country.

corner. The oil factor and his quasi-ideological rhetoric of Russian national greatness suggest that he will find it more difficult to change his tone now than in the past. The fragmentation of NATO and the disruption of European moves toward expansion and unity—both of which Russia has long cherished as a goal of Russian foreign policy—may turn out to be anything but an asset for Russian security or for the rebuilding of its influence as a major factor of international relations in Europe and Asia.

Shortly after the direct military phase of the second Gulf war, Putin began to ease himself out of his self-imposed impasse, when it became evident that both France and Germany were all too willing to let Russia carry the anti-American can while they sought to reduce tensions with Washington. Fortunately for Putin, the Bush administration then decided to relax some of the pressures on Russia while it carried on a direct confrontation with France and the rest of ‘Old Europe’. The Blair government in the UK followed a similar policy of differentiation among the ‘coalition of the unwilling’. How popular the abandonment of confrontation with Washington would play to the Russian public was problematical: surveys showed right after the end of direct hostilities in Iraq in May 2003 that almost three-quarters of Russians approved of Putin’s policy against the war in Iraq.<sup>25</sup> But later surveys showed, once Putin’s policy shift had been publicised, that public opinion was also inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Russian diplomats continued to insist on the imperative of UN endorsement of any coalition actions in Iraq, even more insistently than even France was doing. Any suggestion that the Russians were really less committed to an anti-American position than its new European allies remained dubious. In the long run, the continuing hostility between the EU and the US—over Kyoto, Iran, the International Criminal Court, and the salience of the UNSC, among other things—gave Putin the opportunity to join the European side against the US. That is obviously where he wanted to be. However, the series of misfortunes that befell

<sup>25</sup> ‘Russians overwhelmingly support government position on Iraq war’, *Rosbalt*, 26 April 2003, in JRL No. 7156, 27 April 2003, pp. 7–8.

<sup>26</sup> For a good comparative survey of media comment and public opinion on America see Vladimir Shlapentokh, ‘Anti-Americanism and pro-Americanism stronger in Russia than in France and Germany’, JRL No. 7220, 12 June 2003, pp. 21–5.

Russia in the latter half of 2004, the way Putin handled them, and the extreme sensitivity with which he reacted to European and American criticism of his actions, suggest that he may not be a leader capable of guiding his country into Gorbachev's 'Common European Home'. Putin's overplaying of the Gazprom card in chastising Ukraine for its post-Orange Revolution shift toward the West is only the latest example of this tendency. Officially, this was a commercial decision, but it really demonstrated pure political vindictiveness, which has undoubtedly frightened Russia's European partners and made them wary of Putin's reliability as an economic—and political—partner.

