

# Russia's Unformed Foreign Policy

*Robert Legvold*

TEN YEARS AFTER

NOTHING distinguishes contemporary Russian foreign policy more than the uncertainties surrounding it. Alone among great powers, Russia faces fundamental questions of identity—if anything, more intense today than they were ten years ago. Is Russia a country of consequence in the world, and if so, how and why? Who are the Russians, and where does the country belong—with the West, with China, or somewhere on its own? Harsher yet, who will have it?

Russian leaders spend a fair amount of time reassuring themselves about the greatness and importance of their country. The government's official foreign policy strategy, announced June 28, 2000, refers to the Russian Federation as “a great power ... one of the most influential centers of the modern world ... [with a] responsibility for maintaining security in the world both on a global and on a regional level.” Such preening is hard to imagine from, say, Berlin or Tokyo, but Moscow feels the need.

Yet Russian leaders also know that their country's share of world GDP is now down to 1.5 percent, compared with the United States' 21 percent contribution. (We know they know because the figures come from an article in the journal *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn* written by the deputy director of the planning staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and published at roughly the same time as the official foreign policy

---

ROBERT LEGVOLD is Professor of Political Science at Columbia University and also reviews books on eastern Europe and the former Soviet states for *Foreign Affairs*.



CORBIS-BETTMANN

*The march of history: a matrioshka doll, Moscow, March 25, 2000*

doctrine.) In his first state-of-the-union address, two weeks after the doctrine's unveiling, President Vladimir Putin admitted that the Russian population has been shrinking by 750,000 a year and raised the possibility that "15 years from now there may be 22 million fewer Russians. ... If the present tendency continues there will be a threat to the survival of the nation." Russia's feebleness, as he and nearly every other Russian know well, is manifest at every turn.

This is hardly what one would expect of one of the "most influential centers of the modern world." Still, to take Russian weakness as the reality they know and the boasting as the gloss with which they compensate would be to miss the way Russians are struggling with the "who are we" question. They are aware that, for all its weaknesses, Russia matters to others for three reasons: the atom, the veto, and the location. Nuclear weapons and Russia's permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council are important reasons not to think of Russia as a disempowered nonentity. In addition, Russians realize that they still have potent influence within their immediate neighborhood and that if that neighborhood is important to the larger world, Russia must be

important as well. Russian elites, including the president, quite consciously see their capacity to shape events in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova as a key to strengthening their international standing. Their uncertainty is over how to muster and deploy this capacity.

To complicate the picture further, Russians perceive the impact of their country in terms beyond its (missing) material power. Russians want to believe that, as a distinct civilization, they can and should exert an influence on the outside world. Perhaps this is only psychological balm for what Russia does not have, but even the most nonsentimental Russian politicians hark back to this notion often enough to suggest that it plays a role in their thinking. Such a vague sentiment, however, merely adds to their quandary. Not only are Russian leaders unable to translate it into a practical idea, but they fully understand that Russian values cannot translate abroad until those values are revitalized, sold to their own people, and made intelligible to others.

#### GO WEST?

IF QUESTIONS about Russia's identity and status shadow the country's foreign policy on a deep emotional level, another set of concerns is more practical and immediate. The first of these is whether to seek partnership with the West. This question is not about identity but about strategic choice. With whom should Russia align to advance its workaday interests? It is important to recognize that this question is posed not in a neutral or general way but specifically in terms of the West. Other alignment options come afterward and arise only as part of the leadership's (unsuccessful) struggle to resolve the question of Russia's attitude, aims, and approach toward the West.

Choosing a partner other than the West is scarcely easier. Partnership with China remains largely hypothetical, a choice that in the end depends far more on China than on Russia. Partnership with both China and India is a more impressive alternative but is even further out of reach for the moment. When a spokesperson for the Russian foreign ministry raised this possibility on the eve of Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov's latest trip to India in April, Chinese Foreign Minister

Tang Jiaxuan, in Moscow at the time, said once again that China was not interested.<sup>1</sup> Soon the Indians declined as well.

Still another option can be summed up in the turn of phrase “the West and the rest.” Some Russians have toyed with the notion of Russia’s siding with the many countries opposed to U.S.-led Western dominance. This is not the lunatic “southern strategy” proposed by right-wing parliamentarian Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (who calls for a Russian alignment with every outlaw regime from Iraq to Libya), yet the gain to Russia is hardly more evident than the gain from Zhirinovskiy’s strategy.

The last alternative is what might be called “fortress Russia.” Unlike the others, it is very much within Russian control. It is the option that Russian politicians cite regularly, especially when all else seems unavailing. Out of frustration more than preference, they imagine Russia standing on its own, eschewing alliances other than with former Soviet republics, marshaling its own resources to defend its most vital interests, and focusing on enhancing relations with regions close to Russia and essential to those vital interests. Although it would involve geographical retrenchment, “fortress Russia” is not isolationist. Nor does it require giving up great-power aspirations. On the contrary, Russia would still exert every effort to make itself a country of consequence.

Westernizers among the Russian foreign policy elite sometimes insist that the choice has already been made. Putin deeply desires to draw Russia toward the West, they say, but—unlike during the early years of Boris Yeltsin’s presidency—on Russia’s terms. They consider Putin’s references to Russia as a European nation and to Russian culture as European as a signal of his desire to be invited into Europe. Despite their wishful claims, however, the issue seems far from resolved. Happy as Putin and his people are with the bonhomie of their first encounter with President George W. Bush in June and with the flurry of activity marking their relations with the western Europeans, none of this diplomacy indicates the Russian leadership’s readiness to face basic choices.

---

<sup>1</sup> The spokesperson was Alexander Yakovenko (“Igor Ivanov letit v Deli,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, April 29, 2001); Tang’s response was reported by the PTI News Agency (New Delhi) on May 3, 2001. The idea was first seriously raised by then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov on the eve of his December 1998 trip to India.

A second question fits within the first, rather like a *matrioshka*, the Russian nested doll. Russian policymakers and politicians are having difficulty settling on the implications of U.S. global primacy. They know that they do not like it at a visceral level, but precisely what it means for Russia and what they should do about it remains a conundrum. This question is linked with the first because it greatly muddies the issue of the kind of relationship Russia can have with the West. If Russia were to decide to contest U.S. primacy, what kind of relationship could Moscow have with the Europeans? Dare it think of the West in any way that does not feature the United States? And even if Russia did choose to resist U.S. preeminence, how would it go about doing so effectively? As one Russian analyst has put it, "there can be all kinds of plans highlighting the Commonwealth of Independent States, Europe, or China. They are all good, but only as food for thought. Whether we like it or not, our possibilities in the rest of the world are largely determined by our relations with the United States."<sup>2</sup>

#### GRAVE NEW WORLD

THE OUTSIDE DOLL of the *matrioshka* frames the two previous questions about partnership with the West and U.S. primacy. Russian leaders are deeply confused about the very nature of the new world facing them. Is it essentially an economic world, one primarily concerned with the wealth of nations? Or is it still dominated by security issues, ranging from internal threats to national cohesion to external threats to national sovereignty where misshaped military balances matter?

Here enter the rambling, muddled debates about multipolarity and globalization. Ever since a majority of the Russian foreign policy elite decided around 1996 that U.S. primacy was bad, multipolarity has been the common currency of discussion. The debate has revolved around three questions: Is multipolarity relevant, especially given other powerful forces at work, such as globalization? If it is

---

<sup>2</sup> Viktor Kuvaldin, "Does Growing Anti-Americanism in Russia Pose a More Serious Threat to the U.S. or to Us?" *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, May 12, 2001. Kuvaldin is a member of former President Mikhail Gorbachev's circle.

relevant, is it a reality or a goal—an objective description of how things stand or simply an end that Russia and other unhappy players might pursue? If only a goal, is it an appropriate and wise one for Russia? Various Russians have different answers to each of these questions, but apparently few of them, not even the president and senior policymakers, understand that they have to answer those questions in order.

In the case of globalization—a topic that is beginning to rival multipolarity in Russian analytical circles—much of the discussion is about winners and losers and the threats that globalization poses. Few Russians have begun sorting out globalization's more subtle dimensions. As a result, they argue over whether the essentially economic issues that globalization raises should be given priority over the more familiar concerns of armed disorder and military disadvantage. The debates over both multipolarity and globalization, however, are about what the outside world can do to and for Russia, and in neither case are Russian leaders at all clear about the answers.

Although individual Russian commentators have their own responses to some of these questions (the three questions that make up the *matrioshka*), the leadership seemingly does not—at least those who articulate national policy offer nothing that looks like a judgment on which to base policy. Thus, compounding the disorientation that flows from fundamental uncertainties, contemporary Russian foreign policy, ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, has few answers to the questions that encase it.

Unable to provide answers that would give depth and coherence to policy, the Russian establishment has formulated a united conception of threat and uses this as a common ground on which to build. Beyond the permanent, internal threat—the prospect of domestic economic and political failure—three other threats weave their way through official statements of foreign and security policy. What Russians recognize but are loathe to acknowledge is that all three pose the danger of Russia's being left out.

First, there is the threat of U.S. unilateralism under unipolarity. Kosovo is the best example, but Putin and his foreign policy team stress that the danger arises not from a single instance but from an overall pattern of behavior. As a result, the Russians, along with the Chinese, are the leading proponents of a “strict constructionist” interpretation of

the United Nations Charter, especially regarding those sections dealing with the use of force. For the same reason, they speak often and emotionally of the “immutable right of the veto.” And they stress state sovereignty as a right, whereas the West increasingly views it as a responsibility. These positions have become their first line of defense against the perils of the United States’ doing what it wants where it wants.

They also sense that even U.S. allies share their misgivings over growing American unilateralism. Russian leaders appear to calculate that joining or even helping to mobilize a consensus against one-sided U.S. actions may constitute a second line of defense. Beyond this stands the temptation to think bigger—to play with the idea of actually balancing against the United States. Yet the Russians realize that they cannot do it alone, and no country of any importance is yet ready to throw its lot in with them. The idea dissipates in a meaningless haze of rhetoric.

The second threat concerns the dangers of globalization. Since the financial crisis of 1998, Russian leaders have come to recognize that globalization punishes the economically weak and not merely the economically undeveloped. They also realize that the effect of globalization on disadvantaged countries will depend on how self-absorbed and stingy the economically strong turn out to be. But they have no idea about how to shape the outcome.

The third threat comes from regionalization, and it takes two forms. Russians are acutely aware that most of the violence in the world occurs within failed or failing states in regions that may not be of pressing concern to the international institutions capable of stopping the violence—and that several of these regions border Russia. Russians also worry that regional trading blocs and regional markets are becoming the most powerful economic formations in an increasingly interdependent world. Putting aside the sputtering and uninspiring ties that Russia has with the other post-Soviet states, regionalization of this sort makes little room for Russia.

#### RES PUTIN

BECAUSE RUSSIAN LEADERS either do not know how to resolve their underlying uncertainties or are not ready to try, they leave policy without a solid conceptual foundation. Putin and his colleagues make

little effort to define the world in which they live and Russia's role in it. Their confusion is driven home by documents, such as the June 2000 official doctrine, that string together a series of hopes, fears, and slogans rather than create a workable, analytical basis for policy.

Lacking conceptual ballast, Putin's team is not in a good position to make strategic choices; as during the last years of the Yeltsin era, Kremlin decision-makers spend much of their time avoiding strategic policy decisions. Contrary to the recurring alarm in the Western news media that Putin is trying to mobilize the Europeans against the Americans or is getting ready to abandon a Western option and push for a strategic alignment with China, the mark of Putin's foreign policy is the studious effort not to choose. This approach leads to a criticism widespread in the Russian foreign policy community that, despite Putin's whirlwind travels these past two years, Russian foreign policy is without a strategy.

But one dimension does have a considerable degree of coherence. At a tactical level, Putin has set priorities and pursued them with consistency. His first priority is economics. Under Putin, not only is foreign policy to be subordinated to domestic needs, as every Russian leader back to Mikhail Gorbachev has stressed, but economic relations have received special attention. Since his election in April 2000, Putin has traveled constantly—to Austria, Canada, Cuba, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, North Korea, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, South Korea, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam—and everywhere he has worked at upgrading Russia's economic ties.

In nearly all of the seven high-level meetings held with the Chinese over the last two years, a key Russian priority has been to increase Russia's current 1.6 percent share of China's foreign trade and expand exports to China beyond commodities or low-value-added products. (Russian exports to China consist mostly of such goods, even though China and India together buy, in roughly equal shares, 80 percent of Russia's \$4 billion in annual arms sales.) In India, Putin pushed an elaborate program of scientific and technical cooperation—150 projects in 17 sectors. Even in Cuba, a good deal of his visit was devoted

---

Putin hopes to increase Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space.



to reinvigorating Russian participation in the Las Camaricas nickel-ore processing plant, two oil refineries, and the Juragua nuclear plant.

And so the story goes, whether with North or South Korea, Vietnam, or Canada. Nowhere is this emphasis on economics more evident than in Russia's expanding relations with Europe. Putin has met five times with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and attended four summits with the European Union (EU). During his meetings, no topics have been more central than debt and energy—not even national missile defense. Even a small breakthrough on the Northern Territories dispute at the April 2001 Irkutsk summit with the Japanese prime minister owed its inspiration to dreams of recharging Japanese investment.<sup>3</sup>

Putin's second foreign policy priority has been to continue Yeltsin's attention to Russia's nearest neighbors. He has traveled extensively in Uzbekistan, Ukraine, and Belarus and extended relations with all parts of the former Soviet Union. More than ever, the instrumentality is economic, although in Central Asia the Russians have also stressed security ties in the face of what Uzbek President Islam Karimov and other Central Asian leaders perceive as the threat from Islamic extremism.

It is not easy to trace the precise connection between official foreign policy and Russia's giant energy company Gazprom or its national electricity combine, RAO ESS. Yet there is little question that the less-than-gentle efforts of these and other Russian corporate interests to acquire large equity stakes in pipelines, refineries, power grids, and other strategically significant economic entities accord well with Putin's desire to increase Russia's influence throughout the post-Soviet space.

Outside the post-Soviet space, Putin has invested heavily in relations with both China and western Europe, with slightly more effort going into the latter. Should the Bush administration give a renewed push to economic relations between Russia and the United States after the pause of the last several years, Putin will respond enthusiastically, but Europe is still likely to capture more of his attention. China, however,

---

<sup>3</sup> At that summit, Putin re-embraced the 1956 agreement by which Russia agreed to return two of the four islands that make up the Northern Territories: Shikotan and the Habomais. Because the 1956 agreement is predicated on the conclusion of a peace treaty (which would have to include a resolution of the full territorial issue), however, the two sides are still far from an agreement.

## *Russia's Unformed Foreign Policy*

far more than Europe, is central to a third tactical feature of Putin's foreign policy: the careful cultivation of common ground with Russia's like-minded interlocutors.

In communiqués and press conferences, Russian officials and their counterparts from India to Cuba tick off an impressive list of subjects on which they see eye to eye: the threat of terrorism and separatism, state sovereignty and the role of the U.N., the U.S. national missile defense threat and notions of strategic stability, how not to deal with what the United States used to call "rogue states," and, of course, NATO expansion. Beyond the public display of foreign policy "parallelism," however, the Russians have made only fleeting efforts to actually coordinate with more than one or two countries on any of these issues.

The final priority is one that Putin and his foreign minister stress on every occasion: Russia's new foreign policy pragmatism, by which they mean an intention to go about business in practical ways, curbing historical biases and ideological distractions. But this agnostic approach also has an operational context. As the official foreign policy strategy states, Russia will pursue an "optimal combination of effort along all vectors." Thus Putin has set about building relations simultaneously with China, Japan, the United States, Iran, Iraq, India, and Cuba—all pursued without contemplating the tradeoffs that such diversity will necessitate. It is a tactical attempt to have one's cake and eat it too—ultimately another manifestation of the puzzlement at the root of contemporary Russian foreign policy.

### U.S. INERTIA

FACED WITH A RUSSIA that is a shell of its former superpower self and, worse, that is disoriented and unable to make clear choices, some argue that the United States would be wisest to go about more important tasks while leaving the Russians to collect themselves. Russian objections to U.S. policy initiatives, including the development of a national missile defense or a departure from parts of the arms control regime, should be ignored, they say, and Russian misbehavior punished. This can be done with impunity, the argument runs, because the Russians have few countermeasures in the immediate future, short of those certain to damage themselves far more than the Americans.

An alternate approach calls for Washington to work diligently to ensure that Moscow makes the “right” choices: that it forswears imperial hopes and comes to respect the independence of its neighbors; that it recognizes the futility or, at a minimum, the dangers of attempting to build coalitions against the United States; and that it makes its peace with a modern, democratic Europe that is expanding institutionally to Russia’s borders. Those who favor this approach would have the United States engage in ambitious, even aggressive initiatives designed to increase the economic and military independence of countries such as Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine. They would move NATO eastward as swiftly and as far as possible. And although they would welcome Russia’s reconciliation with the West, they want it to be on U.S. terms.

The proponents of this more active approach are bound to be disappointed. Nothing suggests that Washington or the American public is in a mood to embrace an ambitious policy toward Russia. The inertia leading the United States to disengage from the Russian problem in the last years of the Clinton administration, therefore, seems likely to continue.

The Bush administration inherited a policy of benign neglect: Russia is acknowledged, the lines of communication are kept open, and various cooperative projects are proffered as a sign of good intentions, but little effort is made to address the hard problems at the core of the relationship. It remains to be seen whether the new administration means to change this. The flashes of attention stirred by the summer and fall Bush-Putin encounters are the first test. Will the administration struggle with crafting an ambitious policy that coordinates the many dimensions of the U.S.-Russia relationship? Or, as the first steps suggest, is the United States more likely to concentrate on a national missile defense policy, a Caspian oil policy, or a policy toward rogue states, with each sphere containing a disembodied Russian angle?

If U.S.-Russia relations deteriorate further, the replacement for benign neglect is likely to be malign neglect, as the administration, pushed by Congress, looks distractedly and haphazardly for ways to discipline and punish Russia for perceived misdeeds. Washington’s attention to the Russia challenge has been waning for reasons that advocates of the more ambitious approach rightly deplore. Russian

weakness and the ambivalence of its leadership, many in the administration and Congress assume, take the United States off the hook. But correct as this perception of Russia's condition may be, it also risks being historically shortsighted. Russia could yet create serious, even grave, threats to U.S. interests in at least three areas.

First, an anchorless, insecure Russia, divorced from the West, will not be much help in stabilizing the edges of Europe. On the contrary, were things to go wrong in Ukraine, were Belarus' authoritarian regime to lose control, or were any of the unresolved conflicts from Nagorno-Karabakh to Transdniestra to re-ignite and escalate, an alienated Russia would likely be part of the problem.

This raises the question of how hard the United States has worked to open a Western option for Russia. The dreamy talk in some circles of one day including Russia in NATO fools no one, least of all politicians in Moscow. Russia will not enter the West or develop a partnership with it via membership in Europe's major economic and security institutions. But neither will a thin membrane of ad hoc special arrangements suffice to give Moscow a stake in a constructive joint approach to major security challenges in the netherworld between Europe and Eurasia. Through bilateral contacts, EU summits, the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council, and even the G-8 group of industrialized nations, the United States and its allies should be engaging Russia to find ways to avoid destabilizing outcomes in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the Caucasus. This should not be a case of the great powers plotting over the heads of the locals but instead should be an exchange leading to concrete, complementary actions directed at eroding the sources of trouble. For example, some experts have suggested that Western generosity on Russia's 2003 debt crunch be constructively reciprocated by a comparable Russian generosity on Ukraine, Georgia, and others' crushing debt burdens. There are dozens of avenues along which Russia and the West can cooperate to make this critical, unattended part of Europe a safer place, from a coordinated policy toward Belarus' unreconstructed regime to enhanced multilateral security arrangements to aid settlements in the war-torn Caucasus

---

Russia is no match for the United States in any region, save one—the post-Soviet space.

Nothing of the sort is likely, however, if NATO expands in 2002 to include any of the Baltic states, let alone all of them. If President Bush's June speech in Warsaw suggested a decision has already been made, then it was a hasty decision, taken in a narrow rather than a broad context. Exercising restraint regarding NATO enlargement in the near term provides the only opportunity to enlist Russia in building a safer and more reassuring security regime for Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the Caucasus, and ultimately the Baltic states as well. By itself, exhibiting patience would not mean giving Russia a veto over NATO decisions. Such a veto would become a reality only if the West allowed Russia to insist on NATO's assurances before Russia proved its willingness to construct mutual security in Europe's forgotten half.

The second threat is an extended and more palpable version of the first. Today's Russia is no match for the United States in any part of the world, save one: the post-Soviet space. For some time, many within the Russian leadership have believed that U.S. initiatives toward the countries along Russia's southern border represent a concerted effort to outflank Russia and roll back its influence. So far, the Russian response has been spotty and half-hearted. Although the United States has no reason to accommodate paranoid fantasies, it is not in the U.S. interest to inadvertently, let alone intentionally, spark a strategic rivalry with Russia in Central Asia, the Caucasus, or among the threesome of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova.

Yet engineering "geographical pluralism" among the countries of the former Soviet Union simply invites adverse Russian reactions, when energy-transport options are chosen on the basis of short-term strategic calculations, and when Partnership for Peace military exercises are implicitly designed for Russian scenarios. As for bilateral relations, the United States has a legitimate interest in the continued independence and security of Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the other former Soviet states. But this objective is best pursued by convincing Russia that its security is best achieved by enhancing the security of its neighbors, and this will not happen unless the United States takes Russia's own security concerns seriously.

The third threat, improbable but no longer unthinkable, would arise if two or more of the major powers were to become alienated from the United States and then unite against it. Although for the moment

neither China nor India—nor in fact Russia—has any desire to gang up on the United States, that situation could change. If the United States were to pursue an aggressive strategy of containment against China, Chinese leaders might well decide that economic cooperation was not worth the candle. If parts of Eurasia, including the Chinese borderlands, then descended into disorder, Beijing might look to collaborate with others capable of helping control the situation and ally itself with a Russia that had its own reasons for disregarding U.S. opinion and concerns. Apart from attending intelligently to U.S.-China relations and avoiding the casual alienation of Russia, therefore, the United States ought to think more about ways that it can, together with its European and Japanese allies, help diminish the danger of upheavals in inner Asia's great cauldrons, such as the Ferghana Valley, Xinjiang, and northwestern Kazakhstan.

Given the humble status of Russia and the "think small" attitude of the U.S. Congress, the executive branch, and much of the media, the prevailing mood in the United States is not likely to change any time soon. Nor are any of these threats likely to mature during the next three years. Thus, if the Bush administration chooses to carry on in the disengaged, scattered fashion of the moment, it can do so, and probably without regrets. Those will come further down the line. 🌐