Is Russia an Independent and Unpredictable Power?

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To what extent has Russia since the demise of Boris Yeltsin emerged as an 'independent regional power and an unpredictable player on the international stage'?

"Russia's modern foreign policy is based on the principles of pragmatism, predictability and the supremacy of international law."

*Russian President Vladimir Putin, May 2006**[1]***

Boris Yeltsin presided over a tumultuous time in Russia's economic and political landscape.[2] Indeed, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a source of 'humiliation' for many Russians[3] – states within the Russian traditional 'sphere of influence,[4] that had once made up the Soviet Union, had now found independence, stripping Russia of its own long-held perception as a Great Power[5] and forcing itself to look inward at domestic reforms at least up until the Second Chechen War in 1999. Russia's independent power over post-Soviet states, in the sense that it could act free from external influence and constraint, had waned and various players had made tentative steps to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union – notably the United States. When Boris Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, came to power in 1999, and elected in March 2000, however, he sought to reverse this state of affairs, making Russia's central foreign policy objective to re-establish itself in its 'near abroad'[6]. This essay will, therefore, assess the extent to which Russia, under the leadership of Putin and his successor, Dmitry Medvedev, has re-emerged as an 'independent regional power' in international politics by looking at the successes and failures of Russia in its attempts to exert power over states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, how its independence has been hindered in these areas by other regional powers and whether the conflict between Russian foreign policy objectives and international barriers to them makes Russia an 'unpredictable player' on the international stage.

Eastern Europe

NATO after the Cold War lacked a set of coherent ideas as to its place within the European security framework and was in need of modernisation. As part of this process, NATO has expanded eastwards. Often seen as a tool of American power, NATO enlargement threatened Russian interests in the region,[7] and so Moscow opposed NATO enlargement 'from the beginning'.[8] By using force against states in its 'sphere of influence' and by interfering in their elections, using energy insecurity to apply political pressure, new strategic military installations and turning towards friendly regimes in need of diplomatic and economic assistance for their loyalty[9], Putin has attempted to halt NATO enlargement in order to assert Russia's power independently in Eastern Europe. For instance, in the 2004 Ukrainian Presidential elections, Moscow allegedly used espionage to 'exert pressure on the election' in favour of the pro-Russian candidate.[10] His efforts to stop NATO expansion have, however, been mixed. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania became NATO member states between 1999 and 2004, yet, as a result of pressure

from Russia, Georgia and Ukraine were denied NATO membership in 2008.[11]

In the wake of September 11 2001, US-Russian relations looked to become stronger and differences reconciled, though Bush did not see Putin's Russia as an equal, Putin expected to be treated as such.[12] This helps to explain why Russia was not overtly critical in the US' unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (it did not meaningfully threaten its sphere of influence), but when a US Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) system was deployed in Poland it caused alarm, leading to Russia threatening to retaliate with nuclear weapons against Poland (despite the fact Russia's huge nuclear arsenal could overpower the installation anyway)[13], as Putin wanted a multi-polar world where Russia was treated equally.[14] Indeed, the increasing tendency of Eastern European states to turn towards the EU and the US threatens Russia's ability to influence these countries in the future, as it has become apparent that the more Russia tries to lure them back, the more motivated they are to look towards the EU and US[15], reducing Russian political and economic influence in the region further. Medvedev responded in 2009 by establishing a military base in the only country within the region willing to accommodate a Russian base – Serbia[16], and in 2010 by proposing a Russian security structure mechanism for Europe as an alternative to NATO.[17] The fact that just one other state is willing to host a Russian base is a clear indicator that Russia is not an independent regional power in Eastern Europe, yet considering Russian foreign policy since Yeltsin has been focused on restoring it, Russia's assertive and at times threatening behaviour is entirely predictable – as Russia and the West become increasingly divided over NATO expansion and TMD, the more threatening Russia becomes.

Despite Russian military shortcomings in Eastern Europe, Russia has, to a significant extent, managed to ensure European dependency on its oil and gas. In 2005, the Ukraine was forced by Russia to pay four times the price of gas that it was paying, bringing Europe to an embarrassing face-off with Russia as 'fifty percent of EU gas was imported from Russia and eighty percent of that came through Ukrainian pipelines'[18], demonstrating Russian power not just over its traditional 'sphere of influence', but also over Western Europe too.[19] Indeed, EU energy security has become a major cause for concern.[20] Arguably, joint EU-US developments of energy export infrastructure, such as the Nabucco pipeline, which bypasses Russia, will undermine Moscow's influence over Europe further.[21] Yet European dependency on Russian energy resources looks set to continue and increase for some time to come[22], however, despite the EU's lack of coherence in implementing regional security objectives[23], this does not mean Europe will bow to Russian pressure. Russia has unsuccessfully tried to influence and manipulate Baltic countries, but Russian policies have thus far failed to bring them 'under the Russian sphere of influence'.[24] Ironically, what this demonstrates is how, in an attempt to re-establish its 'sphere of influence' in Eastern Europe, Russia is creating greater divisions between it and the states it seeks to influence, which in the short term produces variable results, but in the long term pushes those states towards closer cooperation with the West, frustrating Russia further and, predictably, increasing the threat of Russia exerting more political, economic and military pressure.

The Caucasus

Since the Second Chechen War in 1999, Russia has sought to reassert its power in the Caucasus with surprising success. Indeed, the war has become symbolic of Russia's re-assertiveness in the Caucasus and Central Asia and provided the platform for Putin's presidential campaign in 2000.[25] Despite the ongoing violence and the cruel terrorist atrocities committed by rebels, including the horrific Beslan siege in September 2004, Putin presented Chechnya as an 'unqualified success'.[26] Therefore, given Putin's rise[27], and Medvedev's National Security Strategy signed in 2009, including Medvedev's priority on protecting ethnic Russians and continuing to place an importance on its 'privileged interests' in certain regions[28], Russian assertiveness in the Caucasus was, and remains, a predictable outcome.

The war in Georgia in 2008 'invalidated' one of the underlying concepts of post-Cold War Eurasian and European security, namely that Russia was 'essentially a peaceful status quo orientated power'.[29] However, the Russian dismissal of the 1975 Helsinki treaty, a cornerstone of European security, was met with rhetoric over action by the US and EU as they demonstrated their inability, or unwillingness, to do anything constructive for her[30], and was met with silence from the UN. Indeed, Russia perceived Georgian 'aggression' against South Ossetia as 'an attack on Russia' and as such defended 'Russian citizens'[31] – Moscow had warned Georgia and the US that if Georgia

'acted aggressively', Moscow would respond with a 'wide scale war'[32] – despite the fact that Russia's war plan had been prepared long in advance[33], suggesting a more calculated attack against Georgia to send a message about who really owns the Caspian Sea 'energy spigot'.[34] The subsequent recognition of the Georgian republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries in 2008 only reinforced the message that this was Russian 'territory' – to this day, Russian flags still fly in the breakaway republics. However, Russia did not simply return to the status quo with the West. Russia's membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) became unlikely, investors became nervous and its credibility had weakened, in short 'its geopolitical costs' for invading Georgia were mounting.[35] The effective abandonment of Georgia by the West and the repression of Chechnya, demonstrates that the Caucasus is part of Russia's sphere of influence. It is this understanding that explains France and Germany's blocking of Georgian NATO membership –they realised this would upset Russian interests and they could, predictably, expect political and economic retaliation from Russia if they did not.

Central Asia

Russian influence is strongest, largely unchallenged and most independent in Central Asia, at least with its politicians.[36] The Russian-centred strategic system, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Euro-Asian Economic Community (EAEC) are largely made up of the Central Asian 'stans'. In contrast to the Yeltsin era[37], its influence in the region has increased, in no small part due to Putin promoting Russia's 'strengths in economic complementarity, security "outsourcing", and ethno-cultural ties'[38] with the region. In an effort to maintain its monopoly on pipelines in the region, Russia has pressurized the 'stans' to remain as subservient as possible. Kazakhstan's population, for example, is 32 percent ethnically Russian and so Russia's military doctrine, to protect Russians, will not have gone unnoticed when Russia invaded to 'protect' Russian passport-holders in South Ossetia in 2008.[39] Furthermore, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have large Russian military bases, the latter hosts the largest Russian military force in Central Asia.[40] Reinforced by the colour revolutions that swept through several former Soviet states[41], Central Asian states rely on Russia for their security.[42] Indeed, Russia's growing economic links, such as Kazakhstan's Customs Union with Russia[43], Turkmenistan's reliance on Gazprom's pipelines for exporting gas[44] and Uzbekistan's Lukoil deal[45] make good reading for Russia's strategy planners and demonstrates the tools of Russia's influence in the region, despite continuing US presence in the region.[46] However, the rise of China and its growing influence in the region, through actors like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), makes Russian behaviour more difficult to predict than in its other regions of influence. Russia wants political and economic cooperation with China as it would positively contribute to Russia's security and economy – both could rely on each other's solidarity when 'faced with Western criticism'[47], and at the same time reduce concerns over terrorism, extremism, and separatism. Indeed, Russia has substantially supported Chinese military modernisation[48] and has conducted joint military operations with China and the SCO.[49]Further, Russian-Sino prospects for cooperation on energy have increased – energy comprises 40 percent of Russian exports and has soared from $500m in 2001 to $6.7bn in 2007[50] and Russian-Sino trade reached $33.4bn in 2006.[51] However, the extent to which Russia is prepared to sacrifice greater Chinese influence in its 'strategic backyard', for limited gains, is not entirely clear. China is steadily encroaching on traditional Russian 'territory', much to Moscow's fear – Sino-Asian trade has increased from $500m in 1992 to $10bn in 2006[52], China is building huge energy infrastructure projects in Central Asia[53] and concerns over Chinese illegal migration to Russia's Far East lingers.[54] This suggests that cooperation is issue selective.[55] Therefore Russian influence, while currently strongest in Central Asia, could be set to decline as China's rise continues – its growing interest in securing Central Asian oil and gas could lead Beijing to reconsider its policy of 'regional deference'[56] and expand her influence in Central Asia. If Russia's attempts to assert power in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus are a guide, then Russia will retaliate against Chinese encroachment in Central Asia, which is increasingly threatening Russia's gains in regional power since the demise of Yeltsin. However, stronger political and growing economic ties to China make Russian behaviour in the region, and towards China in the future, harder to predict.

Conclusion

Since the demise of Yeltsin and the rise of Putin and Medvedev, Eastern Europe has moved towards the West. Russian regional influence there has decreased as a result of political, economic and military integration, and it

certainly cannot act independently, despite Russia's (predictable) efforts to stop this. Unsurprising Russian economic and military assertiveness in the Caucasus has, in contrast, *increased* her power – even though her ability to act independently in the region has been hampered by Western overtures in the region. Finally, in Central Asia, Russia has to a significant extent emerged as an *independent* regional power, although as China's economy grows it will place a higher priority on Central Asia as a place to meet its energy needs, threatening Russian influence in the region. Whilst Russia's predictable response would be to retaliate, political and economic ties to China make Russian behaviour in the region, and towards China in the future, harder to predict. In conclusion, Russia has made a concerted attempt to become an 'independent regional power' since the demise of Yeltsin with limited results in Eastern Europe, but with greater success in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and as Putin's quote suggested, its behaviour has been entirely predictable. Nonetheless, China looks set to challenge Russian power in Central Asia in the future – what Russia's response to this will be, however, is unclear.

A Bill Board in Tskhinvali, South Ossetia reads; 'Putin is Our President'.

[57]

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[2] The uncertainty initiated by the demise of the Soviet Union completely changed the dynamics of international politics and challenged the framework with which academics had been using for decades, see John Lewis Gaddis, 'International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War', in *International Security*, 17. 3 (1992), 5-58 (p. 6).

[3] Michael Klare, 'Russia and Georgia: All About Oil', *Foreign Policy in Focus* (2008) <http://www.fpif.org/articles/russia_and_georgia_all_about_oil> [accessed 18 March 2011].

[4] Arguably Russia has a lengthy history demonstrating a desire to be the regional hegemon, see Paul Rich, 'Russia as a Great Power', in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20. 2 (2009), 276-99 (pp. 277-291) and also, Stephen Blank, 'America and the Russo-Georgian War', in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20. 2 (2009), 425-51 (p. 432).

[5] Rich, pp. 276-99, see also Henning Schröder and Marcel de Haas, 'Russia's National Security Strategy', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 62 (2009) <http://kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/101960/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/f7dd2b0b-b75e-43f0-a14e-b1f7bc1b98bb/en/Russian_Analytical_Digest_62.pdf> [accessed 13 March 2011] (p. 7).

[6] Janina Sleivyte, 'Russia's European Agenda and the Baltic States', *Defence Academy of the United Kingdom: The Shrivenham Papers,* 7 (2008) <http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/monographs/Shrivenham%20Paper%207.pdf> [accessed 19 March 2011] (p. 15).

[7] James MacHaffie, 'China's Role in Central Asia: Security Implications for Russia and the United States', in *Comparative Strategy*, 29. 4 (2010), 368-80 (p. 374).

[8] Eugene Rumer and Angela Stent, 'Russia and the West', in *Survival*, 51. 2 (2009), 91-104 (p. 93).

[9] Aleksandar Fatić, 'A Strategy Based on Doubt: Russia Courts Southeast Europe', in *Contemporary Security Policy*, 31. 3 (2010), 441-64 (p. 446).

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[12] Deborah Larson, and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy', in *International Security*, 34. 4 (2010), 63-95 (p. 90).

[13] Certainly, Putin despised the way the US has asserted itself in its 'area of privileged interests' and has subsequently reduced the threshold for Russia's use of nuclear weapons, see Oksana Antonenko and Bastian Giegerich, 'Rebooting NATO-Russia Relations', in *Survival*, 51. 2 (2009), 13-21 (p. 15), London, House of Commons Library, Research Paper 09/35, Russia's Military Posture (p. 22), and Harry de Quetteville and Andrew Pierce, 'Russia Threatens Nuclear Attack on Poland Over US Missile Shield Deal', *The Telegraph* (2008) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/2566005/Russia-threatens-nuclear-attack-on-Poland-over-US-missile-shield-deal.html> [accessed 19 March 2011].

[14] To this effect, chief of the Russian General Staff, General Yury Baluyevskiy, suggested that Russia would 'only support a NATO missile-defence system that was jointly developed with Moscow' and that NATO must choose 'whether the missile defence system in Europe will be developed jointly with Russia, or whether it will be a segment of the US national system', see Richard Weitz, 'Illusive Visions and Practical Realities: Russia, NATO and Missile Defence', in *Survival*, 52. 4 (2010), 99-120 (p. 109) and Stephen Blank, 'Threats to and from Russia: An Assessment', in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies,* 21. 3 (2008), 491-526 (p. 492-3).

[15] "They have actively sought to shape a more critical EU line towards Russia, using means like critical non-papers, diplomatic footwork and even vetoing negotiations about a new EU agreement with Russia. Motivated by Russian pressures, but also by unresolved historical grievances, they have… frosty political relations with Russia, and this often spills over into the economic field." See Mark Leonard and Nicu Popescu, 'A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations', *European Council on Foreign Relations* (2007) <http://ecfr.eu/page/-/documents/ECFR-EU-Russia-power-audit.pdf> [accessed 19 March 2011] (p. 48).

[16] Russia 'naturally sees Serbia as the last place for projection of its own opposition to NATO expansion in the Balkans' and US TMD as the 'uniform position of the Balkan governments' is to join the EU, see Fatic, p. 462 and p. 450.

[17] See Richard Krickus, 'Medvedev's Plan: Giving Russia a Voice but not a Veto in a New European Security System', *Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College* (2009) <www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub958.pdf> [accessed 13 March 2011].

[18] Even Russia's 'closest' ally, Belarus, has not been immune to Russia's new pricing regime, which led the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus in 2007 to tie the Belarusian ruble to the US dollar instead of the Russian ruble, see Pravda, 'Belarus Abandons pegging its currency to Russian Ruble', *Pravda* (2007) <http://english.pravda.ru/world/ussr/23-08-2007/96292-belarus_russia-0/> [accessed 19 March 2011] and Jeremy Page, 'Fears of a New Cold War as Russia Threatens to Switch Off the Gas', *The Times Online* (2005) <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sport/football/european_football/article783481.ece> [accessed 19 March 2011]

[19] Across Europe, Moscow has used the 'energy weapon' to impose 'political conditions, suborn foreign political leaders and institutions, and punish states and governments that do not respond to its desires', see Stephen Blank, 'Challenges and Opportunities for the Obama Administration in Central Asia'*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College* (2009) <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub921.pdf> [accessed 13 March 2011] (p. 11).

[20] As a result of Russian transgressions the EU is actively seeking alternative sources of energy to balance Russian influence, see Diana Bozhilova and Tom Hashimoto, 'EU-Russia Energy Negotiations: A Choice between Rational Self-Interest and Collective Action', in *European Security*, 19. 4 (2010), 627-42 (p. 627).

[21] Tracey German, 'Pipeline Politics: Georgia and Energy Security', in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20. 2 (2009), 344-62 (pp. 345-54).

[22] Bozhilova, p. 631.

[23] Laure Delcour, 'The European Union: A Security Provider in the Eastern Neighbourhood?', in *European Security*, 19. 4 (2010), 535-49 (pp. 535-8).

[24] Pranas Ciziunas, 'Russia and the Baltic States: Is Russian Imperialism Dead?', in *Comparative Strategy*, 27. 3 (2008), 287-307 (p. 305).

[25] Roland Dannreuther and Luke March, 'Chechnya: Has Moscow Won?', in *Survival*, 50. 4 (2008), 97-112 (p. 97).

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Schröder, p. 4.

[29] Blank, 'America and the Russo-Georgian War', p. 425.

[30] While Russia was criticised vociferously, provoking Russia, by taking economic or military action, was not thought to be desirable. Europeans were concerned about the effect such action would have on their oil supply and the US because Russian support for a favourable position on Iran was being sought at the time. Others were Blank, 'America and the Russo-Georgian War', p. 426-7.

[31] Roy Allison, 'The Russian Case for Military Intervention in Georgia: International Law, Norms and Political Calculation', in *European Security*, 18. 2 (2009), 173-200 (p. 176-80).

[32] Blank, 'America and the Russo-Georgian War', p. 425.

[33] Carolina Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, 'Russia's War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences', in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20. 2 (2009), 400-24 (p. 404).

[34] Klare, 'Russia and Georgia: All About Oil', p. 1.

[35] Stephen Blank, 'Georgia: The War Russia Lost', *Military Review: The Professional Journal of the U.S. Army* (2008) <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20081231_art008.pdf> [accessed 13 March 2011] (p. 40).

[36] 'Russia's sponsorship of unrepresentative post-Soviet elites has brought it geopolitical stability at the price of encouraging these elites to repress, rather than address, the powerful social and political forces at work in their societies.' See David Kerr, 'Central Asian and Russian Perspectives on China's Strategic Emergence', in *International Affairs*, 86. 1 (2010), 127-52 (p. 151).

[37] Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov in 2005, for example, said 'Russia is our most reliable partner and ally', in contrast to a few years beforehand when the US appeared to be Uzbekistan's favoured friend, and relations with Russia 'were cooler', see Sarah Shenker, 'Struggle for influence in Central Asia', *BBC News* (2005) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4467736.stm> [accessed 20 March 2011]

[38] Kerr, p. 151.

[39] MacHaffie, p. 372.

[40] MacHaffie, p. 372-4.

[41] MacHaffie, p. 376.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Stephen Blank, 'Resetting the Reset Button: Realism About Russia', *Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College* (2009) <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/download.cfm?q=956> [accessed 13 March 2011] (p. 358).

[44] Gazprom is state owned by Russia. Rajan Menon, 'The Limits of Chinese-Russian Partnership', in *Survival*, 51. 3 (2009), 99-130 (p. 120).

[45] Likoil is state owned by Russia. Blank, 'Challenges and Opportunities for the Obama Administration in Central Asia', p. 33-4.

[46] Menon, p. 118.

[47] Menon, pp. 107-108.

[48] Which has 'increased from $8bn between 1996 and 2000', to '$27bn since 2000'. Menon, p. 113.

[49] Menon, p. 116.

[50] Menon, p. 123.

[51] Christina Yeung and Nebojsa Bjelakovic, 'The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: Views from Beijing and Moscow', in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 23. 2 (2010), 243-87 (p. 265).

[52] Péyrouse, S., 'Economic Aspects of China–Central Asia Rapprochement', *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Paper* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 2007), p. 12

[53] Menon, p. 119.

[54] Menon, p. 121.

[55] Yeung, p. 285.

[56] Richard Weitz, 'China-Russia Security Relations: Strategic Parallelism Without Partnership or Passion', *Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College* (2008) <www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub868.pdf> [accessed 13 March 2011] (p.

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