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LINES OF (DIS)CONTINUITY IN A PROCESS OF
AFFIRMATION**

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The Making of Russian Foreign Policy: Lines of (Dis)continuity in a Process of Affirmation*

Abstract: This paper looks at the dynamics underlying Russian foreign policy, with the aim of identifying drivers, strategies and goals in a process embedded in complexity. The domestic political setting and its interplay with the international context are fundamental elements in the analysis of the projection of Russian power and influence. In a constant search for balance between the national interest, international compromises and the bargaining/concessions duality, Russia has been pursuing a policy of affirmation, both in regional and international terms. However, this has been a course where lines of (dis)continuity produce fragile contours that are not always easy to grasp. Underlying this course are issues about Russian identity and how this plays a role both at the domestic level and in external policy dealings. However, an increasingly assertive tone is noticeable. Whether this is still an expression of a loss of empire not yet overcome or the result of powerful internal developments is here analyzed. This paper aims, thus, to analyze Russian foreign policy making, shedding light on lines of continuity and discontinuity in this continuous, though not linear, search for affirmation.

Keywords: foreign policy; multi-vectorial; multipolar; identity; Russian Federation

Introduction

Russian politics after the end of the cold war have undulated according to internal and external constraints, in an effort to adapt and respond to the new internal and international circumstances. The Russian Soviet inheritance remains strong after the breakup of the Soviet bloc, and Moscow's dealings with its new power status, strategic perceptions and identity construction remain a wide challenge. The Russian Federation is a large country with a unified policy and well defined political, strategic and economic interests, based on a strong hand at home and tough stance towards foreign issues considered vital to Russian interests,

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pursued in many instances outside the traditional contours of democratic practices. The so-called “managed democracy” intends to be the defining model for an authoritarian style of ruling based on the holding of electoral processes. This reflects a combination of western values and the so-called “Russian way”, resulting in a mix in politics.

Based on a vertical power formula described by Russian authorities as a needed assurance for order and democratization, the centralization trends in Russian politics seem to contain the weight of the country’s imperial past with which Russia has not yet fully come to terms. In fact, the Soviet imperial logic is still much present in Russian foreign policy, expressed in Russia’s current trend of affirmation and regaining of influence. This alignment has allowed some continuity in Russian post-cold war dealings, despite the ups-and-downs resulting from the need to adjust to an all-adapting international context throughout the post-cold war decade (1990-2001). The terrorist attacks of September 2001 in the United States constituted, however, a turning point. The United States became prominent, putting forward an assertive agenda. Russia reacted and followed, adding a more affirmative stance to discourse and action. In a post post-cold war setting, Russian foreign policy became pro-active and assumed an affirmative tone, underlined by pragmatic and realist considerations about Russian possibilities and limits at home and abroad.

This paper analyzes the dynamics underlying Russian foreign policy, with the aim of identifying its drivers, strategies and goals. Departing from the assumption that Russian foreign policy follows the principle that the definition of the national interest is the basis for the pursuit of (inter)national objectives, and taking it in the context of the interlinkage of the internal/external relationship as a bi-directional process in the making of foreign policy (Rosenau, 2006; Katzenstein, 1976; Hill, 2003; Saideman and Ayres, 2007; Alons, 2007), Russian foreign policy dealings are an expression of Moscow’s wish for affirmation and international recognition of its role in regional and global politics. Driven by a favorable domestic context, through the centralization of power at home and the pursuit of an assertive policy abroad, embracing balancing policies, such as those regarding the United States, containment, with regard to China, or influence and control as happens towards some of the former Soviet republics, it applies multilateral cooperation for attaining a multipolar order, simultaneously with the pursuit of an indisputable place in this international order. This equation of drivers, strategies and goals is underlined by a

combination of *realpolitik* elements, translated in power politics at the basis of Russian foreign policy decision-making and implementation, and constructivist lines, with issues of identity and perception shaping foreign policy outcomes.

The projection of Russian power and influence demonstrates a constant search for balance between the national interest, international compromises and the bargaining/concessions duality. However, this has been a course where lines of (dis)continuity produce fragile contours that are not always easy to grasp. An increasingly assertive tone is noticeable under Putin, after the inconsistencies of the Yeltsin years. The alignments of the newly elected president in March 2008, Dmitry Medvedev, are expected to follow suit on Putin, but are still to be tested. As such, this paper argues that the growing assertiveness in Russian foreign policy is still an expression of a past not yet overcome, of the way(s) Russia defines itself (the identity question), and the result of internal developments that have allowed an empowerment of Russia, elements that clearly contribute to (in)actions regarding lines of continuity and discontinuity in the country's foreign policy, rendering it a continuous, though not linear, search for affirmation.

Lines of (dis)continuity in Russian foreign policy: a multi-level model of analysis

The post-cold war decade might be described as a decade of “soft revisionism” as an expression of Russian pursuit of its own place after the breakup of the Soviet Union, in a generally non-confrontational way, seeking to maintain the balance between its different foreign policy goals and the international context where these were projected. This decade allowed the clarification of Russian foreign policy objectives, despite various adjustments, resulting in the revision and adoption of fundamental documents, such as the foreign policy concept, the national security concept and the military doctrine (2000). These documents consolidate the directions, options and objectives of Moscow's external policy with the delineation of preferential areas for action along with the need for an affirmative and more assertive course in both domestic and international terms. September 11 will to some extent project these Russian objectives, as further analyzed.

Russian foreign policy has been shifting according to several factors, both endogenous and exogenous, though the main post-cold war structuring principles and goals have remained over time. What has been changing and conferring a sense of undulation to Russian policy making has been the conjugation of means and opportunities in the definition and pursuit of interests. The trend suggests that whereas Yeltsin was very much focused on the external context, reacting and adjusting continuously to the changes taking place at the international stage, Putin shifted the focus to internal issues, understanding this move as essential to sustain Russia's outwards look. This means that with Yeltsin, Russian foreign policy was essentially reactive to the western positioning, either demanding or consenting. This was noticeable particularly in the first years after the end of the cold war, during Yeltsin's first mandate; the mid 1990s witnessed a change in the orientation of Russian foreign policy, with a more reassuring tone and reaffirmation in what Moscow defined as its "near abroad". Primakov was of the utmost relevance in this redesign of Russian foreign policy, as well as in giving more orientation to economic transformation within the country, having been instrumental in the engineering of these fundamental shifts. Maybe the best example of this changing trend was Russia's hostile reaction to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in the Balkans in 1999. It gave a clear demonstration of dissatisfaction with United States and European policies towards the area, and showed a tougher stance in terms of its position in the international system, clearly seeking recognition of its status as a relevant power.

With Vladimir Putin, the consolidation of internal growth and stability paved the way for an increasingly affirmative tone in foreign policy. Resting on a pragmatic assessment of Russian possibilities and limits, Putin conferred substance to the concept of a multi-vectorial policy, which has lent to Russian external dealings a sense of continuity and stability by including the CIS as a priority area, as well as the western and Asian dimensions. However, by enlarging the package, Putin also got added leeway, playing with these different dimensions to Russia's best interest and in the broader game of projecting power in an increasingly interdependent international order (Freire, 2008). Putin's first mandate allowed therefore the consolidation of a trend initiated with Yeltsin, but which became a solid option in Russia's foreign policy during his mandates as President of Russia.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States marked a turning point in international politics with the United States affirming its primacy and profoundly changing the ordering of the international (dis)order. Washington assumed an active foreign policy course built over two main lines: one of strategic instability aiming at creating a new multipolar framework of regional security, drawn in its image (a multi-unilateral model, to play with Huntington's words) (Huntington, 1999: 35); and another of institutionalization of the concert of great powers, on the basis of a very elementary commonly shared security concern, with a particular focus on the fight against terrorism, nuclear proliferation, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), etc.

This strategy, which became global in its expression, has been raising different reactions at the international level, in a context where the post-9/11 power transition problems are not completely settled yet. This unclarity has either been due to a lack of recognition of a new power distribution in the international system or to clashing visions over this same power transition dynamics, in a context itself marked by relative instability and unpredictable events. The Russian Federation has been a bit ambivalent in this regard, both in its understanding of the "myself/other" relationship and with regard to its self-definition as a power, in a volatile international context. Its responses to United States (US) primacy and revisionist posture after 9/11 have shifted between cooperation and competition, in an effort at affirmation in an unfavorable context (where China and India are powers on the rise). Clearly, September 11 constituted an accelerator of tendencies already in place in Russia, with a policy of affirmation gaining added strength, both domestically and with regard to foreign policy.

As such, understanding Russian identity is fundamental, as a variable helping to explain the sometimes conflicting nature of its policy orientation. Russian identity has been built between east and west throughout time: for instance, "Ivan IV was both Khan (Asiatic ruler) and Basileus (Christian emperor)" (Hosking, 2003: 5). The legacies of the historical past of Russia have profoundly marked Russian traditions and cultural perceptions. These also carry with them a demonstration of the Russian "in-between identity", combining Euro-Asian elements. In fact, 71% of the population describe themselves as Russians in their own way, an understanding deeply rooted in cultural and historical perceptions as a people, defined as the bridging link between west and east, between Europe and Asia, an

intimate definition that becomes very much clear in domestic politics and in its external expressions. Internal divisions in Russia, with the Euro-Atlanticists favoring closer ties to the United States and Europe, the Eurasianists looking at the eastern scenario for strategic alliances, including China and India in their horizons, and the Russia-first seeking an affirmation of Russian power on the basis of the country's imperial legacy, political strength, influence, and economic resources, the scenario at home reveals, in this very simplistic way, the multidimensional foreign policy discourse (see for example Porter, 1996: 121; Lowenhardt, 2000: 167-174).

However, the definition of Russian identity does no longer carry the ideological weight that was attached to Soviet ruling, not functioning anymore as a development model carrying normative attractiveness for others. The identity construction process still in progress in Russia, no longer Soviet, but also not democratic in the western sense, has implied a constant search for a regaining of its own identity – a modified identity in a modified context. To some extent, the consolidation of particular trends in Russian foreign policy under Vladimir Putin has allowed a differentiated and sophisticated Russian approach towards internal and external matters, with “Putinism” coining a very particular way of ruling. This demonstrates the very much needed ideological framing in Russian politics, with the recovery of massive military parades running through the Red Square in the Soviet style as a clear demonstration of this. Putinism as equal to power centralization and *ruling vertical* is complementing its model of governance with an ideological frame understood as fundamental for giving consistency and projection capability to Russian foreign policy. In this way, it plays a dual function: one for internal consumption and the other regarding the molding of external perceptions.

President Putin's power and powerful say in foreign policy have managed to transform these various discourses into a unified foreign policy, allowing more coherence in both wording and action. Centralized ruling as a guarantee of stability, and the toughening of politics as an assurance of order, are signs of an authoritarian legacy still much present in Russian policy-making. But despite the identification of continuity elements in the Russian authoritarian course, “[t]he new Russia is not the Soviet Union, moreover nor is she the old Russian Empire. Her new borders, option, culture, civilization, inner development did make Russia another state that previously had not existed on the global political or geographical

map” (Kortunov, 2000: 7). Thus, Russian identity is still in the making, combining inheritances from the past and trying to learn how to deal with a new political, social, economic and strategic context. And while still carrying many elements from yesterday, today’s Russia, despite growing political assertiveness, centralized ruling and authoritarian style, is a new Russia, seeking for affirmation in a changed context.

The role of political elites and their loyalty to the central governing power has always been a fundamental element in Russian history, as it is still today. Controlling dissident voices, punishing opposition movements, and closely monitoring propagandistic moves were common practice in czarist times and under the Soviet regime, and are still visible in today’s Russia. “Russia is still best understood as a network of interlocking patron-client relationships. This is one reason why post-Soviet Russia has such difficulty in generating its own sense of civic community” (Hosking, 2003: 6).

The institutionalization of the *ruling vertical*, with support from the political elite close to the president, guarantees political and social control. This strong ruling, which in the exchange of liberty for security gathered ample support, has nevertheless been facing contest from civic movements and opposition groups, though with limited expression. This shows that the elements of democratization experienced in post-cold war Russia have been kept under close scrutiny by the central authorities, which play them off to their own benefit. This is done in a constant game of giving and taking, justifying tough politics at home with the need for order; allowing the *ruling vertical* on the grounds of building stability; and holding electoral processes as the maximum expression of a democratic country. The very much criticized presidential election of 2 March 2008, from the campaign to the counting of votes, is such an example.

In parallel to this domestic dimension, on the international stage, changing patterns in political-economic and strategic dealings have been opening new avenues for cooperation and competition. This is a demonstration of the linkages between the internal and external dimensions of foreign policy making.

Foreign policy has to ‘serve’ domestic policy, which includes primarily the establishment of efficient security, the raising of living standards and the development of civil society. (...) Concern about internal economic and social problems is a more effective way of protecting national interests and hence of making Russia a really great country without relying on the old concept of a ‘Great Russia’. (Slezneva, 2003: 26-27)

The course of affirmation of Russian politics is therefore both the result of inward and outward driven processes, following a multi-level approach, visible in tough politics at home and an assertive stance in international affairs. With Putin, this has, however, been built on an asymmetrical understanding of the internal/external dichotomy, with a clear focus on the internal dimension and the need for domestic consolidation and stability, to then move on to an affirmative course in foreign policy dealings.

The US is affirming its primacy in the international system, the European Union (EU) is gaining an increased role in international affairs, India and China are emerging as regional powers – a scenario where Russia struggles with ambiguities in its own search for affirmation and regaining of influence. Describing western engagement in the former Soviet area as interference in a vital area of Russian influence and trying to counter it, Moscow's political options have been revealing both ambiguities and a toughening in discourse and action. The linkages between domestic choices and external power projection become clear in a complex geostrategic setting where Russia's affirmative course gains increasingly clear contours.

Russian foreign policy after the end of the cold war: Apparent discontinuities

Russian foreign policy has evolved from an essentially reactive and, at times, incoherent basis, particularly throughout the first half of the 1990s, to a pro-active, consistent and affirmative policy, which has been reinforced under Putin. Besides becoming assertive on the lines of promoting the national interest and Russia's affirmation in the international scenario, Moscow's foreign policy has been making the most of international developments, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In a pro-western context after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia pursued rapprochement to the west, defining itself as a natural ally of Europe. This approach was evinced in its search for integration into western institutions, seeking membership of the Council of Europe, joining Partnership for Peace in the context of NATO, and deepening relations with the European Communities, based on the signature of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 1994, along with the strengthening of ties with Washington. However, the expected

western financial assistance proved late and insufficient and the conditionality associated with it ended up generating anti-western feelings and a demand for internal political change, mainly associated to the nationalists and communists. Criticism about western meddling in Russian affairs, particularly regarding the treatment of Russian minorities abroad (namely in the former Soviet republics), raised discontent and pushed the authorities in Moscow towards a more interventionist policy.

From 1993, a reaffirmation course became clear in the policy orientation of the Kremlin: reaffirming its role as an influential actor, particularly in regional terms. This course was pursued through economic influence and leverage, political pressure and military strongholds in the former Soviet space, to the discontent of some of these republics. As a guarantor of stability in this neighboring area, Russia assumed the former Soviet space as an area of strategic national interest where outside interference was not welcomed. From 1995 this approach was consolidated, with the initial definition of a multi-vectorial foreign policy by the Kremlin. By the mid-1990s Russian foreign policy was designed around two main circles: an inner one, encompassing the former Soviet republics, and an outer one, including the western (European and US) and Asian dimensions. Till the end of the post-cold war decade this tendency was reinforced.

Since gaining the presidency in 2000, Vladimir Putin has defined Russia's foreign policy as multi-vectorial and multipolar. The main documents adopted at the beginning of his first mandate state the potential destabilizing role of a "unipolar structure of the world with the economic and power domination of the United States", the CIS as an area of strategic importance and the Eastern dimension (the Asia-Pacific region) as a relevant region in Moscow's external policy (National Security Concept 2000; Russian Military Doctrine 2000; Foreign Policy Concept 2000). Thus, Russia seeks a balanced foreign policy where the search for multiple poles aims at diversifying allies and allowing the shifting of privileged relations in a constant search for counterbalance and primacy. The multi-vectorial formula gains a new dimension under Putin.

September 11 added another element to this foreign policy layout: a new international order under the primacy of the US. Putin offered his support to the global fight against terror, and the western critical voices regarding the disrespect and violation of human rights in Russia, and particularly in the Chechen Republic, were almost silenced. In addition, the

concrete realization that Russia could not do much in the face of inevitable developments, such as EU and NATO enlargement, made Russia change its discourse. This was due to the pragmatic realization that direct confrontation in words would poison its relationship with the west, eventually leading to isolation and consequently add to the country's fragility (Freire, 2007). In fact, Russia tried to invert a trend it could not contain and use to the best advantage, playing with the further integration of former Soviet republics into these western institutions. Thus, Moscow realized that the inclusion of neighboring countries into NATO and the EU could lead to further involvement of Moscow in these processes, as well as the pursuit of policies of divide and rule (such as it has been promoting regarding the EU, seeking internal division and consequently politically weakening the Union). "Russia's changes in foreign policy since 11 September, therefore, are based on calculations of priority and interest, where risk is distinguished from threat and real needs are separate from false ambitions" (Lynch, 2003: 29-30). Thus, *realpolitik* principles drive Russian foreign policy dealings.

With a realist looking over Russian national interest and external policy priorities, the so-called "pragmatic nationalism" (Light, 2003: 48), Vladimir Putin power projection and affirmative course rests on an internal stable order and economic growth, mainly sustained by increasing oil and gas revenues, which have been conferring on Russian policy more independence and a self-confidence regarding its role and place in international affairs. This course is acknowledged by Russian authorities, with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stating that "Russian foreign policy today is such that for the first time in its history, Russia is beginning to protect its national interest by using its competitive advantages" [energy geopolitics] (RFE/RL, 2007). The combination of internal and external factors has rendered possible this affirmative stance, with order and growth at home sustaining the search for recognition and legitimacy in regional and global political dealings.

The election of Dmitry Medvedev as president of Russia on the 2 March 2008 elections, though implying continuity to "Putinism", brought about a new approach towards economic issues – a much needed change, expressed in a policy of diversification in investments, and in the development of other sectorial areas (non-energetic) in order to overcome a clear over-concentration on energy resources. This over-dependency on one economic sector has rendered the Russian economy highly vulnerable, with adjustments

needed to avoid unexpected fluctuation in oil and gas prices, with direct consequences in the overall performance of the Russian economy. Again, this political move aims at strengthening the foundations of the Russian economy, giving it a solid basis, understood in the Kremlin as an essential part of an affirmative and effective foreign policy.

The ‘near abroad’: An expression of revived imperialism?

Russian foreign policy objectives include as a first goal the promotion of the CIS as an area of vital interest. It is, nevertheless, a heterogeneous area with differentiated states in their political options, economic resources and social profiles. This means that the Russian goal of influence and control is limited, despite its acknowledged leverage in the area. This has been translated in Moscow’s policy of engagement in economic, political and military terms. The perpetuation of military bases in Moldova and Armenia are one example. In addition, the region’s vast natural resources push Moscow towards controlling pipeline routes and infrastructures as a way of maintaining influence over local governments, while at the same time profiting from these economic assets. Nevertheless, within limits.

The colorful revolutions in 2003 in Georgia, 2004 in Ukraine, and 2005 in Kyrgyzstan, have caused concern in Russia about the western-orientation of the new governments and its consequent diminished influence. And Russian attempts at regaining influence, by using energy dependence as an element of pressure, have revealed some miscalculation. With the interruption in oil and gas supplies to Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus, for example, which ended up having a direct impact on European deliveries, Russia faced these countries’ and European criticism. These moves ended up having an opposite effect, with Ukraine and Georgia distancing themselves even more from Russia. The immediate effect has been the search for alternative energy sources, in order to gain an independent stance from Russia. The negotiations over new pipeline routes, with many projects bypassing Russia, demonstrate this increasing search for independence from what is described as a non-reliable partner. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, bringing oil from the Caspian to Turkey and further to Europe is such an example. Energy policies in the area have thus been raised high in the international agenda, with fierce competition over the control of oil and gas production and transit, further deepening Moscow’s feelings of vulnerability.

In this setting, regional integration processes in the former Soviet space have suffered from a simple malaise: usually they are regarded as pro- or anti-Russian, which renders their existence and meaning difficult to sustain. This is why the CIS has never been effective. Interpreted as a Russian extension of the Soviet Union “idea”, which was later consolidated in the Russian leadership role within the Commonwealth, the CIS never functioned as a regional grouping, but more as a Russian-led and pro-Russian politics enhancing group. The result has been disarticulation and disconnection within the CIS, also contrary to Russian intentions of having a unifying catalyst element in the former Soviet space.

The former Soviet area, to a large extent due to its energy resources, has become an area of intersection of different interests, giving it complex contours. By assuring a margin of maneuver in political-diplomatic and economic terms, Moscow pursues simultaneously the goal of keeping this area as a special area of influence, and of counterbalancing and having a say regarding particularly the US presence in the region. This balancing has encompassed, therefore, contradictory tendencies of favoring the US, with regard, for example, to the stationing of troops in Central Asia, but also of restraint as to the extent and quality of this presence. In addition, the EU has been gaining added presence in the area, suggesting also a reactive attitude from Moscow, critical of the Union’s involvement, while attempting to establish preferential bilateral deals with EU members, such as Germany and even Hungary. As for the Asian dimension, concentrating attention on Central Asia, Moscow seeks both to assure energy resources and restrain the western and Asian (particularly Chinese) influence. This raises the question: how to deal with the western and eastern dimensions in Russian foreign policy dealings?

Russia between west and east: The western and Asian dimensions in foreign policy

In its affirmative course, Russia has to deal with and balance the western and eastern dimensions in its foreign policy, making the most of it. In its multivectorial foreign policy Moscow acknowledges the benefits arising from cooperation, though dissension over a number of issues remains, both to the west and east. The sharpening of differences evinced in early 2007 with Putin’s discourse loudly criticizing Washington’s assertive policies and

actions, and difficulties in the negotiation of a new model of cooperation with the EU, have to some extent promoted rapprochement between Russia and China, as well as India, though the latter to a less extent. How cooperative frameworks will be empowered remains open due to the bargaining and complex geostrategic game, particularly with regard to energy resources. Security issues, political sidings and economic matters are part of this game, either constraining options or opening new avenues for cooperation. The patterns change, mainly due to competing approaches, but it seems to be an underlying trend to see further collaboration in the east whenever relations with its western counterparts sour. A form of enhanced leverage, which has, however, limits due to the political confrontation between two giants, with both Russia and China's desire for affirmation and primacy in the region. Thus, cooperation when possible, both to the east and west, while rivalry and competition are always present ingredients.

The EU's giant neighbor, the Russian Federation, is a relevant and strategic actor. Its non-inclusion in the European Neighborhood Policy package, despite the application of the same financial instruments, is an example of positive differentiation. Both the EU and Russia recognize the relevance of this bilateral relationship, underlined by substantial economic and commercial interdependence, along with common historical and political values. However, and despite the identification of these elements, many problems persist, which in the first months of 2007, seem to have further complicated dialogue. Difficulties regarding the negotiation of a new agreement to replace the PCA (Partnership and Cooperation Agreement), which expired on 1 December 2007, are a clear demonstration of differences. The automatic renovation of the existing agreement was interpreted as a sign of a lack of political will to reformulate the terms of the relationship. A negative signal, translated on the one hand in the fact that Russia did not see a new agreement favoring its own interests, particularly regarding energy issues, with Russia accusing the EU of only opening its market to Russian energy resources and closing it to other economic assets; and, on the other hand, in the reticent posture of the EU in drawing a new model for relations with Moscow, as a result of the lack of a coherent strategy to deal with its giant neighbor.

The lack of unity and cohesion in the EU has been exploited by Russia in a logic of power and division. Intransigence by Poland due to a Russian meat embargo, the demands from Lithuania regarding the reopening of the Druzhba pipeline, and the controversy in

Estonia due to the relocation of a Soviet war memorial in Tallinn, contrast with the agreement between Germany and Russia for the construction of the Nord stream gas pipeline through the Baltic or the abandoning by Hungary of the Nabucco project, which would bring natural gas to Europe from the Caspian, in favor of Gazprom Blue stream (Schöpplin, 2007). But, in the face of dissension, the EU should keep tight to the principle of solidarity, called upon by Angela Merkel at the time of the Samara Summit in the first half of 2007, and work on the definition of a common strategy towards neighboring Russia.

Despite its labeling as a “strategic partnership”, the EU-Russia relationship is, in fact, a strategic relation, but far from a partnership. Distrust, misunderstanding and mutual criticism have underlined differences, marking a negative stance. In a more optimistic tone, the development of the Four Common Spaces as agreed at in St. Petersburg in 2003 might constitute a good platform for dialogue. The cooling down of the more critical voices together with positive signs of a political will to consolidate this neighborly relation are fundamental. It is a strategic bilateral relationship that even not following a cohesive model, should be underlined by political will and joint ownership of responsibilities. Clear signs of the building of confidence together with dialogue and its translation in concrete projects are fundamental. Dialogue on energy, transfrontier cooperation, and the reinforcement of communication infrastructures are some of the areas where these developments might and should produce results. However, even in areas where effective collaboration is recognized as mutually beneficial, trade-offs are kept as an expression of the need from both sides to keep their bargaining power – an implicit demonstration of the underlying difficulties of this relationship.

Despite official declarations trying to minimize the limited results of the last bilateral summits (Samara in May 2007 and Mafra in October of the same year), these have made the growing differences clear, with even official discourse not escaping a climate of growing hostility. This adds to President Putin’s harsh words in Munich in February 2007, and to the state of the nation discourse (26 April 2007), the last of his mandate, where the Russian president announced a moratorium on the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, not ratified by some NATO members, together with the announced Russian withdrawal from the INF Treaty. In a context of high international tension, with delicate issues on the agenda, including the US anti-missile defense shield, the eternal question of

NATO enlargement, and the more enduring issues about (dis)respect of human rights and democratic principles, along with an inconsistent and non-cohesive posture from the EU and the souring of relations with the US, this attitude is not surprising.

In fact, the Russia-US relationship seems to take on a more assertive tone. According to Mikhail Margelov, Russian Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council, the “American propaganda machine fits any new problems related to the conflict of interests into the context of the US concern with the future of democracy in Russia and associates it with the current issues such as strengthening the ‘vertical of power’ in Russia. This makes it harder to continue bilateral cooperation and develops into another type of the fluctuating system of relationship priorities” (Margelov, 2006: 25).

Cooperation with Washington does not prevent Moscow from criticizing the unilateral stance of Washington’s policy as countervailing international interests, and Russian interests in particular. Russia is very critical about NATO’s enlargement policies and the deployment of military forces close to its borders, showing a persistent fear over western institutions. Agreement on the creation of the NATO-Russia Council in its new format as “NATO at 20” (now at 27), meaning an equal status to Russia in decision-making regarding European security, diminished the voices of discontent, though it did not silence them.

Moscow and Washington collaborate in the fight against terror and organized crime, the proliferation of WMD, the fostering of democratic political systems, the protection of individual rights, and the consolidation of economic benefits. These goals have been stated in the Moscow Declaration on the New Strategic Relationship signed in May 2002, and reaffirmed in meetings and statements in both capitals. Moscow shut down some cold war military facilities, amply supported the US campaign in Afghanistan, and gave its consent to the stationing of American military forces in Central Asia, showing a cooperative stance (Blagov, 2004). In response, it received recognition as a market economy, full membership in the G8 group, and support for its accession to the World Trade Organization.

These areas of cooperation have found resistance in topics over which disagreement prevails. Certain American actions reinforced the suspicions of some Russians that the US is seeking to parlay the war against terror into a war for control of oil, gas, and pipeline routes (Foglesong and Hahn, 2002: 11), linking directly political and economic issues. Moreover, the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2001,

despite the signature of a new treaty in May 2002 concerning the reduction of long-range nuclear weapons – the Strategic Offensive [Arms] Reduction Treaty (known as SORT) –, and the development of the national missile defense shield, with concrete expression in the deployment of sophisticated military equipment in Poland and the Czech Republic, raised suspicion in Russia. In reaction, Moscow announced the adoption of a preemptive military doctrine following the footsteps of Washington, as well as the development of a new nuclear missile system as an assurance of Russia's security.

The post-September 11 primacy discourse of the US has, thus, been eliciting a tougher position from Russia. Simultaneously it has been promoting rapprochement to the east, with the triangle formed by Russia, China and India gaining consistency. In fact, "India, China and Russia account for 40 per cent of the world's population, a fifth of its economy and more than half of its nuclear warheads" (Page, 2007), conferring on this triangulation of power interesting contours.

However, this rapprochement seems more the result of a negative dynamic of countering US primacy, than being genuinely built over shared principles and common endeavors. Although the potential for cooperation in economic and military terms is substantial, social and political factors hamper a relationship free of geopolitical constraints. Issues related to minorities and competition between giants for regional affirmation are examples. Nevertheless, the agendas have been dominated by the powerful drive to balance US weight, based on the assumption that "the more that Russia and other Asian nations can cooperate with each other in creating a multipolar system in this region, the more Russia and others hope they can limit the United States to pursuing goals they all (especially Russia) approve" (Katz, 2006: 147). In addition, they share the multipolar and terrorism-fighting discourse, have taken the same path regarding Iraq in 2003, and share a common approach towards Iran, hold important commercial ties, particularly in military and energy terms, and avoid interference in internal affairs, such as in Chechnya, Xinjiang or regarding instability in northeast India. In this context, Russians state that "[m]ultidimensional, mutually beneficial cooperation has become a distinguishing feature of relations with our greatest Asian friends – China and India" (Ivanov, 2003: 37).

The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June 2001, and its empowerment in order to render it a significant regional military bloc (Kapila,

2006); the Joint Declaration on the International Order in the 21st Century, of July 2005; and the first Russian-ASEAN summit, in December 2005, described as “Russia’s ‘peaceful offensive’ at Asia” (Ivanov, 2006: 54), are expressive of the moves to foster regional inter-linkages, described officially as a result of the regional effort at further integration and not directed at countervailing US primacy. The closer Sino-Russian relationship is, therefore, under close scrutiny in Washington. While the US understands the difficulties in empowering a strategic partnership between Russia and China (two competing powers in the region), it sees with caution rapprochement between the two giants. “Russia and China have been successful in using the USA’s strong aversion to terrorism since 9/11 for their own ends – to tackle Islamic insurgency within their territories” (Pant, 2004: 315).

However, “[n]ot only are Russia, China, and India too weak to balance US power in any significant measure, the allure of US power remains too strong for them to resist” (Pant, 2004: 313). Thus, the idea of a “strategic triangle” seems still far. US policies have driven Russia and China closer, and India has joined due to its long term and long stated concern regarding the need for a multipolar world order. However, it seems clear that “Russian policy towards Asia is not the result of doctrine, but is based on pragmatism, and dynamic policies in this area are balanced by the obvious domination of its European policy” (Slezneva, 2003: 19). Thus, this regional engagement seems to reflect a feeling of western challenge to natural areas of influence, of a particular relevant strategic nature, such as Central Asia and the Caucasus. But we cannot discard the fact that these same areas are subject of regional competition, and of a weight-measuring game between Russia and China, where power politics play a fundamental role. But as Russia bandwagons towards the US, China does the same, avoiding to be marginalized from the international security dealings, playing for example an active role in negotiations with North Korea, a role very much appreciated in Washington (Pant, 2004: 324).

This same reasoning applies to the possibilities and limits of the SCO, since “[t]o a large extent, common, positive targets are absent. For example, China is seeking markets and energy resources; Russia is eager to regain its leadership status within the CIS as well as that of a superpower in the international arena; and the Central Asian regimes consider the SCO as their guarantee for political survival” (Haas, 2006). This means various possibilities remain open while the geostrategic game is played, with policies of

rapprochement, collaboration, bandwagon, competition, and confrontation being weighed in a constant cost-benefit equation.

Conclusion

Russian foreign policy has been revealing elements of continuity, with an affirmative course underlying its policy making, bargaining and implementation. It translates the Russian desire for recognition as a key player in the international system, complaining against what it understands as double-standards, demanding what it sees as of its own right, cooperating whenever advantageous. It seems that the Russian affirmative course has been the result of its domestic political options, resulting from a strong construction of perceptions and confidence in ruling, built upon the stability discourse, and rendered operational in domestic stabilization and economic growth. This enhanced internal context allows for outside power projection, built on popular consent regarding Russian affirmation as a great power, in line with its historical past, and searching for accommodation with a changing present. But as much as this search for affirmation needs internal grounding, it is also based on Russian traditional power politics and assertive dealings when applied to external policy. This demonstrates the close inter-linkage between the internal and external dimensions of policy-making, and the relevance of strong domestic support for outside affirmative expression. And this course has been pursued essentially in a proactive manner, particularly under Putin's presidency, as a foreign policy goal of regaining international recognition.

In this game of engagement and disengagement, Russia has been following both a collaborative and a competitive course, which instills a sense of ambiguity to foreign policy: collaboration as a way of preserving international security, according to the Russian model, signing accords and defining the level of western engagement in the former Soviet space, which Russia only acquiesces to when convenient; competition whenever Moscow feels its interests are under threat, using political and economic leverage and resorting to concrete pressure as a way to invert unfavorable tendencies. The underlying discourse of promoting a multipolar international system, subscribed by partners to the east and west against US primacy, in a more explicit or implicit manner, is a reflex of the continuous

bargaining between extending cooperative approaches and avoiding competitive losses that might put in jeopardy Moscow's search for primacy.

In addition, Russia has been fighting internally with ambiguity, trying to deal with both an evolution in attitudes and a changed domestic and international context, while seeking to cope with its historical past and the legacies inherited from centuries of autocratic ruling and imperial status. A mixture of different tendencies that reveals itself in Russian current dealings, demonstrating the difficulties the state has been facing in the definition of its own identity, fundamental for justifying trends, options, attitudes. These internal difficulties have expression at the international level. The affirmation course in the international scenario is just like the mirroring of the Russian domestic image, that of consolidation of power and affirmation. The Medvedev presidency promises to keep Russia on this track; however, only time will tell.

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