



Statism in Russia: The implications for US–Russian relations

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 June 2011

Accepted 10 September 2011

Keywords:

Russia

US

Statism

Putin

Yeltsin

Chechnya

Foreign policy

Nationalism

ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to identify and assess the general shift in Russian foreign policy thinking during Vladimir Putin's presidency. The main thesis of this essay is that a general shift in Russian foreign policy had occurred during Putin's presidency owing to the rise in Statist thinking. To substantiate the thesis, the author uses the State of the Nation addresses of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin to make a comparative analysis of the presidents' foreign policy approaches. As demonstrated in the essay, the Russian foreign policy had experienced a dramatic influx of state power during Vladimir Putin's presidency, which resulted in the relative quantitative and qualitative reduction of cooperative initiatives between the United States and Russia.

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1. Introduction

The beginning of the twenty first century marked the dawn of a new era in US–Russian relations. The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and the ensuing warm relations between the former adversaries brought the decades of geo-political, military, economic confrontation and of the competition for the spheres of influence across the globe to an end. The collapse of the Soviet empire resulted in a form of an alliance between Moscow and Washington in the first half of the 1990s, when president Yeltsin was the head of the Russian state, which gradually transformed into fragile interstate relations filled with mutual suspicion, mistrust and political confrontation after Putin succeeded Yeltsin as the new Russian leader. During the Soviet era the

confrontation and the inability to bridge the gap between the superpowers could be understood in the broader context of the ideological struggle. In the mid-1990s, however, when Russia's leadership vowed to support the ideals of democracy and market economy and when the Western world was no longer concerned about the spread of communism in Europe, other factors came into play. Rising nationalism and internal political pressure engendered by deteriorating economic conditions, widespread social discontent and a threat posed to state security by the secessionist movements in the Caucasus brought Putin to power and allowed him to accumulate a substantial amount of political might.

Given such adverse domestic conditions, the demand for a strong leadership in Russia rose and mainly because of that, president Boris Yeltsin hand-picked Vladimir Putin to lead the country out of chaos and disorder. Yeltsin assumed that Putin's character and determination would be critical in strengthening Russia's economic and political position in the world and also in assuring the continuity of the country's political and foreign policy course. However, Putin's response to major global political processes differed from

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the preceding political decisions made during Yeltsin's presidency. Putin hoped that a change of a political strategy would provoke the growth of the country's welfare, enhance security and revive the global power image that was largely lost by the preceding leadership as the former superpower transformed into a new nation-state. Increasingly, Putin maintained a hard-line stance on many domestic and foreign policy issues, which resulted in the renewal of political tensions between US and Russia, reminiscent of the confrontation during the Cold War era. Even today, he continues to wield a substantial amount of political power largely because he never managed to lose the support of power elites. Over the years of his rule, Putin structured the entire political system in Russia according to his own belief of how to reach progress and stability for all. Obviously, the centralization of executive power was the major step taken by Putin toward authoritarianism and, simultaneously, the distancing of Russia from the West. Why did Putin decide to change the Russian foreign policy course and was it a product of his personal motives or of a much broader negotiation process among the political and business elites? While answering this question is not a simple task, I will try to bring to light some aspects of Putin's leadership which I thought were the engine of this change.

Although a change of a pro-Western Russian foreign policy could be observed as early as 1993 when Boris Yeltsin was in power; the arrival of Putin marked the beginning point of a new political era for the Russian society. Moreover, following Putin's election, the official Russian foreign policy thinking experienced a dramatic shift. Undoubtedly, Putin came to power when Russia's domestic economic and political conditions differed drastically from those during Yeltsin's presidency. Such a policy shift could be seen as a normal reaction of any administration to various circumstances. Indeed, many scholars contend that there was no fundamental change of Russian foreign policy from Yeltsin to Putin. They believe that Putin's foreign policy was in large part a continuation of the course that was conceived during the late-Yeltsin period. Mankoff (2009, p. 4) argues that "the assertive, narrowly self-interested foreign policy that has characterized Russia during the Putin–Medvedev years is merely the culmination of a process that began over a decade earlier, during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, at a time when the bulk of the Russian elite came to recognize that integration with the West and its institutions was neither possible nor desirable, at least in the short run" (Mankoff, 2009). However, to understand the distinction between Yeltsin's and Putin's foreign policy, one would need to look deeply into Russia's official standing on various issues of global and domestic importance as expressed in the State of the Nation addresses and a political behavior of both presidents.

The State of the Nation address is the central annual speech made by the Russian president to highlight the country's main economic and political challenges, objectives, and priorities. It also reflects and reinforces the general political orientation of the leadership. The rhetoric of the Russian president in the annual address sets the tone for the country's foreign policy during the years of any

administration in power. Critical international and domestic issues are addressed in the speech to express the official standing of the leadership and inform any interested parties, including other global powers. I will use a number of case studies to support the main argument of the essay – namely, the US National Missile Defense, NATO expansion initiatives, the situation in Kosovo, the war in Chechnya and, more broadly, US reactions to the Russian policies in the Caucasus, as well as US–Russian relations in the context of the global campaign against terrorism. By comparing the annual State of the Nation addresses of Putin and Yeltsin, I will identify the shift in the official positions toward these aspects of foreign policy and assess the ramifications of the statements. The purpose of this essay is not to formulate a substantive critique of Putin's or Yeltsin's approach to foreign affairs but rather to trace the distinction and provide an explanation of policy actions of both presidents under various circumstances.

When Putin succeeded Yeltsin as President in 2000, the Russian foreign policy toward the United States began to shift – from what looked like a soft confrontation and sporadic economic and political partnership during Yeltsin's era to an explicitly cold, aggressive and highly pragmatic diplomacy, accompanied by military demonstrations, strong rhetoric and other conspicuous aspects that characterized Putin's foreign policy. This change was mainly aroused by his personal perceptions of Russia's new political and military standing in the world, his strong patriotic and nationalist convictions. In order to illuminate this dramatic shift in Russia's foreign policy, I will draw a comparison of two time periods – the foreign policy trends from 1992 to 1999 and from 2000 to 2007 under Yeltsin's leadership and under Putin's leadership, respectively.

The Russian policy toward the United States under Putin was mainly concerned about the advancing US plan to build a National Missile Defense system against the so-called "rogue" states and the abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Russia perceived the plan to install the missile shield as being targeted against it. As a result, Putin had sparked an international campaign against these US initiatives. The missile shield was seen as a threat to the strategic parity, the global balance of power, and, more importantly, to Russia's strategic and geo-political interests in Europe. The US plan "wonderfully fits the overall picture of the American global anti-missile defense, which, according to our analysis – just look at the map – is being deployed along Russia's perimeter, and also China's, incidentally" (Putin, 2007a). US–Russian relations were further strained when George W. Bush succeeded Bill Clinton as US President in January 2001 mainly because he made the final decision to implement the project rapidly. Although, President George W. Bush had sought President Putin's acquiescence to his administration's plans, in December 2001, Bush announced his intention for the United States to withdraw from the ABM Treaty in six months without waiting for Moscow's approval.

The unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the arms control treaty and the drive of US policymakers to expand their military presence and to pursue their security objectives in the areas of traditional Russian influence in

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