

Review - Russian Foreign Policy: From Nation State to Global Risk Sharing

Written by Louie Woodall

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Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia endured a difficult rebirth into a unipolar world order where it struggled to find its place. Nicolai Petro traces the journey the nation's governments have made since this painful transition and looks to the continuing evolution of Russia's diplomatic identity in "Russian Foreign Policy 2000-2011: From Nation State to Global Risk Sharing". Petro opens his analysis with the contention that Russia today has "a clear vision of the type of global order that [it] wants" (3). This is described as a multipolar international system, where a plurality of stakeholders shares the burden of enforcing international law and guaranteeing global stability. The main body of Petro's article deals with how Putin and Medvedev shaped this vision over the course of the last decade by dividing the period into three distinct 'Phases' and analysing the transformation of Russian foreign policy within each.

In the first Phase, Petro argues that the central objective of policymakers was the re-establishment of Russian sovereignty. This, he argues, the country lost following the economic and social shocks that accompanied the dismemberment of the Soviet empire. Its restoration, meanwhile, was perceived in the early 2000s as vital to the regeneration of Russian power abroad. Petro places Putin firmly centre-stage as the driving force behind the project to recapture the level of self-determination needed for Russia to become a global player once again, but also acknowledges the role played by senior advisers in his inner circle, such as Vladislav Surkov.

Throughout the article, Petro weaves together the domestic story of Russia's development with the evolution of its foreign policy in order to illustrate how changing perceptions of Russia's place in the world governed its post-communist diplomatic strategy. In an especially astute piece of analysis he forges a link between the internal restructuring of the Russian historical narrative with the Kremlin's pursuit of a multipolar world order. According to Petro, the dissemination of a new history of the fall of the Soviet Union- which recast its collapse as a democratic victory by the Russian people- gave rise to a world view that placed Russia as a member of a diverse international community. These twin developments constitute a complete inversion of the ideology that held sway in the 1980s and 1990s when the Soviet regime interpreted global affairs through the prism of bipolarity.

Unfortunately, Petro does not draw comparisons between then and now, which somewhat deprives his analysis of greater historical scope. He also misses the opportunity to link Russia's modern aversion to unipolarity with its historical experience battling the perceived global hegemony of the United States. A few historical comparisons could have led to a more rounded analysis in this case.

In the second Phase, "Russia: Forward!", the author outlines how the current Medvedev presidency has embraced Putin's vision of a multipolar world order and seeks to expand Russia's ability to bring this about by championing economic and social recovery at home. Medvedev's foreign policy is cast as the natural evolution of Putin's, as it shares his predecessor's concern that only through a domestic regeneration can the country hope to regain its ability to project influence across its borders.

However, Petro steers clear of labelling Medvedev a puppet of the Prime Minister and, although he acknowledges Russia's curious "tandemocracy", recognises that Medvedev has expanded Putin's foreign policy model to incorporate the notions of "collective leadership" and "risk-sharing." These elements of Medvedev's foreign policy point to Russia's intentions to form working partnerships with former Soviet, and other, states. These in turn are seen as vital to managing regional risk by facilitating the sharing out of international responsibilities. However, Petro does not venture beyond Medvedev's talk of collective responsibility and collective leadership to discover whether recent actions reflect the rhetoric. The stated aim of Russian foreign policy may be the maintenance of "a crisis-resistant international system"(9), but whether or not this is pursued in reality is absent from the author's study.

More satisfying is his study of how the Georgian crisis of 2008 strengthened Russia's resolve to make its foreign policy a truly global doctrine. Petro sketches out Russia's perception of the crisis, and the Kremlin's frustration with the West's unilateral support of Georgia throughout. He then argues convincingly that the anger at the manner in which the West seemingly endorsed Georgian aggression spurred Medvedev and his Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, to strongly demand that multipolarity and respect for international law be treated as inviolable principles by

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the global community. These principles, he maintains, were embraced by the presidency as a promising antidote to the wilful proliferation of Western-style models of behaviour that did not accommodate the diversity of political attitudes throughout the world.

Where the Georgian Crisis plunged Russo-American relations to new depths, the Obama administration's 'Reset' strategy sought to revive them as never before. The confines of Petro's article does not allow for a detailed discussion of the factors that made the Russian government receptive to America's entreaties, but does provide space for the list of objectives achieved by both nations in this period. What the author usefully highlights is the extent to which the 'Reset' allowed Russian policy aims to dovetail with American ones after the Georgian hiatus. The concessions made by both countries are recognised as ushering in a new era of cooperation, and Petro even mentions that Moscow was receptive to the idea of cooperating closely with NATO in future matters of international order.

The third and final phase of Petro's analysis, "Beyond Reset: Pax Medvedica?" outlines the current and future goals of Russian foreign policy, but fails to highlight the contradictions within it. For example, Petro argues that Russia recognises the plurality of interests expressed by medium-sized and small countries in its vision of a multipolar world. However, this does not accord with Medvedev's speech of 2010, quoted later on, in which he argues that the world is now "one common civilisation" and that there are "no blocs now". (20)

He also skips over the institutional tension caused by Russia's traditional concern for national security and new desire to forge meaningful strategic partnerships with other countries. Is national interest- conceived in the narrowest terms- the overarching aim of Russian foreign policy? Or is it really the construction of a multipolar order wherein these interests would be theoretically protected? The official stance of the Russian government remains ambiguous, and Petro sheds little light on the true thinking in Moscow.

The limitations of the article also prohibit an in-depth look at how Russia continues to use its status as an energy superpower as leverage in international relations, which would have married Russian "means" in foreign policy to the "ends" described.

However, Petro's conclusion is thoroughly satisfying in that he recognises that Russian foreign policy has developed in an unbroken line from the early Putin presidency to the current Medvedev administration. This has allowed the government to create a clear vision of the world it wants to work within and, importantly, allowed the international community to predict Russian behaviour in a manner that was unthinkable two decades ago. The author also dispels the myths pedalled by some that Russia retains the old animosities of the Cold War by highlighting incidences of Russo-American cooperation in arenas as unexpected as Iran and North Korea. Ultimately, the picture that emerges is of a nation growing increasingly assertive on the world stage and unafraid to broadcast its vision of a stable world order across the globe.

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