

# Understanding Russia's Post-Cold War Foreign Policy Towards the EU and USA

Written by Peter Cuthbertson

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PETER CUTHBERTSON, JUL 17 2008

### **Applying a Theoretical Framework of your Choice, Analyse and Evaluate Russian Foreign Policy towards the USA and the European Union since the 1990s**

Since the end of the Cold War, the policies followed by Russia towards the United States and the European Union have defied simple analysis. In the decade and a half since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has at times followed the policies allies would follow towards each of these parts of the world, and at times has been much more hostile. The overall aggregate of these policies is ambiguous enough to require theoretical explanation, and in this essay I hope to use the theory of 'offensive realism' to do this. Outlined by John J. Mearsheimer in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*,<sup>[1]</sup> this variation of realism offers explanation for Russian foreign policy in the context of a non-ideological pursuit of regional hegemony and ultimately of great power status. Russian policy towards the United States and the European Union has been the use of the best means and diplomacy at the country's disposal to secure this power for Russia. In evaluating the policy, I conclude that in light of the constraints the country has faced in the post-Soviet period, it has been successful.

#### **Offensive Realism as a Theoretical Framework**

Offensive realism, like the wider 'realist' branch of International Relations theory from which the latter part of its name comes, is based on the idea that states' interests and security concerns rather than ideology are the main influence on their policy. It adopts the 'billiard ball' model to individual states and their governments, whereby ideas and principles matter little and the size and weight of the balls – their wealth and military power – are what determines how they interact.

Moreover, the realist framework offers prescription as well as description. A non-ideological pursuit of a nation's interests is likely to be the most effective policy, because the world is such that a state's concern for its own survival must be paramount. Therefore, realism suggests that not only do states tend to act as if their own interests are the guiding values of their foreign policies, but that they ought to act this way, and are negligent if they diverge too greatly from this prescription.

One of the distinguishing features of Mearsheimer's 'offensive realism' is its stress on regional hegemony. Arguing that "land power is the dominant form of military power in the modern world",<sup>[2]</sup> there is a 'stopping power of water' in modern international relations that puts a great obstacle up against states invading one another successfully except through land armies. Therefore, the key to a nation's security is regional hegemony, and that is perhaps the chief goal of states.

However, regional hegemons do fear peer competitors elsewhere in the world, because they can be expected to ally with neighbouring land powers, and pose a military threat in this way. Therefore, regional hegemons will come into conflict with each other, and with other nations anywhere in the world that aspire to regional hegemony. It is the resultant conflict between America, as a regional hegemon in the Americas, and Russia, as an aspiring regional hegemon in its own part of the world, that has been the central fact of Russian foreign policy since (at least) the

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1990s. I seek to argue that it has dictated how Russia has acted towards the United States since that time, and explains much in terms of the policies the country has followed towards the European Union and NATO, too.

## Opposing American Power

Throughout the period under scrutiny, the United States – itself of course the regional hegemon of the North American continent – has been the leading power in both Europe and Asia, Russia's two continents. American superpower status outlived the superpower status of the Soviet Union, and allowed it unrivalled supremacy as it retained armies and allies across both continents.

Offensive realism predicts that aspiring great powers will come into conflict with regional hegemonies in other regions of the world as those distant regional hegemonies will attempt to dominate all other regions than their own. In this case, as the regional hegemon of North and South America, the United States will attempt to dominate Europe and Asia, and Russia as an aspiring great power will oppose these efforts. America faces the obstacle of 'the stopping power of water' to direct invasion from sea or air of any country attempting to dominate either of these continents. But given America's supremacy in its own region, it is in a position to ally with smaller European and Asian powers to balance against any powers on these continents that threaten to achieve regional hegemony. The US can do this by strengthening its allies in any war to prevent dominance of either continent, or by fighting directly in such a war itself, using these allied countries as a base for land armies. The aim of these policies is to destroy any other country's efforts to secure regional dominance or great power status, preventing a peer competitor on another continent from arising. Russian efforts to become either a regional or a great power will therefore naturally produce conflict with the United States.

It is in areas of American unilateralism that some of this Russian opposition to America is most clear. Russian efforts to preserve multilateralism and Mutually Assured Destruction in global affairs may seem selflessly ideological, but both serve realist ends.

Early in his first term, President Putin made clear his opposition to a system of 'Star Wars' or National Missile Defence when he "proposed that Russia should host a new international conference in 2001 on preventing the militarization of space".[3] The Russian legislature likewise has been so strong in its support for the existing framework of Mutually Assured Destruction that when it came to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty of 1993, "the Duma attached amendments" that allowed Russia to "revoke it if the USA violated the 1972 ABM accord".[4] Putin attempted to increase the price of abandoning MAD by warning that should the United States take such action, "Russia would cease to consider itself bound by any US-Russian control agreements".[5]

This Russian defence of MAD is strongly consistent with realist theories. Mutually Assured Destruction may have equivalent downsides – total annihilation – for both America and Russia – but abandoning MAD as a guiding doctrine for the world's nuclear powers would harm Russia far more than America, because while the United States is in a position economically and technologically to work on a missile defence system that would safeguard the country against nuclear attacks, Russia is not. Offensive realism would predict Russia to be motivated in its preference for retaining Mutually Assured Destruction not by a selfless regard for the fairness and symmetry of the situation but by a self-interested preference for this symmetry over the asymmetry of a world in which America can defend against nuclear attacks but Russia cannot.

Similar attitudes can be seen in Russian attitudes towards American unilateralism in other areas. For Margot Light, opposition to unipolarity already "was a persistent theme in Russian political discourse before the Kosovo crisis" – but following the 1999 war between NATO and Serbia, "it became more insistent".[6] Limited by its own strength and financial dependence on the West, Russia was careful about the means it used to express opposition to the Kosovo War,[7] but its actual stance was unambiguous. Immediately after the NATO bombing began, President Yeltsin issued a fiercely worded statement reflecting Russian concerns about US power with the claim that it was "an attempt by NATO to enter the twenty-first century in the uniform of the world policeman" and the warning that "Russia will never agree to this".[8]

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An ideological approach to analysing this stance might suggest a simple preference for multilateralism was the Russian motivation. Realist analysis would suggest the Russian preference for multilateralism in deciding global issues like Kosovo exists because while America is powerful enough to act unilaterally across the globe, Russia is not. An American preference for multilateralism would mean sacrifices of influence in the world, whereas Russian power would actually be increased if the United Nations Security Council, on which it sits as a permanent member, were to be the final arbiter on such issues as Kosovo. Notably, as we shall see below, Russia is not nearly as keen on multilateralism in the 'Near Abroad', where the country is militarily supreme, and where multilateralism would mean concessions of power and much more equality of status with her neighbours.

## Dividing NATO

A second area in which Russia is a strong proponent of negotiation and diplomatic niceties and complexities is in its approach to the European Union, and their membership of NATO. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was established in opposition to Russian power in the late 1940s, and its survival after the collapse of the Soviet ideology demonstrates the realist thought behind NATO's self-conception: it is more than a mere anti-Communist instrument.

The NATO alliance creates severe problems for Russian efforts to gain influence in the world and pressure European states to do as it would wish, because it can force Russia to defer even to much smaller countries because when challenging their interests, she is dealing not with that one militarily weak state but the whole of NATO. Military alliances have a tendency to reach decisions internally, then negotiate after this with outsiders, for whom these decisions may seem by this time to be *fait accompli*. As if to prove this point, when President Clinton introduced in May 1997 the structures whereby Russia would possess 'a voice, but not a veto' over NATO affairs, Russia remained unopposed and "criticism of expansion did not abate"[9] – veto power over NATO is precisely what Russia wants and needs to satisfy her national interests. Without it, those interests lead to continued opposition.

Russian national interests therefore dictate that she ought to attempt to undermine and divide NATO. The first reason is that the greater those nations' separation from NATO, the more different individual relationships between Russia and NATO states may be formed as and when Russia and that state wishes this. This has led in Russia to a "deeply rooted conviction" that when it comes to Europe "the bilateral track [dealing with individual countries] is more promising than the multilateral one [dealing with NATO or the EU]".[10]

This preference for Russia to encourage European states to take decisions outside the NATO structure as much as possible, predicted by realist theory, has led the country to promote not only the United Nations but the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and even entirely new bodies in preference to NATO. Russian opposition to NATO expansion, examined in more detail below, led the country to propose a new structure whereby "NATO and Russia jointly guarantee East European security"[11] – depriving NATO of a special role in Eastern Europe and implicitly granting Russia equal or rival status. NATO was unsurprisingly against the proposal. To the French and German leaders, Yeltsin also suggested "a 'Great Europe' extending to the Urals as a space for an entirely new Pan-European policy".[12]

When it comes to existing bodies, there have been Russian attempts to give the OSCE more power but with considerable justification they are "often perceived as motivated by the intention to oppose it to NATO".[13] Henry Kissinger echoes these perceptions and issues the warning that a closer relationship between Europe and Russia than between Europe and America – or even one merely "comparable to it" – would "spark a revolution in Atlantic relations".[14] For Kissinger, this is the reason "Putin is so assiduously courting some of America's allies".[15]

This 'courtship' has focused on Europe's most powerful states, which makes them more useful to Russia in their own right, but also key actors in the European Union and NATO. This Putin policy was simply a continuation of Yeltsin's – who by 1997 "was talking openly in European capitals about the need to reduce U.S. influence in 'our Europe.'"[16] Yeltsin himself later wrote of his efforts: "The very atmosphere of the meeting was infused with an important idea: Something was needed to oppose the American pressure".[17]

Russian attempts to build alliances with members of the European Union have been strongest when it comes to

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Germany. The fact that both Russia and Germany had their status changed dramatically by the end of the Cold War – the former shrinking and latter growing – has produced a unity of interests on certain matters. Unification had not only “attenuated” but had “even on some level removed”[18] the dependence of Germany upon its traditional allies in the European Union and NATO. With the country “still feeling to some extent restrained and constrained by its Western partners” and Russia naturally “sensitive to attempts to isolate her”, for Trofimenko the two had a certain amount of “national affinity for each other”. [19]

France had a longer history of opposition to US interests, and Yeltsin's efforts to work against the latter appeared to pay dividends with President Chirac, who told him “The French didn't want a one-dimensional conception of a unipolar world to prevail, but the fact was that the Americans had the means to conduct such policy”. [20]

Putin followed this policy of attempting to build relationships with EU members that in some way contradicted those members' relationships with the EU and NATO – and indeed augmented it. Baranovsky notes: “By the end of Yeltsin's presidency, France and Germany were considered to be Russia's major partners on the European scene; Russia's new president, Vladimir Putin, has ‘upgraded’ the UK to this status.” [21]

Russia, then, had strong reasons to oppose NATO's power as an American-lead alliance that keeps so much of Europe on the US side and in opposition to Russia's view of her national interests. But there have also been cases of apparent conciliation and a surprising degree of openness to NATO, even to the extent of the country talking of perhaps at one point joining. Similarly with the European Union, Russian foreign minister Kasyanov has “insisted that at some point Russia could become a member” as part of its general effort to promote a common European space.” [22] Realism would suggest this is less about a willingness to sacrifice Russia's interests or reconcile them to America's than a means by to allow Russia to receive more attention to its interests by NATO and EU members than would otherwise be the case. By assiduously courting some Western European states, Russia attempts to undermine the unity of the overall coalition between America and Western Europe – a coalition it rightly perceives as not merely inadvertently opposed to its interests but as actually existing for that purpose.

## Striving for Regional Hegemony

One consequence of Mearsheimer's theories on the ‘stopping power of water’ [23], stressing that offensive realists believe it is land armies that determine international security and power politics, is that status within a geographical region is consequently of almost inestimable importance. If a country is reasonably secure from invasion from sea or air, then its security becomes a question of the control and power it possesses over adjoining land, from which invasions with much more promise of success can be launched. Regional hegemony is the route to that security, and it is this for which all aspiring great powers are predicted to strive. Regional hegemony for Russia means supremacy in the Commonwealth of Independent States and what it calls the ‘near abroad’, but it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine how Russia has sought this influence. What Russia's struggle for regional hegemony would imply for the areas this essay explores is strong opposition to efforts by rivals in the United States and the European Union who seek influence within the region Russia seeks to control.

A classic example of a country's assertion of regional hegemony is the American ‘Monroe Doctrine’ demanding that the rest of the world cease intervention in a US sphere of influence that spans North and South America. The speed with which Russia sought to follow suit with a “Russian ‘Monroe Doctrine’ in the ‘near abroad’” [24] is remarkable, but to be expected in the context of offensive realist theory. “Already in March 1992”, Sakwa notes, a new Monroe Doctrine for Russia was being asserted, “defining the whole area of the former Soviet Union as one vital to Russian national interests”. [25]

Above, we saw the extent of Russian opposition to American global unilateralism. When it comes to the Eastern European territories nearest Russia, a opposite attitude was taken – attitudes inconsistent ideologically, but entirely consistent with realist prescriptions. In the early 1990s, President Yeltsin “appealed to the UN ‘to grant Russia special powers as the guarantor of peace and stability in this region’”, and the following year the Security Council issued a Foreign Policy Concept which declared “Russia to be the guarantor of stability in the former Soviet Union”. [26]

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Notably, for all Yeltsin's foreign minister Kozyrev's status at home and abroad as "better than anyone else the liberal, democratic and pro-Western"[27] symbol of Russia, he too was ultimately to follow the same realist logic in his policies. As soon as 1993, "Kozyrev had adopted a more sharply defined empire saving strategy", insisting to the United States and Europe that "Russia had the right to intervene to prevent the country 'losing geopolitical positions that took centuries to achieve'".[28]

In their pursuit of regional hegemony and their efforts to find ways around the opposition of the US or EU, Russians have used American behaviour in such conflicts as Haiti and Kosovo to justify their own involvement in the 'near abroad' – for Goble a "‘your backyard, our backyard’ image of the world".[29] The wars in Chechnya similarly caused particular concern in Europe, but Russia defendly fiercely its perceived rights in these conflicts. President Yeltsin recognised the threat to Russia's regional power if Chechnya's military success were to be witnessed by the world: "the situation in Chechnya threatened to spill over into the entire north Caucasus. Then, with help from abroad, the Muslim separatists would begin breaking other territories off from Russia."[30] He was swift in his memoirs to dismiss EU opposition to Russian actions in Chechnya as "the West trying to instil this feeling of guilt in us".[31]

Above we saw that one reason Russia is so likely to come into conflict with NATO and the EU is that with each being structures that exclude Russia, they are likely to produce internal policies amongst themselves which Russia must then accept as an outsider, rather than have a direct role in making them. At least as significant in explaining Russian conflicts with the EU and especially NATO, however, is a second reason: that each threatens Russia's efforts to establish regional hegemony by providing an alternative structure of allies and partners for Eastern Europe. Among the threats listed by the Russian government's own National Security Concept in 2000 was simply the "[s]trengthening of military-political alliances, especially NATO's eastward expansion".[32] The same year Sergei Ivanov, now a possible successor to President Putin, warned that in response Russia was "prepared to undertake adequate measures to counter the alliance".[33]

NATO expansion above all is seen as a threat because it has the effect of turning America rather than Russia into the looming great power in the eyes of the Eastern European states. For Richard Sakwa, "The fundamental question remains unanswered: If there is no longer a security threat from any European power, then why should Nato expand?".[34] But to offensive realists the answer is clear – even if complacency about present and future security threats seems justified, that is all the more opportunity for America to seek to assert her dominance. Bowing to the "natural geopolitical impulse in the balance of power game", "the winners in the Cold war decided to formally collect the stakes by expanding their zone of control".[35]

By *itself* remaining the supreme military power in Europe, America can be confident, in the words of the US Senate, of preventing "the re-emergence of a hegemonic power confronting Europe".[36] For Henry Kissinger, removing any strategic vacuum in Central Europe that future great powers may seek to exploit is "the most important reason for admitting Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into NATO".[37] In the language of foreign minister Kozyrev, "Nato's advance toward Russia's borders cannot but be seen as a continuation, though by inertia, of a policy aimed at containment of Russia".[38] But the threat to European peace and to American hegemony that NATO expansion is intended to eliminate does not need to be specified. Since the nineteenth century it has included France and Germany as well as Russia – but the NATO logic remains the same: removing even the potential for a European power to bolster its power at the expense of its central European neighbours. Russia is in a sense just one anonymous 'victim' of this NATO policy – though a victim compelled by her national interests to oppose it.

## Evaluation

The theoretical framework of offensive realism explains why Russia has sought regional hegemony since the 1990s, and why this has led to conflicts with NATO and the United States and European Union – especially over the expansion of NATO. The country is disadvantaged by the strong alliance structures of NATO, and so has been keen to work out bilateral alliances with European powers designed to undermine that alliance's unity. Overall, Russian interests are served most efficiently by following unilateralist approaches in the CIS and 'near abroad' while hypocritically urging multilateralism on the wider world and insisting on such restraints as the UN Security Council and Mutually Assured Destruction – where Russia is equal to the US and NATO – in preference to raw military power

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– where Russia is inferior.

In evaluating this foreign policy, it is easy to point out where Russia has failed – NATO countries bombed Serbia and Iraq irrespective of the United Nations' view, America has withdrawn from the 1972 ABM Treaty and NATO expansion has not been prevented. However, in the context of Russia's recent decline and diminution in status and military power, these failures reflect more on Russia's influence than on any supposed folly as policies. The realistic alternatives available to Russia – meek acceptance or even support for foreign actions detrimental to her interests – would not deserve kinder judgement.

Alongside failures, there have also been successes. Russia has enduring interests and her foreign policy since the 1990s has enabled her to pursue them. In particular, the country is approaching the status of regional hegemon in the Commonwealth of Independent States irrespective of efforts by the US and EU to oppose Russian efforts in the region, such as in Chechnya. John J. Mearsheimer's framework of offensive realism explains why Russia has taken the actions it has since the 1990s. The theory also shows how these policies have been among the best the country could have hoped to follow in service of its interests.

[1]Mearsheimer, John J. (2001), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, London

[2]Ibid, p.83

[3]Shearman, Peter (2001: 229), 'Personality, Politics and Power: Foreign Policy under Putin', *Russia After Yeltsin*, Vladimir Tikhomirov (Ed.), Sydney, Melbourne, Australia, pp.222-247

[4]Light, Margot (2001), 'Post-Soviet Russian Foreign Policy: The First Decade', *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, Archie Brown (Ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.424

[5] Ibid

[6] Ibid, p.426

[7]Sakwa, Richard (2002), *Russian Politics and Society: Third Edition*, Routledge, London, p.355

[8]Yeltsin, Boris (2000), *Midnight Diaries*, PublicAffairs, New York, p.258

[9]Light, Margot (2001), 'Post-Soviet Russian Foreign Policy: The First Decade', *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, Archie Brown (Ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.425

[10]Baranovsky, Vladimir (2001), 'Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?', *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, Archie Brown (Ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.438

[11]Donaldson, Robert & Joseph Noguee (2005), *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, M.E. Sharpe, p.254

[12]Yeltsin, Boris (2000), *Midnight Diaries*, PublicAffairs, New York, p.148

[13]Baranovsky, Vladimir (2001), 'Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?', *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, Archie Brown (Ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.438

[14]Kissinger, Henry (2001), *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?*, Simon & Schuster, London, p.79

[15] Ibid

[16]Donaldson, Robert & Joseph Noguee (2005), *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring*

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Interests, M.E. Sharpe, p.260

[17]Yeltsin, Boris (2000), *Midnight Diaries*, PublicAffairs, New York, p.149

[18]Trofimenko, Henry (1999), *Russian National Interests and the Current Crisis in Russia*, Ashgate, Sydney, p.169

[19] Ibid

[20]Yeltsin, Boris (2000), *Midnight Diaries*, PublicAffairs, New York, p.263

[21]Baranovsky, Vladimir (2001), 'Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?', *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, Archie Brown (Ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.438

[22]Sakwa, Richard (2002), *Russian Politics and Society: Third Edition*, Routledge, London, p.368

[23]Mearsheimer, John J. (2001), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, London, Chapter Four: The Primacy of Land Power, pp.83-137

[24]Kortunov, Andrei (1995: 184), 'Russia, the Near Abroad, and the West', *The New Russia: Troubled Transformation*, Gail W. Lapidus (Ed.), Westview Press, Oxford, pp.143-191

[25]Sakwa, Richard (2002), *Russian Politics and Society: Third Edition*, Routledge, London, p.353

[26] Ibid, p.354

[27]Donaldson, Robert & Joseph Noguee (2005), *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, M.E. Sharpe, p.243

[28]Sakwa, Richard (2002), *Russian Politics and Society: Third Edition*, Routledge, London, p.354

[29]Goble, Paul (1995: 198), 'Turning the Cold War on Its Head', *Russia: A Return to Imperialism?*, Uri Ra'anani and Kate

Martin (Eds.), St Martin's Press, New York, pp.197-207

[30]Yeltsin, Boris (2000), *Midnight Diaries*, PublicAffairs, New York, p.336

[31] Ibid, p.335

[32]Muraviev, Alexy (2001: 197), 'Russian Military Power at the Turn of the Millennium', *Russia After Yeltsin*, Vladimir

Tikhomirov (Ed.), Sydney, Melbourne, Australia, pp.194-221

[33] Ibid

[34]Sakwa, Richard (2002), *Russian Politics and Society: Third Edition*, Routledge, London, p.354

[35]Trofimenko, Henry (1999), *Russian National Interests and the Current Crisis in Russia*, Ashgate, Sydney, p.159

[36]Quoted in Kissinger, Henry (2001), *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?*, Simon & Schuster, London, p.43

[37]Kissinger, Henry (2001), *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?*, Simon & Schuster, London, p.42

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[38] Sakwa, Richard (2002), *Russian Politics and Society: Third Edition*, Routledge, London, p.416

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