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Rethinking Russia's Return to Global Big Policy

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In the first decade of 21st century Russia managed to get out of the economic crisis, restore its military strength, and take course to become a sovereign political pole. To understand the entire scope of Russia's reaction to difficult foreign challenges and to analyze its probable steps, it is important to investigate its foreign policy strategy.

On November 30, 2016, the Kremlin adopted the "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation" (Concept), which was signed by President Vladimir Putin. In the future, Russian diplomacy will continue its operations with this document as one of its main legal pillars.

This Concept argues that Russian foreign policy aims to ensure security, independence and territorial integrity of the state. It must contribute to the development of the democratic and juridical institutions of the country, and also be used for the further growth of the Russian economy.

It is worth mentioning that due to the Concept, one of the main aims of Russian foreign policy is making Russia one of the most influential centers in the modern world.

This clause of the Concept describes that in the future, Russia will be more actively involved in international politics. It will try to create new spheres of influence and find new allies and supporters, with whom it will be able to defend its national interests and reap benefits from different international developments.

It is worth mentioning that Russia has powerful levers to implement the aforementioned aims; the following circumstances can be mentioned:

1. Russia is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This factor provides Moscow with an opportunity to make its voice heard on the main platform for creation of international law. Permanent membership gives Russia veto power, which means that the other parties of the UNSC cannot adopt any resolution without Russia's agreement. Thus, Russia remains in the group of main players in world affairs. It is the main reason why, in the new Foreign Policy Concept of Russia, it is mentioned that Russia will make efforts to strengthen the role of the UN.

2. Even after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or Soviet Union) Russia still possesses the second most powerful military arsenal in the world, strengthened by modernized nuclear weapons. Only Washington surpasses Moscow with its military capabilities.

To strengthen and modernize its military capabilities, Russia plans to invest \$700 billion before 2020.

3. Russia possesses tremendous sources of energy and other natural resources, which provide Russia with an opportunity for further development. Even during recent years, when prices on energy resources have drastically decreased, this factor has still played a significant role in Russia's foreign policy, as Russia gets some economic and political influence in the countries, it supplies with its energy resources.

4. Russia's geographic location also has its impact, as it provides great opportunities to the Russian navy and air force to maneuver from East to West. This geographic advantage also gives Russia wide economic prospects, as it is a unique bridge connecting Europe to Asia.

This paper aims to analyze and answer the following questions: in which directions will the "Russian bear" move? Which tools and sources will be used by Moscow for implementation of its foreign policy? Which kinds of developments will take place in the era of Russia's return to big policy?

From Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

In the section on regional priorities of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, it is written that Russia's main aim is to develop bilateral and multilateral relations with the CIS member-states and foster implementation of integration projects in this organization with Russia's involvement.

In the 51st clause of the Concept, it is written that in the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union, it is very important to develop relations and implement joint projects with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The main purpose of this ambitious plan is to unite in one political and economic union the former republics of the USSR which are not integrated in other economic or political unions. Firstly, it regards republics, which, unfortunately, after the collapse of the USSR, could not adapt to challenging modern world developments. These states could not find an economic and political role that could make them interesting for the world's other main players, and as a result their economies have been destabilized and contracted greatly. These states are in deep political and economic crises, and they have also security problems, as they are not able to secure their countries without the help of third parties. In this regard, Vladimir Putin mentioned, that the disappearance of the USSR was a "major geopolitical disaster." Indeed, it was a disaster for the most of the USSR's former member states and for its main allies. One-day citizens of the USSR slept in the one of the most powerful countries in the world, and the next day they woke up in a field state with a difficult political and socio-economic situation. In some former republics of the USSR, interethnic clashes started. It seems that Post Soviet states would be also very interested in integration with the EAEU, but the situation is much more complicated, because of the many conflicts acquired as a result of the USSR's collapse. These unresolved issues create problems for integration processes in the Post-Soviet space.

The second main obstacle to integration developments in this space is the position of the West, which tries not to allow possible "reconciliation" of the USSR. However, it is evident that this is not possible even theoretically.

The Ukrainian revolution, which was fully supported by the West, can be considered the main argument for this second hypothesis. As a result of this political turmoil in Ukraine, Kiev broke its ties with Moscow, and did not join the EAEU, which is led by Moscow. Additionally, the clashes between Ukrainian military forces and the

Russian population in East Ukraine are creating barriers between the two Slavonic nations, which are connected to each other by various historical and cultural ties.

In addition, the economic situation in Russia was heavily damaged by Western sanctions and the decreasing price of energy resources. Regardless, even in this challenging situation, Russia could have some success in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad was able to get out of a troublesome situation and start his counterattack with the help of Russian air forces. In East Ukraine, Pro-Russian forces also keep a huge territory under their control.

The Russian Bear Tries to Save its Burned Middle Eastern Hives

From a Russian perspective, resolution of the Syrian conflict is possible via the restoration of the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.

By the way, Russians can agree with Turkey and Iran on ridding Aleppo of terrorists and the so-called Syrian moderate opposition, and afterwards on the return of this strategically important city to Assad's regime. It is worth mentioning that this unique triangle (Russia-Iran-Turkey), composed of such different states, could come to a conclusion without making an agreement with the US on this issue.

In the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, it is mentioned that International society must jointly struggle against terrorists and prevent creation of dangerous organizations such as ISIS. Additionally, the Russians offer to create a coalition which will battle against terrorism and operate based on an agreed-upon legal framework.

Russia's tough position on the Syrian crisis and its main aim to finally destroy radical Islamists, who are spreading their ideology worldwide, formed partly because Russia has millions of Muslim citizens, and by struggling against Islamic fundamentalism in Syria, Russia is trying to stop the proliferation of this "dangerous disease", which is called "the Ideology of ISIS", on its own territory.

As one of the Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Russia plays a significant role in resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue. On the Iranian diplomatic "front", international society could achieve some success thanks to the constructive role played by Russia and other partners. It is worth mentioning that Russia always disagreed with the US on regime change in Iran under the shadow of the struggle against nuclear proliferation. Russia was against solving this problem by military means and also against unilateral sanctions imposed by the West and its partners to bring Tehran to its knees, as those sanctions were not approved by the UNSC. Playing a constructive role, Russia offered to solve the Iranian nuclear issue using a step-by-step method, which later formed the basis for success in multilateral negotiations with Iran.

Modern Russo-Turkish relations can be described as series of ups and downs, but it is a fact that both sides place importance on bilateral economic and political relations. The main argument of the aforementioned hypothesis is that the crisis of the Russo-Turkish relations was very short. This crisis started when Turkish forces shot down a Russian military jet along the Syrian border. Nevertheless, there is now a new political situation in the Middle East. As the US is trying to leave or showing that it would like to leave this region, it is possible that a new Russo-Turkish confrontation will emerge to divide spheres of influence, and of course, Iran will also participate in this struggle to protect its own national interests.

The Russian Far Eastern Vision, or the Russian Bear Looks towards Beijing

In the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, it is mentioned that the world's potential is clearly being concentrated in the Asia-Pacific region, and consequently the West is gradually losing its historical role as political and economic leader of the world.

In this context, the emerging Far Eastern superpower China is worthy of note, because through its “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “21st-century Maritime Silk Road” programs (The Belt and Road), it is trying to enlarge its influence. It is interesting that Russian President Putin does not see the new Chinese initiative as a threat; on the contrary, he believes that the EAEU and the Belt and Road must be combined.

It is obvious that in these circumstances, as a result of aggravated relations between Russia and the West, Moscow will deepen its relations with Beijing. It is also mentioned, in the 84th clause of the Concept, that Russia will increase its political and economic cooperation with China. But it is important to mention that China is unable to close the gap in the Russian economy, which emerged after the worsening of Russo-US and Russo-EU relations, alone.

Unlike economic relations, which are growing slowly, Russia and China have succeeded in forming close political cooperation. As a result of close political cooperation, Russia and China try to act as partners during negotiations on resolution of the Iranian and DPRK nuclear issues, as well as the problem of the South China Sea and Syrian crisis. In this regard, it is also worth mentioning the tough Sino-Russian position against the decision of the US and South Korea to place THAAD systems (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) next to the border with North Korea, making them capable of destroying missiles fired from Russian and Chinese territories as well as North Korean.

Russia is against the proliferation of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula. As in the case of Iranian nuclear issue, Russia does not wish to see new turbulence in the Korean peninsula due to the DPRK nuclear issue, and favors a peaceful solution to this issue through political and diplomatic efforts and negotiations. From my point of view, Moscow has agreed to follow China’s lead on the DPRK nuclear issue in the UNSC, in exchange for China following Russia’s lead on the Iranian nuclear issue.

It is worth mentioning that Iranians attempted to derive benefits from Sino-Russian cooperation in the UNSC. In this regard, Hassan Rouhani said, “We knew that if we could turn Russia to our side, China would also stand next to us.”

Closing, but Still Unclosed Doors to the West

Although it is mentioned in the Concept that Russia will continue implementation of the reduction and limitation of its strategic offensive arms, which it is undertaking due to Russo-American agreements, it must be mentioned, that the current escalation of tensions in Russia-US relations may complicate the possible conclusion of new arms-reduction agreements. Moreover, in this situation, there is the risk that both sides may abandon the agreements reached previously and start a new arms race, like that which existed during the Cold War. The Concept also condemns NATO and EU policies in the Euro-Atlantic region. In this document, Russia deems the policies being implemented by these two Western organizations expansionism.

It is mentioned that the idea to create a “European Common Security Framework” has remained on paper, and the main reason behind the escalation of tensions in relations between Russia and the West is the joint strategy of the US and its Western partners to contain and isolate Russia.

After the collapse of the USSR, when the former members of the Warsaw Pact started to join NATO, Russia tried to understand on which levels these processes helped or contradicted the national interests of Russia. It is worth mentioning that from 1988 to 1999, Russia reduced its army’s personnel from 5 mln. to 1 mln. people.

As Russian researcher Aleksandr Barsenkov mentioned, in the early 90s, Russian President Boris Yeltsin announced that Russia was ready to begin integration into NATO—one of Russia’s long-term goals in its foreign policy. After several years Yeltsin added that Russia is against NATO enlargement without Russia.

Furthermore, when Yevgeni Primakov was appointed as Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, he announced that Moscow was against NATO's enlargement, because to Russians it was a threat; due to NATO enlargement, soon Russia would be left alone, surrounded by NATO members.

As Yevgeny Primakov mentioned in his book about negotiations on the enlargement of NATO, "on July 30, 1996, during my meeting with Malcolm Rifkind, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs of the UK, I mentioned that there are two red lines regarding NATO's enlargement which Russians will not allow to be crossed. The vertical red line means that Russia is against the placement of NATO infrastructure next to Russian borders by drawing in new members, and the horizontal one means that Moscow will never approve of Baltic or post-Soviet States joining NATO."

This position remains one of the most important pillars of Russian Foreign policy regarding the enlargement of NATO, and because of this foreign policy priority, Russia has tried to express its disagreement by presenting a tough reaction to Georgia's and Ukraine's desire to join NATO.

High-level Russian officials are convinced of the idea that NATO has an anti-Russian orientation. The main argument for this hypothesis may be Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech in the General Assembly of the UN. He stated, "Sadly, some of our counterparts are still dominated by their Cold War-era bloc mentality and the ambition to conquer new geopolitical areas. First, they continued their policy of expanding NATO – one should wonder why, considering that the Warsaw Pact had ceased to exist and the Soviet Union had disintegrated." It appears that NATO is the West's main lever for deterring Russia, and also the West's unique watchdog, used to topple regimes which are not playing according to Western rules.

This Russo-American confrontation also takes place in cyberspace. The countries are engaged in a real war there. On the American side, with the help of Russian hackers, information about Hilary Clinton's official electronic correspondence was spread worldwide, which had an influence on the results of presidential elections in the US. As a result, Clinton lost votes. Because of these Russo-American clashes in cyberspace, the Obama administration deported Russian diplomats from the US, accusing them of involvement in cyber-attacks perpetrated against the US. Putin did not respond to this measure with an equally aggressive answer, and instead announced that he had no wish to fall to the level of "kitchen diplomacy." With this step, he did not participate in the burning of the Russo-American "last diplomatic bridge". He confirmed once again that he is ready to cooperate with Donald Trump, elected president of the US, and that he did not want to escalate the situation.

However, while in 2017, Russia was able to keep its balance and avoid economic collapse, in the future, confrontation with the West may become more harsh and dangerous.

After the referendum on the status of Crimea, when Crimea was integrated into Russia, both the US and EU adopted sanctions against Russia.

In June 2016, during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, President Putin offered several proposals for normalization of Russia-EU relations to European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, but, the EU prolonged sanctions on Russia.

Further development of Russia-EU relations also highly dependent on US foreign policy under Donald Trump, because up to now US decisions have had profound influence on the generation of EU foreign policy.

Taking into consideration the fact that nowadays, the EU's main leader is Germany, from my point of view, the political developments that have taken place in Ukraine can be placed within the framework of Russo-German historical clashes, but now in a new confrontation.

Throughout history, the German political elite was interested in the East, where it clashed with Russia several times, and as a result was forced to retreat. Until 1945 Germany's eastern policy consisted of trying to conquer

Eastern Europe by military means, but this strategy failed. It appears that German political thought has made new calculations, and now it tries to spread its influence not with weapons, but using its economic leverage—Soft Power. As a result of this new “Eastern Policy”, the majority of Eastern European countries have already joined the EU.

Because of the new Russia-West confrontation, Ukraine has been divided into two parts. On one hand, Western Ukraine has started cooperating with the West and set integration into the EU as its long-term political goal. On the other hand, Crimea and Sevastopol have been integrated into Russia, and Eastern Ukraine is still controlled by pro-Russian military groups.

It is worth mentioning that the annexation of Crimea by Russia was seen as a possibility by the Ukrainian political elite long before 2014. Back in 2007, former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yuliya Tymoshenko wrote in “Foreign Affairs” that Russia must not be permitted to use Kosovo’s independence from Serbia as a precedent to promote secessionist movements, most importantly a Crimean secessionist movement, in attempt to destabilize national governments.”

However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov mentioned that Russia has no intention to continue confrontations with the US, EU and NATO. As he stated, the best option for defense of the interests of the European continent’s population may be the creation of a single economic and humanitarian space, which would reach from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. He added that the newly established EAEU could become the best bridge for integration processes between Europe and the Asia-Pacific.

Non-Traditional Forms of Classical Diplomacy: New Directions

It is mentioned in the Concept that soft power must be one of the most important tools of Russian foreign policy, and must be widely used by Russian diplomats.

The “Gerchakov Fund” and the “Russian World” foundation actively work towards the improvement of Russia’s reputation and the creation of a network of supporters worldwide. They grant scholarships and organize special courses to represent the Russian language, as well as Russian culture, history and policy.

In the new Concept, Russian diplomacy places high value on the preservation of Russian communities and Russian identity around the world. It is worth mentioning that Russia has started to place importance on the involvement of the Russian diaspora in its foreign policy. It means that Russian diplomats plan to use public diplomacy to achieve their main goals.

The 48th clause of the Concept says that Russia must take steps to use the potential of Russian researchers in its public diplomacy by activating contacts between Russian and foreign scholars. Currently Russia has many powerful analytical centers, for instance: the Russian Council on International Relations, the PIR Center, the Valdai International Discussion Club, and others, which, with the help of modern technologies, distribute their publications in both Russian and English.

Conclusion

It is worth mentioning, that in the Concept’s 21st and 22nd clauses, Russia acknowledges its responsibility for the maintenance of security on both regional and global levels. It is mentioned in this document that throughout history, Russia has always played a unique role, balancing international relations and contributing to the development of civilization.

Professor Stephan Kotkin does not agree with this idea; as he mentioned, “Until Russia brings its aspirations into line with its actual capabilities, it cannot become a ‘normal’ country, no matter what the rise in its per capita GDP or other quantitative indicators is.” In my turn, I do not agree with Kotkin, as after the collapse of

the USSR, Russia tried to integrate into the Western world several times and become, as Kotkin described, a “normal” country, but it came across closed doors. Then it tried to turn toward the East, but in East it is also very hard to play one’s own game, as China, in turn, tries to play the leading role there and will not surrender its position to the Russians. That was the main reason that Russia turned to the former Soviet Republics and started to create its own, independent pole.

Because of the West’s attempts to isolate and deter Russia, the country started to implement aggressive policy to defend its national interests and break the potential blockade. As a result, with lightning speed, Russia reunited with Crimea and Sevastopol.

By retaking Crimea and maintaining Assad’s regime, Russia ruined the West’s plans, due to which Russia could have been ousted from two seas, the Mediterranean and the Black. In short, thanks to its support of Assad, Russia extended its military bases in Syrian Latakia, and by reconquering Crimea, it kept the dominant strategic position of the Russian navy on the Black sea.

After the collapse of the USSR, during the Syrian crisis and Ukrainian political turmoil, Russia has demonstrated that it is capable of defending its national interests, not only via declarations and negotiations, but also by exerting its influence and projecting its power on a global scale by combining its military and economic strength.

Which kinds of developments will take place in the era of Russia’s return to big policy?

If Russia unites most of the Post-Soviet States in one economic and political block, it could form a new strong pole, which could become an alternative to the US and China’s political models. Russia chose the so-called Eurasian ideology for uniting different Eurasian nations under the umbrella of the EAEU. Indeed, this ideology can provide an opportunity to various states which were not brought into the EU or other integration programs projected by the West to join EAEU. The other argument is that if Russia and China will be able to harmonize the EAEU with the Chinese “One road, one Belt” program, they can form a very strong pole, and thus they will irreversibly change the unipolar world order, which was created at the end of the Cold War. Russia’s return to global big politics means that the role of the UN will be strengthened. If, in the recent past, the US underestimated the role of UN, and many times made several steps without waiting or asking the UN, now it must, because Russia and China can keep them in the same manner, and as a result international society will face dangerous chaos. Thus, Russia’s return to “global big politics” will bring balance to world affairs. Development of the EAEU will provide an opportunity to improve the economic situations of Post-Soviet states, which are not in good political, social and economic condition.

The process of integration into the EAEU will provide opportunities for development to most of the Post-Soviet states which are still mired in political turmoil and economic hardship.

The only problem with Russia’s return to global big politics is that it can lead to new political crises in the world, arms races, a continuation of the so-called Cold war, wars, and victors and losers, if this return is seen by western capitals as a great threat.

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