

Conflict Studies Research Centre



**Russian Foreign Policy:
Strange Inconsistency**

Dr Thomas Gomart

March 2006

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Abstract:

The Russia of Vladimir Putin has recouped some international leeway. However, its foreign policy objectives remain unclear, between the forces of consistency – military tropism, geopolitical foresight, the need to control an empire, reference to rich energy reserves – and the temptation towards fickleness – on the Iranian affair or the European option; the reasoning behind this is that Russian external policy cannot be reconciled with our standards and requires constant analysis and interpretation.

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Foreign Policy

Russian foreign policy is remarkable for its ability to seize opportunities and its inability to generate new situations. Flexible rather than rigid, more reactive than creative, it now finds itself caught in the crossfire of harsh criticism. On the one hand, the neo-imperial posturing of Moscow is deprecated, with its rebuilding of offensive military capabilities, the continued use of the intelligence services and the exploitation of energy as a weapon.¹ On the other, the organisation of the Russian system and its external implications necessitate caution, justified by the ambivalent attitude of the Russians – and especially the younger generation – to its totalitarian past, by the bureaucratisation of power, indissociable from the questionable exploitation of the long term income from energy reserves and, finally, by the decline in civil liberties.²

From a rational perspective, such criticisms should not be allowed to mask the essential fact: in contrast to the Yeltsin period, Russia has regained real freedom of action on the international stage. Despite his many grave errors, Vladimir Putin has frequently managed to turn round critical situations by resorting to an economic/security dialectic, exploiting “international terrorism” and skilfully catching his partners off balance.³ Following the *annus horribilis* of 2004, mainly resulting from the international consequences of Beslan (North Ossetia) and the “orange revolution” in the Ukraine, Russian foreign policy in 2005 achieved greater success: the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the signature of road maps with the European Union (EU) relating to the four spaces defined at Saint Petersburg, the recouping of influence in Central Asia via the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the military exercises with China and India, the visit to the Middle East and the pursuit of an ambivalent policy with respect to Iran, all bear witness to the Kremlin’s policy of vigorous action on international matters. Its recovery capability has been helped by world energy prices that give it significant financial resources. By opening 2006 with a gas crisis with the Ukraine, the Kremlin shed light on an underlying trend of its foreign policy: the use of energy supplies to highlight the power differences between Russia and its neighbours. On the eve of his first presidency of the G8, Mr Putin feels he is in a strong position, convinced of the centrality of “energy security” in international power relationships.

Current events and situations therefore require us to make an attempt to interpret Russian foreign policy. This policy is deeply rooted in a national post-imperial identity that is being completely remodelled, still obsessed with its foreign relations. The internal situation always has an impact on foreign policy that, with the next presidential election (March 2008) in mind, invites close attention to the regression/progression movement that characterises the Russia of Mr Putin.⁴ This

may seem contradictory, but recent initiatives by the latter must be seen as indicative of both consistency in Russian foreign policy and of a form of inconsistency, itself structural. It cannot be denied that Vladimir Putin has managed to expand his options by slackening the noose around the Yeltsin years, without however being convincing about his strategic decisions, thereby allowing some uncertainty to remain that favours action over targets. The Russian president's policies therefore subscribe to a historical and strategic tradition that can be summarised thus: retain one's freedom of action, but do nothing with it.

A Decisive Consistency

The Strategic and Historical Heritage

Without delving deep into Russian strategic culture, it is nonetheless instructive to identify certain constants. Since the 17th century, Russia has conceived its *grand strategy* against a geopolitical backdrop consisting of three theatres: western (from the Baltic to the Carpathians), southern (from the Danube to the mountains of Persia) and eastern (from the Volga to the Altai).⁵ The nation's politico-military elite has always endeavoured to be in a position to be able to intervene *simultaneously* in these three theatres in order to exert overall dominion over the heartland. This urge to retain an operational capability at any cost resulted in a power structure characterised by a command unit (the tsar and his councillors) and a governing class dominated by the military. This system engendered amongst the people and the elite a close association between the prestige of the State and that of the army: during imperial times as during the soviet era, military objectives held sway over all others.⁶ This root and branch militarism also resulted in a fear of encirclement and invasion, perhaps rooted less in the memory of the Mongol occupation (13th to 14th centuries) than in the attempted invasions from the west, all of which failed.⁷

With its deep-rooted ideological metamorphoses, this view of the world has endured and can still be detected in Moscow's current outlook. This "mental toolkit" obscures its quest for identity and restricts the political elite to a summary role, in so far as the latter now sees itself as the repository of both the soviet and the imperial past.⁸ This dual heritage can be seen in Vladimir Putin's relationship with the past; he would like to reconcile white and red Russians by the political exploitation of nostalgia: as examples, he readopted the Soviet national anthem (December 2000) and organised a state burial for General Denikin in the Donskoi monastery (October 2005).

This desire for historical association is echoed in a series of exhibitions organised recently in many capitals with support from the Russian authorities.⁹ This relationship with the past assumes a more polemical and painful aspect as soon as it touches on the attitude of Moscow towards the formerly dominated states.¹⁰ Doubtless it is still difficult to imagine to what extent the death throes of the Soviet experiment are troubling consciences and inhibiting behaviour. For Russia, reconciliation with its neighbours (starting with the Baltic states and Poland) also involves firstly an acceptance of the diversity of its own past, as well as a period of mourning. Recognition of the ascendancy of history would be the first step towards the instigation of a degree of internal accord.

Power From the Status Quo

This strategic heritage, this burden of memory, makes anything associated with national sovereignty extremely sensitive. Central to the Russian political debate, this concept is most often viewed in the context of the internal or external threats to which it is subject.¹¹ This aggravated sovereignty leads Russia towards a policy of independence aimed at defending, quite openly, its national interests, at all times and in all places. Russians have been, are now, and will always be patriots. This historical truism induces a political and strategic behaviour. Politically, the drift from patriotism towards nationalism can always be encouraged by political powers, at the risk of deviating towards primal racism. Strategically, it gives rise to an innate inability to accept the role of junior partner with anyone. Speculations about a Russo-American partnership along these lines, in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, cannot be confirmed.¹²

With Vladimir Putin, this strategic heritage finds three practical applications. Firstly, since he came to power, the Russian President has been at pains to loosen the stranglehold of debt to break from the Yeltsin era, by rejecting prolonged dependence on international creditors. In 2000, debt represented 61.3% of the nation's GDP; in 2006 the aim is to reduce this to 14.8%.¹³ On 1 October 2005, Russia's external debt amounted to 86.8 billion dollars.

At this rate, the Kremlin should have paid off most of its debts by around 2008-2010. Secondly, Moscow sees Russian territory as a strategic pivot and therefore pursues a policy that is both global (through activism within international institutions) and bilateral (which puts it in a strong position, especially within the post-soviet arena). From this viewpoint the concept of the "Great Game", frequently quoted to describe current rivalries in Central Asia, by analogy with the Russo-British contest in the 19th century, is misleading: for Moscow, the "game" does not concern only Central Asia, but a zone stretching from the Balkans to the Far East.¹⁴ As far as Putin is concerned, there is no withdrawal from the field of action on foreign policy. Thirdly, Putin's Russia is making every effort to maintain its positions, in other words to bring to an end the loss of influence of the Yeltsin years, especially in the post-soviet arena. In parallel, at all levels, from the politico-strategic to military cooperation projects, Moscow aims to ensure, at all costs, its freedom of action.¹⁵ For the Kremlin, its preservation is not a means to an end but an end in itself. Officially this implies a military tool combining the modernisation of the strategic nuclear forces, development of deployable conventional forces and an increase in wide-ranging exercises.¹⁶

A One-Legged Power

The significance of the military tool is having its impact on resource allocation with a spectacular rise in the military budget.¹⁷ With defence spending higher than that of France and an economy comparable to that of the Netherlands, Russia is no longer in a position to rival the USA, and, ultimately, China, while remaining a leading nuclear power. At a technological level, it still seems able to protract the cycles from the soviet era: it therefore finds itself continuing old designs rather than innovating. Its share of registered patents and scientific publications is on a downward curve, although it is retaining its position in niche specialisations and training schemes.¹⁸ By using the energy dividend, the Kremlin is giving preference to short term expansions in power without laying the foundations for technological regeneration.

In reality, Vladimir Putin is trying to formulate an energy-based deterrence from first principles. As with nuclear deterrence, this is based on an arsenal, declarations and credibility. In contrast to nuclear, it may have identifiable operational applications, without however implying annihilation, by exploiting the global economy's vital need for energy while adjusting to the position and solvency of the nations concerned. The arsenal is the reserves, the production volumes and the export systems. With 6% of global reserves in oil, 31% in gas, 10% of world oil production and 22% of gas production, as well as the ability to exercise control over the export systems of the nations of the Community of Independent States (CIS), Russia is a leading energy player.¹⁹ The declarations are the speeches and statements by Vladimir Putin. In 1997, the future president submitted a thesis (*kandidat*) to the University of Saint Petersburg on natural resources as a factor in economic development. According to his studies, published in 2000, after his appointment as Prime Minister, the development of Russia requires the exploitation of energy reserves: to catch up with the developed nations, it needs to achieve a growth rate of 4-6% by means of industrial-financial consortiums capable of competing with western multinationals.²⁰ Seventh in the world in terms of stock market valuation, Gazprom is hard on the heels of companies such as Shell or BP, and now personifies the Kremlin's international ambitions. In April 2005, during his annual speech to the Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin justified the use of pre-emption by state-controlled companies to ensure protection not only for defence industries but also natural resources and infrastructure.²¹ The credibility of energy deterrence requires presidential involvement in all the major energy agreements. The Kremlin deliberately politicises the energy question to the extent that, viewed from abroad, it aims to be the sole point of entry, with the following principle: if president Putin is in the loop, the contract will be signed. If he is not, foreign investors are taking an enormous risk. In other words, it is neither market forces nor the legal arsenal that will guarantee investments, but presidential endorsement. Also, by making "energy security" the primary theme of its presidency of the G8, Moscow aims to present itself as a leading supplier (oil *and* gas) on a world scale, it being implied that this supplier, whatever changes may occur in Russia between now and 2008, will remain less unstable than OPEC nations.

Russia's foreign policy is now weakened by two fault lines, which will surely continue to have an influence in the future. Firstly, in the formulation of his energy deterrent, Vladimir Putin has forgotten the fundamental principle behind deterrence: it should not be used. By resorting, even in a limited and controlled manner, to cuts in supply (also implemented by Yeltsin in his own time), Putin has devalued his key trump card, as he is bound to encourage by-pass strategies amongst his clients and reinforce the one-legged nature of Russian power. Secondly, by embracing a historical connection, the master of the Kremlin is subjecting his actions to the permanent features of Russian foreign policy, while paradoxically giving evidence of inconsistency, or a degree of versatility in his long term policy directions. This unpredictability is without doubt explained less by the ups and downs of his presidency than by the ponderous tendencies of Russia towards its neighbours: the mismatch between the narrow-mindedness of the strategic vision and the burgeoning of shock tactics is striking. This inconsistency re-emerges whenever there is a question of a rapprochement in the form of an alliance or an integration system, in fact as soon as any long term expression of confidence in a partner is required. In all this we should surely detect more of an inheritance of a tradition of suspicion than the expression of any lack of self confidence.

A Degree of Inconsistency

The Iranian Affair

Because of its highly sensitive nature, the Iranian affair puts Russia at the heart of current events, giving it a role as mediator because of its direct involvement in Teheran's nuclear activities. Skilful in some eyes, reckless to others, Russia's policy towards Iran also demonstrates deep-seated inconsistencies, as it reveals piecemeal management of an affair likely to disrupt the global and regional strategic equilibrium. Things are happening as if Moscow was following the affair from a purely diplomatic and/or economic standpoint, ignoring the military and strategic implications of a programme being undertaken by an ambitious and aggressive neighbouring power. Once again one can see a decoupling, both cause and effect of Russian fickleness.

Moscow has always rejected the concept of the "rogue state" employed by the USA to describe nations that threaten international security. Russia thereby boosts its status as intermediary between western powers and Iran or North Korea. Not unskilfully, it thus earns three types of dividend. Firstly, its contacts globalise its foreign policy by giving it a presence and allowing it to remain active in both the Middle and Far East. Secondly, it finds in these nations potential markets for its weapons and technologies. This source of revenue was decisive in the Yeltsin era, but with the rise in energy income under Putin it now occupies second place. Thirdly, the close relations with Iran enable the uni-polar system dominated by the USA to be disrupted.²² This short term approach is transforming the arms trade into a primary lever of Russia's political influence in the Middle East. Teheran is now its third largest arms customer.²³ The Russian tightrope act however risks having to come to an end in the next few months, even if Moscow, following the example of Beijing, thinks it can act as an arbitrator. At a diplomatic level, the considerable reticence of the Kremlin to agree to the submission of the affair to the Security Council must be seen as a desire to protect lucrative commercial activities, but above all to defer once more and for ever the "proof of the truth".²⁴ The time for this is however approaching with the transfer by the IAEA of the Iranian report to the Security Council (February 2006): Russian support denotes a significant shift. At a strategic level, again in the name of the constants of Russian foreign policy, Moscow's positions should be determined once and for all as a function of the interests of its security policy; it is difficult to understand why and how it could accommodate a nuclear Iran and a disintegration of the international nuclear non-proliferation system.²⁵

Integration Versus Eurasianism

It is now instinctive to define Russian foreign policy by referring to its relations with Europe.²⁶ This blinkered outlook can be explained by the deep-seated conviction amongst the Russian elite that holds that Europe remains a natural partner because of the closeness of cultural links, but above all because of the identification of the population with its way of life.²⁷

Such prejudice is simplistic. By restricting the analysis of Russia's foreign policy to its time-honoured predicament – how to Europeanise without losing its national identity – and to its claimed specificity, one rationalizes in terms of degree of integration when, fundamentally, Moscow continues to analyse in terms of *status quo* and the balance of power. At the same time, Moscow is not seeking a face-to-face confrontation with the USA or to move towards the EU, but defends the

principle of an interaction that does not rely on a system of constraints and shared values.

The inconsistency of Russian policy arises out of the friction between burdensome trends (the geographic situation, the deeply ingrained sense of insecurity, the framework of the strategic culture, the demographic decline) and short term challenges: the pragmatism attributed to Putin should be seen more as a permanent agility than a closely controlled relationship between the well-known long term strategic objectives (foremost amongst which are the increase in the power of China and Iran) and operational decisions that are usually reactive.²⁸ This pragmatism also articulates an acute difficulty in implementing strategic decisions, and holding to them regardless of any obstacles that might arise. Here it is possible to establish an analogy between the Yeltsin and the Putin eras in the links with the West and in the use of relations with China and Iran. With different attitudes and methods, the two leaders began with a stated intention to foster links with the West and ended up with Eurasiatic tendencies. Here one should distinguish between the intellectual trend and its diplomatic implications.²⁹ Many recent signs bear witness to similar changes amongst those primarily responsible for Russian foreign policy.³⁰ But Eurasianism is more or less a literal translation into foreign policy of Russian nationalism, which is currently enjoying an obvious renewal of popularity via a glorification of the armed forces, virulent anti-Americanism, systematised State interventionism, renewed affirmation of political authoritarianism and finally rejuvenated projects to bring the post-soviet arena under control.³¹

The Real and The Virtual Russia

However, the Yeltsin/Putin parallel cannot explain two fundamental differences: the shift of the political centre of gravity and the nation's financial situation. Boris Yeltsin supported the democratic transition and left the country ruined. Vladimir Putin will leave a country free of debt, with reduced public involvement in government. The shift in the political centre of gravity can be seen in the influence now exercised by nationalists comforted by the relative well-being of a Russia that owes its salvation to its own resources alone and to its ability to survive. To summarise, in the public debate, Rodina ("Motherland" – the nationalist party) has replaced Yabloko (the liberal party). While nationalists are becoming more active, the liberals are suffering from their own internal divisions and are exhausting themselves trying to justify the transition years. As far as the country's main political force – Yedinaya Rossiya ("United Russia") – is concerned, it contents itself with defending and passing on the decisions of the Kremlin. The intellectual influence of the nationalists is most noticeable in Russian policies within the CIS. Their position is in fact based on the following observation: to different degrees, no CIS state can consider a future without Moscow because of its energy dependency.³² This matter has become the primary tool of diplomatic management, resulting in yet further bilateralisation of the stakes between Moscow and the capitals involved.

By playing the energy card, Moscow can demonstrate its strengths and obtain concessions, but at the cost of wrecking its regional integration projects. This is also one of the lessons to be learnt from the "gas war" with Ukraine. More profoundly, the Russian leaders have still not been able to draft, propose and manage a positive integration project, based on the principles of equality and joint decision-making.³³ However they do hold some not insignificant assets, such as the presence of these nations within Russia's informational sphere. The expansion of Russia is now occurring via major investment capacity, without it being truly

possible to know if the latter forms part of an overall pattern or the simple pursuit of private interests. This lack of viable regional integration projects demonstrates the difficulty of making long term commitments by building mutual trust. In this sense, Russian policy remains profoundly immature. Like a capricious teenage girl, Putin's Russia is vulnerable, takes the greatest care over her image, despite risking excessive make-up, takes many risks and yet doesn't get invited to sit at the grown-ups' table. She believes she can exist without thought for tomorrow. Will she avoid the ring on the finger?

The difficulty in analysing Russian foreign policy can be explained by the friction between consistency and inconsistency. Nevertheless, three useful lessons can be drawn from this. Firstly, it must be understood that the Russia of Vladimir Putin has emerged from a rationale of aid, which is currently disrupting its relations with the USA and Europe, by opening up the question of the external usage of the financial resources arising from the oil dividend and internal stabilisation. This change should lead to envisaging partnerships with Russia not from the viewpoint of integration, but from that of an association enabling Moscow to defend the principle of a degree of specific politico-economic development. In other words, Russia intends to participate in demonstrating that the model of relationships between the state and society promoted by the West is less universal than the latter might claim.

Secondly, Russia will continue, at a tactical level, to mobilise some of its external resources to maintain its position in the post-Soviet arena and to regain a foothold there wherever opportunities arise. From a European point of view, this implies opening and pursuing the debate on the neo- or post-imperial nature of Vladimir Putin's policy, but above all to understand that Russia has gone beyond the stage of imitating models, and feels itself ready to assume its own orientations.

Thirdly, in methodological terms, one should de-Europeanise any analysis of Russian policy. In truth, if Russia were to have behaved as Westerners hoped at the time of the fall of the USSR, endeavouring to respect democratic principles and to observe the basic concepts of the market economy, then its foreign policy would have been worthy of less attention in so far as it would have corresponded, in general terms, to the same system of values. This is not the case today. It will probably not be the case in years to come. A realistic approach therefore demands continued study of the matter in order to correctly assess the state of a Russian power that is vital to European equilibrium and the general stability of the heartland.³⁴ More than ever, one must therefore show proof of consistency in the attention paid to Russia, precisely because of the fluidity of its foreign policy.

Endnotes

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This article first appeared in *Politique étrangère* no 1/2006, pp25-36.

Translated by Anthony Bell

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See:

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ISBN 1-905058-62-4

Published By:

**Defence Academy of the
United Kingdom**

Conflict Studies Research Centre

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Watchfield

Swindon

SN6 8TS

England

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ISBN 1-905058-62-4