



Russia's Foreign Policy Towards Central Asia Under President Vladimir Putin



* Monika Pawar

December, 2011

* Research Scholar, International Relations specializing in Russian and Central Asian Studies
School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

ABSTRACT

The foreign policy of resurgent Russia under President Putin was a clear reflection of the age old principles of Alexander Gorchakov. His principles basically focused on internal reorganization, alliances with threatening powers, and concessions with the rising powers. There had been a paradigm shift in the Russian foreign policy from traditionally security oriented to that of cooperation and mutual engagement in energy and economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By adopting a strategy of classic balance of power towards Central Asia, Russia successfully completed its domestic reforms, secured its neighbourhood and strategically balanced the United States by cooperating with it after the 9/11 attacks, to address both internal and external security threats from radical Islamism.

The change of status of Russia from a super power to a great power and then to a declining power in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s respectively led to a change in Russia's foreign policy with respect to its neighbours, whether it was the case of the West, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or the Central Asian countries.

In Post-Soviet period, Russia faced tremendous challenges in adjusting to its new position as a declining state in international system and was searching for a new course of action corresponding to its new status. At this time there was a drastic reduction of Russia's influence in Central Asia.

This study tries to analyze the changes in the Russian foreign policy towards the Central Asian countries through a systematic study of the previous regimes. This study will also take into account the internal and external factors influencing Russia's foreign policy. An effort will also be made to see whether Russia's foreign policy revisited the age old policy formulated by Alexander Gorchakov.

He formulated the Russian foreign policy at a time when Russia was defeated in the Crimean war and the Paris Peace Treaty.ⁱ The situation of Russia after the Crimean war and the situation of Russia after the Soviet era were more or less similar as both the situations were characterized by a declining Russian power.

Alexander Gorchakov combined an agenda for domestic reform with a long term foreign policy perspective with the aim to return Russia to a great power status. The focus was more on internal reorganization. Barry Buzan argues that the revisionist states feel alienated from the status quo and generally oppose its continuance.ⁱⁱ Gorchakov's policy included the unilateral abandonment of commitments with

Europe, alliances with the less threatening powers and concessions with the rising powers. It was an example of the classic art of balance of power.

Vladimir Putin's predecessor Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin both made serious attempts to focus on the Gorchakov's principles of foreign policy but they were partially successful. Mikhail Gorbachev introduced the concept of perestroika and 'new foreign policy thinking'. He emphasized on economic and political spheres in contrast to the strong tradition of Soviet/Russian foreign policy of relying on security aspects and military aspect. Thus, his policies aimed to increase resources by means of domestic reform while reducing costs, by reducing on international commitments and appeasing the USA and its European allies. But the disintegration of the Soviet bloc led to his discontinuance.

President Yeltsin continued with his predecessor's policy and his pillars of strategy were the same: economic and political reforms; international cooperation and a re-approachment with the West. But during his tenure the foreign policy became a battle ground with vested interests, competing for influence.

The Russian government adopted a more militant rhetoric and a strategy of retrenchment for the purposes of domestic reform which seemed to have moved into the background.ⁱⁱⁱ The combination of domestic reforms and a foreign policy retrenchment, on the one hand, and to restore Russia's great power status, on the other hand, posed fundamental contradictions. This resulted in tension with the West, therefore policies needed further revision.

Vladimir Putin, on becoming the President emphasized that domestic reforms and the economic development of Russia was his priority and, to this

end, the improvement of relations with the West, in particular the United States. Russia founded a new policy for this situation. Russia developed its relations with Eastern Europe, the Baltic States and the western CIS States. Economic cooperation instead of Military cooperation moved to the forefront of Russian European policy.^{iv} But the situation was different in Central Asia. Though Russia recognized the independence of Central Asian countries but wanted to maintain a role as a security guarantor for the region and a leader with regard to economic integration.

Russia had two major concerns with regard to Central Asia, firstly it had strategic concerns about the growing engagement of foreign actors in Central Asian Countries, and secondly it had security concerns about the threats to the security of the region.

Economic concerns were intrinsic to both the issues. The increasing influence of the Taliban in 1996 in Afghanistan, their further influence in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan border in 1998 and the fact that it gave support to Chechen separatists which was regarded as a major internal security threat, posed several problems for Russia.

The growing "Islamic threat" posed as the major internal and external security threat.^v Along with this, the growing influence of the United States added to the problems of Russia. Russia had to manage both its domestic economic priorities and also had to secure its neighborhood.

Traditionally, military and security aspects had dominated Russia's relations with the Central Asian countries.^{vi} Russia's new focus on economic and energy cooperation became the central theme of its foreign policy towards Central Asia.^{vii} Russia's response to US influence was of special interest as it was away from the zero sum perspective.^{viii} There was a clear reflection of a cooperative perspective in Russia' approach.

The 9/11 terrorist attack was a major event which influenced the Russian foreign policy. Rather than taking rhetoric steps to oppose US presence in the Central Asia, Russia actually cooperated with US and gave consent to a US military presence in 2001. The support for US military presence can be justified as both of them were victim of radical Islamism and both wanted to pursue their national interest i.e. domestic security.

It can also be argued that Russia's weakened role and lack of capacity to respond to its challenges in Central Asia caused Putin to modify its foreign policy as per the Alexander Gorchakov's principles of foreign policy.

Russia successfully aligned itself with the less threatening countries in its vicinity like Central Asia and gave concessions to the rising power i.e. USA. By adopting this policy, Russia successfully managed its domestic economic reforms and peacefully managed its foreign relations. This was clearly a reflection of the Gorchakov's principles of foreign policy.

REFERENCE

- i Hopcrick, P. (1994), *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, New York: Kondansha American Inc. ii Barry, B. et al. (1998), *Security: A New Frame Work of Analysis*, London: Lynne Rienner Publisher iii Jonson, L. (2004), *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia: The Shaping of Russian Foreign Policy*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. iv Oldberg, I. (2010), *Russia's Great Power Strategy under Putin and Medvedev*, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Occasional Papers, No. 1 v Malashenko, A. (2004), "Islam, Politics, and the Security of Central Asia", *Russian Politics and Law*, 42(4): 6-20 vi Allison, R. (2004), "Strategic reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy", *International Affairs*, 80(2): 277-293 7 Poussenkova, N. (2010), "Rethinking Russia: The Global Expansion of Russia's Energy Giants", *Journal of International Affairs*, 63(2):103-124 viii Kramer D.J. (2010), "Resetting U.S.-Russian Relations: It takes Two", *The Washington Quarterly*, 33(1): 61-79