Abstract

Russian policy in the West Asia since Boris Yeltsin, the first President of Russian Federation, has centered on basic aims in the region; to ensure stability, to minimalize the US influence, and to allow fair access to trade and general economic relations.

The key to understanding Vladimir Putin's foreign policy is not to dwell on foreign policy concepts or philosophies but to look at his domestic economic and political agenda. Putin was seeking to recreate Russian national strength after years of what he believed to have been stagnation and decay. Perhaps in his estimation there was a direct connection between creating domestic order and strengthening the Russian state and increasing international respect for Russia abroad. He saw foreign policy as a way not only to raise revenues for the state and his political allies (through arms sales and special commercial relations with China, India and Iran) but also to increase respect of the state among the Russians themselves. In this way, he used foreign policy to shore up his drive for domestic political and economic order.

With this goal in mind, one can see four pillars to Putin's foreign policy:

1) To expand the Russian sphere of influence in the "near abroad" and create a common market in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

It is in this in context one can see that Putin's efforts to recreate a Russian sphere of influence in the CIS are partly economic (to enhance political control over neighbors and secure a buffer security zone against Islamic extremism in the South); and partly domestic politics (to enhance is popularity and to quiet communists and nationalists).

2) To develop the European Union as a major energy market and principal source of technology and foreign investment.

The economic incentive is critically important. Leaders of the Russian business community who are already involved in energy exports and have floated American Depositary Receipt (ADRs) in the US believe that Russia's future lie in export to the West (particularly Europe) and in raising Western capital. They say they
reject neo-Soviet or anti-Western positions and are willing to play a more prominent role to move Russia towards closer integration with the West. They also claim that they are capable of working with Duma deputies and Kremlin staff to facilitate a more pro-Western position, suggest developing channels to work more closely with the Russian business community.

This means that this politically influential community will encourage Putin’s outreach to the European Union. Again, there is a domestic and economic interest driving foreign policy in this area. Given the strong political, economic and business interests of Europeans—particularly in Germany—to cooperate with Russia, one can expect closer ties in the future.

3) To develop China, India and Iran as an arms market.

Russians have strong but ambivalent views about these countries. Some Russians dream of bringing these countries into a coalition to counterbalance the United States. Those who espouse this “Eurasian” position such as Alexander Dugin, the chief ideologist of Eurasianism, see Russia as the nucleus of the future anti-American bloc in the Eastern Hemisphere. They are strong supporters of Putin, who some Russian analysts believe supports this “Eurasian” orientation. In short, Putin is looking for cash and for ways to maximize his international leverage, which the special relationships with these three countries provide.

4) To develop a pragmatic relationship with the United States that maximizes the perception of Russia’s great power status.

Putin’s attitude toward the United States is unlike that of Boris Yeltsin, who adhered emotionally to the hope of a close relationship with the United States. Putin has no such emotions or expectations.

Putin’s foreign policy is like a Russian form of Gaullism ever seeking independent actions to maximize his ability to maneuver and keep opponents from coalescing against him.

This means that Putin is neither pro-American nor anti-American. His global strategy appears to be to develop a multi-polar set of relations with China, West Asian states and the European Union to maximize Russia’s international influence, prestige and leverage—not to mention its finances (which explains Russia’s role in proliferation
and its relations with some rogue states). Very often this will put Russia at odds with the United States. Moreover, there is a strong psychological desire to preserve the perception of Russia as a great power. Hence the need to appear independent from and equal to the United States, particularly in strategic matters.

From the concept of Putin’s Russian foreign policy above, West Asian region can be seen as a major factor in strengthening Russia’s area of influence and presence with a sense of urgency.

It can be summarized, therefore, that the Russian Federation in Yeltsin’s era that had emerged from the end of the Cold War was different entity from the former Soviet Union. It is smaller, both in terms of territory and populations, and is physically far away from the West Asian region. Russian approach to the geo-political dimension has two major elements, which do nevertheless represent some degree of continuity with the Soviet period. First, geographical propinquity determines the degree of national interest in the region on its southern borders. Thus for Russia the territorial integrity of the country is the principal concern, with Chechnya as the most pressing immediate issue; second in importance is the “Near Abroad” in the south, with Central Asia and the Caucasus acting as critical intervening variables in Moscow’s policies towards its neighbors in the “Far Abroad”. In terms of the West Asia itself, next in order of priority are the countries of the Northern Tier, most notably Iran and Turkey. The rest of the West Asia—the Levant and the rest of the Arab world—is of far less significance to Moscow, with an almost complete disappearance of any Soviet-style commitment towards the “progressive” cause of Arab anti-imperialism. In strategic importance, Russia in Yeltsin era had experienced the various phases in Russian foreign policy outlook, which began as ideologically pro-Western in 1991 and settled into a pragmatic, national policy by 1996. In ideological terms, Post-Soviet Russia had shed the Soviet ideological power and commitment, influenced its policies in the West Asia, even if much of its policies were driven by pragmatic and geopolitical considerations, and was now wholly driven by pragmatic interests and geopolitics. In political terms, the post-Soviet Russia had multicity of actors influencing foreign policy and subsequently decentralized and sometimes chaotic nature of decision-making which well represented by the Russian foreign policy in early 1990s. In Economic terms, Russian economic interests in post-Soviet Russia had played an increasingly vital role in order to make a process of decision-
making replacing Soviet ideological interests. From all considerations, The West Asia in Yeltsin era was not a region of primary interest. However, same as Soviet time, Russia had on occasion played a role of inordinate significance in the region for Soviet foreign policy-makers.

Putin’s Russia has nonetheless come to be regarded as very different in style and substance to the leadership of his predecessor Yeltsin, a feature Putin deliberately sought to emphasize. Yeltsin’s desire and efforts to integrate Russia into the Western community of nations was portrayed, often unfairly, as a form of capitulation by his political opponents. Putin’s message to his people and to the world was that Russia had the confidence, strength and resources to stand on its own feet and defy the West to protect its interest.

In this context Russia’s cultivation of relations with states such as Iran and Syria were interpreted as signaling a new era of confrontation. Putin’s overtures to Iran, despite its controversial nuclear program, and Syria, with its belligerent regional agenda that included support for militant groups considered as terrorists by most Western countries, led to strong doubts that Russia and the West could cooperate to face the challenges of the modern era. Instead there were deep suspicions that Russia was exploiting the fluidity in the international system and the role of militant non-state actors to promote the interests of the political elite in Moscow.

A dominant view emerged in Russia, as in the West Asia, that the West ultimately respected political power and not human rights. This attitude partially explained Moscow’s efforts under Putin to deflect international pressure away from Syria and Iran, both of which were considered as valuable regional partners. The establishment of an international order based on a balance of powers was the major driving motive of Putin’s foreign policy despite all the rhetoric in Moscow of endorsing international law and cooperation. Syria and Iran had become important tools in this strategy that was primarily focused on limiting US power. According to critics, Russia under Putin was deliberately destructive player in the West Asia by manipulating the untraditional but potentially dangerous post-Cold War order to strengthen its own standing in the world. In its drive to enhance its status in the West Asia, Moscow in the first decade of the twenty-first century stood accused of passing on nuclear technology (Iran); illicit sales of advanced conventional weapons (Iran,
Syria, Hezbollah); hindering UN Resolutions on the Security Council; political cover and support for terrorist organizations (Hamas, Hezbollah); and blocking peaceful democratic development (Syria, Lebanon and indirectly Iraq).

Russia’s power play helped to transform the region’s political and geo-strategic landscape from a decade earlier in the 1990s. An immediate consequence of Russian diplomatic and military support for Iran and Syria was that they emerged as dominant players in the region. Syrian and Iranian proxies Hezbollah, Hamas and others also become more potent and therefore Moscow was culpable in undermining the sovereignty of Lebanon, the security of Israel and generally damaging the standing of Western governments in the West Asia. This rise of Iran, with Russian backing, also increased the sense of danger felt by the Arab Gulf monarchies. The Russian leadership vehemently rejected all of these accusations, arguing strongly that it had in fact tried to play a positive role in all these areas. But Putin and the Russian Foreign Ministry did not deny that Moscow was not obliged to toe the line defined by Washington and reserved the right to act independently in the West Asia, as in any other region in the world, in pursuit of its national interests.

During Vladimir Putin’s presidency (2000-2008), Russia re-emerged in the West Asia as diplomatic, economic and military actor. Putin’ primary goal in the region was to demonstrate that Russia was again a factor in the West Asia, even if its influence in the region remained limited.

Putin stepped down after completing two four-year terms to abide by constitutional term limit but retained power as prime minister before being elected president again in 2012 for a six-year term. Putin’s two track policy which seeks to gain maximum interests from all parties becomes a basis of Russian foreign policy framework up to the present time.

This study is important at least on two levels. Firstly, Russian Federation returns its position to the major world power that is keen to join the game of influence of major world power in any region of the world, including the West Asian region, particularly with respect to Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The study intends to know Russia’s role in this region and to estimate Russian political behavior in foreign policy towards the West Asian Countries in the future. Secondly, this study will
increase a knowledge in the Russian-West Asian relations which is not well researched.

This study traces the development of Russia’s relation with the West Asia which is not new phenomena but very old and experiences over the times of history, to understand the Russia’s of foreign policy which not only refers to its policy towards the West Asia during Vladimir Putin’s presidency (2000-2008), but also reflected its recovery from domestic crisis and its global ambitions, and finally to find out the main aspect of Russia’s foreign policy towards the West Asia.

While attempting to these issues the study will try to answer the following questions:

1. Is Russian activity in the West Asia driven by either new dynamics, or old superpower rivalries as resurfacing in the region?

2. Has Russian foreign policy towards the West Asia still maintained its character from Soviet foreign policy?

3. To what extent Russian role in supporting Iran, Syria, and Libya is able to change the balance of power among West Asian countries and all major powers directly or indirectly influencing in this region?

4. Have West Asian countries recognized Russia as both substitutional major power and a vital factor in peace process in this region?

5. What are the origins of Russian objectives in the West Asia?

6. How have socio-political changes in Russian statehood in the recent and not so recent past affected the direction of its foreign policy?

7. What are the basic goals and characteristics of Post-Soviet Russian diplomacy in the West Asia, and what is Putin’s contributions?

8. Can Russia’s presence in the region be compatible with American, Israeli, or broader Western objectives?

The concern is to find answers to these basic questions with an attempt to find out the main aspect of Russia’s foreign policy towards the West Asia during Vladimir
Putin's presidency (2000-2008). This intention is also to provide forward-looking analysis i.e. Russian policy on the current issues of countries in the West Asia.

In doing so, this study is concentrated on describing and analyzing five distinct areas, in the form of study chapters: (1) The Tsardom of Russia to the Soviet Union: An Overview, (2) A General Outlook of the Soviet Foreign Policy with Special Reference to its Policy towards the West Asia, (3) Conflict Issues and the Involvement of the Soviet Union in the West Asia with Special Reference to Arab-Israeli Conflicts, (4) Russian Foreign Policy in the West Asia during Boris Yeltsin’s Presidency (1991-1999), and (5) Russian Foreign Policy towards the West Asia during Vladimir Putin’s Presidency (2000-2008)—leading to significant conclusions about the development of Russian foreign policy towards the West Asia which varies but inter-connects in different phases.

The methodology followed in this study is inductive, analytical and descriptive. To get reliable and objective information, the study relied both on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include documents published by governments and other international organizations. The secondary sources include newspapers, electronic media, books, periodicals, journals, research reports related to the area of the study on Russian Foreign Policy with emphasis on the West Asian region.

The first chapter attempts to trace the development of Russia's relations with the West Asian countries. This is to emphasize that this relationship is not a new phenomena but very old and experiences over the times of history. In order to trace the genesis of the Tsardom of Russia to the Soviet Union, the first chapter discusses the historical background beginning with Tzarist Russian relations with the West Asia (1547-1721). The chapter further analyses the nature of relationship as developed and grew between the West Asia and the Russian Empire (1721-1917) and subsequently the Soviet Union's relations with the West Asia (1922-1991).

The second chapter discusses the genesis and formation of the Soviet Union with special reference to West Asia in the context of geo-political importance. In doing so, this chapter also examines the importance of the West Asia and Soviet Objectives in the region. An attempt is also made to summarize the political and
international economic trends to analyze the Soviet Union’s relations with the region till 1991.

The third chapter discusses the involvement of the Soviet Union in the region with special reference to Arab-Israeli conflicts which have been investigated with reference to four wars i.e. the 1948 war, the 1956 Suez crisis, the 1967 Six-day war, and the 1973 war. The chapter also discusses Soviet Objectives with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflicts.

The fourth chapter concentrates on the transformation and debates regarding foreign policy postures under Yeltsin from 1991 to 1999. The chapter also examines the development of Russian Foreign policy towards the West Asian region in general and the countries chosen for the study in particular.

The fifth chapter deals with Russian foreign policy towards the West Asia under Vladimir Putin from 2000-2008. Russian Interests in the West Asia in terms of geopolitics, security, economy, are also discussed and examined in detail. The last section of this chapter analyses Russian policy towards the countries of its focus in the region.

The concluding chapter provides an overview of the study in Russian Foreign policy towards the West Asia in Vladimir Putin’s presidency during 2000-2008. The chapter also attempts to investigate and analyze Russian policy on current issues especially Russia’s role in the West Asia after the Arab Spring 2011.

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