CHAPTER 4

Putin and the Near Abroad

Vladimir Putin assumed office as the second president of Russia on May 7, 2000 though he had been the acting president since January that year. As seen in the last chapter, Vladimir Putin inherited a curious mixture of success and failure in the realm of foreign policy from his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin had succeeded in solving some very complex issues like settling various issues with Ukraine and the transfer of nuclear weapons to the Russian soil. He had also been able to reassure the countries of the Near Abroad on the irreversibility of their independence – a major irritant and suspicion that marred Russia's relations with these countries. But on the other hand, he was unable to establish mutual trust among most of the former Soviet Republics. His approach towards the Near Abroad was mostly erratic. His frequent change of foreign ministers also reflected a lack of conviction in his approach towards the former Soviet space.

Apart from Yeltsin's legacy that he inherited, Putin’s accession to power was marked by three significant events that were to later play important role in determining his policy towards the Near Abroad. First was NATO’s expansion towards the east and the subsequent war in Kosovo. To Russians, these were the embodiments to Russia of the US-led effort to isolate Russia and ignore her legitimate security concerns. The second was the outset of another war in Chechnya. This time around, the war had stopped being just a secessionist movement – it was now a war on Islamic fundamentalists and international terrorism. And the third was the financial collapse of the ruble in 1998. Despite the currency meltdown, there was no help forthcoming from the international community though the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international lenders who were pouring billions into Indonesia, South Korea and Brazil, as well as other countries.

These experiences underscored the harsh reality that Putin and the political elite internalized: the international community could not be counted on to help Russia rebuild its economy, provide security reassurances, or support Moscow's attempt to
thwart the rise of Muslim extremism. In other words, Russia, as they saw it, was essentially alone. Hard-nosed and unromantic pragmatism were now the Russian watchwords. There were to be no more “free lunches” for energy-starved countries of the former Soviet Union. And more effort needed to be placed on bilateral relations rather than trying to find group consensus through mechanisms such as the CIS. And, Russia would have to pursue its interests and define its friends according to “what's in it for Russia.”

During the March 2000 presidential election campaign, Putin refused to outline his policy program in any detail or debate other candidates, but took positions on some issues. He called for a strong and stable Russia, fighting crime, and law and order (exemplified by fighting Chechen terrorists as convenient scapegoats). He stressed that “the stronger the state, the freer the individual,” trying to equate safety and freedom. He also argued that a strong state is “part of Russia's genetic code.”

Tough lacking in clarity, these statements gave ample indications where Putin wanted to take Russia and what image he wanted to cultivate for his country in the new millennium.

After Putin became acting president, he gave assurances that Russian foreign policy would not change. A debate on Russia's foreign policy course, however, soon began, encompassing such traditional themes, such as whether Russia should be oriented toward the West or the East, should embrace “globalism” that includes ties with the West or “multipolarity” that emphasizes equality in foreign relations and reliance on multi-lateral institutions. Though Putin in his election campaign mainly stressed domestic issues, he did appear to reject an anti-Western foreign policy. In a letter to the Russian People, Putin stated: “Russian foreign policy should promote national interests. The real, especially economic, interests of the country alone should determine what Russian diplomats do.”

\footnote{Ibid.}
centric approach became very pronounced in most policy decisions taken later by Putin, especially towards the countries of the Near Abroad.

**Pragmatism: Cornerstone of Putin’s Policy**

Putin started readjusting Russian foreign policy even while he was the acting president. The aim was to protect Russian interests to the most extent, to make the nation strong, the people rich, and revive the economy. However, the cornerstone of the new Russian president was 'pragmatism'. Such was the focus on pragmatism that Putin was prepared to give it another try with the West despite the recent bitterness in relations. He realized that Russia could not afford to break away from the financial assistance for its economic recovery over at least the next decade or so. He was prepared to condone the West’s indifference as shown in NATO’s actions simply because he was focused on Russia’s economic interests. In an effort to convince the West, especially the US, about his intentions, he urged the Duma to ratify START II as soon as possible.\(^{154}\) Russia also actively tried to befriend European countries as well. Putin invited German, British, French and Italian foreign ministers to visit Russia, and held consultations on bilateral as well as global issues. On April 16, he broke convention and visited Britain on the eve of his presidential inauguration, conducted meeting with Prime Minister Tony Blair and other business leaders. This not only demonstrated that Putin was prepared to adopt flexibility in Russian diplomacy, but also made clear Putin’s pragmatism centered around economic interests.\(^{155}\) He was prepared to forget the recent wrongs if he thought that would help Russia attain economic prosperity and independence.

This flexibility was most prominent in Putin’s approach towards the NATO. In a BBC interview on March 5, he indicated his desire for close ties with the West and more influence in NATO affairs, reflecting his decision to renew some Russian ties with NATO broken during the Kosovo conflict. He stated: “We believe we can talk about more profound integration with NATO, but only if Russia is regarded as an

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154 On April 10, 2000 Putin chaired a national security meeting to specifically discuss START II. On April 14, he personally made a lobbying speech ensuring the smooth approval of SART II by an overwhelming majority, thus breaking a 7-year deadlock.

155 Guiling, Liu, "Russian Foreign Policy in Putin Presidency", STRATEGIC DIGEST, September 2000, p. 1258
equal partner.” Russia had opposed eastern expansion of NATO, Putin suggested, only because Moscow had been excluded from discussion of the issue, “but this does not mean we are going to shut ourselves off from the world. Isolationism is not an option.” When Lord Robertson visited Russia in March, Putin held talks with him and decided to make rapprochement with NATO and resume contacts. As the acting president he even didn’t rule out “the possibility for Russia to join NATO”, if the latter paid attention to Russian interests and regarded Russia as an equal partner. The western response to Putin’s gestures was immediate. The western creditors agreed on a package of postponing repayments, reducing principal and interest and interest rates, and extension of repayment period over 30 years.

There was a very discernable shift in Russia’s foreign policy towards the West as soon as Putin was appointed the acting president. And unsurprisingly, his pro-Western foreign policy became a source of much speculation, and even wonderment, among both Russian analysts and Russia-watchers in the West. According to one school of the thought, Putin had proven almost visionary in rejecting the reflexive anti-Americanism of his country's political class and steering foreign policy unequivocally westward. For some of the adherents of this view, Putin's move in this direction has been heroic, given that it has powerful opponents throughout Russia's foreign policy, military and security establishments, not to mention its parliament.

The other, more cynical view of Putin's foreign policy shift proclaimed that it was aimed at winning the West's acquiescence to the suppression of press freedom, vote-rigging and human rights violations in Russia. The adherents of this school even suggested that Kremlin propagandists were deliberately fanning nationalistic

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157 Ibid.
158 Guiling, Liu, “Russian Foreign Policy in Putin Presidency”, STRATEGIC DIGEST, September 2000, p. 1258
159 “Foreign policy: westward ho?” CDI Russia Weekly #201, #2, Jamestown Foundation, Apr 10, 2002
opposition to Putin's foreign policy in order to convince the West that he is surrounded by "nationalistic and anti-Western wolves" and thus deserves increased support.\textsuperscript{160} Such cynicism, however, has not found much support from others.

In July 2000, Putin approved a new foreign policy doctrine focusing on economic interests, the rights of Russians abroad and intelligence gathering. Putin also endorsed a document already adopted by the Russian Security Council on March 24 before his election in May. According to various news agencies reporting on the Putin doctrine, top priority for the foreign ministry would be to defend Russian economic interests abroad. The document also focused on the situation of Russians living in the 14 other former Soviet constituent republics. Of particular concern was the alleged discriminatory treatment of Russian minorities in the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

But what seemed to grab everyone's attention was the element of pragmatism in the new doctrine. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov was quoted as saying: "The special thing about this new conception is that it is more realistic than the one approved in 1993."\textsuperscript{161} The new foreign policy doctrine was linked to a new Russian security doctrine adopted by the Kremlin earlier that year, under which Russia hardened its line on use of its nuclear arsenal. The new defense policy went further than the previous one drafted in 1997, which reserved for Russia the right to carry out a first nuclear strike in response to "an armed aggression that seems to threaten the very existence of the Russian Federation." The new version said that Russia envisaged the possibility "of using all forces and means at its disposal, including nuclear weapons, where all other means to settle the crisis have been exhausted or have proved ineffective."\textsuperscript{162} Observers have said that this reliance on nuclear weapons as a means to secure Russia indirectly hinted at Russia's incapability to deal with threats through conventional means.

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{161} http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200007/02/eng20000702_44479.html, Sunday, July 02, 2000

\textsuperscript{162} "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation", Nezavisimaya gazeta, July 11, 2000, pp. 1-6 in CURRENT DIGEST OF POST-SOVIET PRESS, Vol. 52 (8), 2000, p. 7
Putin's Policy towards the Near Abroad

President Putin's arrival into the presidential office in the Kremlin signaled a fundamental change in the very approach of Russian foreign policy. If not in her deeds, Russia in her words seemingly agreed with the West that Western countries' relations with CIS countries is not a "zero sum game" for Russia. Since the beginning of 2001, Russian foreign policy changed its tone in relations with almost all CIS countries from a big brother attitude to a pragmatic approach. The new approach that Russia started to implement was to be called "pragmatic realism", implying the use of a whole array of Russian leverage tools.

On his accession to power in Russia, Putin discovered that the West was gradually but surely intensifying its infiltration into the CIS by providing financial help as bait. At the same time, some CIS members were actively seeking a balance of power between the West and Russia for the sake of their own interests. In a nutshell, the CIS was confronted with increasing serious eccentricity, chaotic economic order, and slower integration process. Though over 2500 legislation documents were drafted or signed over the first decade of post-USSR era, they did hardly anything for the actual integration of the CIS members. The first-ever real step towards integration was the Russian-Belarus Union Treaty of December 8, 1999. Though it was open to other members also, most of the CIS members showed little or no interest in joining the union. During the entire Yeltsin period, in the Kremlin, the CIS was regarded as a mechanism for preserving Russian great power status and a compensation for the collapse of empire. For the other former Soviet republics, the CIS promised to be a framework, which could ensure the continued flow of Russian goods, oil and gas at subsidized prices but without the overbearing influence from Moscow. Both sides were disappointed: Russia was unable to translate its pre-eminent economic power into political influence, and the other republics discovered that economic dependence on Moscow had to mean

163 James Purcell Smith, "Putin's pragmatic approach to CIS countries is paying off", CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST, July 17, 2002, cited on http://www.cacianalyst.org
164 Ibid.
165 Guiling, Liu, "Russian Foreign Policy in Putin Presidency", STRATEGIC DIGEST, September 2000, p. 1261
political dependence as well. Yeltsin had studiously avoided facing this basic fact. Instead, he tried to 'consolidate' the CIS through the creation of a myriad of new institutions and various political declarations, all of which were intended to draw the member countries closer together, while restricting the cost of Moscow's imperial burden.

Whatever the shortcomings of the CIS as an integrating mechanism in the post-Soviet space, Putin was very clear from the beginning that the former Soviet Republics would be an important area of focus under his presidency. In his State-of-the-Federation address on April 18, 2000 Putin made it very clear that the Near Abroad would remain the top priority of Russian foreign policy. Putin's speech contained altogether nine paragraphs dealing with foreign affairs, and seven of them were dedicated to the Near Abroad countries. One of the paragraphs of the speech stated that, "work with CIS states is the main foreign policy priority of Russia". He called the CIS a "real factor of stability on the vast territory...an influential association of states." He once again claimed that Russian foreign policy would be entirely pragmatic. For Putin, CIS could be a powerful basis and strategic backbone for stabilizing neighborhood, balance against NATO and rebuilding major power status. "The first 20 years of the 21st century will be a key decade to establish a modern CIS which will be an influential regional organization, and promoting the prosperity and cooperation in the post-Soviet land," he said. He soon took certain initiatives to give practical shape to his thoughts on strengthening the CIS mechanisms. He focused mainly on two things: strengthening alliance and centrality of CIS, and on promoting collective security cooperation.

Putin visited Belarus and Ukraine and reached consensus with President Lukashenko on common border defense, currency and nationality, and held consultations with President Kuchma on cementing military cooperation. He also

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166 "Putin launches revolution”, an article from Foreign Report at www.jane's.com Nov 11, 2000
167 Cohen, Ariel, "CIS remains top priority in Russian foreign policy”, CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST, April 24, 20002 cited on http://www.cacianalyst.org
168 Ibid.
169 Ibid.
expressed his desire to include Ukraine and Kazakhstan into the Union of Russia and Belarus within two to three years. Russia and Kazakhstan signed a general agreement on military cooperation, which would strengthen Kazakh armed forces with Russian technology. In April the same year, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan held a joint Chief Command military exercise called "CIS Southern Shield – 2000" in Dushanbe. Putin discussed military, economic and security cooperation with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan during his visit to these countries on May 18-20.

There is little doubt that Putin considers the Near Abroad as a Russian sphere of influence. Putin’s efforts to recreate a Russian sphere of influence in the CIS are partly economic (to secure oil and other revenues); partly geopolitical (to enhance political control over neighbors and secure a buffer security zone against Islamic extremism in the South); and partly domestic politics (to enhance his popularity and to silence communists and nationalists). During Yeltsin’s presidency, Russia supported “hot spots” and de-facto independent quasi-states in several areas where they could be used to pressure sovereign governments. Trans-Dniester in Moldova, Abkhazia in Georgia, Karabakh in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, and Islamic radicals in Uzbekistan were some examples of such “hot spots”. Putin didn’t intend to give up that policy totally. However, a new policy that combined economics and security soon emerged under Putin. Added to this was the tone of assertiveness of Russian interests in the region.

Though Putin made the Near Abroad as one of his top most priorities in Russian foreign policy, he was up against apprehensive counterparts throughout the former Soviet space. And that was not only due to his predecessor’s actions during the last decade of the 20th century. The CIS elite feared Putin because he is a former KGB agent and also a potential liberal. They fear his rather erratic fight against corruption, his economic liberalism, and the contradictory combination of introducing civil rights policies with restoring order in the country.170

There were certain indicators that can be helpful in understanding Putin’s policies towards the Near Abroad. First, unlike his predecessor, Putin was not considered responsible for the Soviet Union’s dissolution and therefore didn’t really need to maintain the image of a successful CIS, which Yeltsin had to do in order to justify his behavior in 1991. Second, Putin is not a public politician. He does not need to manipulate Near Abroad issues in order to raise public support or boost his popularity at home. Third, Putin’s regime, unlike the previous, was not anti-Communist, as demonstrated by the January 2000 deal between pro-presidential and Communist factions in the Duma. Again, this meant that policies towards the Near Abroad would no longer be divisive since it was unnecessary to use this card to outplay the left opposition. All the above factors permit a cautious prediction that Russian policy towards the Near Abroad under Putin would be more pragmatic and consistent than before.  

One of the problems that Putin faced on becoming the president of Russia was the creation of free economic zone among the CIS members – something that had proved to be elusive for almost a decade. After Russia’s August 1998 economic crisis, certain CIS countries began a customs war among themselves. Though many of these measures were later rescinded, as a rule, whenever Russian products were competitive they faced custom duties, while the CIS republics appealed to Moscow to continue the supply of cheap fuel. When Russia obliged it soon discovered that even subsidized fuel was often not repaid; the CIS member states were much more concerned with settling their international debts to Western financial institutions and governments, rather than eliminating their debts to Moscow. Putin was infuriated by the fact that some CIS members, while maintaining the guise of the CIS, were indulging in other strategic games, which were not to Russia’s advantage. A CIS Central Asian Union, composed of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, was created to stand up to Russia’s military interventions in the region, while milking the Kremlin of maximum financial assistance. Much more significant was the creation of GUUAM, which consists of Georgia, Ukraine, 

172 “Putin launches revolution”, an article from Foreign Report at www.jane’s.com November 11, 2000
Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova. These countries were planning to establish their own free trade zone without consideration for Russia's interests. Putin reacted in the manner that has become his distinct style now. Moscow canceled its visa-free travel regime with all the countries. There were indications that Putin might take the drastic action of dismantling the CIS altogether replace with the individual bullying of key former Soviet republics. The instruments are Russia's traditional ones: oil deliveries and armed forces.

Putin is determined to change Russia's policies towards the Near Abroad despite resistance from a number of states. No longer slogans, or paper institutions within the CIS but naked power and bullying is now Moscow's message. Viewed from another perspective, Putin is using the 'carrot and stick' policy towards the Near Abroad. His new approach is exemplified in the case of Ukraine. He showed great respect for Ukraine by visiting Kiev first as the Russian president. However, at the same time, he didn't forget to show the Kremlin's teeth. The Ukrainians were told that if they couldn't settle their fuel bills Russia would accept payment in the form of a share in Ukraine's oil pipelines. The aim is self-evident: if Russia ultimately controls the pipelines legally, Ukraine's independence will be diminished.

**Putin and Ukraine**

Ukraine probably serves as the best example of the new pragmatism in Russian policy under Putin towards the Near Abroad. When Putin became the president of Russia, Russian-Ukrainian economic relations were in decline due to protectionism on both sides. However, Russia remained Ukraine's largest economic donor both in terms of state debt and energy. The energy debt on Ukraine had reached an astonishing $3.5 billion. Exploiting its near monopoly on Russian gas transit, Ukraine had dilly-dallied on repayments apart from siphoning of 2-3 billion cubic meters of gas. Schemes of debt payment were frequently agreed upon, but Ukraine never implemented them, not even payments in kind. On the other hand, given the state of its own economy, Russia could no longer afford to subsidize Ukraine. Recognizing the need to put pressure on Ukraine, Putin adopted a 'no more free

\[173\] Ibid.
lunches' policy rather than former brotherly attitudes towards Ukraine. Measures were taken to dismantle the donor-recipient model of economic relations between Russia and Ukraine, primarily by decreasing Russian dependence on Ukrainian transit. Alternative gas transit routes – for example one through Belarus and Poland – were planned and executed. Electricity supplies and deliveries of fuel for nuclear power stations were stopped or suspended by Russian producers who did not receive payments. In early December 1999 Russia imposed on Ukraine oil and electricity embargo in order to persuade it not to steal gas from the pipelines. Also, during debt negotiations, Russia consistently tried to pursue an agenda that seemed to be coordinated with business. This contrasted with the earlier tradition in which all talks ended in Ukraine's promises to pay later and Russia's readiness to accept payments in (almost any) kind. In other words, ever since Putin's coming to power, Russian policy towards Ukraine has been more economically driven and aimed at promoting Russian business interests in Ukraine.

It was clear that Putin was stepping up pressure on Ukraine. Russia pressured Kuchma to fire Ukraine's pro-Western Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk in 2000 and Prime Minister Victor Yushchenko in 2001. In January 2001, Moscow and Kiev reportedly signed a 52-clause classified military agreement giving Russia considerable influence over Ukrainian military planning. Clearly, Ukraine is under pressure to re-align itself more closely with Russia. This maybe subtly aimed at alienating Ukraine from NATO. On the economic front, Russian companies are on a buying spree to gain control over the electric grids, oil and gas pipelines, and aluminum refineries, which will economically further link Ukraine to Russia. Russian companies are spending hundreds of millions of US dollars to acquire these assets. As it was predicted, Kiev turned towards Moscow, by signing major intergovernmental agreements in June 2001, including gas transit agreement for 15 years, cooperation in military-scientific sphere, steel, shipbuilding and many others fields of interstate cooperation.

**Putin and Belarus**

Russia has large economic interests in Belarus. Apart from being one of the top trade partners of Russia, Belarus serves as a vital transit route for Russian gas. Also, 80% of Russian road transit to Western Europe goes through Belarus.
contrast to most other Near Abroad countries, the process of political integration, including reunification with Russia is very popular in Belarus.\textsuperscript{174} While he was in power, Yeltsin constantly played the Belarusian card whenever he needed to retake the initiative in the integration field from the Communists.\textsuperscript{175} In other words, the reintegration with Belarus was a very emotive issue and was often politicized under Yeltsin. This has changed to a great extent under the Putin administration because there is currently no need to exploit the issue in domestic politics.\textsuperscript{176}

**Putin and the Baltic States**

Economic considerations have never been the real issue between Russia and the three Baltic States. Russian trade with the Baltic States is too insignificant to stimulate consistent attention. Only ice-free Baltic ports and servicing Russian exports are considered an element of interdependence between Russia and the Baltic States. Sudden tariff increases on Russian exports have sometimes resulted in a crisis in bilateral relations with the Baltic States. Initially, the status of Russian minorities there created bitterness in relations, but even that has lost its significance due to the fact that immigration of repatriates from the Baltic States has almost stopped. Though the issue can still be exploited for political purposes, it is unlikely to rally long-lasting electoral support. Also, it really remains an issue with only Latvia and Estonia since Lithuania has already granted citizenship to all its residents, thereby fulfilling an important precondition for bilateral interaction. Under the Putin administration, Russian policy toward the Baltic States has mostly retained its Yeltsin paradigm, which is aimed at keeping the relationship stable in the long run. Occasionally, Moscow has raised concerns regarding the problem of the Russian Diaspora. Other irritant has been the NATO expansion in these states, but Moscow has already acquiesced in the NATO policy, though reluctantly. This was a given condition to Putin and he has decided to maintain the status quo.

\textsuperscript{174} According to two polls conducted in October and November 1999 by the Public Opinion Foundation and VTSIOM, if the reunification referendum took place in Russia, 68% and 71% respectively would be for it, with only 17% and 13% against.

\textsuperscript{175} Moshes, Arkady, "Russian Policy Towards Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States in the Putin Era", Memo No. 123, PONARS, 2000, cited on http://www.fas.harvard.edu

\textsuperscript{176} For details on why was it so, see: Ibid.
Putin and the Central Asian Republics

Ever since the collapse of the USSR, both Russia and the Central Asian republics have found it very difficult to come to terms with the meaning of independence in the post-Soviet world. The collapse of the socialist system took the Central Asian states by surprise, as they were totally dependent on Moscow in socio-economic terms. Consequently, the Central Asian leaders opted for restoring their economic links to Moscow, despite their desire to remain politically independent. The paradoxical objectives of restoring economic ties to Moscow in the short-term and safeguarding their political independence in the long term has often complicated these states' relationship with Moscow.

Under President Putin, Russia's foreign policy establishment has been revising Russia's foreign policy towards the Turkic states. In the post-Yeltsin period, Moscow relies not on the strategy of achieving territorial domination but on the notion that Russian national interests are best served by the exploitation of economic levers of influence. Under Putin, Moscow has been trying to address a number of related security and social issues, including the prevention of the spread of Islamic radicalism and the penetration of Western business interests into Central Asia. Also, Moscow is trying to persuade ethnic Russians living in these states to remain in these states, rather than emigrate. Therefore, ethnic Russians are an effective instrument of linking the Turkic states to Russia closely.

There is little doubt that in the long-term, Russian objective remains to keep the Central Asian republics under its hegemony. However, this task is clearly beyond the capacity of Russia. Putin has understood the financial limitations that Moscow faces in dealing with the security threat from its southern flank. Hence, the post-September 11 alliance between Russia and the US must be seen in that backdrop.

There has been criticism of Putin permitting US in Central Asia republics. The critics say that the step might undermine the effectiveness and the very rationale of

CIS. Others feel that a 2-3 year US presence would help Russia to reduce radical Islam. Also, they realize that cooperating with the West in Central Asia and in other matters is the only option for Russia’s economic development. But the critics have used the occasion to corner Putin on his ‘anti-Near Abroad’ approach.

**Putin’s Response to Russian Security Concerns**

One of Putin’s first official decisions in the area of security policy was to sign the National Security Concept in January 2000. Interestingly, Russia had its first official national security concept only in 1997 – seven years after the collapse of the USSR. The 2000 Security Concept was a substantial change from the December 1997 National Security Concept, and also a significant shift from liberal elements in former President Yeltsin’s political coalition. The 1997 National Security Concept stated that the most important threats to Russian security lay not in the international system but in Russia’s internal conditions. Since Russia’s internal threats arise from economic decline, instability, and societal problems such as poor health and unemployment, they must be addressed through economic reform. It was truly astonishing that the national security policy of such a large and important country considered internal threats to security more significant than external threats. Traditional international security threats were noted, but these were secondary to the internal threats. However, by the turn of the millennium when Putin assumed the presidency of Russia, the internal as well as external conditions had altered significantly. And there was a logical shift in the security concerns. The reasons for the shift were partly internal, arising from Russia’s own domestic political and economic developments after the August 1998 financial crisis, but they are also the result of NATO’s war in Kosovo and other difficulties in Russia’s relations with the US. One of the most significant factors, however, that changed Moscow’s security concerns was the rise of international terrorism throughout the world, and particularly in its neighborhood.

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179 Ibid.
Rise of Islamic Extremism

Moscow's growing concerns about the rise of Islamic extremism were evident in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation approved by Putin in July 2000. In one of the paragraphs, it stated that Moscow "regards the fight against international terrorism, which is capable of destabilizing not only individual countries but even whole regions, as a crucial foreign policy objective..."\(^{180}\) Again, "the threat of global destruction that characterized the Cold War, has been replaced by such repugnant phenomena as international terrorism, militant separatism and interethnic conflicts, the illegal arms and drug traffic."\(^{181}\) Of special concern was Russia's apprehension about the rise of Islamic extremism in the Central Asian states. President Putin visited these states in May 2000 and expressed his concerns regarding the rise of Islamic extremism, especially in Uzbekistan. In one of his press briefings after Uzbekistan visit, he said: "Uzbekistan can count on Russia's understanding and help."\(^{182}\) Talking about terrorists who were entering Uzbekistan from abroad, especially from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, he said: "Our efforts in this area will be stepped up. Preemptive strikes will be taken if necessary."\(^{183}\) The result of these shared threat perceptions among Moscow and the Central Asian states was a host of military agreements through which Moscow was able to protect its sensitive soft underbelly. If looked in the Chechnya context, Moscow was able to justify its war in the name of fighting against international terrorism.

Later, in the wake of September 11 attacks on New York, Russia played a very significant role in the strikes against Afghanistan-based Taliban and Al-Qaeda. It permitted the US use of its airspace and also to establish military bases in Uzbekistan to carry out strikes against Taliban. Though this step was criticized in certain circles, Putin realized that cooperation with the US was needed if he had to successfully fight against similar threats inside the Russian Federation.

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\(^{181}\) Igor Ivanov, quoted from Nezavisimaya gazeta, January 20, 2000, p. 9 in CURRENT DIGEST OF POST-SOVIET PRESS, Vol. 52 (3), 2000, p. 9


\(^{183}\) Ibid.
Kosovo, Chechnya, and Russia's New Environment

The 1998-99 period was a turning point for Russian assessment of its international environment, and for the composition of its governing coalition. The liberal-statist balance of political elite interests was upset in 1998 and 1999 by the August financial crisis and, more importantly, by the Western war in Kosovo. The August crisis undermined liberal views by exposing Russia's vulnerability to the international economy and financial markets. On the other hand, NATO's unilateral action in Kosovo was in total disregard of Russian concerns. During the last some years, Russia had reluctantly agreed to partnership with NATO because it assumed that NATO would act with UN mandate in settling international disputes. And since Russia had a veto power in the UN, it could play a significant role in those disputes through the UN. However, NATO's Kosovo war was disillusionment for Russia. The issue of the expansion of NATO's membership was difficult enough for Russia: with Kosovo, it faced the expansion of NATO's mission, unrestrained by the UN. The expansion of NATO's mission to encompass unilateral intervention to settle an internal ethnic conflict and enforce Western human rights priorities created the potential for something deemed even worse than membership enlargement. Given instability on and within Russia's borders in the Caucasus, Caspian, and Central Asia – areas in which the US has expressed both economic and geostrategic interests – the expansion of NATO's mission could threaten Russia's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. The US might not agree, but it is important to understand that Russians consider Chechnya in light of Kosovo, Western policy and priorities, and NATO's mission expansion. Kosovo signaled that American and Russian priorities were not in sync and that the US was more willing than the 1997 Concept had assumed to use military force closer to Russian borders. "A number of expectations associated with the development of new, equal and mutually beneficial partnerships between Russia and the surrounding world, as was anticipated in the 'Basic Provisions of the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy Concept' approved by presidential order on April 23, 1993, and in other documents, have not been borne out." This recognition of failure to achieve the

184 Ibid.
desired objectives necessitated a re-look at the entire process in the new security concept under Putin.

The 2000 Security Concept elevated the importance and expanded the types of external threats to Russian security. The Concept provided a substantial list of external threats, including: the weakening of the OSCE and UN; weakening Russian political, economic, and military influence in the world; the consolidation of military-political blocs and alliances (particularly further eastward expansion of NATO), including the possibility of foreign military bases or deployment of forces on Russian borders; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the means of their delivery; weakening of the CIS, and escalation of conflicts on CIS members' borders; and territorial claims against Russia.

Though it devoted a great deal of attention to internal threats to Russian security, arising primarily from the difficulties of its post-communist transition and its unsuccessful economic reforms, it also emphasized terrorism, societal discontent and disharmony, the uneven benefits of economic reform, the criminalization of Russian society, and the lack of a rule-based state to guarantee the safety and well-being of Russian citizens to a greater degree. It further justified a reform policy with greater emphasis on the role of the Russian state in shaping the economy, safeguarding stability, and regulating social and political life. On the economic front, Russia's financial vulnerability had been severely exposed in August 1998. When the ruble was devalued after the crisis, Russian economy showed immediate recovery. This convinced the political elite that a less Western-dependent, more state-directed policy of economic reform could be Russia's path to stability and eventual prosperity. Given the greater significance accorded to external threats in the new assessment, it is not surprising that the new Concept called for a greater emphasis on traditional security instruments.

Putin and NATO
One of the most complex issues that have bogged down Russian policy makers ever since the collapse of the USSR has been the eastward expansion of NATO. By the turn of the millennium, it was a forgone conclusion that the US-led NATO was ignoring all Russian pleas and was determined to increase its presence in East
Europe. But it was the desire of some of the CIS members to seek protection from NATO and build closer alliance with the organization that worried Putin and Russian policy makers more. After the Prague Summit of NATO in 2002, the Uzbekistan president Islam Karimov was particularly outspoken, emphasizing that his country needed NATO for protection and that it would be seeking even closer cooperation with the Alliance in the future.\textsuperscript{186} The September 11 terrorist attacks on the US was a turning point in this direction. Islamic terrorism had assumed new dimensions since that day and being close to the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, the Central Asian republics in particular wanted a more effective protection mechanism for themselves. Russia realized that it had no option but ultimately to acquiesce in NATO's expansion, which it did in the beginning of the new millennium. Putin's response was immediate. He gave in to NATO's eastward expansion, but demanded that the West must recognize Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia as areas of Russia's exclusive strategic interests. And his assertiveness is paying off. NATO seems to be increasingly giving consideration to Russia's view of the CIS.\textsuperscript{187}

In the wake of the Kremlin's decision of not to oppose NATO enlargement, focus was shifted to adopt what many called a 'damage limitation strategy'. Tighter military integration in the Near Abroad was seen as a key element of that strategy. On May 14, 2002, a decision was taken in Moscow to transform the defunct Tashkent treaty organization into a military-political alliance similar in structure and functions to NATO. It is very clear that as far as the former Soviet space is concerned, Russia is steadily becoming more assertive. It is actively seeking to reinforce its positions in the region, by the means of new military basing rights, a growing intelligence presence, and control over the energy, transport and telecommunications sectors of former Soviet republics. And this new approach was evident in the formation of the Collective Security Organization (CSO) in October 2002.

\textsuperscript{186} Trifonov, Denis, "Russia reasserts superiority over he CIS in the wake of NATO summit in Prague", CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST, December 4, 2002
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
Collective Security Organization

On October 7, 2002 the presidents of Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed the founding documents of a Collective Security Organization (CSO) at the CIS summit in Chisinau, Moldova. The CSO is designed to operationalize the 1992 CIS Collective Security Treaty (CST), advancing from a largely declarative document to a political-military structure. Creation of the CSO marks a further step toward the formation of a Russian-led bloc in Eurasia – a goal that Putin declared from the outset of his presidency in January 2000 and reasserted at successive occasions since then. The documents were to be ratified by all the respective parliaments by May 2003 – an unusually short timeframe by CIS standards.

The CSO charter permits troops and other personnel from CSO member countries on the territories of other member countries. In practice, this would basically mean Russian troops and personnel on member countries’ territories. Russia has indicated that it values this evolving mechanism primarily for authorizing the short-notice entry, transit, or operations of Russian troops on the member countries’ territories, as well as providing a multilateral framework for joint military exercises. Anti-terrorism operations also provide Moscow’s rationale for planning such troop movements and exercises under Russian leadership. In other words, Moscow is trying to use anti-terrorist rhetoric to justify the formation of military and security structure in Central Asia under its own leadership.\textsuperscript{188} The CSO has subsequently been described as a “collective military-political structure.”\textsuperscript{189}

\textsuperscript{188} Socor, Vladimir, “Eurasian Military-Political Bloc Mooted at CIS Summit”, IASPS Policy Briefings: Oil in Geostrategic Perspective, October 23, 2002

\textsuperscript{189} The formula and the planned modus operandi of the CSO, as unveiled at the May 2002 CSO summit, recall the Warsaw Treaty Organization in several ways. Like that defunct organization, the “collective” CST/CSO would: provide a framework for bilateral relations between Moscow and each of the member countries; ensure that doctrine, planning, procurement policies, and training within the CSO are centrally controlled from Moscow; guarantee that Russian officers dominate the nominally collective staffs; and, if necessary, place a collective stamp of approval on Russian-initiated troop movements. The CSO mechanism is explicitly designed for use on the territories of its own member countries, recalling the Warsaw Pact’s role in lending its collective name to what were in essence Russian policies and operations.
The fact the CSO summit coincided exactly with NATO’s Reykjavik meeting which confirmed the alliance’s enlargement intentions as well as the new partnership with Russia proves that it was a signal to the West that Moscow felt entitled to set up a bloc of its own. But how far the alliance will go remains a big question mark. Russia’s financial constraints coupled with the half-hearted willingness of the other members to be corralled into a Moscow-led alliance can put paid to Putin’s desire of such an endeavor in the Near Abroad. Nevertheless, CSO remains one of the options for Russia to recoup some of the lost influence following NATO’s eastward expansion as well as US-led deployments in Central Asia.

Continuity and Change under Putin
In this section, we will try to highlight the elements of changes and continuity that Putin brought about in Russian foreign policy from those pursued by Yeltsin. There were apparently some evident changes that Putin brought in and which were a complete break from Yeltsin’s era. These included: restoring close relations with a number of former Soviet client states (regarded in the US as “rogue regimes”), including North Korea, Cuba, Iraq and Iran; putting economic pressure on independent-minded former Soviet states; escalating sales of arms to China, India and Iran; and modifying Russia’s doctrine on the use of nuclear weapons. In a testimony to Congress, the CIA director George Tenet said that: “Moscow may be resurrecting the Soviet-era zero-sum approach to foreign policy.” The testimony prompted a New York Times headline: “CIA Chief Sees Russia Trying to revive its challenge to US”. Putin’s arrival signaled a fundamental change in the very approach of the Russian foreign policy. However, subsequent events proved that Putin had no intentions of reviving the Soviet Union; he was merely more assertive than his predecessor in protecting Russian interests.

The above assessment of Russian foreign policy under Putin suggests a definite break from the Yeltsin era. But a closer examination of Putin’s record, combined with a look back at Boris Yeltsin’s last years, shows that the reality is much more
complicated than the observers' rhetoric suggests. In his paper, Donaldson argues that Putin's foreign policy demonstrates substantial continuity with the line that was followed during Yeltsin's last years in office – as opposed to the much more pro-American policy initially pursued by Yeltsin and Kozyrev in 1992. Indeed, Putin's basic foreign policy line does not essentially depart from the direction set by Evgenii Primakov during the period 1996-1999, when he was foreign minister and then prime minister of Russia.

Even Yeltsin had often shown distrust towards the West, especially during his last year in power. This was mainly because Russia's interests were clearly ignored by the West during the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, and the expansion of NATO's membership, which was downright humiliating for Russia. As early as 1997, Yeltsin was complaining bitterly of American unilateralism and insisting on restoration of a multipolar world: "We do not need an uncle from somewhere," he told a European gathering. And when Western, especially American critics, sought to put pressure on Russia on the Chechnya issue in 1999, Yeltsin even sent a veiled nuclear threat to the US.

President Yeltsin's primary foreign policy objective was to create a non-threatening international environment that would be most conducive to the country's economic and political development. Given Russia's economic weakness and its declining military strength, this originally resulted in a foreign policy of accommodation, retrenchment, and risk-avoidance, particularly in relations with states beyond the old Soviet borders. Putin has essentially followed the same ideology in foreign policy. The fact that he initiated positive steps in relations with the West immediately after becoming the acting president shows that he didn't want to


192 An extract from Yeltsin's speech as it appeared in "Boris Yeltsin's Chinese Warning", Kommersant, December 10, 1999, in CDPSP, vol. 51, no. 50 (1999), p. 1: "Yesterday Clinton permitted himself to put pressure on Russia. He evidently forgot for a second, a minute, or half a minute just what Russia is, and that Russia possesses a full arsenal of nuclear weapons. He forgot that....It never has been and never will be the case that he alone dictates to the world how to live, how to work, what sort of recreation to have, and so on. No. I repeat, no! A multipolar world – that's the basis of everything."
jeopardize the international environment in a way that could hinder Russia's economic development. Institutionally, under Yeltsin, the Russian president dominated the country's foreign policy, a trend that has continued without any alteration under Putin as well. For Putin, as for Yeltsin before him, priority number one in Russian foreign policy has been the relationship with these and other states of the former Soviet Union. The basic aim of Russian foreign policy, and the definition of Russian national interests, has essentially remained the same under Putin.

Putin has pursued continuity in the basic direction of Russian foreign policy. However, there is no doubt that he has brought a dramatic change in diplomatic and policy-making style. There have also been some substantive innovations, but much of the change that has been perceived by outside observers results either from stylistic differences or from the remarkable improvement that has occurred in the internal policy-making environment, i.e., in Russia's economic and political circumstances.

The most visible change that Putin has brought to Russia's foreign policy is a heightened level of presidential activism. The vagaries of Yeltsin's health kept him sidelined during much of his last term in office, but this was compounded by his aides' evident concern at his erratic behavior on foreign trips. When he (Yeltsin) was in Moscow he would heatedly and sincerely make a scapegoat of the West, but when he was back in the West under the influence of the friendly attention of his host, Yeltsin would make concessions that were unanticipated even by his closest foreign policy associates. Yeltsin had failed to articulate a clear and consistent vision of Russia's national interests and to enforce sufficient discipline on the government team to translate his vision into an effective policy. Jealous of the power of subordinates, eager to decide all major questions, but reluctant to shoulder responsibility, Yeltsin seemed to delight in setting opposite forces in his administration against each other, apparently blind to the


inconsistencies and instability that resulted. Ultimately though, it was the absence of a guiding vision in foreign policy that produced a foreign policy that seemed to lurch from point to point. That explains to a great extent consistent vacillation in Russian foreign policy under Yeltsin.

Putin, on the other hand, has been very clear in his understanding of Russian foreign policy and national interests. He seems to know exactly where he wants to take Russia. In sharp contrast to Yeltsin's relative inactivity, Putin logged two-dozen foreign trips in his first year as president! Unlike Yeltsin, Putin has not let personal whims dictate terms in matters of state policy. For him, Russia's interests have been paramount. Putin has been able to improve relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia precisely because he has let national interests— and not personal likes and dislikes— be the guiding principles. And compared to his predecessor, he has handled his team more effectively. Not only have the frequent ministerial shuffles been absent, but also the propensity to create new councils and advisory bodies in the foreign policy realm. Also, Putin has stood up more firmly to the pressure from the ultra-nationalists within his government. Putin has also made Russian foreign policy more 'pro-active' in sharp contrast to his predecessor's 'reactionary' policies.

Of course, these changes have been aided by the changed circumstances— both economic as well as political— in Russia. The virtual disappearance of political opposition has given Putin a freer hand in policy-making. The positive economic growth for two consecutive years following the devaluation of ruble in 1998 also freed Putin from over-reliance on international assistance.

But as noted throughout the above discussions, what has really differentiated Putin from Yeltsin in matters of foreign policy is the emphasis on "pragmatism". In an interview with Russian journalists, Putin summed up the new pragmatism in Russia's approach to the world. "In the Soviet days we scared the world so that huge military and political blocs emerged. But ten years ago we decided for some

reason that everyone heartily loves us....We must get rid of imperial ambitions on
the one hand, and on the other clearly understand where our national interests are,
to spell them out, and fight for them."\footnote{196} In Russian foreign policy, Putin has
imparted vigor and activism that has perhaps startled a world grown accustomed to
Boris Yeltsin's style.\footnote{197} But at the same time, he has kept his eye on the theme that
has characterized Russian foreign policy since it was so clearly articulated by
Evgenii Primakov five years ago: "Russia doesn't have permanent enemies, but it
does have permanent interests."\footnote{198}

**Conclusion**

Even as Putin approached the end of first year as the Russian president, observers
started to analyze his style with great interest. While some accused him of being
over nostalgic about the Soviet period, others saw in him being too soft towards the
West. Putin's rule has been characterized by dramatic changes in Russian domestic
and foreign policy, which can generally be named as triumph of the national­
interest-driven system of power.\footnote{199} Under Putin, Russia's strategy has become
more assertive, diversified and pragmatic than before. His pragmatism has
increasingly revolved around economic considerations rather than zero sum
thinking. Under Yeltsin, Russian foreign policy was characterized by Russian
desire to exert influence in a multi-polar world and was heavily steeped in zero
sum terms. Russia saw itself as the sole arbiter in regional conflicts, and the energy
debts owed to Russia by former Soviet states allowed it to keep CIS states under its
thumb. However, under the leadership of Putin, Russia adopted a new policy

\footnote{196} "Putin Seeks a 'Pragmatic' Foreign Policy Line," JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION MONITOR, January 4, 2001, in CDI Russia Weekly, #135


\footnote{198} Quoted in Robert H. Donaldson and Joseph L. Nogee, "The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests", Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, NY, p. 120

focused around the economy, multi-lateral conflict resolution, and pragmatism.\textsuperscript{200} Russia's policy under Yeltsin was too expensive and yielded limited results. Putin has realized that Russia cannot afford to drain its limited resources by meddling unnecessarily in the Near Abroad if there were to be any economic reconstruction.

One of the very strong evidences of Putin's pragmatism has been his collaboration with the US after September 11 attack on the US. Though he knew it would allow US intervention on the Central Asian countries – claimed by Moscow as exclusive Russian spheres – he also realized that it could serve Russian interests in fighting the Chechen rebels. Hence, he acquiesced in allowing US air basis in Central Asia in its fight against Afghanistan-based Taliban and Al-Qaeda. In fact, in his 2002 State of the Federation Address, Putin took the credit for "liquidating the most dangerous center of international terrorism in Afghanistan" through "common efforts" of the US and Russia.\textsuperscript{201} But at the same time, he emphasized the role of CIS as a "real factor of stability on the vast territory...an influential association of states."\textsuperscript{202} Such attempts to balance the role of the CIS and extra-CIS organizations in maintaining stability in the Near Abroad is bound to be difficult task for Putin in the coming years. The US, especially under President George W. Bush has committed itself to fight against international terrorism wherever it may arise. How long will the US-Russia alliance last on this front would be interesting to watch. There are already strains between the two over US mission in Iraq.

Putin's pragmatism has already paid off as is evident from the case of Ukraine. He agreed to cut Ukraine's enormous gas debt and to work out an agreement for repayment in exchange for the cessation of Ukrainian siphoning of gas from Russian pipelines. It was clear that Putin wanted to get past the issue and improve relations with Ukraine. Also, Russia began negotiations for withdrawal from Transdniestria.


\textsuperscript{201} Cohen, Ariel, "CIS Remains Top Priority in Russian Foreign Policy", CENTRAL ASIA-Caucasus Analyst, April 24, 2002 cited on http://www.cacianalyst.org

\textsuperscript{202} Ibid.
Of course, there have been exceptions to Russia’s apparent new policy of pragmatism and abandonment of Cold War policy approaches.\textsuperscript{203} Russian-Georgian relations have suffered because Putin saw September 11 as an excuse to crack down on what Russia alleges as terrorism in Georgia. The Ministry of Defense still maintains a great deal of influence in Georgia, and it appears that Russia has no clear policy toward the troubled state. Russia appears stuck in a perpetual damage control mode. Many analysts suggest that Georgia will become a failed state in the next three years or so, which will pose a significant security threat to Russia. Furthermore, Russia continues to use energy as a political weapon.\textsuperscript{204}

Despite some occasional criticism, there is near unanimity among observers that Putin’s new pragmatic approach towards the Near Abroad is paying off for Russia. Under Yeltsin, Russia had adopted a “big brotherly” attitude towards the former Soviet Republics, often generating apprehensions among the newly independent states. Yeltsin’s approach was based on presumption of the new Russia’s equality to the Soviet Union and its geopolitical interests, rather than based on the new realities of national economy.

Starting from the mid-2001, Russian foreign policy became “more personalized”. Putin continues the process of centralization of power, increasingly becoming the sole generator and implementer of foreign policy missions.\textsuperscript{205} Let us now conclude this chapter by reviewing some of the new trends and security concerns in Russian foreign policy under president Putin.

Firstly, geo-political approaches continue to dominate over geo-economic issues. For Russian decision makers, the problems of security (NMD, NATO enlargement, or international terrorism) are more important than accession to WTO, or


\textsuperscript{204} Ibid.

promotion of Russian businesses on the global markets. However, there can be seen increasing tendency towards *economization* of Russian foreign policy under Putin. Moscow now realizes its limitations of the resources available – both financial as well as military – in pursuing its objectives in the Near Abroad. Secondly, which flows from what is said above, is that Russian foreign policy is more pragmatic. What it means is simply that it indulges in a realistic assessment of the resources available to Moscow. That is very clear from the pressure that Putin has put on Ukraine in matters of energy supplies: no more free lunches at the expense of Moscow. In other words, Putin’s approach has been to tone down the rhetoric and empty threats that was so prominent during Yeltsin’s time.

Thirdly, we can see diversification and commitment to the concept of a multi-polar world under Putin. Today, Russia is attempting to restore relations with the former Soviet allies, trying to be open to the West as well as the East, and to play on the differences between world powers, rather than trying to be affiliated with the US (like during the early years of Kozyrev) or India, China, and the Middle East (under Primakov). Fourthly, Moscow is still concerned about its status in the world. In fact, some observers believe that Putin is more obsessed with a global status than his predecessor. High status on a global arena helps him to promote his ideas and ensure public backing for his reforms a home, since he appears to be a defender of national interests and a person respected by world leaders.

To conclude, we can say that Russian foreign policy under Putin has seen some substantial alterations from the Yeltsin’s era. Though the basic goals and objectives have remained almost the same, it is the style and approach to achieve those that have seen the greatest change. Pragmatism and flexibility have been the new elements in Russian foreign policy under Putin. And most observers believe that the new approach has paid off for Russia. Though Putin inherited a beleaguered foreign policy from Yeltsin, he has succeeded in giving a very clear direction to it.

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206 Ibid. p. 183
207 Ibid.