

Nota del Coordinador del Número 3

Special issue – Russia’s foreign policy and its effects

In the time since Ukraine’s conflict broke out in early 2014, Russia’s foreign policy has suffered no let-up in activity. Russia continues to weather a storm of accusations about its continued role in Ukraine. With the Dutch investigation into the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 in July 2014 moving closer to its final conclusion, there have been calls for a United Nations tribunal to be established to prosecute those responsible for the tragedy. The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has so far stymied this move, saying Russia considered this to be “an untimely and counterproductive initiative” (Putin, 2015). Russia’s own very early Ministry of Defence report into the downing of the airplane has been challenged by a citizen journalist group, Bellingcat, who have compelling evidence that the Russian MoD doctored the satellite imagery (Higgins, 2015). Russia’s reputation in some quarters is therefore suffering. Nevertheless, Russia continues to demonstrate that it is a necessary partner in certain areas, most notably with Iran, and it manages to exploit its historical relations and present-day power as an energy giant to some effect in others.

In this special issue, authors cover a wide range of Russia’s foreign policy activity in recent years. Separate articles evaluate bilateral relationships with China, Kyrgyzstan and the US, multilateral relations within the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa group) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Also examined are Russia’s actions in Central Asia as ISAF (international stabilisation operation Afghanistan) troops withdraw from Afghanistan, as well as its peacekeeping activities in its neighbourhood throughout the post-Cold War period. The aim of the issue is not to provide or apply a single theoretical or methodological framework. Rather, we aim to provide a wide-ranging, largely empirically-driven account of Russian foreign policy in its most recent years. Authors tackle the weaknesses as well as strengths of Russia’s external actions, evaluating the opportunities available to Russia and whether and how it has managed to exploit those opportunities to serve its national interest well. Ultimately, a tone of pessimism underlies many of the contributions with authors concluding individually that Russia walks a fine foreign policy line in which it is as likely to come out the loser as the victor. Stepping back from the individual contributions and looking at them in the round permits a viewing of Russian foreign policy through a wider lens, which in turn illuminates the possibility that Russia is engaged in a process of over-reach and that by failing to narrow its scope of activity, it runs the risk of losing more than need be the case. Many of the authors, notably David, German, Lewis and Salzman also comment on the watchful stance that other actors are adopting in relation to Russia, concerned by its actions in Ukraine and elsewhere and what those say about Russia’s real intentions and motivations. Such actors worry too about the impact of Russia’s worsening relations with the West and how they themselves will be received by others.

No single journal issue can do exhaustive justice, of course, to the full extent of Russian foreign policy. Russia faces challenges in a number of relationships and in connection with a wide range of issues. As a result of the ongoing Ukraine conflict and Russia’s increasing number of confrontations with EU member states and NATO, Russia is garnering an unprecedented amount of attention, amongst politicians, economists, academics, policy analysts and even the general public. Ukraine is not the only former Soviet republic to be on the receiving end of Russia’s message that it intends to retain, even augment, its influence across the territory of its former empire and beyond. In the Western Balkans, for instance, Russia is working to maintain its influence there and to prevent the eventual accession of these states into either or both of the EU and NATO (Der Spiegel, 2014). Even in places outside its area of traditional influence, the

weight of Russia's preferences is being felt, in Sweden, for instance, concerned by Russia's actions in Ukraine and moving ever closer to NATO in response (Withnall, 2014).

The recent Russian reliance on military force or threat of use of force calls into question the extent to which Russia really believes in the effectiveness and value of soft power. Since the mid-2000s, Russia has turned its hand to the exercise of soft power, seemingly having understood that it could not rely on hard power alone to establish and retain influence. The Kremlin has focused on ensuring that the Russian view of the world is communicated through mass media such as RT (formerly Russia Today) foundations and funds such as *Russkiy Mir* and the so-called *Compatriot Funds*. The role of the Kremlin is suspected though not necessarily proven in think tanks based abroad, such as the *Institute for Democracy and Cooperation*, based in Paris and run by a former Duma member. Others are open in their links with the Kremlin, Serbia's *Nasa Srbija*, for instance, advertising its connections with the Russian institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) (*Nasa Srbija*, 2013). RISS has extremely wide links with the Kremlin and is credited with developing Russian foreign policy. Developments in this direction are not necessarily negative, of course, and mirror the type of work that many states have long been undertaking. And in the context of deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, such activity becomes all the more important – cooperative relations with Russia are more likely to be built if a greater understanding of Russian culture and ideas can be achieved. Russia's soft power credentials, however, are damaged not only by its actions in Ukraine but also by other developments at home. Notable here is the *Foreign Agents Law*, which requires non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to register if they are funded from abroad and engage in political activity, and which is condemned by Human Rights Watch as a tool to limit the work of independent organisations (Human Rights Watch 2013). Another example is the creation of the *Federal Supervision Agency for Information Technologies and Communications* (*Roskomnadzor*), responsible for the blacklisting of offending internet sites and with the power to order internet service providers to block sites altogether (David, 2015). Other examples of repressive behaviour at home abound and it is unsurprising, therefore, that Russia's soft power capacities are doubted. Even where soft power has been used as an alternative foreign policy tool to try and maintain Russian influence with other states, most notably in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, its effectiveness has been limited (Nixey, 2012) and is unlikely to be enough to assure such states remain orientated towards Russia and do not look elsewhere for ideas and transferable models.

One theme common to many analyses of Russian foreign policy, whether directly or indirectly, is that of Russia's conflicted state identity. The relevance to and effect of identity on its foreign policy has been well documented over a number of years (Neumann, 1995; Petersson, 2002; Prizel 1998; Trenin, 2006). In Foreign Policy terms, it has meant Russia making a choice between turning westwards, retreating into a more isolationist, nationalistic space, or building Russia as a great Eurasian power. Slowly deteriorating relations with the West and the immediately and devastatingly damaging effects of Crimea's annexation and Russia's alleged ongoing role in Ukraine have seen an end to references to a "Greater Europe" in which Russia has a role as an equal partner (Putin, 2001). Rather, we appear to be seeing a turn more consistent with Putin's talk of the necessity for Russia to have a "civilisational identity", one which will "preserv[e] the dominance of Russian culture" (Putin, 2012). Increasing Russian references to the need to protect its diaspora are evidence of this shift, references which are easily interpreted as threats to existing borders, as the response of the Baltic states has made clear.

That Russia is unlikely to confirm to Western-made structures is additionally confirmed by the manner in which it has reacted to the effects of a globalising and interdependent world. As a counter to western dominance of global organisations, such as the World Trade Organisation and World Bank, Russia is applying what it has learned from others' coping mechanisms. Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) may look to be stalled at the present time but it is an indication

nevertheless that Russia prefers to rely on regional arrangements in which it has the dominant role (EEU) or at least the equal partnership (SCO) that it demanded from the West and did not receive. That Russia has turned its back on the West seems undeniable. There has been a good deal of talk about whether or not China and Russia are building a new “superpower axis” (Graham-Harrison et al, 2015), this despite the fact that China represents a far more real threat to Russian territory and influence than ever the West could. That does not mean that Russia has abandoned its historical links with and ambitions in Europe but it does suggest that the alternative of a Russian identity rooted in Europe has been renounced.

The special issue opens with Rachel Salzman’s commentary on Russia within the BRICS. It offers an understanding of how Russia’s policy towards and position within this grouping has evolved, including since the Ukrainian conflict began. Much of our wider understanding of the BRICS stems from analysis of the other members, rather than Russia. Indeed, as Salzman shows, Russia was from the outset an unlikely member of this grouping, less of a rising power than its counterparts. Nevertheless, Salzman argues, Russia has acted as something of an opportunist, driving forward the BRICS narrative. Russia has had many motives for doing so, the BRICS group offering it a forum through which to project and build power and, crucially, in a forum that is not Western-led. In this commentary, readers are therefore offered an account of the evolution of the BRICS that reveals a pivotal role for Russia. Beyond the economic grouping first envisaged, Russia has sought to promote a political agenda for the BRICS. In her analysis, Salzman shows how important Russia’s conflicted identity continues to be to any analysis of Russian foreign policy. Of particular interest to many will be how Russia has turned to the BRICS grouping to mitigate some of the worst effects of the sanctions levied against it by Western states and Salzman’s analysis of what this means for the grouping itself. The BRICS members, Salzman shows, have long negotiated a path between asserting their rights and powers and not antagonising more established, especially Western, powers. It remains to be seen whether and how Russia’s increasingly vitriolic anti-western rhetoric will affect its fellow BRICS.

Complementing Salzman’s contribution that sees Russia orientated away from the West, Stephen Blank narrows the focus, situating Russia’s foreign policy amongst that of China and India and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Even as Russia’s relations with the West have continued to nosedive, its relations with China have occupied increasing amounts of media and scholarly attention. China occupies the central place in the analysis to some degree, presented as the context in which Russia’s choices and opportunities, as well as its policy towards India, can be better understood. Blank finds evidence that, despite denials to the contrary, a Sino-Russia military alliance is in the making. However, in keeping with other analysis on this relationship (see Kuhrt, 2012, for instance), Blank demonstrates the imbalances and asymmetries of power, weighted in China’s favour. This article is an interesting complement to that of Lewis, also in this special issue, providing further evidence that relations with China are as likely to prevent Russia achieving its ambition of regional hegemon as they are to help it succeed. To understand why Russia seeks to deepen ties with China, therefore, it must be remembered that the SCO and China are also important tools in Russia’s policy of excluding the US from the region. At the same time, from Blank’s detailed discussion of the SCO, one must conclude that Russia has little choice but to engage in this regional organisation if it is to limit the advance of Chinese influence.

As already outlined above, more attention is rightly being paid to Russia’s use of soft power. In her analysis of the US-Russia relationship, Ruth Deyermond examines these two actors’ separate discourses of democracy and accompanying values. She provides a basis for understanding Russia’s increasing antipathy towards the US, the emergence of its conceptualisation of democracy as sovereign and its instrumental use of democracy in its foreign policy. In a nuanced counter to prevailing arguments that Russia has adopted a cynical use of democracy in order to prevent democratisation at home and amongst its neighbours, Deyermond argues that insufficient attention has been paid to the context in which

Russia has operated. By focusing on the foreign policy of George W. Bush's administration, Deyermond reveals a heavy concentration of activity in Russia's backyard. This activity, moreover, in common with Bush's wider policy of democracy promotion, was highly selective, as Deyermond shows in her discussion of the varying support and encouragement versus condemnation shown for Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Russia itself as each of these fell in or out of favour with the US. The stakes were high for Russia, not only because of the US's move into what Russia saw as its traditional territory but also because of the nature of US activity there, which Russia interpreted as an existential threat to itself, an assault on Russian identity and security, the Colour Revolutions being notable in this respect. Having established the context, Deyermond moves on to a stimulating assessment of Russia's concept of Sovereign Democracy and how Russia has used this to argue for a democratisation of international relations, challenging US foreign policy in the process.

Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy is as well understood as a consequence of its vulnerability as from its strength. Tracey German's analysis of Russia's concerns over Afghanistan offers an excellent example of why this is so. As the drawdown of ISAF troops continues, Russia has legitimate concerns about the scope for an increase in terrorist threats and for an influx of drugs across Afghanistan's borders, into the central Asian states, which together form, German reminds us, Russia's "soft underbelly". German additionally reminds us, however, that with threats can come opportunity. While German shows there is evidence to suggest the ISAF withdrawal will not lead to an increase in problems for Russia or its southern neighbours, it nevertheless offers a chance for Russia to reassert itself in the region, legitimated by its desire to ensure wider stability as well to ensure its own borders are secure. Also, perception is everything and Russia is aware that the North Caucasus remains vulnerable to externally-driven terrorist activity and that not all its neighbours are able to secure their borders from drug traffickers. German therefore examines the consequences of Russia's threat and opportunity perception. She details the ways in which Russia has deepened its bilateral cooperation with Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan before moving on to a study of developments within the two relevant multilateral relationships, the Collective Security Organisation (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

David Lewis's article focuses on Russia's actions in Central Asia through the lens of Kyrgyzstan and, like German's, offers important reasons to remember Russia's weaknesses as well as its strengths in understanding why Russia focuses where it does and how. Lewis's work constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of Russia's thinking on regionalism especially. Relying on the concept of regional hegemony, Lewis demonstrates both the extent and limits of Russia's reach in the region. He utilises explanations of hegemony that move beyond its mere material aspects to those that encompass ideational power. That said, Lewis ends by concluding that Russia's ability to establish and maintain hegemonic status will be dependent on its longer term capacity to meet the economic demands of Kyrgyzstan, and, by extension, the region more widely. Lewis reveals a Russia that is intent on establishing a hierarchical form of regionalism that learns but is distinct from both the EU and ASEAN. His work therefore has relevance not only for International Relations theory on regional hegemony but also to the emerging body of literature on Russia's employment of soft power. It offers, in addition, a detailed analysis of a relationship that features in relatively little scholarly work but which offers an important complement to work focused elsewhere. Lewis's article should be read in conjunction with other literature that analyses Russia's role in other former-Soviet republics but also that which focuses on the Western Balkans and even EU member states such as Greece and Hungary. Taken as a whole, they suggest a Russia that remains ambitious for influence but which is also limited by its failure to exert soft power credibly and which relies, therefore, on its economic reach.

Recent events have concentrated on Russia's role in causing or at least prolonging conflict. Lance Davies's article on Russia's peacekeeping activities provides a valuable corrective to this. He delivers an overview of Russia's involvement in

peacekeeping to date, ensuring a necessary contextualisation is provided in order that the readership can understand the security logics that inform its activity here. In common with other articles in this issue, Davies confirms Russia's intention to ensure its continued influence in the former soviet republics (the Baltics aside) and the region more widely, arguing for the need to understand that these intentions reflect Russia's understandable concerns about security, not least the destabilising effects of regional conflict that have capacity to impact on Russia itself. Davies offers a timely outline of what Russia understands by peacekeeping operations and related concepts and measures. Examining the evolution of Russia's doctrine in this regard, Davies follows the development of peacekeeping regulations in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the subsequent influences on Russia's thinking. Davies draws important conclusions about Russia's "institutional learning", portraying the process as a protracted and problematic one, beginning in the early 1990s in Georgia and Moldova. Russia has been accused of deliberately engineering a freezing of conflicts in the region but Davies argues that alongside the strategic benefits for Russia there are other logics, not least a desire to maintain consensus on regional approaches to peacekeeping, even if this comes at the expense of a resolution of conflict. Davies nevertheless highlights the deficiencies in Russia's learning, particularly the failure to understand the complex, multivariate nature of peacekeeping operations, while also acknowledging the contradictions that its actions in Ukraine in particular have demonstrated.

In the penultimate article in the special issue, Maxine David also connects to the contradictions evident in Russia's policy on international intervention. These contradictions, I argue, can only be understood if we first acknowledge that international structures remain in a state of flux following the end of the Cold War. Until 9/11, analysis was very much targeted at building an understanding of how Western states were moving out of the modern era into a post-modern one. This debate took various forms but at the heart of all approaches sat the concept of state sovereignty. The response of the US and its allies to 9/11 brought a halt to the vast majority of this work, even as the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) began its work on a rehabilitation of the concept of state sovereignty, which would result in 2005 in the United Nations' General Assembly adopting the principle of the Responsibility to Protect, by which sovereignty was seen as circumscribed by the responsibility to ensure the protection of human rights. I place Russia's views on international intervention within the context of a disputed international structure in which Russia acts as both receiver and driver of other actors' foreign policy but in which it also has capacity to impact on international structures themselves. Most often regarded as a defender of Westphalian values, in my article I show how Russia conforms to some principles and forms of behaviour that accord with a post-Westphalian order. I therefore argue for a refocusing on the modern versus post-modern debate, in which Russia can be approached as a reformist actor which seeks to ensure it retains a seat at the table when decisions on the future shape of international structures are made.

It is fitting not just for a Special Issue on Russian Foreign Policy but on Foreign Policy generally to end with an article that recognises the necessity of taking account of Russia and its capacity to act as either a constructive or a destructive influence. Analysis of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) understandably often takes account of the neighbour to the East, Russia. Liz Arranz's consideration of the current situations of Georgia and Moldova offers excellent reason for doing so. Bound in so many calculations by reason of their frozen conflicts and their separate desires to integrate with Europe, these two former Soviet republics are further united by the desire of Russia to thwart their European ambitions. Reliance on Russia energy makes them both vulnerable to Russian policy, while the disputed nature of part of their territories renders them unlikely to achieve their objectives in the European Union.

Focus on any actor's foreign policy long enough and the deficiencies and failings will soon become clear. Foreign policy is, after all, about interactions and therefore actors can only ever rely on a certain degree of accuracy in their policy. It is the job of policy-makers to consider the possible consequences but all too often it is the law of unintended

consequences that prevails. Russia is no exception to this rule. The complexities of foreign policy-making are made all the more problematic for Russia because of unresolved identity problems and therefore the need to negotiate a range of conflicting ideas and preferences at home. Putin's continued hold on power is dependent, additionally, on his capacity to retain influence in Russia's traditional neighbourhood, explaining in part the no-nonsense approach to the possible loss of Ukraine to the European Union. In answering to exigencies at home, however, Russia has neglected exigencies abroad, as the articles contained within this issue reveal. What the longer term effects for Russia will be remain unknown but, as the authors here demonstrate, there are as many, if not more, reasons to be pessimistic as optimistic.

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