



Muhammad Umar Farooq Baloch

Research Associate, National Defence University, Islamabad

Shehar Bano

M.Phil. Scholar, Strategic Studies Department, National Defence University, Islamabad

Analysis Of Grand Strategy Of Russia: A Case Study Of Putin's Regime

Abstract

The article revolves around the debate of Russian Grand Strategy with special focus on the Putin's era. By using empirical designs based on interpretive approach, the research claims that modern day Russia is greatly transmuted by the Putin's grand strategy. The dynamic shift of the Russian strategy has triggered the debate of resurgence of Russia, therefore it has changed the narrative from reserved assertiveness towards aggression by Putinism greatly prevailed through the 4 terms of his rule. Unlike Gorbachev Putin's Russia rose through the remnants of cold war towards the dominance over the world but the western actions diverge it towards aggression as the security threats posed by NATO's eastward expansionism. Russia pursues the objective to reclaim and hold its influence on its near abroad through challenging western ideals and pursuance of strategic ends across wide range of means.

Keywords: Grand Strategy, Russia, Putin, Ukraine, NATO, east word expansion

Introduction

The article delves into the subject matter by taking into account the formulated hypothesis that Russian grand strategy is greatly transmuted by Putinism thus shifting from hegemonic dominance over the world to hold dynamic influence on its near abroad and central Asia. The significance of the research lies in the context of ongoing Russo Ukraine war and how it is essential to understand Russian grand strategy in the backdrop of Putin's four terms of ruling Russia. The research aims to answer the questions of how Putinism have shaped Russian Grand strategy? Are there any differences among stated strategy and how does west perceives it? And what are the implications of Russian grand strategy towards west?

Since Vladimir Putin was elected in 2000 Russia has witnessed a significant resumption on international level. As the fall of USSR, the dreadful Russian economy, the instability in rule and conflicts with several states of former Soviet Union followed. With Russia's ascendancy, the animosity between Russia and west grew parallel. The hostility reached to its max in 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and 2022, Russian invasion of Ukraine. This move made west shocked and concerned over Putin's flagrant contempt for international law. Gradually his obsession to make Russia great and restore territorial integrity and honor grew which resulted in military attack of Georgia 2008, annexation of Crimea 2014 and non-military but multifaceted assault of Kyrgyzstan 2010. It took a long time for west to realize his obsession and his capability to cross the limits in order to achieve his goals. However, it is evident that the strategy of Putin changed drastically after his appointment 3rd time as president.

The aim of this study is to evaluate Russian intention to achieve greatness shifts towards the regional dominance and security at its borders. The factors of the current disparity among the West's assessment of Putin's assertive military interventions and its inability to explicitly relate them to broader strategic purpose are not hard to determine.¹

Considering Putin seriously undermines the notion that a Europe can be constructed primarily on soft power. It requires abandoning the premise that post-Soviet Russia will be an ally rather than a rival, the paradoxical discontent can be viewed in Putin's approach of west too. Nevertheless, the grand strategy of Russia is still highly influenced by a handful of oligarchs and ex security officials of Putin's cabinet yet the final decision making authority still resides in Putin alone.

Russia's Grand Strategy in Debate: An Overview

The existing literature on the subject area delineated that after the fall of USSR, Russian Federation has initiated series of tactics and strategies in order to restore its former glory and its influence across former soviet regions. They also believed that western action in response to Russia suggest that USA and European state actors have failed greatly to understand how Russia's strategy is systematically achieving its goals. With that in mind they believe American and Western policy makers have failed to counter Putinism and its great strategy. Putin is very ambitious to achieve the Russia's former glory. He is using these tactics in its former USSR space and against NATO and EU. One popular strategy is subversion of target state by discrediting their government leaders and employing economic tensions. Other tactics include energy warfare, use of modern media for propaganda are very new. Exploitation of ethnic hostilities and establishment of "frozen conflict" have been tested in Caucasus region and Moldova before it was implemented in Ukraine. Russia also used cyber warfare against NATO and EU member Estonia than it was deployed in Georgia in 2008.²

The researcher Liva Karen Stang, in her thesis "A study of Russia's Grand Strategy and Russia-West relations during the Putin era (2000-2014)" in 2015, is implying that there is very high impact of Putin in Russian national strategy as Putin has been in power for more than a decade and before that he was prime minister and held de facto powers. In related to the idea of Grand Strategy Russian Government use the term National Security Strategy instead, which clearly implies its assertiveness policy on security.

During first two periods of Vladimir Putin, Russian Federation focused on acquiring great regional power and global influence. Regaining regional hegemony and protecting territorial sovereignty was of utmost importance. Economic growth and other state being dependent on Russia was of main focus as Russia needed to regain its former glory and arise from collapse of USSR in 1990. As Russian economic and political power grew west perceived it as threat, which resulted into a stronger and aggressive strategy by Russia. Strategic and flexible partnership, regional consolidation and containment of the west were the means of political diplomacy in this new strategy.³ Joseph Roger Clark in his Paper, "Russia's Indirect Grand Strategy (February 2019)", states that Russian Federation is revisionist nation state. It seeks to end international hegemony led by US and its western alliances. To regain former power and dominancy over its region is the objective of Russian federation. National Security Strategy under president Putin seeks that objective. Moscow is under the leadership of Putin wants to avoid direct confrontation with America until Russia acquires necessary power and global influence to gain its political goals. Until Russia has achieved its goals, it is hovering as threat to America, then to dismantle America's strength i.e. political stability within and outside, its domestic institutions' and security and stability provided by western allies. These indirect strategy posed very little threat in the past to America as there were no nuclear powers. Today's modern and advance technology along with social media has altered the course of security environment.⁴

Dr. Hasan Canpolat in "Understanding the Ukraine Crises Through Putin Doctrine (February 2022)" argued that principle action of Russian federation is mainly extracted by its foreign policy Nation Security Strategy, which was not clearly in early Putin era. Putin's rule is to guarantee that the West, as it did during the Ussr, considers Russia as a "power to be

acknowledged and respected, with special privileges in its territory and a say in every significant international issue." The current conflict between Ukraine and Russia is a result of a thirty year struggle among Russia and America, and European countries. It is about the fate of the European system that emerged after the Soviet Union fell apart. The America, in Russia's opinion, is presently less eligible to seek a weak, fragmented, and cohesive foreign policy. Europe, but in the other hand, is economically powerful but militarily and politically vulnerable, and it is preoccupied with domestic issues. Despite the current threats and vulnerabilities, Russia sees this as a moment of opportunity and has mobilized all of its resources to make the most of it.⁵

Russian Grand Strategy through the matrix of Neo-Classical Realism

Russian grand strategy can be assessed from a neoclassical realist model since it considers the variety of factors impacting its foreign policy and behaviour. It aims to comprehend international politics by taking into consideration the nature of international system in which states interact.⁶ Neoclassical realists argue that when states peruse their foreign and security policies they respond to challenges posed by states and opportunities to tackle with them under international system. However, these responses are framed by factors such as the nature of political regime, leadership, strategic culture and state-society mutual relationship. Neoclassical realism also points out the limitations of neorealism such as international system do not always gives unambiguous signals of threats and prospects instead it tries to view these things by taken into account analysis of international system from domestic and international political framework by building on them.⁷

The research claims that these contours of realism provide in-depth understanding of the subject area. Russian foreign policy in ongoing years has founded on the perception of security threats from the hegemony of US on the international system and is directed towards establishing its strong hold of its "Near abroad". In terms of security, politics, economics and diplomacy, the Putin's ambition of supremacy over former soviet states grew gradually relative to the enlargement of NATO and its eastward expansion.⁸ The apparent reason or factors responsible for the Kremlin behaviour are often interlinked and viewed from the neo realist perspective of power competition and limited cooperation, that resulted from the fall of USSR and restricting of Russian political system and leadership orientation towards power struggles and foothold in Kremlin Politics. But the real reason lies in the fact that the best approach to apprehend Putin's Russia is through the lens of Neoclassical realism and security dilemma concept. While taking into account the formation of grand strategy and pursue of national interests, the foremost element is the formation of foreign policy that in today's globalizing world is crucial to fulfill national interests.

In Putin's case, the Russian grand strategy although is highly dependent on Putin's and his Cult but is actually shaped by the anarchic international system that views Putin led Russia as a threat taking into account its military actions of the past 2 decades. In other words, neoclassical realism combines all domestic and foreign variables and claim that because the international system nature is dynamic so there is a need of a global sovereign regulating other states behavior and keeps a check and balance in compliance with the norms and traditions of international system which ultimately eliminates the mistrust among states that causes security threats.⁹ Another foundation of Putin's grand strategy is security dilemma concept since the NATO's eastward expansion. The concept's original proponents were Herbert Butterfield, John Herz and Robert Jervis. According to them, "The greatest war in history can be produced without the intervention of any great criminals who might be out to do deliberate harm in the world. It could be produced between two powers, both of which were desperately anxious to avoid a conflict of any sort".¹⁰

According to them, the security dilemma might compel states to war even when they do not intend to war. Butterfield in his writings proposes 6 premises of security dilemma,

1. Fear from other state
2. Uncertainty of other states intentions
3. Unintentional
4. Aggravated by psychology
5. Produces dreadful results
6. Fundamental cause of conflicts

Thus, in Russian perspective, one can see that Vladimir Putin, once high priority of bringing back Russian prestige along with the security has shifted to the immediate existential threats from the west especially NATO. Following WW2, NATO was formed as a mutual defense treaty to strengthen western Europe and to control former USSR. The occupied Baltic states after the fall of USSR immediately became a member of NATO fearing Russian aggression. Consequently Russia perceived it as a threat of expansion and encircling its territory.¹¹ With several NATO countries sharing a border with Russia, the Russian perception of security threats has alleviated ultimately taking measures to stop former soviet states from NATO alliance through military might which has led to the containment of Russian Precedent once again. Especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Donbass and Luhansk region, once again western sanctions on Russia are heavily imposed. This all fit exactly in the framework of Neoclassical realism and security dilemma that how the international environment had shaped the Russian foreign policy, one of the important tiers of grand strategy, and ultimately creating a security dilemma for the whole Europe vs Russia.

An era of gradual yet reserved Assertiveness, 2000-2008

After Putin officially elected as president in 2000 the inherited Russia was deteriorated. The economy was collapsing and military depreciated. The superpower image was no longer as it had already lost all the prestige with its fall even Russia could not be even regarded as regional power. The isolation made Russian grand strategy to focus only on the reactions from western events, the matter at hand was sustainability at home. These events strictly made Putin to keep its strategic policies in response to western actions.

The era from 2000's onwards Putin leadership focused on economic development and a pragmatic approach towards west but as the economic stability gained from increasing oil and gas high prices, the kremlin attitude shifted towards opposing western policies and ideals. Since 2004, being isolated from major world politics, Russian objective started to incline towards regain of Russian independent position as a great power in world politics. Russian objectives and threat perception from the uncertain environment led to the formulation of reserved assertiveness strategy. This reason behind was not to be pushed aside and ignored national interests. Meanwhile the economic policies were based on increasing exports to Europe and assertive strategy primarily pushed through political diplomatic channels. Militarily, the assertive strategy still centered on nuclear deterrence.

The strategic objectives of Russian during this time confined to only national security, international participation and regional hegemony accompanied with the internal strategic objectives of border protection, foreign involvement in internal politics and economic security. The documents published during 2000 to 2004, including the national security document, foreign policy document and military document of Russia included all the strategic objectives mentioned above. Since, Putin regarded disintegration of soviet union as the "greatest catastrophe of century", he used the strategy of integrated alliance to the security of Russia's vast territory.¹²

Ultimately this strategic approach created a pro-Russian minority that grew to become a mass rebellion in former soviet states particularly Crimea and Ukraine's some parts. It is due to this support that enabled Putin to annex the regions. Resultantly, this era of Putin leadership focused on achieving strategic goals of reestablishing Russia as a great power and

increase in Russian economic power that was ultimately combined with enhancing regional influence that linked to the Russian territorial sovereignty and integrity.

Economic stability followed by a shift from maintaining global influence towards active assertiveness, 2008-2014

As per Russian constitution, Putin stepped down to the position of prime minister while replacing the Dmitry Nikolayevich Medvedev. His regime unlike Putin based on approach of cooperation and liberalism with western world although strategic goals did not change. Putin still was Centre of security and foreign policy decision making, during that time the strategic policies did not changes yet the horizon of it broadened. Russia finally emerged as a significant player in international politics as a result of strong economic and domestic strength.

Furthermore, Russia had re-established itself as hegemonic actor in the regional politics. During the second phase, 2008-2014, grand strategy of Russia remained based on global influence and strong international position but with the more confident independent approach. Analyzing Putin's perception as a new czar, western approach shifted to unilateralism and containment of Russian by building strong cooperation with the post-soviet states i.e. encirclement. This was the time when Putin's analysis of west as a threat resulted in the form of active assertiveness strategy towards west. Contrary to the first phase, military became prominent in Russian grand strategy. To fulfil strategic objectives, Putin increased defense spending, more show of power increased i.e. naval exercises and posturing, and new fronts of frictions with west. Unlike 2007, the strategic nuclear deterrence military strategy shifts to the offensive military strategy. The military force grew especially in conflicted zones.

The new foreign policy document 2008 and military doctrine updated in 2010 mentioned the same objective but the 2013 document of foreign policy covers the middle east political interests too and in 2014 the new military doctrine based on it approved. Now Putin's grand strategy did not limit to domestic and western politics but shifted towards the middle east as a new proxy power too i.e. the intervention in Syria. This further led to the more offensive military approach particularly to the arctic region as there lies the heart of Russian economy. Not only in term of hard power, Russian kept on pushing for a polycentric international system too on many forums if UN, G20, G8 and BRICS too. To sum up, Putin regime's core strategic objectives broadened visible to more threats and friction from the west particularly after the Georgian invasion 2008 and Crimean annexation 2014. Russian economic policies grew stronger and better as the economic growth output exceeds to 2.8trillion dollars making it above the chart from 9th of 2007 to 6th of 2012.¹³

From assertiveness to aggression 2014-2022

The Russian strategy up to the 3rd term of Putin in office gradually changed from reserved to active assertiveness but 2014 onwards, Russian grand strategy primarily focused on the fulfilling of its strategic objectives through military might. Now there are several myths regarding grand strategy of Russian which although were correct in the past decade but today these are nothing but myths. Russian grand strategy is driven by ideology, seeks to unify Russian empire and restore world order. These are the myths that diverge people to see Russian perspective properly.¹⁴ It is true that for Putin disintegration of USSR is a catastrophe but it does not subject to drive Russia by ideology or unify it rather Putin's actions from 2014 onwards are highly based on the security threats from west and decreasing regional influence since for a long time there is an unending cold rivalry between the two. The immediate cause of this sudden aggression strategy started with the overthrow of pro-Russian government in Ukraine 2014. Situation escalated when Ukraine applied for the NATO and EU membership. This move could lead NATO at the door step of Russia.

Despite having its concerns over NATO expansion, Putin still demanded guarantee from NATO not to expand eastward which was rejected.¹⁵ Russian strategy particularly emphasized on risk of NATO and destabilization of countries and regions which according to Dimitri Trenin could be taken as middle east, Baltic states, Ukraine and their capabilities particularly US strategic ballistic missiles. This is the same time when Russian meddling in Syria is at peak. Putin justifies Russian aerial bombing over Syria on basis of eliminating ISIS to support Assad regime but according to US media, the action meant to target Anti Assad rebels backed by the US. In 2016, US also accuses Russia of meddling with US elections to harm Clinton and boost up Trump's potential supporters.¹⁶

However, Russia denies the fact but the US sources claims to provide evidence in this regard. Similarly, the Russian diplomatic relations too emphasized on the regional dominance particularly in central Asia and its near abroad rather than over international system but the events at the start of 2022, Russian invasion of Ukraine made matter particularly complexed. Until now, Putin has only demand of guarantee from NATO and US not to expand eastward which US has denied and it poses a crucial question that despite claiming biggest supporters of liberalism and freedom principle, why US is not assuring Putin of security? The hypocrisy is evident at its peak that US itself feels threatened from Chinese peaceful BRI project and is taking necessary security steps and forming integrated security alliances in the form of QUAD, AUKUS, five eyes etc. Although there is a huge distance between China and US but is expanding NATO at Russia's doorstep which is not even providing security guarantee.

Deciphering Russia's Grand Strategy in the 2022 Ukraine Invasion

The start of 2022 marks as an extension of Russian grand strategic plans. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, in the name of demilitarizing and de Nazifying lead the west to think of another crazy Putin adventure but in essence there is no way that Putin has not calculated the outcomes of the war. Critics may argue here that Russia lost heavily in Ukraine but in reality, this move enabled Russia once again to be one of the most influential global powers. In fact, the Russian history itself is always marked with these kinds of endeavors to maintain its influence on its near abroad or expand from there by hook or crook. The western perspective on the subject held Russia responsible and argues that it is one of the instinctive adventures but the Ukrainian invasion foundations are embedded into Russia's threatened influence on its near abroad and unaddressed security concerns from the west. Of course, one might argue that it is against one country's sovereignty to prevent it to take certain decisions i.e. Russia cannot dictate Ukraine not to join NATO.

However, it can do so by making sure that the pro-Russian group stays in power thus keeping up with the Primakov doctrine of 1990, which states that Russia should insist on primacy and lead integration in this region. It also supports the stopping of NATO expansionism. Up till 2014 there was pro-Russian government in Ukraine with Viktor Yanukovich as president. His replacement by the Petro Poroshenko lead to the Russo Ukraine war in Crimean Peninsula due to its pro-western stances since he highly advocated for joining NATO and EU. So, from this angle, one can argue that the grand strategy of Russia regarding its influence on near abroad has not changed but the tactics to achieve the goal needed to take alternate routes¹⁷.

This resulted in the form of adopting Gerasimov doctrine, an essay written by the Chief of the general staff of Russian forces. It focused on the transition of traditional concept of war towards nontraditional concept which uses political, economic, diplomatic and other non-military measures in combination with the use of military force. As is seen in Ukraine's case, the whole of government in war approach has been adopted with special focus of using peacekeeping and humanitarian missions as a pretext for war. And it has been done by Russia in Donbass and Luhansk region under the guise of protecting Russian speaking population

and captured those. So, one can say that Gerasimov doctrine is more closed to Russian grand strategy but at the same time we can't ignore Primakov doctrine which supports that buffer zone is really necessary and for Russia it is its former states.

Since Ukraine's have been inclined towards the west and desperately wanted to join NATO. Also, the government inclined towards Russia in 2014 in Crimea was overthrown, not forgetting the Ukrainian Request to join EU, all added to the Putin's calculations compelled it to invade Ukraine, and this too is in line with the Gerasimov doctrine. Now critics might say that Putin could have gained so much more with the use of soft power instead of invasion because in Ukraine, there were supporters from far right that have inclination towards Russia. He could have influenced them by using soft power tactics based on ethnic lines. Not to mention, NATO was not willing to give Ukraine membership since Ukraine was already in conflict over some of its territories with Russia and NATO membership is not given in that case. Even it recently denied Ukraine's request to join NATO in July 2023. Thus, it was only Putin's crazy decision that throw Ukraine towards west since this move has created security threats across Europe. As of its ramifications on the international level, Russia has kindled bloodiest conflict in Europe since World War II. Russia faced many sanctions at international level which makes it push towards isolationism at international level.

NATO or US were less inclined towards Ukraine before but since the invasion began, Ukraine now enjoys full-fledged support of US, NATO and EU as this has altered the dynamics of modern warfare which now were made to believe that there is no direct confrontation of armies in modern times. United Nations tried to pass a security resolution but Russia vetoed it.¹⁸ So, now US and NATO allies has increased the defense, economic and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since it is the only option for them to defeat Putin. Up till now, NATO allies have spent more than 100 million Euros in military aid to Ukraine and allied forces are also training them for the use of this equipment. Besides, this step of Putin has now opened the doors for the Europe to adopt new measures in this new security landscape, latest of which is the Madrid Summit in 2022 where NATO introduced new baseline for its deterrence and defense posture with a 360-degree approach i.e. land, air, maritime, cyber and space domains against all threats and challenges.

The combine defense planning and posture of EU and NATO have several repercussions for Russian Grand strategy in a longer term. After cold war there were some times for Russia when there was a possibility to be in a harmonized relationship with the west as from 1991 to 1995, the era of Yeltsin. But now Putin's Russia is emerged as a new threat in this modern world. It must not be ignored that the west is equally responsible for this behavior of Russia if it has considered Putin's concerns and addressed them. The long-term repercussions of the conflict can significantly impact Russia, particularly due to U.S. and allies' responses. However, perceptions shifted following the Israel-Palestine conflict on October 2023, where U.S. actions seemingly undermined its stance on aggression and human rights. This apparent hypocrisy has, to some extent, mitigated criticism of Putin, redirecting global scrutiny towards the U.S. and its foreign policy inconsistencies.¹⁹

Discussion:

Russian federation prior to Gorbachev greatly relied upon the Marxist-Leninist approach of an unending communism vs capitalism debate. Although Stalin had introduced some changes yet the core of doctrine remains the same. Rejecting Brezhnev doctrine, Gorbachev introduced the new Thinking "policy of a reset leading to the arms and regional conflict negotiations". This was one of the first time a Russian ruler was ready with a liberal approach towards west. Along with this he also introduced "glasnost" and "perestroika" which further open the doors for the capitalistic approaches to the Russian strategy of the

time. Gorbachev believed that Russian people have the right to choose whatever system they wanted to adopt. Here, it can be taken as the federating units of USSR.

One can see that these steps of Gorbachev paved the USSR towards disintegration. While on the other hand today's Russia led by Vladimir Putin regarded this period as a period of Russian submission and humiliation by west. Keeping in view these experiences, Putin adopted a stricter yet strategic position of Russian interaction with the west. Gradually assertive and aggressive behavior of Russia is the extension of pragmatism towards west that become the guiding principle of Russian grand strategy along with the pursue of national interests. One might conclude that Putin may be the new Czar of Russia due to his extreme hegemonic rule in domestic as well as international arena but analytically it is clear as day that it is shaped by the actions of west and international political system. West perception of Russian grand strategy aimed to assert dominance over the world politics and unified Russia but actually is not the case as modern day Russia aims for security, stability and influence over regional states through partnerships and coalitions.

Conclusion

Putin is very ambitious to achieve the Russia's former glory. He is using these tactics in its former USSR space and against NATO and EU. Moscow is under the leadership of Putin wants to avoid direct confrontation with America until Russia acquires necessary power and global influence to gain its political goals. To sum up, the era of Putin leadership focused on achieving strategic goals of re-establishing Russia as a great power enhancing regional influence that linked to the Russian territorial sovereignty. The security policies increased its role in hard power too. The period is complex since there are episodes of tension and ease. Russian strategy particularly emphasized on risk of NATO and destabilization of countries and regions which according to Dimitri Trennin could be considered as middle east, Baltic states, Ukraine and their capabilities particularly US strategic ballistic missiles. As Russian Ukraine conflict is still ongoing, let's see what will be the new grand strategy of Russian President or will he still be a president in 2024?

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