

Russia and Global Governance in the Post-Western World

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Abstract

Russia has historically strived to bridge principles of multilateral decision making with those of multipolar balance of power. Not infrequently, Russia's efforts to maximize power have been a response to failed attempts of entering Western-centered international arrangements, such as NATO and the European Union. Independently of those efforts, Russia also has sought to preserve the capabilities of a regional great power essential for securing its border and meeting other security challenges. In the world that is no longer ordered by the West, Russia will continue to emphasize the institutional primacy of the United Nations, while seeking to strengthen relations with both Western-centered and non-Western international organizations.

Russia's Perspective on Global Governance: Multipolar Multilateralism

Russia has historically emerged as a regional great power with strong transcontinental ties and sustained influence in global affairs. Russian leaders have always been preoccupied with defending the country's long borders and cultural allies—Orthodox Christians in the 19th century, communists in the 20th century and ethnic Russians after the Soviet Union's disintegration. Meeting these challenges required that Russia develop power capabilities and be recognized as an influential player in both regional and global settings. Russia has therefore viewed a regional power status as a prerequisite for a sustained multilateral engagement and a concert of great powers as a basis for establishing a successful international organization.

Such combination of power and international engagement has assisted Russia in surviving in a region historically populated by some of the most powerful states on earth. Principles of multilateralism were in focus for Russian rulers since at least Alexander I in 19th century. Having defeated Napoleon, Alexander liberated the European continent and briefly seized Paris, but then withdrew his forces in an organized fashion and initiated the Holy Alliance as a way to preserve order and justice in the post-Napoleonic Europe. Instead of attempting to establish Russia's own hegemony, Alexander sought to create a multilateral security arrangement based on principles of autocracy. He therefore embraced anti-revolutionary Germany and Austria, rather than progressive France, as his role models. Soon, however, Russian rulers had to decide between the old monarchy-centered vision of the world and the new balance of power commitments. In the second half of the 19th century, fearful of the rising Germany, Russia chose to cultivate relationships with France and Britain and ultimately entered World War I on the side of the Triple Entente. By entering the First World War, Nicholas II sought to comply with his alliance commitments and a vision of a just, Europe-based world order.

Even the Bolsheviks, with their radically different principles of world order, eventually came to accept that only multilateral institutions could prevent the rise of a future hegemonic power and provide a basis for international justice. Not only did they abandon the early efforts to overthrow the "bourgeois" governments in Europe replacing them with rapprochement and pragmatic cooperation with the West, but they also joined the League of Nations and championed a collective security system in Europe in order to prevent the rise of Fascism. Later, Soviet leaders participated in creating the United Nations, but they also expected a bigger role in shaping European security partly because the Soviet Union single-handedly won the most important battles against Nazi Germany, including the battles for Moscow, Kursk and Stalingrad, and contributed a much greater share of resources to the overall victory in the war. The other part of the reason had to do with Russia's belief in securing its position of regional influence. Although the Cold War and the communist ideology prompted Bolsheviks to develop global ambitions, they remained true to Russia's traditional aspiration to dominate the Eurasian landmass from the Far East to the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Each time Russia failed in its multilateral diplomacy, it resorted to politics of multipolarity, balance of power, and alternative institutional arrangements. When collective security failed to contain Hitler, Russia signed a defense pact with Hitler hoping to isolate Russia from World War II or at least to buy enough time to prepare for it. In the Cold War era, Josef Stalin responded to the U.S.-proposed Marshall Plan by establishing the Communist Information Agency (Cominform) and brushing aside the Polish and Czech hopes to join the Plan. The Soviets then embraced the global "correlation of forces" strategy, which included the establishment of alternative institutions, such as the Warsaw Pact, and reflected their interest in balancing perceived dangerous influences from the Western powers and preserve Russia's independence in world affairs.

After the Cold War

After the Cold War, Russia briefly experimented with the idea of joining Western-centered institutions, while abandoning its traditional regional ambitions and great power aspirations. Unlike Mikhail Gorbachev, who envisaged a global concert of different politico-economic systems, his successor Boris Yeltsin embraced the vision of gaining a full-scale status in transatlantic economic and security institutions, such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, International Monetary Fund, and G-7, and separating the new Russia from the former Soviet republics economically, politically, and culturally. This Western-centric vision proved unsustainable however because it both lacked domestic support and the Western nations were not eager to welcome Russia as an equal participant in their institutions. The decision by NATO to expand eastward in 1994 and to use force against Serbia outside the UN Security Council's jurisdiction in March 1999 signalled the power of the Western-centric world.

A dissatisfied Russia then revived the traditional course of advocating multipolarity, multilateralism and regional great power status. With Yevgeni Primakov as foreign minister, Russia pursued "multi-vector" policies, which meant that it would no longer unequivocally side with Europe or the United States at the expense of its relationships with key participants from the Eurasian continent, such as China, India, and the Islamic world. Russia was also proclaimed to be a distinctly Eurasian great power.

However, multilateralism did not fully yield to multipolarity, as Moscow continued to emphasize the centrality of the UN and work on strengthening Russia's role in traditional global governance structures. In July 1992, for example, it managed to join the G-7, despite the opposition from Britain and Germany. Russia also pursued an ambitious agenda of developing an economic union and a collective security pact with the former Soviet republics. Despite growing resentment toward NATO, it did not break its ties with the alliance and in May 1997 negotiated the establishment of Russia–NATO Council on a permanent basis. Russia also became a founding member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that emerged out of a 1997 Russia–China treaty on border-troop reduction and included China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The organization became prominent after September 11 by emphasising the need to address terrorism and security problems in Central Asia.

A similar pattern of failed attempts at multilateralism followed by a renewed emphasis on multipolarity took place under President Putin in the 2000s. Immediately after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United

States, Putin sought to engage the Western nations into common international projects and security arrangements, but changed his approach as soon as he sensed that the West wanted to preserve Western-centric institutions and principles across the globe. As with Primakov, Putin's response did not really amount to replacing multilateralism with multipolarity. Rather, it was an attempt to assert Russia's right to participate in Western institutional arrangements. In particular, the Kremlin wanted to build joint security institutions with the West to replace the abandoned ABM treaty, join the WTO, and establish greater cooperation between NATO and the Moscow-initiated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in securing Central Asia from terrorism. This was at the heart of Putin's speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, in which he accused the U.S. of "unilateralism" and "disdain for the basic principles of international law."

After not receiving the sought-after recognition of his ideas, Putin moved towards strengthening Russia's cooperation with non-Western nations and institutions. For example, Russia stepped up its economic and military cooperation with China and the SCO. In June 2009, Russia also hosted the first summit of the leaders of the BRIC countries in Yekaterinburg, which resulted in a joint declaration on the establishment of an equitable, democratic and multipolar world order. For the first time, Russia's insistence on multipolar multilateralism was recognized prominently, albeit by non-Western powers. In addition—true to its desire to remain a regional power—Russia also sought to strengthen its control over the post-Soviet region, building pipelines in all geographic directions, raising energy prices for its oil and gas-dependent neighbours and working to develop Russia-friendly political and military relations in the region.

In the Post-Western World

The 2008/9 financial crisis revealed that the world was now entering a radically new stage of development. Structurally, the world is still dominated by the US, with the Western powers (especially America) retaining their military dominance around the world, supported by their global superiority in political, economic and cultural terms. However, in terms of its dynamic trajectory, the world is becoming increasingly less Western-centric, even if the exact direction and end-result remain unclear. While the global economic crisis has severely undermined the Western-centered model of global economic expansion, the Russia–Georgia war also ended the West's monopoly on the unilateral use of force previously demonstrated by NATO's military attacks on Yugoslavia and the United States' invasion of Iraq. The

fact that Russia chose to use force in the Caucasus in defiance of the West has shown a de-centralization of the use of hard power and highlighted the difficulties facing the West as a result of the continuous expansion of NATO's geopolitical responsibilities at the expense of its political arrangements, such as in the case of the SCO and CSTO.

However, it is unclear whether this change will translate into the sort of multipolar multilateralism as currently favoured by Russia. Despite its relative decline, the West remains powerful enough to challenge this form of multipolar multilateralism. Russia is also faced with the rise of China and that of the other BRICS members. Multipolarity assumes Russia's ability to consolidate and project its power abroad, yet the country is faced with formidable domestic problems and is unlikely to emerge as an independent pole, or center of power any time soon. Russia does not have the global economic reach of China or India. Although it has recovered from its sustained economic depression of the 1990s, much of Russia's recovery has been due to the high oil prices, which complicated the government's attempts to reduce the country's over-reliance on its energy exports. In addition, the Russian state suffers from a wide-range of problems such as corruption and a failing demographic situation.

Under these conditions, the Kremlin is trying to cooperate with both Western and non-Western organizations, as well as its significant partners in Eurasia, whilst remaining critical of the unilateral use of force. This pragmatic foreign policy is facilitated further by the fact that Russia is a member of a wide-range of international and regional forums. As noted by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, solutions for Russia should come from "network diplomacy rather than entangling military-political alliances with their burdensome rigid commitments". Unable on its own to effectively respond to security challenges from NATO, Russia continues to develop coalitions with selected European and non-Western countries. For instance, acting jointly with

China, Russia vetoed the United States and Europe-sponsored UNSC resolutions regarding Syria. Fearful that such resolutions would lead to a military intervention and regime change in Syria, as happened in Libya, the Kremlin instead pushed for negotiations between Bashar al-Assad and the military opposition. The BRICS summit held in April 2012 in India further supported these negotiations over Syria.

On the other hand, Russia continues to value its participation in Western institutions and seeks to expand such participation. Following its military conflict with Georgia, President Dmitri Medvedev proposed a pan-European treaty to establish a new security architecture, in which Russia would become a fully-fledged participant. According to him, the fact that neither NATO, nor the OSCE were able to prevent the military conflict indicated the need for an improved security framework in Europe. In the economic arena, Russia's main focus remains greater integration with the EU's economy and the WTO. In late 2011, Russia finally completed its negotiations over its membership in the WTO. In East Asia, the Kremlin is also keenly interested in developing economic and security ties with South Korea and Japan in order to address the issue of a rising China.

Finally, Russia is taking advantage of a relatively favourable geopolitical environment to strengthen its institutional presence in Eurasia. In October 2011, most members of the CIS signed a free-trade agreement that would increase the intra-regional trade by removing various import and export duties. In addition, Putin proposed to build a new Eurasian Union between the CIS states. The Kremlin has also worked to consolidate its military presence in the region by constructing a new anti-terrorism center under the CSTO's auspices in Kyrgyzstan. In an apparent response to Arab-like uprisings, the CSTO also amended its mission by pledging to defend its members from internal "unconstitutional disturbances".

About the Author

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Further Reading

- Lukyanov, F. Rethinking Russia : Russian Dilemmas in a Multipolar World. J. of International Affairs Vol. 63, No. 2, Spring/Summer 2010.
- Petro, N., Russian Foreign Policy, 2000–2011: From Nation-State to Global Risk Sharing. Bologna, PECOB's Papers Series, June 2011, #12