

# The Continuity of Russian Foreign Policy

Russian foreign policy in the 20th century in the face of regime change: continuity or rupture?

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The history of Russia over the course of the 20th century is dominated by two momentous events: the downfall of the Romanov monarchy in 1917, and the collapse of the Communist partyrule in 1991. These two regime changes correspond to times of complete political transformation and policy reorientation in the country. As the ancient Tsarist autocracy was swiftly replaced by a petulant Bolshevik tyranny, and the decrepit partocracy of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in turn gave way to the fledgling presidential republic of the present-day Russian Federation, the Russian political landscape underwent radical metamorphosis. Beyond the domestic ramifications of the political reconfiguration induced by the rise of new regimes and their underlying ethos, the extent to which these turning points produced durable effects on foreign policy conduct merits attention. It is indeed tenable to assume that rupture and revolution in domestic politics prompted by the advent of a new regime would similarly extend to the conduct of foreign policy. In the case of Russia, it could therefore be expected that the regime changes occurring in 1917

and 1991 might have set the country on altogether different foreign policy axioms due to the incontestably contrasted supporting political ideology and understanding of international relations of the governments they spawned. In effect, this assumption rests on the notion that a given regime pursues a foreign policy that is commensurate with its doctrinal aspirations, thus applying the 'logic of appropriateness' to foreign affairs, and which is typically attributable to Constructivism in intentional relations studies. This comes in opposition to implementing policies akin to the 'logic of consequences' which presupposes divorce from ideological prescriptions and the conduct of a foreign policy that aligns with national interests rather than dogmatic preferences, which is for its part commonly identified with Structural Realism by academics. According to Constructivist theory, therefore, the Russian Empire, the USSR and the Russian Federation, should have engaged in foreign policy doctrines consistent with the foundational ideology underpinning their rule, and

therefore distinct from one another. Namely, it could be expected that the Russian Empire might have adhered to balance-of-power principles as they were the norm for great powers of the 19th and early 20th century; that

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the USSR would have behaved according to Marxist theory on the world stage as a matter of course; and that the Russian Federation would have answered to Neoliberal tenets in concordance with its initial constitution and the outlook of the elites gravitating around the presidency at its inception.

## The Russo-Turkish case

Yet, the examination of the impact that regime changes in

Russia projected on her foreign policy over the long-run reveals that the latter is indeed extant yet ephemeral, and that fails to durably remodel Russia's posturing in the international arena. Taking Russo-Turkish relations as an illustration, and using the 'Treaties of Friendship' signed between the two countries in 1921 and 1992 respectively as case studies to illuminate the dynamics of Russian foreign policy recalibration in the aftermath of regime change, the dissertation this analysis is derived from demonstrates that newly-installed regimes in Moscow do attempt rupture with the foreign policy of their predecessors in line with the dispositions foreseen under Constructivism, but that, ultimately, they inexorably revert back to it, under the guise of balance-of-power policies characteristic of Structural Realism. The case of Russo-Turkish relations is an especially telling one as it crystallises Russia's behaviour towards a resilient regional contender with colliding geostrategic and civilisational ambitions in their shared neighbourhood over a significant timespan. Turkey being of one the oldest continuous

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international interlocutors Russia has had to deal with in her history, the longevity of their relationship provides a suitable backdrop against which to gauge the evolution of Russian foreign policy over the centuries and contrast that trend against times of political upheaval in the country. At these critical junctures indeed, the research showed that the new rulers of the Kremlin did firmly intend to chart a new course and normalise these ancient and significant relations with Turkey. It is under that impulse to redefine the relationship along new ideological lines that the

Friendship Treaties' of 1921 and 1992 purported to usher a new chapter of rapprochement between the two nations in contrast with the past and in line with present. As a result, these treaties are replete with incantations for a rejuvenated relationship, a divorce with the past, and the establishment of a future grounded on a Marxist anti-imperialist vision of world order in 1921, and a Neoliberal institutionalist understanding of international affairs in 1992. However, despite these grand designs, the relations between Russia and Turkey did not rise to the invoked level of partnership over time. Gradually, hope faded into resignation as the relations between the two powers returned to an atmosphere of tension after a brief interlude of congeniality that the two successive 'Friendship Treaties' were destined to bring about.

## Failed Diplomatic Revolutions

The failure of these attempted diplomatic revolutions is owed to

several critical factors that conditioned Russia's foreign policy at these turning points, and which in effect provide for its continuity irrespective of regime changes occurring in the country. Crucially, and independent of the will and beliefs of the new ruling elites in Russia, regime change does not alter the fundamental structural constraints the country is subjected to, whether internally or externally. The country still suffers from the same chronic shortcomings in terms of territorial overextension, minimal infrastructure, technological and economic backwardness, low demographic distribution splintered across a plethora of nationalities, weak industrial output relative to direct international competitors, and powerful contiguous neighbours with potentially hostile intentions. Taken together, these factors promote a sense of 'permanent insecurity' in the minds of Russian policymakers who are well aware of the limitations the country must contend with. This constant preoccupation encourages the emergence of an eminently security-driven foreign policy, the main aim of which is to at minimum mitigate this perceived

hereditary imbalance in the international arena, or redress it in the best case, with the view of perpetuating the survival of the nation. However, the regime changes of 1917 and 1991 plunged Russia into times of deep political turbulences that materialised into opposition movements and separatist insurrections that either overtly contested the legitimacy of the new authorities in place, or rejected the domination of the Russian core over the multi-ethnic periphery. For the new rulers of the country, the consequence of this severe domestic disarray amounted to a dramatic reduction of the already-scarce resources and assets with which to fend off potential external threats, thereby aggravating the syndrome of 'permanent insecurity' Russian elites must reckon with. This scenario, making the perennial 'internal-external security challenges' traditionally afflicting Russia all the more acute, heightens the imperative for new regimes to devise reactive strategies to swiftly eliminate these threats and protect the gains made by the new regime in their rise to power, consolidate their grip on the country and restore it to the initial strategic

position the preceding regime enjoyed. It is therefore because regime changes dangerously deplete the capabilities at the disposal of Russian state in the event of foreign aggression that the abandonment of a foreign policy predicated on the 'logic of appropriateness' becomes inevitable. Indeed, the sheer necessity for self-preservation prompt new regimes to return to a security-driven foreign policy grounded in the 'logic of consequences' and associated with the teachings of Structural Realism, which had historically formed the baseline of Russian foreign policy prior to 1917, to ensure their perpetuation and consolidate their power over the country.

## Three Pillars

It follows from the above that instead of providing points of rupture in foreign policy tradition, regime changes not only create the conditions for a systematic return to Structural Realism as guiding principles for Russian foreign policy, but in fact encourage its stimulation, thereby providing a basis for continuity.

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The exigency to react to the drastic reduction in the capabilities at the hands of the regimes coming to power in 1917 and 1991 stems from a restorationist impulse to reconstitute former geographical and material endowments to the nation. However, the ultimate goal of such strategy is to better protect the country against foreign threats to the extent possible, thereby making it eminently defensive rather than expansionist, as such a policy would exceed the resources of the Russian state at these particular junctures. This attitude

of what can be described as Defensive Structural Realism has, upon examination of the Russo-Turkish relations in times of political transition in Russia, crystallised into three fundamental pillars underpinning Russian grand strategy. Firstly: intervention in the borderlands to quash unrest and exclude any foreign powers seeking to exploit any degree of permeability into Russia's close perimeter to their advantage. Secondly: the constitution of buffer zones between Russia and rival great powers to better insulate the country against superior enemies and keep them at bay. Thirdly: indirect confrontation with aspiring hegemonic powers in regions neighbouring Russia to thwart their aspirations and prevent them from attaining a position whereby they could pose a lethal threat to Russia's existence. The history of Russo-Turkish relations over the period scrutinised by the dissertation this report is based on furnishes ample evidence that these three principles were applied as instruments of foreign policy towards Turkey in the pursuit of Russian national interest. Frequent incursions in the



Caucasus, the establishment of a bulwark against Western inroads using countries in the Caucasus or Turkey herself, and the relentless game for influence over Turkish officials at the expense of the West are all apt examples of this strategy at play. Importantly, the research further demonstrated that this formula has traditionally been consistently applied by the three regimes that have succeeded one another in Russia over the course of the 20th century, which suggests that the continuity of Russian foreign policy is encapsulated by these three pillars of grand strategy. In the final analysis, Russia abides to foreign policy principles inherited from Defensive Structural Realism because she lacks the resources and capabilities to project her forces far beyond her borders without allies as the country is inherently contained by superior powers all along her borders.

### **About the author(s)**

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