

# STATISM IN RUSSIA: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

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*ABSTRACT: This work identifies and assesses the general shift in Russian foreign policy thinking during Vladimir Putin's presidency. The main thesis of this work is that a general shift in Russian foreign policy had occurred during Putin's presidency owing to the rise in Statist thinking. To substantiate the thesis, the author uses the State of the Nation addresses of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin to make a comparative analysis of the presidents' foreign policy approaches. As demonstrated, Russian foreign policy experienced a dramatic influx of state power during Putin's presidency, which resulted in the relative quantitative and qualitative reduction of cooperative initiatives between the US and Russia.*

*KEYWORDS: Russia, US, Statism, Putin, Yeltsin, Chechnya, foreign policy, nationalism*

## INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the twenty first century marked the dawn of a new era in US-Russian relations. The winding down of the Cold War in the late 1980s and ensuing warm relations between the former adversaries brought the decades of geo-political, military, economic confrontation and of the competition for spheres of influence across the globe to an end. The collapse of the Soviet empire resulted in a form of tacit alliance between Moscow and Washington in the first half of the 1990s, when president Yeltsin was the head of the Russian state, which gradually transformed into fragile interstate relations filled with mutual suspicion, mistrust and political confrontation after Putin succeeded Yeltsin as the new Russian leader. During the Soviet era the confrontation and the inability to bridge the gap between the superpowers could be understood in the broader context of the ideological struggle. In the mid-1990s, however, when Russia's leadership vowed to support the ideals of

democracy and market economy and when the Western world was no longer concerned about the spread of communism in Europe, other factors came into play. Rising nationalism and internal political pressures engendered by deteriorating economic conditions, widespread social discontent and a threat posed to state security by the secessionist movements in the Caucasus, brought Putin to power and allowed him to accumulate a substantial amount of political leverage.

Given such adverse domestic conditions, the demand for strong leadership in Russia rose and, consequently, Yeltsin hand-picked Putin to lead the country out of chaos and disorder. Yeltsin assumed that Putin's character and determination would be critical in strengthening Russia's economic and political position in the world and also in assuring the continuity of the country's political and foreign policy course. However, Putin's response to major global political processes differed from the preceding political decisions made during Yeltsin's presidency. Putin hoped that a change of a political strategy would provoke the growth of the country's welfare, enhance security and revive the global power image that was largely lost by the preceding leadership as the former super-power transformed into a new nation-state. Increasingly, Putin maintained a hard-line stance on many domestic and foreign policy issues, which resulted in the renewal of political tensions between the US and Russia, reminiscent of the confrontation during the Cold War. Even today, he continues to wield a substantial amount of political power largely because he never lost the support of key power elites. Over the years of his rule, Putin structured the entire political system in Russia according to his own belief of how to reach progress and stability. Obviously, the centralisation of executive power was the major step taken by Putin toward authoritarianism and, simultaneously, the distancing of Russia from the West. Why did Putin decide to change the Russian foreign policy course and was it a product of his personal motives or of a much broader negotiation process among the political and business elites? While answering this question is not a simple task, I will try to bring to light some aspects of Putin's leadership which I consider the engine of this change.

Although a change from a pro-Western Russian foreign policy could be observed as early as 1993, while Yeltsin was still in power;

the arrival of Putin marked the beginning of a new political era for Russia. Moreover, following Putin's election, the official Russian foreign policy thinking experienced a dramatic shift. Undoubtedly, Putin came to power when Russia's domestic economic and political conditions differed drastically from those of Yeltsin's presidency. Such a policy shift could be seen as a normal reaction of any administration to various circumstances. Indeed, many scholars contend that there was no fundamental change of Russian foreign policy from Yeltsin to Putin. They believe that Putin's foreign policy was in large part a continuation of the course that was conceived during the late-Yeltsin period. For instance, Mankoff argues that 'the assertive, narrowly self-interested foreign policy that has characterised Russia during the Putin-Medvedev years is merely the culmination of a process that began over a decade earlier, during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, at a time when the bulk of the Russian elite came to recognize that integration with the West and its institutions was neither possible nor desirable, at least in the short run.'<sup>1</sup> However, to understand the distinction between Yeltsin's and Putin's foreign policy, one would need to look deeply into Russia's official standing on various issues of global and domestic importance as expressed in the State of the Nation addresses and political behaviours of both presidents.

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The State of the Nation address is the central annual speech made by the Russian president to highlight the country's main economic and political challenges, objectives, and priorities. It also reflects and reinforces the general political orientation of the leadership. The rhetoric of the Russian president in the annual address sets the tone for the country's foreign policy during the years of any administration in power. Critical international and domestic issues are addressed in the speech to express the official standing of the leadership and inform any interested parties, including other global powers. I will use a number of case studies to support the main argument of the essay – namely, the US National Missile Defense, NATO expansion initiatives, the situation in Kosovo, the war in Chechnya and, more broadly, US reactions to the Russian policies in the Caucasus, as well as US-Russian relations in the context of the global campaign against terrorism. By comparing the annual State of the Nation addresses of Putin and Yeltsin, I identify the shift in the official positions toward these aspects of foreign policy

and assess the ramifications of the statements. The purpose of this work is not to formulate a substantive critique of Putin's or Yeltsin's approaches to foreign affairs but rather to trace the distinction and provide an explanation of policy actions of both presidents under various circumstances.

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When Putin succeeded Yeltsin in 2000, Russian foreign policy toward the US began to shift; from what looked like a soft confrontation and sporadic economic and political partnership during Yeltsin's era to an explicitly cold, aggressive and highly pragmatic diplomatic form, accompanied by military demonstrations, strong rhetoric and other conspicuous aspects that characterised Putin's foreign policy. This change was mainly aroused by his personal perceptions of Russia's new political and military standing in the world, his strong patriotic and nationalist convictions. In order to illuminate this dramatic shift in Russia's foreign policy, I will draw a comparison of two time periods; the foreign policy trends from 1992 to 1999 and from 2000 to 2007 under Yeltsin's leadership and under Putin's leadership, respectively.

Russian policy towards the US under Putin was mainly concerned about the advancing US plan to build a National Missile Defense system against the so-called "rogue" states and the abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Russia perceived the plan as being targeted against it. As a result, Putin launched an international campaign against these US initiatives. The missile shield was seen as a threat to the strategic parity, the global balance of power, and, more importantly, to Russia's strategic and geopolitical interests in Europe. The US plan 'wonderfully fits the overall picture of the American global anti-missile defense, which, according to our analysis - just look at the map - is being deployed along Russia's perimeter, and also China's, incidentally.'<sup>2</sup> US-Russian relations were further strained when George W. Bush succeeded Bill Clinton as US President in January 2001 mainly because he made the final decision to implement the project rapidly. Although, Bush had sought Putin's acquiescence to his administration's plans, in December 2001 Bush announced his intention that the US to withdraw from the ABM Treaty in six months without waiting for Moscow's agreement. The unilateral withdrawal of the US from the arms control treaty and the drive of US policymakers to expand their military presence and to pursue their security

objectives in areas of traditional Russian influence in Europe and across the globe, sparked a new cycle of political contention, when Russia began to rise as an energy superpower and an important world actor on matters related to international security and peace. Certainly, rocketing oil prices, the high dependence of foreign markets, primarily European, on Russia's energy resources, and an economic boom accounted for the tone with which Putin asserted the country's international position. More importantly however, this assertiveness mirrored the substantial agreement among the Russian political and public circles on the nature of Russia's new role in the world, inspired by the patriotic convictions of Putin. Herspring and Rutland explain the nationalist sentiments in Russia as such: 'if there is an "ism" that drives Putin, it is nationalism – nationalism built not on ethnic, cultural, or spiritual values, but on the centrality of state power, which in Putin's case embraces a deep-seated desire to restore Russia's former greatness.'<sup>3</sup> Putin claims that 'patriotism is a source of courage, staunchness, and strength of our people. If we lose patriotism and national pride and dignity, which are connected with it, we will lose ourselves as a nation capable of great achievements.'<sup>4</sup>

During the early 1990s, the situation was drastically different, when Russia, dependent on foreign, mainly US economic assistance and investments, sought to collaborate with the West on a multitude of issues, from liberal reforms to disarmament and space programs. US-Russian relations were often described as apprenticeship rather than rivalry during the early years of Yeltsin's presidency. The Russian society then quickly became embittered by the economic reforms initiated by a group of liberal reformists headed by Yegor Gaidar and soon after, Russia's leadership moved toward bilateral partnership and reduce the dependence on Western political expertise and guidance. Prior to Putin, Russian foreign policy thinking had been influenced by Primakov and other hard-line policy-makers. Consequently, Putin's approach seemed not to be such a drastic departure of a change from state policies towards the West. The radically transformative domestic policies and a lean towards an authoritarian rule were suggestive of Putin's will that Russia appear as a strong and competitive player in the eyes of the West. While the contrast between Yeltsin's and Putin's domestic policies is hard to overlook, the correlation between domestic and

foreign policies in Russia is probably more intimate than in many other countries. Russian foreign policy is, in large part, reflective of the internal political processes as much as it is a reaction to international developments and events that touch upon the short- and long-term security interests of Russia.

#### THE REVIVAL OF STATISM IN RUSSIA

For centuries, Russia's foreign policy has been shaped by developments in the West, how the status of Russia as a global power was evolving in that light, and how its national strategic interests were met by key external actors. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union, the leadership embarked on a quest for a new sense of national identity. Initially, a pro-Western vision of national identity and foreign policy was espoused by Russian leaders, which was consistent with their perception of the world at large. Subsequently, following economic decline, the new Russian worldview was derived primarily from the perception of its own economic backwardness relative to the steadily growing Western economies and the ideological unity among most Western countries, consecutive financial crises, and the disintegration trends that dominated the Russian domestic arena.

Statists, along with "Westernists" and "Civilisationists," constituted the three distinct traditions, or schools, of Russian foreign policy thinking. Tsygankov maintains that these schools 'sought to preserve Russia's international choices in ways consistent with the schools' historically established images of the country and the outside world.<sup>5</sup> Westernists tend to embrace Western modes of thinking, stressing Russia's similarities with the West. Westernists emphasise Russia's alignment along the Western-orientated political course. They view Russia as a Western power that should strive to acquire the status of a modern, liberal-democratic power. Westernists are also labeled as Atlanticists and international institutionalists. Their mode of thinking was popular from 1987 to 1990 and was captured in such phrases as "global problems" and "interdependence." Andrey Kozyrev was a foremost defender of Russia's orientation towards the West. Along with other reformists of the Yeltsin era, including Anatoly Chubais and Yegor Gaidar, he was later criticised for having conceded the Russian position to the

West on a multitude of foreign policy issues. In light of the political challenges brought about in the mid-1990s, the Russian political establishment was compelled to reassess the country's official foreign policy thinking and expel Westernists from the political arena.

Faced with such new challenges as military conflicts in the Russian periphery and within Russia (Chechnya), the semihostile attitudes of some of the former Soviet republics toward Russia, NATO expansion, and flare-ups in the Balkans, those advocating international institutionalism were unable to offer a conceptual perspective on how the country should face such challenges. Their grand strategy involving the development of a deep, multisided partnership with the West turned out to be deeply flawed. As a result, international institutionalism has been challenged by other schools of foreign policy thinking.<sup>6</sup>

Civilisationists, on the other hand, have always seen Russia's distinctive role in the world through the prism of a cultural opposition between Russia and the West and they assert that Russia is not a Western power. Early-Soviet Civilizationists challenged the West in a most direct fashion, defending the doctrine of the world revolution. They are also labeled as revolutionary expansionists. Other Soviet thinkers however, advocated peaceful coexistence and limited cooperation with the "capitalist world." Yet another version of Civilizationist thinking is the so-called Eurasianism that saw Russia as a distinctive entity from both European and Asian cultures. Eurasianists believe that Russia has a unique destiny. According to this paradigm, Russia is a Eurasian power that lies between the Western and Eastern civilizations and has its own; a "third" way of development. Eurasianism stresses Russia's dominance in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Alexander Dugin, a neo-Eurasianist, contends that Russia and the West – represented by the US – are destined to collide because of their uncompromising values.<sup>7</sup> According to Dugin, 'In principle, Eurasia and our space, the Russian heartland, remains the staging area of a new anti-bourgeois, anti-American revolution.' According to his 1997 book, *The Basics of Geopolitics*, 'The new Eurasian empire will be constructed on the fundamental principle of the common enemy: the rejection of Atlanticism, strategic control of the US, and the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate us. This common civilisational impulse will be the basis of a political and strategic union.'<sup>8</sup> Generally speaking, Civilizationists have always

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viewed Russian values as different from those of the West. However, Dmitry Shlapentokh believes that it remains unclear whether Putin belongs to the so-called “Eurasianist camp” of policy-makers and ideologues.<sup>9</sup>

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Putin’s presidency marked a consistent political course toward the enhancement of the bilateral and multilateral partnership with the Central Asian republics. Additionally, Putin took steps to consolidate the position of the Russian government in the Caucasus. Early in his tenure as president, Putin even proclaimed that Russian foreign policy is prepared to make a “decisive turn” towards the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Putin consistently attempted to restore Russia’s geo-political and economic presence in Asia-Pacific. Relations with China and India, as well as other countries of the Asia-Pacific region, were promising mainly due to economic partnership and numerous arms trade agreements, all which formed the backbone of a wider Russian strategy to weaken the US position in the region and prepare the groundwork for the so-called “multipolar triangle,” and further a “quadrangle” – with Brazil to be included – despite the fact that US ties to China and India were also solid as never before. However, it would be wrong to view Putin as guided entirely by the Eurasianist paradigm. The reform of state power institutions was seen by Putin as the best solution to Russia’s looming political and economic crisis when he succeeded Yeltsin. Putin exhibited an undeniable conformity to a Statist paradigm though his commitment to an Eurasianist conception could justify the necessity to counterpoise the Western influence across the world.

Statists have always sought to preserve and increase the role of the state and its ability to sustain the social, political and international order. The Statist way of thinking is conducive to the consolidation of state control. More importantly, Statism is reinforced and accompanied by a strong national idea. For Statists, the West is seen as a threat to a strong state because Western interests are thought to weaken statehood in Russia. Statists, by their nature, tend to prevent and undermine Western influence in Russia, the post-Soviet spaces and beyond. One of the central preexisting factors leading to Statism is the presence or perception of an external threat to the security of the state. Plans to expand the US military presence in Europe and in the former Soviet territories had sparked

a new wave of Statist thinking because of the perception of immediate threat to Russia's national interests, among other factors. As will be demonstrated below Putin's main political vision of Russia's place in the world coincided with the Statist paradigm, particularly if Russia's national security and cultural identity initiatives under Putin are scrutinised. Putin's views were intimately tied to a Civilisationist perspective of Russia's international role combined with a renewed belief in state institutions. In other words, according to Putin, Russia is neither a Western nor an Eastern power. Russia is a global power in its own right whose security and integrity are the ultimate goals of state leadership.

Yeltsin sought Russia's integration in the Western community even though he never challenged Russia's distinctive role in the world. Likewise, Putin sought Russia's integration in global economic and political affairs, yet through the increased reliance on power structures and with the ambition to create a new Russian state identity. The attempts to negotiate the accession of Russia to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) have led to nothing since Putin's reforms were aimed at the consolidation of state power institutions, the erosion of democratic mechanisms, and a marked growth of state involvement in the economy, particularly, in the resource extraction sector which contradicted the norms of the WTO. Putin believed that the state plays a key role in Russia's resurgence as a global power whereas, all other considerations, including the significance of a thriving civil society and democratic institutions, are essentially incompatible with the Russian milieu. Putin believed that Russia has its own form of governance – democratic in essence, yet different from what is considered a “traditional democratic model” in the West – with a near complete absence of checks on state leadership and the balance of political powers. By and large, the executive branch fused with the legislative and the judicial became subordinate to the executive. Putin took steps to reduce the involvement of private capital in the economy, particularly in the industrial and resource extraction sectors, thereby appropriating the major source of state income. These tendencies significantly alienated Russia from the West during Putin's presidency and the political contention between Russia and US culminated in a 2008 war between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Complete reliance on power structures, military force, and coercive state power; excluding civil actors from the political process makes Statists diametrically opposed to Westernists. Putin eliminated those foreign NGOs and civil society actors who were actively promoting governance reforms, a free society, and crisis management from Russian territory. Many opposition groups and government critics were silenced during the first few years of his presidency. In the aftermath of Putin's reforms, the executive and legislative branches of power merged and many government officials were also members of the ruling party, United Russia, headed by Putin. Such a political model bears a close resemblance to the Communist Party's dominance of the political landscape during the Soviet era. Opposition parties and prominent anti-establishment figures were effectively marginalised so as to achieve state-centrist objectives. State-centrism also characterised the foreign policy course under Putin, which led to a discord with the US leadership over plans to install the components of the National Missile Defense (NMD) system in Central and Eastern Europe.

#### US NATIONAL MISSILE DEFENSE

Plans to install a NMD system date back to late 1950s when the US leadership sought to develop and implement a defensive system against Soviet ballistic missiles. The current national missile defense initiative is the latest version in a long series of attempts. It is intended to protect the US against a limited nuclear attack by a so-called "rogue" state like North Korea or Iran.

Although Yeltsin objected to US plans to deploy the elements of the National Missile Defense (NMD) system in the former Warsaw Pact countries, a financial aid package and membership in the G7/G8 were promised in exchange for implementing liberal and economic reforms which helped to tone down Russian criticism. The signing of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1996 and the promise of advancing the ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention were indicative of the relative success and of the ongoing cooperation between the US and Russia during Yeltsin's terms. Following Yeltsin's resignation 1999, Putin became acting president. Soon after that, a new National Security Concept was signed into law which reaffirmed Russia's strong commitment of the previous

1997 Concept to the principle of nuclear deterrence and the possible preventive first use of nuclear weapons. The Concept reiterated the leading role of nuclear weapons in protecting state integrity and security. Whereas the 1997 National Security Concept had reserved the right to a nuclear strike ‘in case an armed aggression creates a threat to the very existence of the Russian Federation as an independent sovereign state,’<sup>11</sup> Putin’s version of the document contained an alteration of the wording: ‘the use of all forces and means at its disposal, including nuclear weapons, in order to repel armed aggression against itself or its allies, when no other means are deemed possible to prevent the liquidation of Russia as a party to international relations.’<sup>12</sup> Putin’s 2000 military and foreign policy doctrine referred to NATO as an impediment to securing Russia’s strategic interests, though it highlighted the difference between Europe and US and underscored the importance of a “multipolar” global order. The signing of the SORT treaty in May 2002 by Putin and Bush opened the door to the reduction in the number of nuclear warheads to 1700-2200 in Russia and US over the next ten years.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the START treaties that were signed prior to, and following, Putin’s presidency, the SORT treaty was later criticised on a number of aspects, including the absence of proper verification provisions that ensured the implementation of the terms of the treaty; no guarantees prohibiting the redeployment of warheads after the treaty expires in 2011 and other weaknesses related to implementation mechanisms.<sup>14</sup>

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Interestingly, Yeltsin expressed his opposition to the US initiative to install the components of the NMD system in Central and Eastern Europe, yet he never used the language of threat to influence the decision of the countries involved and to delay or disrupt their plans. Both Yeltsin and Putin consistently stressed the importance of respecting Russia’s national strategic interests by international partners: Putin went further and resorted to threatening to target former Warsaw Pact allies by Russia’s offensive strategic nuclear forces in an effort to prevent the installation of the system. In a newspaper interview while attending a G8 Summit, Putin stressed that ‘(i)f the US nuclear potential extends across the European territory, we will get new targets in Europe. It will then be up to our military experts to identify which targets will be targeted [sic.] by

ballistic missiles and which ones will be targeted [sic.] by cruise missiles.<sup>15</sup>

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We have taken several other steps required by the Adapted Conventional Armed Forces Treaty in Europe (ACAF). But what have we seen in response? Eastern Europe is receiving new weapons, two new military bases are being set up in Romania and in Bulgaria, and there are two new missile launch areas – a radar in the Czech republic and missile systems in Poland. And we are asking ourselves a question: what is going on? Russia is disarming unilaterally. But if we disarm unilaterally then we would like to see our partners be willing to do the same thing in Europe. On the contrary, Europe is being pumped full of new weapons systems. And of course we cannot help, but be concerned.<sup>16</sup>

A perception of external threat posed by the expansion of US defensive missile systems in Europe led Putin to pursue a counter-strategy aimed at the revival of the military, building new alternative alliances, demonstratively testing new missiles, resuming strategic bomber flights in close proximity to NATO's bases, and conducting war games in concert with anti-Western countries. Putin also took steps to restore relations with Germany and France, offering them an alternative Russian-European missile shield to counter US proposals. However, European NATO member countries were reluctant to accept Putin's proposal, which excluded the US. Indeed, during his speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in 2007, Putin said:

why is this being done, why are our American partners so insistent about implementing the missile defense plans in Europe, if they are obviously not needed for protection against the Iranian or North Korean missiles? It is well known where North Korea is located and what the range of their missiles needs to be to reach Europe. It is clear that it is not against them or us, because everyone knows that Russia does not intend to attack anyone. Why is this being done? Perhaps, to provoke our response and to prevent our integration into Europe. Missiles with a range of about five to eight thousand kilometers that really pose a threat to Europe do not exist in any of the so-called "problem" countries. Any hypothetical launch of,

for example, a North Korean rocket to American territory through Western Europe obviously contradicts the laws of ballistics. As we say in Russia, it would be like using the right hand to reach the left ear.<sup>17</sup>

The global war against terrorism (GWOT) improved Russia's relations with NATO and in May 2002 the NATO-Russia Council was formed. Its goal was to promote cooperation in fighting terrorism, crisis management, arms control, rescue operations and emergency situations, to name a few. In January 1992, Boris Yeltsin also called for a global missile defense system that could be developed and operated by both Russia and US. Such a system could be based on modified Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) technology. In essence, Yeltsin's offer contradicted his previous statements reaffirming Russia's compliance with the Antiballistic Missile Treaty which prohibits extensive missile defense systems. The proposal was left unrealised because of the pessimism prevalent among US policy-makers with regard to a joint anti-ballistic missile defense system with Russia. Bobo Lo describes the 'overall of Russian foreign policy during the Yeltsin period as "ad hoc" and "reactive"'. He argues that 'policy-makers consistently sought to give the impression of strategic vision and long-term thinking. But the competition between sectional interests within the elite had anaesthetising effect on policy. Decision-making was driven by lowest common denominator principles, based on the avoidance of risk. The outcome, largely accidental, was a "pragmatism by default" instead of the consensus sought by the regime.'<sup>18</sup> Russian foreign policy priorities during Yeltsin's administrations were geared to accommodate the need to reinforce statehood to the expectation that was prevalent among the US decision-makers to move forward with the realisation of governance reforms in Russia and implement the disarmament initiatives according to the agree-upon timeline. It is clear that Yeltsin aspired to see Russia become a part of the international community and cooperating with the US on a broad range of issues was deemed as the most effective way of achieving that.

Putin's political course effectively decelerated the progression of the state along that vector. His rhetoric related to US missile defense initiatives manifests a more deterministic approach to foreign affairs; all the more so as Russian national interests were believed (and claimed) to be directly affected by the US defense initiatives

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in Europe. Putin perceived the US plan to install the elements of NMD in Europe as designed to offer protection against Russia's nuclear weapons, not Iran's or North Korea's officials from the Bush administration had argued. Whereas Putin's opposition to Western security initiatives may be seen as a response to the rejection of his proposals to deploy a joint missile defense system with both European states and the US, more importantly, state-centrism and the objectives set forth by a new military doctrine appeared to be the main vehicle of the shift in Russia's foreign policy thinking and relations to the US on the question of NMD deployment in Central and Eastern Europe.

#### NATO EXPANSION

After the collapse of communism in East and Central Europe, deep structural transformations including liberal economic reforms, were encouraged by the West and reinforced through pledges to provide foreign financial aid, which in turn assisted the Westernists gain more influence on Yeltsin. Indeed, in 1991, in an effort to demonstrate a pro-Western policy orientation, the Yeltsin administration went so far as to send a letter to NATO expressing a strong interest in membership and the willingness to move toward a full-scale partnership. 'His letter did receive some publicity in the media, but suspicion lingered in the West about the permanency and even about the viability of Yeltsin's democratic reforms in Russia.'<sup>19</sup>

By not encouraging Russia to become a member, the West missed an excellent opportunity to strengthen Russia's nascent democracy. An acceptance, or at least a positive response, would have given an initial boost to Yeltsin's pro-Western foreign policies, a much-needed new identity to the floundering Russian military, and would have effectively countered Yeltsin's nationalist and Communist critics.<sup>20</sup>

Felkay maintains that 'despite NATO's reluctance to embrace Yeltsin's Russia, the Yeltsin-Kozyrev team pushed on toward integrating Russia with the rest of Europe and building a friendly relationship with the United States.'<sup>21</sup> Yeltsin realised that he had to make the post-Soviet political and economic transformations attractive to the US decision-makers, especially Clinton, since Russia's integration into the fold of the international society was a prime, short-term objective and it was recognised that strong relations to

the US could act as a political vehicle to achieving such an objective. And thus, Yeltsin may be regarded as driven by pragmatism and adaptability to a Western orientation in a foreign policy decision- and policy-making, a key avenue towards the realisation of such foreign policy goals. Lo suggests that 'during the Yeltsin period, America represented the single greatest external influence on Russian foreign policy, whether in relations with the IMF, in terms of the strategic disarmament agenda, in determining the level of Russian interest in regional and global issues, or in shaping elite perception of national identity.'<sup>22</sup>

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Such an orientation did not last long however and the rhetoric favoured by Putin was much less conciliatory and more confrontational over what he perceived and presented as Russia's geo-political encirclement by US-led NATO forces. Despite Putin's – like Yeltsin's – rhetorical interest in Russia's NATO membership, no tangible actions were taken to increase Russia's engagement with the vanguard European security community. Contrarily, Putin worked to consolidate Russia's energy position in Europe seeking to emphasise energy dependence (of a great percentage of European countries) on Russia's energy resources. In his 2000 State of the Nation address, Putin stressed the need to alleviate Russia's dependence on foreign aid by stressing that 'it not only relates to our national pride, though it is also important. The question is more dramatic and of much greater significance. It is whether or not we can survive as a nation and civilization when our well-being again and again depends on international loans and the favour of world economic leaders.'<sup>23</sup>

The 2000 State of the Nation Address served, in many ways, as a political blueprint for things to come and it is no coincidence that this tone was apparent throughout both of Putin's administrations. For instance, at the 2007 Munich Conference Putin criticised the US for conducting a unilateral foreign policy, for pursuing its national interests while ignoring those of other countries, both major and minor. He described US diplomacy as using an 'almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force – in international relations, a force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts.'<sup>24</sup> He also expressed Russia's concern when he pointed to the 'so-called flexible frontline American bases with up to five thousand men in each. Again, it turns out that NATO

has put its frontline bases on our borders.<sup>25</sup> In a 2007 speech commemorating the 62<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the Nazi defeat in World War II, Putin tacitly compared US foreign policy to that of the Third Reich. He stated that '(w)e do not have the right to forget the causes of any war, which must be sought in the mistakes and errors of peacetime. In our time, these threats are not diminishing. They are only transforming, changing their appearance. In these new threats, as during the time of the Third Reich, are the same contempt for human life and the same claims of exceptionality and diktat in the world.'<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, during a 1997 speech, Yeltsin reiterated his opposition to NATO expansion plans – in a somewhat softer tone – by stating that 'they aim to contradict the Russian security interests and are conducive to fracturing the European political space. The significance of existing European-wide political organisations will diminish. Never before has anyone been able to create an effective security system in Europe without Russia or against it.'<sup>27</sup> Yeltsin's suggestion however was to increase dialogue in an effort to ease tensions.

During the Yeltsin years Russia's diplomacy sought to implement the foreign policy objectives which centred on creating favourable external conditions for the continuation of domestic reforms, for building and maintaining genuinely equal relationships with the leading countries of the world, corresponding to the status and potential of Russia. Indeed the aim was 'to defend our national interests not by resorting to confrontation, but by building the foundation for future stability and cooperation in international relations. Russian foreign policy is aimed to construct the system of international relations based on the multipolar peace, devoid of the dominance by a single center of force.'<sup>28</sup>

It is important to mention that the agreed-upon financial aid package did not eliminate, but helped tone down, Russia's criticism of NATO's eastward expansion during Yeltsin's terms. The US assurances given on the ABM Treaty also helped. The signing of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the promise of advancing the ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention were gestures of ongoing cooperation between the two, despite their disagreement on NATO expansion. Additionally, the US had made another concession to appease Yeltsin, by announcing that it

would support Russia's full participation in future meetings of the Group of Seven (G-7).

Despite Yeltsin's previous diplomatic gestures and his willingness to cooperate despite NATO's 1999 engagement in Kosovo, Putin pursued a consistent and strictly pro-Russian policy course on matters related to global peace and security. Putin was more cautious about the NATO expansion plans.

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## KOSOVO

The conflict in Kosovo clearly demonstrates that the shift in Russian foreign policy thinking toward Statism was manifested not only in presidential rhetoric, but also in the actions of Russia. This change carried Russia through Putin's two terms and has defined Medvedev's presidency as well. The conflict in Georgia in 2008 over the two annexed Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was justified as being in line with the actions of the West in Kosovo and the US-backed declaration of independence of the breakaway region is illustrative of the Putin administration's disregard for international legal norms and of the commitment to use military force in advancing a new national idea. In Yeltsin's era there was a tendency to defer the making of difficult decisions. Moscow was prone or at least attempted to ignore problems related to Yugoslavia in an effort to postpone a decision on how to respond to Milosevic.<sup>29</sup> As a result of such policy, it appeared that Moscow approved NATO's Balkan policy. Yeltsin was compelled to invent a new type of relationship with the US seeking greater economic support and a solution to accumulating domestic political pressures in light of the transition process and the successive financial crises that had nearly thrown the Russian economy into chaos. At that time, the US was the sole superpower and as many people in the Russian elites asserted, a major source of donor aid. In that context, Yeltsin had no choice but to emphasise the strengthening of US-Russian ties. However, his health problems, inability to handle domestic processes, the peculiarity of his personality, and, at times, a lack of assertiveness created additional impediments to forming a solid, long-lasting foreign policy course.

Putin came to power when Russian foreign policy was weak, inconsistent and ineffective. It was then that a new foreign policy

course began to form. Putin's foreign policy appeared increasingly solid, goal-oriented, and pragmatic. During his visit to Kosovo in 2001 Putin said that 'the international community, which set up a protectorate in Kosovo at the end of the civil war in 1999, must act to implement a UN Security Council resolution guaranteeing the rights of minority Serbs in the province of Kosovo and the integrity of Yugoslavia.'<sup>30</sup> Putin reiterated that the long-standing Russian ties to the Serbian people constitute the foundation of bilateral relations and publicly Russia viewed NATO's intervention as the cause of Albanian nationalism throughout the region.

In his 2000 State of the Nation address, Putin said that

The Cold War is in the past, yet even today we have to overcome its hard consequence, including the attempts to infringe the rights of sovereign states under the umbrella of the so-called humanitarian interventions and the difficulty of finding a common language when it comes to resolving the issues of regional and international threats.<sup>31</sup>

The situation in Kosovo, which Yeltsin failed to handle appropriately, sparked a new wave of anti-Western sentiments and helped Putin consolidate his political power-base and engage in widescale military operations in the North Caucasus. Yeltsin once remarked that 'Russia has a number of extreme measures in store, but we decided not to use them so far. We are above that. On the moral level we are superior to the Americans. The NATO aggression against Yugoslavia is a very big mistake made by America and by Clinton, and they will be held accountable.'<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, Yeltsin appealed to the leaders of the Contact Group on Yugoslavia and called for the Security Council meeting to end the bombing and to continue the search for peace; an effort that did not yield results. However, this demonstrates Yeltsin's commitment to peace and political dialogue. He strove to prevent unilateral military interventions and sought greater involvement of the UN in the resolution of the crisis. Yeltsin proclaimed that 'I will do everything to put an end to military actions in Yugoslavia, but Russia has already made its choice – it will not allow itself to be drawn into the conflict. We are trying to avoid another global split.'<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Putin stated that 'with increased money inflows from abroad we have more external interference with our internal affairs. In the past, states-colonisers referred to the so-called civilization mission

while expanding their national interests, which happens today, only with democracy as a pretext.<sup>34</sup>

#### CHECHNYA

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Disagreements between the US and Russia over the resolution of the conflict in Chechnya were commonplace after Putin was elected. He perceived and presented Chechen rebels as a threat not only to Russia and its territorial integrity, but also to civilization at large, which he predominantly associated with the West, so as to gain greater international support for the operations in the Caucasus. In his April 2002 State of the Nation address, Putin said that 'in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, many people realised that the Cold War is over and that there are different threats and there is another war with international terrorism. This does not require additional evidence and equally applies to Russia.'<sup>35</sup> The first wave of terrorist attacks in Moscow and the second Chechen campaign that followed boosted his ratings substantially before the presidential elections in 2000 and gave him confidence in promoting a centralised system of governance.

Yet, despite such public support the events of 2004 proved a major challenge for Putin. In that year two civilian airplanes were downed and more than a thousand schoolchildren and teachers were taken hostage in Beslan, North Ossetia, both of which resulted in hundreds of casualties. Attacks seemed to have been spreading across the whole region and people felt increasing insecurity. The initial reaction was hardly in line with the pragmatic Western-oriented course. In his first statement, Putin admitted that Russia lacked sufficient and adequate defenses, but also relegated partial responsibility for the Beslan incident to some unspecified external forces that worked to undermine Russia's influence in the region and to instigate secessionist sentiments and movements. In a vague reference to the West, he said that 'some want to tear off a big chunk of our country and others are helping them. They are helping them in the belief that Russia, as one of the greatest nuclear powers of the world, still poses a threat to them and, therefore, this threat has to be eliminated. Terrorism is their only tool.'<sup>36</sup>

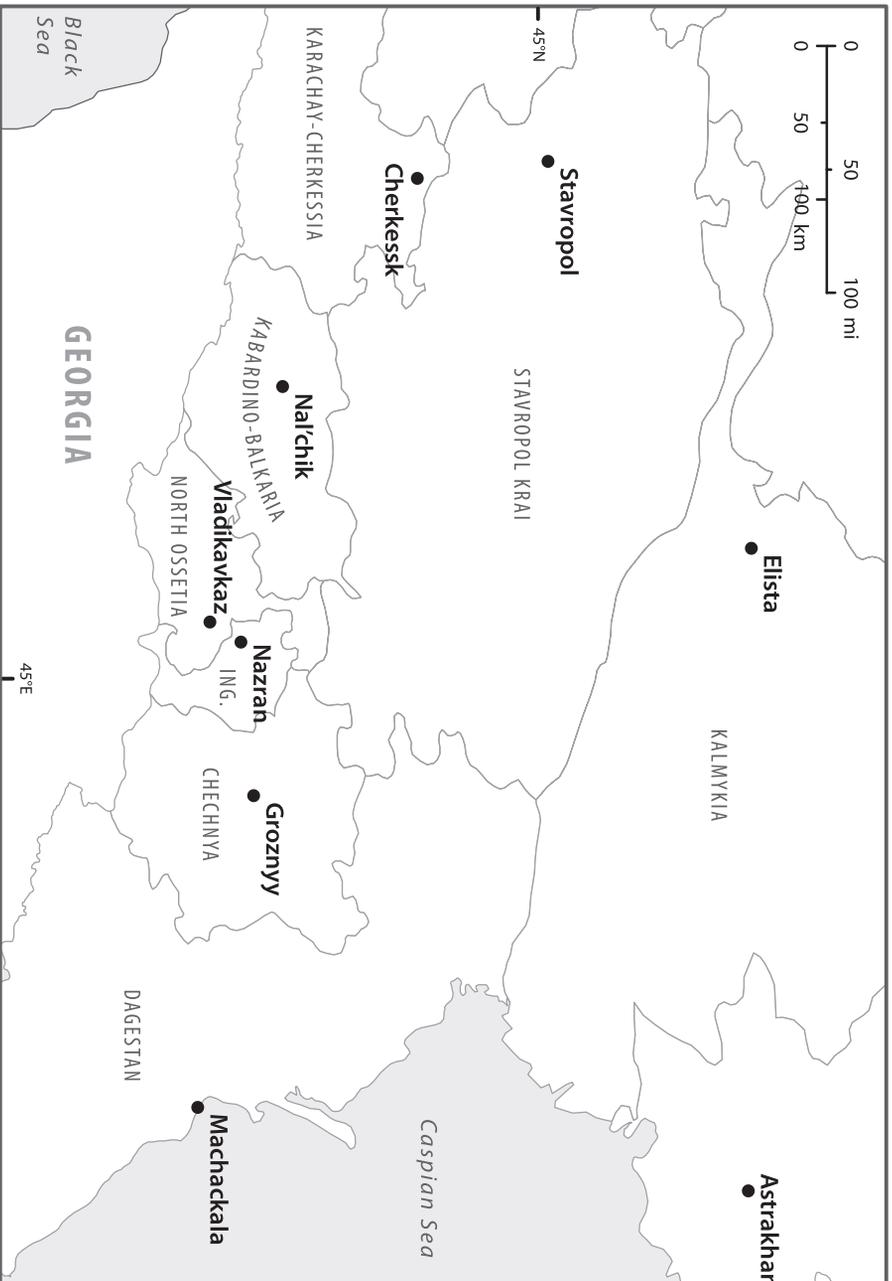
However, US-Russian relations improved in the wake of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Whereas certain

Russian policymakers had expressed their willingness to support the US: concessions on NATO enlargement initiatives were made and Putin immediately endorsed the US plan to launch a global war on terrorism, which was seen as being in-sync with Russia's own domestic campaign to suppress insurgencies and secessionism. The events of 11 September 2001 presented an ideal opportunity for Moscow to build a solid foundation for domestic policies. 'Fighting terrorism has been the argument used by Russia to combat rebel groups in Chechnya and it builds on a strong national consensus created by the bombings of civilian apartment complexes in Russia in 1999.'<sup>37</sup> The obvious reason was that Putin already saw Russia as fighting such a war in Chechnya and that the resumption of this war in 1999 had greatly contributed to his accession to power. Russia thus supported the US-led campaign to oust the Taliban regime and to eliminate the Al-Qaida network in Afghanistan. As a result, Putin reluctantly accepted the US plan to deploy military bases in Central Asia, despite domestic opposition. The result was that Russia was seen as an even closer ally than NATO. The response of the US was softened criticism of the war in Chechnya, which was subsequently referred to as an internal affair of state.

When referring to the situation in Chechnya in 1994, Yeltsin had stressed the need to rely strictly on negotiations to reach a social and political consensus. The consensus aimed at a common goal of consolidating the Russian state and increasing the welfare of its citizens without regard to the differences in opinions and political positions.<sup>38</sup> His 1995 State of the Nation speech depicted a cooperative and conciliatory tone of Russian foreign policy, in large part due to the widely unpopular military campaign in Chechnya. In 1995, he stated that in rare cases when coercion is to be used all actions need to conform to the will of the people, which is enshrined in the Constitution. He further stated that Russia was compelled to use force against the outlawed Chechen regime in the first campaign that was started against the backdrop of weak statehood, the poor condition of military forces, fragile civil society institutions, and a still budding democracy when the government was able not to suppress the wave of criticism and remain open, both domestically and internationally. In 1997, Yeltsin signed a peace treaty with Maskhadov to put an end to hostilities between Russia and the Chechen republic. Despite the war, Yeltsin was well aware of the necessity to maintain



# NORTH CAUCASUS



Map: David Erkomatshvili

a solid, business-like relationship with the West, and was not about to forfeit Russia's right to fully participate in European and world affairs. To alleviate international criticism during the height of the campaign, Yeltsin even allowed an OSCE fact-finding missions to enter Chechnya in an effort to resolve the conflict. By permitting the OSCE to play an important role in Chechnya, the Yeltsin administration attempted to show its willingness to cooperate with international organisations, notwithstanding the strong criticism by the Republican-majority US Congress.

Earlier still, in his 1994 State of the Nation address, Yeltsin stressed the need to enhance dialogue with Chechen authorities with the aim of holding democratic elections in the breakaway republic.<sup>39</sup> He also said that

without developed civil society institutions, state power will inevitably become totalitarian and despotic. It is because of civil society that this power serves the interests of citizens. The distinction of the situation in Russia is that parallel to building civil society institutions, democratic foundations are being developed in so far as a democratic society cannot exist without a civil society. It is not about the interference of the state with the life of the civil society structures and not about equipping these organizations with executive powers, but about a targeted assistance of those institutions that are capable of consolidating the democratic potential of the power.<sup>40</sup>

Putin's position on the Chechen question was drastically different, derived primarily from his firm conviction that state collapse can be averted only by the strengthened nationwide state control. Putin was able to consolidate his rule in Chechnya following the major offensive by the Russian army and a counter-insurgency phase of the military campaign that began in September 1999. Putin's rhetoric related to the war in Chechnya and secessionism in general was obviously more rigid and harsh in comparison to that of Yeltsin. In his May 2003 address, Putin stated that

Russia will be a strong country with modern, well-equipped, and mobile armed forces, with the army prepared to protect its homeland and its allies, the national interests of the country and its citizens. Our history shows that a country like Russia will exist and prosper only if it

is a great power, yet in time of economic or political crises there has always been a threat of disintegration.<sup>41</sup>

Putin took the problem of secessionism in Russia, especially in the regions dominated by Muslim populations, more seriously. His official rhetoric associated with the Chechen problem highlights the paramount necessity to suppress separatist movements by force of arms under the pretext of the war against international terrorism and to project Russian influence across the entire North Caucasus. Generally speaking, state centrism was the most salient feature of Russian foreign and domestic policies under Putin. When he succeeded Yeltsin, the policies of the state towards the Chechen republic and secessionism in general took a more assertive form; that is, despite Yeltsin's initiation of a major offensive against the Chechen separatists in December 1994, Putin's campaign against rebel fighters appeared increasingly uncompromising. This was, in part, due to the external circumstances that dominated the global and post-Soviet political space. Putin strove to link the struggle of the Chechens for independence to a global terrorist threat and Al-Qaida in order to achieve the support of the leading democracies in his state-building campaign. The 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington and the subsequent US-led military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq proved to be a turning point in Putin's anti-insurgency campaign.

According to Sakwa, 'Putin's image as an "iron chancellor" was created and sustained by his uncompromising approach to the Chechen problem. His use of street language in a press conference on 8 September, where he used the underworld jargon of "soaking the bandits in the John," appeared at first as if it would be a public relations disaster, but in the event it only reinforced Putin's image as a man of the people.'<sup>42</sup>

Putin's rhetoric reveals a tendency towards increased state control and the use of coercive military force against the separatist movement in Chechnya in an effort to prevent the disintegration of the Russian state and, more importantly, to consolidate the power base of the ruling regime. Interestingly, Yeltsin had emphasised the involvement and the significance of democratic institutions, civil society and negotiations in tackling ethnic problems in his State of the Nation addresses. The First Chechen campaign that was waged during Yeltsin's presidency was the result of the decision-making

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process among the elite groups and individuals who often bypassed the president's approval of certain policies and avoided his complete comprehension of critical issues. This is not to suggest that it was launched without Yeltsin's consent. Yet many political decisions during his rule can be attributed to his inner circle and key generals in the military rather than his personal initiative. Yeltsin was forced to make unpopular decisions because of the pressure exerted on him by the oligarchy and individuals that were directly linked to his family. Putin was able to overcome the influence of various interest groups, suppress the impulses of power elites in the decision- and policy-making processes and impose his own will and convictions on the formation of new domestic and foreign policies.

#### TERRORISM

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in 2001, Putin offered the US leader his country's strong support in operations against Al-Qaida bases in Afghanistan. This included intelligence cooperation, opening Russian airspace for humanitarian aid flights, participation in rescue operations as well as compelling the Central Asian leaders to provide support to US military forces. There was logic behind these actions. In his February 2002 interview to the Wall Street Journal, Putin expressed his willingness to provide alternative energy market opportunities for the US.<sup>43</sup> At that time, Russia was a major oil producer, yet only one percent of imported US oil had Russian origins. Putin anticipated an increase in the production of crude oil, much of which was intended for export, mostly to the US. Theoretically, this could put the US in a position of dependence on Russia's oil supplies and create another economic lever through which to manipulate US foreign policy. Eager to engage the US, Putin was careful not to overly express his opposition on the long-standing issues, such as the NMD, NATO expansion and the situation in former Yugoslavia. His decision to support the US invasion of Afghanistan derived from the goal to oust the Taliban regime and to replace it with the Russia-backed Northern Alliance. However, while offering his support, Putin made it clear that Russia will not engage in military operations because of domestic and international authorisation processes. In return for his support of the US invasion of Afghanistan, he expected

US approval of his policies in Chechnya and, possibly, accession to WTO. When the Bush administration announced its plans to overthrow Saddam Hussein in support of a democrat Iraq, Russia responded in a different manner. Putin decided to join the coalition of opposing countries. Not convinced by US arguments about the WMD threat, he was insisting on broader UN involvement, thereby asserting disagreement with the US. The decision to oppose the US invasion was driven by Russia's economic and geo-political interests in Iraq under Saddam Hussein and by the reluctance to let US companies occupy the oil-rich country. At that time, Russia was the main supplier of arms to Iraq and had highly profitable oil contracts with the Iraqi regime. In his 2003 State of the Nation address, Putin said that '(c)ountries with highly developed economies are around us. I must say they push us aside from the lucrative world markets whenever possible. Their visible economic advantages give them the reason for geopolitical ambitions.'<sup>44</sup> However, in the end, his efforts to oppose the invasion of Iraq were wasted and Russia could not use its veto power in the Security Council because of the Bush administration's disregard for international normative standards and in favour of unilateralism. In addition, Putin's fears have not materialised and Russian companies have won significant numbers of auction bids for oil development projects in Iraq.

## CONCLUSION

The State of the Nation addresses of Yeltsin and Putin examined in this work suggest that there was a fundamental shift in thinking from Yeltsin to Putin on Russia's foreign policy priorities. This is seen from the expressed commitment to consolidate bilateral cooperation with the US, to develop civil society institutions and to build a free market economy during Yeltsin's presidency to a strong political and diplomatic opposition by Putin of nearly all US-backed security initiatives, military and economic coercion, the centralisation of executive power and the willingness to use military force in tackling political problems, both domestically and internationally. The shift is mainly manifest in the rhetoric and policy actions of Putin and members of his administration. Multiple factors can explain the difference in foreign policy approaches of Yeltsin and Putin in the context of US-Russian relations, such as different

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personalities, distinct socio-political circumstances that accompanied both leaders, distinct manners of speaking, particular personal relationship and different manners of reacting to US proposals. Most importantly however, the changes to foreign policy may be seen as a consequence of Putin's strong personal conviction that Russia's global power image can be restored by means of a consolidation of coercive state power. Arousing the nationalist agenda is one way of achieving that.

As mentioned, Yeltsin was compelled to make difficult and unpopular decisions that were hardly in line with his stated commitment to adhere to a liberal-democratic course. However, many of his decisions were the result of the political pressure that was exerted on him by the oligarchy and senior administration officials. Yeltsin's poor health condition essentially undermined his ability to fully engage in the decision-making process closer to the end of his second term as president. He was preoccupied with the necessity of finding a political successor and ensuring the continuity of Russia's foreign policy course. Yeltsin anticipated a change of domestic and foreign policies; however, at that time, he was mainly concerned about the ability of his successor to handle the complex situation inside the country and in the ever-changing world. Throughout the span of Putin's presidency, his rhetoric on major political and economic affairs suggests a heightened patriotic and nationalist stance. Despite the many setbacks that followed Putin's decisions, Russia achieved a high degree of stability and consolidation. Favourable economic conditions, particularly as a result of high oil and gas prices on the world market and the revenues from resource exports, proved to be the stimulus for the Russian leader to transform the system of governance and the entire concept of the Russian state security in the twenty first century. This was seen as the reassertion of Russian state interests in the West and resulted in tension with the global security vision that was and continues to be espoused by the US.

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