



ISSN-L: 2958-5732

INSIGHT

Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis
National Defence University, Islamabad



Number: G&RS-10

March 27, 2023

PRIMAKOV DOCTRINE AND RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Author(s):

Dr. Muhammad
Shabbir
(Research Fellow)

Edited by:

Amb (R) Fauzia M
Sana

Russian foreign policy has been shaped by a number of factors over the years, including its geography, history, and global power dynamics. One notable approach to foreign policy that has emerged in recent decades is the Primakov Doctrine, named after former Russian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov. This Doctrine formed the pillars of Russian Foreign Policy for about two decades. It emphasizes the importance of a multipolar world order, where power is balanced among various great powers, and has significant implications for global power politics. It calls for a trilateral alliance between Russia, China, and India to resist the United States' rise as the world's sole superpower.¹ For many years, the RIC has been held up as the non-Western hub for discourse and collaboration that would usher in a new multipolar order.² It also represents a shift away from the pro-Western stance that Russia had taken in the early years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and instead focuses on enhancing Russia's influence in its own region and beyond.



The principles of the Primakov Doctrine can be summarized as follows:

- **Multipolarity:** Advocates a multipolar world order wherein no single country dominates global politics,³ implying that power is distributed among several centres of influence, and countries have equal opportunities to participate in international affairs.
- **Strategic Autonomy:** Emphasizes Russia's right to pursue its own interests and its need for strategic autonomy in foreign policy.⁴ Russia should be able to develop partnerships and alliances that serve its national interests, without being subservient to any particular country or bloc.
- **Regional Integration:** Stresses the importance of regional integration and cooperation, particularly in the former Soviet Union.⁵ Russia should strengthen ties with its neighbours and promote regional integration to establish a sphere of influence that reflects its strategic interests.
- **Pragmatism:** Calls for a pragmatic approach to foreign policy, based on a realistic assessment of Russia's national interests.⁶ Russia to pursue partnerships and alliances when it serves its interests, but should also be willing to act unilaterally when necessary.
- **Non-intervention:** Opposes foreign intervention in the affairs of sovereign states.⁷ Russia should respect the sovereignty of other countries and refrain from interfering in their internal affairs. At the same time, Russia should be prepared to defend its national interests and protect its citizens abroad.

Critics of the Primakov Doctrine argue that it represents a return to the aggressive, expansionist policies of the Soviet era. They cite Russia's annexation of Crimea, its involvement in the war in Ukraine, and its support for authoritarian regimes in Syria and elsewhere.⁸ They also argue that the emphasis on multipolarity and rejection of Western influence in international affairs has contributed to a breakdown in trust between Russia and the West. However, supporters of the Primakov Doctrine argue that it represents a necessary response to the threats posed by the West, particularly the eastward expansion of NATO and the European Union into what Russia sees as its traditional sphere of influence. In their view the doctrine

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this Insight are of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect policy of the NDU.

has helped to restore Russia's status as a major world power and has given it greater influence in international affairs.⁹

Russia wants better relations with India and China as part of its policy to pursue a multipolar world.¹⁰ Russia is committed to strengthen further its special privileged partnership with India based on shared foreign policy priorities on urgent international issues and enhance mutually beneficial bilateral ties primarily in trade and economy.¹¹ At the same time, the summit between President Putin and President Xi Jinping before the Beijing Olympics (boycotted by the US and its allies) in February 2022 was a significant pointer to a more robust strategic relationship between Moscow and Beijing. The 5 page Joint Statement covered a whole spectrum of relations and in its final para reiterated their desire to expanding ties of cooperation within the Russia-India-China (RIC) framework.¹²

As Russia continues to navigate a complex and shifting global landscape, it is likely that the principles of the Primakov Doctrine will continue to play a significant role in shaping its foreign policy.

The imprint of Primakov Doctrine can be seen in the Concept for Russia's Humanitarian Policy.¹³ The Policy calls for deeper relations between Russia and West Asia, Latin America, and Africa, as well as increased collaboration with Slavic nations, China and India. Despite its outward appearance as a soft power strategy, the Policy serves as a foundation for Russian politics and religion that have been used to justify Moscow's 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine in defence of Russian speaking population in Ukraine. Analysts in the West viewing this policy as a new Russian attempt to "resurrect the Soviet Union"¹⁴ and cite President Putin's actions in Crimea, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, his comments at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on June 2022 that "the Soviet Union is a Russian historical land." This viewpoint is bolstered by the fact that it is reminiscent of the Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968, later disavowed by Gorbachev, that legitimised the Soviet Union's right to

militarily intervene in other socialist countries-particularly in eastern and central Europe-if their governments were threatened by 'capitalist counter-revolutionaries'.¹⁵

For South Asia, the Primakov inspired Russian foreign policy approach has important implications. It suggests that Russia does not want to see any one power, including the United States or China, dominate the region. With this in mind Russia has strengthened relations with China, consolidated defence and trade ties with India despite India's ever closer strategic ties with the US, and has improved political, military and economic relations with Pakistan notwithstanding Indian reservations. Pakistan-Russia relations are no longer acrimonious. Russia recognises Pakistan's rising geo-economic significance as a result of China's promotion of CPEC as its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its significance for stability and economic development in Afghanistan, and the market it provides for Russia's defence industry. Thus Russia's interest in South Asia is no longer limited to India alone. India's attempts to exercise "strategic autonomy" on the issue of Russia's military operation in Ukraine lends confidence to Russia that in case of any active contestation between US and China, India would still show the courage to stick to this policy.

Concurrently, Primakov Doctrine suggests that Russia may seek to expand its own influence in broader Asia, particularly in areas where it perceives a power vacuum or where it finds similar interests with regional powers. For instance Russia's relations with Iran and North Korea and its interest in playing a larger role in Afghanistan's reconstruction and humanitarian assistance.

Overall, the Primakov Doctrine has had a significant impact on Russia's foreign policy and its relationship with other major powers over the past two decades. In the contemporary international geopolitical environment, the RIC concept has come under direct conflict with the US National Security Strategy that prioritises India's pivotal role in its objective to contain China. As Russia continues to navigate a complex and shifting global landscape, it is likely that the principles of the Primakov Doctrine will continue to play a significant role in guiding and shaping its foreign policy.

References

¹ Salih Yılmaz, *Putin Era Russia's Foreign Policy and Security Doctrines*, İlbilge Yayıncılık Ltd, 2020, 78.

² Nivedita Das Kundu, "Russia-India-China: Trilateral Cooperation and Prospects", Valdai Club, 14 May 2012. https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia_india_china_trilateral_cooperation_and_prospects/

³ Salih Yılmaz, *Putin Era Russia's Foreign Policy and Security Doctrines*, 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Skak Mette, "Russia and the BRICS: On the actual performance of a 21st century great power concert", In *the International Political Economy of the BRICS*, Routledge, 2019, pp. 150-164.

⁹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, and Pavel A. Tsygankov, "National ideology and IR theory: Three incarnations of the 'Russian idea'", *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010): 663-686.

¹⁰ The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Russian Federation, November 30, 2016. https://www.rusemb.org.uk/rp_insight/

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development, 04 Feb. 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>

¹³ Concept for Russia's Humanitarian Policy Abroad, Russian Federation, 05 Sep. 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69285>

¹⁴ Natia Seskuria, "Europe Must Ban Russian Tourist Visas", *Foreign Policy*, 14 Sep. 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/14/ukraine-war-putin-eu-visa-ban-russian-tourists/>

¹⁵ Matthew J Ouimet, *The rise and fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet foreign policy*, University of North Carolina Press, 2003.