Realism in Russian Foreign Policy:
The Crimean Case

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The Crimean crisis marks a pivotal point in the relations between Russia and the West. The revolution in Ukraine, and the subsequent events that unfolded at breakneck pace, including the annexation of Crimea by Russia, throws up a lot of questions, the answers to which will have a massive impact on foreign policy and inter-state relations in the future. It also throws up some broad patterns. The crisis is a worrying return to a trend of land annexation by a great power on a pretext, a trend which was thought to be long dead and gone. The Crimean case is also a validation and ultimate proof of the return of the great power Russia, which was increasingly evident since the Munich Conference of 2007. It brings back the debate on the concepts of "Perception and Resolve" in foreign policy. And, perhaps, most importantly, it serves as a vindication of realists over the liberals, constructivists and other paradigms of international relations, and validates the often discussed idea that state interests triumph over every other aspect.

It is difficult and outside the scope of this essay to discuss each and every point mentioned above, however, I intend to prove that the Russian foreign policy discourse was always realist, even during the entire post Cold-War era, and the periods of short-lived rapprochement and "reset" with subsequent US Administrations. The central argument of

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this thesis is that Russia was, and is, a realist, revanchist, and revisionist great power, quick to redraw borders based on perceived national interests, with a unique sense of civilisational exceptionalism, a unique siege mentality, which prompts itself to feel that it is always vulnerable, under threat, and in a stage of everlasting paranoia, to a great extent promoted and encouraged by Russian state propaganda and the ruling elite.

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Russia, Realism and Putin

From the Czarist Great Games in Afghanistan to confront the British Empire, to the formation of the Triple Entente with England and France to balance the Austro-Hungarian and German Empires, Russian foreign policy has historically manoeuvred the logic of balance of power, although this was not always done quite successfully or efficiently. The Soviet Union also sought to use the balance of power mechanism, and aligned itself with Nazi Germany to neutralise a massive threat on its eastern flank during the Soviet invasion of Finland, and to clinically divide Poland among both the nations, after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939. The Soviet one-sided declaration of war on Japan during the last days of World WarII was also an effort to reap the benefits of power distribution after the war, which resulted in the annexation of the Southern Sakhalin and South Kuril Islands from Japanese sovereign control. The Cold War was in many ways a great balancing game with the United States, where notwithstanding moments of extreme tension, and the use of proxy states during small regional wars, the world remained in a state of a "long peace", with elements of rapprochement and détente, and peace due to the "ritualistically deplored fact that each of these superpowers is armed with a large nuclear arsenal", as noted by John Mearsheimer. It appeared

to strengthen the argument that both the superpowers understood the limits of their hard power and took the prospects of a nuclear showdown seriously enough to come to a tacit understanding, based on balance of power.

Russian foreign policy post-Cold War underwent three key changes in terms of paradigm. The immediate post-Cold War was an era of openness and liberalism, under the "Atlanticists" like Boris Yeltsin and Andrey Kozyrev, and, to some extent, Yegor Gaidar. The immediate post-Soviet leaders after Gorbachev, wanted to capitalise on the liberal momentum of Russian relations with the erstwhile foes, and went ahead with their idea of convergence of their interest with the West. The Atlanticists believed unlike Gorbachev, that Russia and the West are not two distinct identities, but rather, Russia is primarily a Eurocentric, if not completely European, power, and the similarities between the two should be in plurality, democratic rule, free market economy, and individualism. Russia under President Yeltsin, often acted unilaterally with regard to military matters and cutting of missile warheads and supporting Western and international efforts against Iraq. "Russia has from time immemorial been with Europe, and we must enter the European institutions, the council of Europe and the common market, and we must also enter the political and economic unions…" Yeltsin declared in 1992.

With Yevgeni Primakov replacing Kozyrev, Russian foreign policy slowly started to shift back to its realist roots, within years of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia started to forge renewed ties with the Central Asian, formerly Soviet, republics, with economic and security projects, and attempted strategic ties with China and India. In January 1996, Yevgeni Primakov started pursuing the "pragmatic nationalist" and "Eurasianist" viewpoints, declaring that "Russia has been, and remains, a great power, and its policy toward the outside world should correspond to that status" and "Russia doesn't have permanent enemies, but it does have permanent interests".

The Russian discourse on international relations in the post-Cold War era was also as mentioned, partly due to its diminished clout and partly due to its sense of victimhood, more or less centred on a realist paradigm. The post-Cold War Russia, due to its comparatively diminished power and sway over international politics, never quite got over a strict sense of scepticism about the West, even at the height of its Atlanticist honeymoon, opening of the Russian economy and Russian media, and cooperation with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Although there were moments of optimism and cooperation during the Yeltsin–Clinton era, the traditional idea of Russia as an encircled, endangered and victimised nation remained deep-seated in the psyche of the upper echelons of Russian society, enforced and exploited smartly by the Russian political class for domestic political gains.

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) expansion in the east, in the former East European Communist ex-Warsaw Pact countries, starting with Poland, provided considerable unease to the Russian leadership. Russia was, however, in no position to stop the expansion. The Russian leadership under Primakov charted the realist balancing route, and acquiesced to the inevitability of the move, but not before guaranteeing a NATO-Russia joint council, that for the first time, at least formally, allowed Russia to have a voice within NATO deliberations. It should be remembered, that the realist school transcended the ideology boundaries of different groups, and everyone in the foreign policy establishment, even the Atlanticists, slowly started to shift towards foreign policy realism, due to the situations around Russia, most of which were beyond their control. Added to that were the turbulent civil-military relations, unsatisfied domestic electorate,

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and last but not the least, threats of ultra-nationalist and Communist resurgence. Streaks of realism were noticeable there even during the Kozyrev era, though it took serious proportions during Primakov's spell as Foreign Minister. The Russian meddling during the Georgia-Abkhaz crisis of 1992-93, meddling in Tajikistan's internal affairs, growing patrolling of the Afghan border, and nuclear trade with Iran, etc. continued at varied speed under both Kozyrev and Primakov.

Vladimir Putin's arrival as Prime Minister in 1999 changed two things. Putin restarted the economic reforms stalled under Yeltsin, and controlled the bourgeoning oligarchs by strengthening the military and security elites—the Siloviki—often by coercion against the tycoons. In foreign policy, he went out of his way to support the United States and made a massive pro-Western shift after 2001. Putin's "Great Power Pragmatism" was more successful in dealing with security and economy; autonomy, prestige and identity, at the same time. Russia's "bandwagoning" in the "War on Terror" immediately got a great positive response from the West. Subsequently, during the Moscow theatre hostage crisis and the Beslan school siege, involving actions by Chechen terrorists, the disproportionate and heavy-handed response from Russia drew muted criticism from around the world, and support from the US, Britain and the West. Rather, the "bandwagoning" with the US and West helped Russia to hijack the narrative and agenda of the global war on terror, and use it to strengthen the domestic security apparatus, crack down on internal dissent, and allocate a massive budget to an ambitious rearmament plan. The heavy- handed response to the Chechen terrorists also bolstered Putin's image at home as a no-nonsense strong leader, and took the ammunition from the ultra-nationalist and Communist camps.

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There were benefits too, with oil and gas exports and general trade increasing due to proper regulations, structural reforms and institutional changes and policies, resulting in an unprecedented economic boom. Russia also signalled its renewed intention to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The social welfare programmes improved, as a result of a strong economy, as did the general living conditions and wages of average Russians, after a decade of chaos post-Soviet experiments. And, finally, the pride and prestige of being recognised as a great power started to sink in again. Russia was back on the world stage as a partner in the global "War Against Terror", seeking legitimisation of its new role of a revived and revanchist great power and projecting power through economic, and, at times, political–military means. Relations with the West deteriorated, after a brief detente, as Russia increasingly started challenging agreements that were concluded in the 1990s when it was perceived as weak. When Vladimir Putin came to power, relations with the West had already extremely deteriorated, after the war in Kosovo. The Russia-West faceoff in Pristina airport was a tense situation, the first in the post-Cold War world where the two largest nuclear powers faced each other. The 1998-99 financial crash also limited Russia's manoeuvrability and international reach came to a new low. The question of Russian identity and foreign policy was still unanswered, and whether Russia would be Eurasian or Atlanticist was also not properly and conclusively determined. One of the first acts of President Putin was to reinstall both Tsarist and Soviet identities and national symbols. The Duma adopted the Tsarist double-headed eagle as a state emblem, and the Soviet anthem was restored with new lyrics. The blend of Tsarist and Soviet symbols helped answer the question of Russia's search for a 'usable past' that could unite the nation.

The September 11 attacks proved to be a breakthrough for Vladimir Putin. It gave him an opportunity to get into an immediate tactical

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alignment with the West, to offer support to the Americans, even when the Russian elites wanted a more careful, neutral stance, a "proof" that Russia was right all along in its assessment of Chechnya and Islamic terror. It is debatable how much Putin believes that "international Islamism" and not domestic terrorism threatens the Russian state, nor is it clear as to how high is the position of Islamic terrorism in the threat perception of Russia, and whether and how long it is likely to be retained. What is clear is that Russia, specifically Putin's Russia, took the post-9/11 opportunity to legitimise the Chechen conflict, and the Russian military operations in the Caucasus.

Russia's behaviour during the build-up to the US led invasion of Iraq was also a fascinating study in realpolitik. Russia hoped to be in a strong Euro-Western bandwagon after 9/11, which would have helped it fight its own Chechen problem and have control of its own sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space in its immediate neighbourhood. However, with the Chechen War winding down, the newfound slow surging economy, based on the consolidation of oil and gas resources, and stabilisation of the internal economy gave Russia a new confidence. Since 2002, the US had been in talks with the East European countries over the possibility of setting up a European-based Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system to intercept long-range missiles which would apparently help to protect the US and Europe from missiles fired from the Middle East or North Africa. The whole posture of US missile defence in East Europe riled Russia, as it was considered completely unilateral and against the principle of mutual understanding followed since the Cold War, and would make Russia's nuclear weapons worthless. According to Russia, the act of installing a ballistic missile defence system would be contrary to the commitment of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty between the US and the Soviets signed in 1987. Also, Russia's idea of sweeping the human

rights abuses in Chechnya completely under the rug, didn't quite work out well, as there was still a lot of scrutiny of its record.

In 2003, with ever increasing belligerent rhetoric from the United States, Russia sought to ally itself with other European powers, in an effort to balance the United States. The idea stems from the mindset of Russia being a European rather than a Eurasian power, but behind the act was a strong realist idea of balancing, as Russia was increasingly feeling threatened by the unilateral tendencies of the United States.

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Contrary to public opinion, however, Russia never really wanted to defend Iraq. The only thing it wanted was to take the opportunity to form a coalition, a "coalition of the unwilling" at the cost of the internal bickering of the West. The Russian elite, while it obviously didn't support the Iraq War and was wary of a unilateral and belligerent United States, never for once wanted to forego the rapprochement with the United States. Leonid Slutski, the then deputy chairperson of the Duma (Parliament) Committee for International Affairs, prudently declared, "If Russia moved toward an anti-American tripartite alliance with France and Germany... this tactically favorable step would lead to a strategic defeat." The pro-government newspaper *Izvestia*, which often acts as a mouthpiece of the government policies, also echoed the pragmatic realist lines. On March 13, it came out with an editorial titled the "Detachment of the Honest Broker" which stated that the Moscow-Berlin-Paris axis has served its purpose, and would not help Russia anymore, and that the price of a confrontation with the US is far too high. Russia skillfully managed to reach its objective to shame and show the United States as a solo aggressor, hell-bent on comitting a grave error, and made

sure that the error was comitted alone, bereft of global legitimacy. That was the success of Russian realist diplomacy. As *Izvestia* succinctly pointed out, "All this still does not mean supporting Bush's policy in Iraq. Just that he should commit his error alone, if it is an error. To stand in front of a racing steam locomotive, even as it moves towards an abyss, is, at the very least, short-sighted. It was necessary to find the 'golden mean' and abstain totally from participating in the big brawl, with its completely unforeseeable consequences."

The last phase of Russian realism would be noticed in the dealings with NATO and Europe. By the end of the first term of Vladimir Putin around 2004, with the massive human rights abuses in Russia, the West and US lost hope of a blooming democracy in Russia, and were strictly reduced to business-like dealing. But what changed that dynamics was the advent of "colour" revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. The United States and Europe started supporting the democratic change and transition in those border countries of Russia, which were always a part of its perceived sphere of influence. The relations with Europe and the US soured at the same time, in the timeframe of 2003 to 2005. The NATO enlargement processes largely estranged Russia, and established a new dividing line which excluded Russia. Russia clearly felt left out from the economic and political developments as it was not directly associated. Meanwhile, a new form of people's movement started to appear where post-Soviet authorities were challenged by a combination, and alliance, of local political forces, civil society, common people and international actors, human rights groups and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Countries in the post-Soviet authoritarian scenario with a relatively liberal political environment had a developing civil society to receive foreign assistance, and an emerging independent media which, in turn, enabled the opposition to organise and mobilise. Three revolutions—the "rose revolution" in Georgia (November 2003-January 2004), the "orange revolution" in Ukraine (January 2005) and the "tulip revolution" in Kyrgyzstan (April 2005)—radically changed

the situation and geopolitics in the post-Soviet Russian "sphere of influence" and the dynamics of Russia-West relations. Substantial Western support for the civil society and the Western backed NGOs were instrumental in all the cases. The use of NGOs and transnational actors is not new, and it is explained by the realist paradigm as an instrument of hard power. Robert Gilpin was the first to explain the rise of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) as a function of hegemonic stability, and Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye also warned in the 1970s that "transnational relations may redistribute control from one state to another and benefit those governments at the centre of transnational networks to the disadvantage of those in the periphery."

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Vladimir Putin was arguably never serious about any genuine rapprochement; rather, he just used the realist principle of bandwagoning successfully.

The rapprochement failed due to the fact that bandwagoning has limitations, and the Iraq War was one such. Realists believe that bandwagoning stops at a certain level as one state realises that the other is getting stronger geopolitically as both states are essentially rivals. We saw that in the Munich Conference, when Putin accused the United States of using "hyper power" and "unrestrained use of force", and "blatant disregard of international laws".

It is hard in international relations to mark a specific date or even a timeline for a significant change in foreign policy or theoretical framework, but if the end of the first post 9/11 rapprochement between the United States and Russia is to be marked down, it would be the bellicose Munich

Conference speech by Vladimir Putin. By 2007, the Russian need for a tactical realignment with the United States was met. Russia successfully lobbied for membership in the WTO, dealt with the Chechen rebel problem hijacking the global war on terror agenda to cover up for human rights abuses and suppressing internal dissent without a single proverbial finger pointed at it, and got the economy on a strong footing as an oil and gas superpower. Russia's limited goals of opposing the Iraq War with limited bandwagoning with the European powers, and taking advantage of internal dissent and inter-NATO rivalry without jeopardising relations with the United States was also successful. However, the colour revolutions and energy turmoil in European relations proved the deficiencies of Russian foreign policy in dealing with the USA, which was untenable. Washington also moved its largest sea-based missile defence radar in the Pacific from Hawaii to the Aleutian Islands, not far from Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula, and announced plans to install a radar system in the Czech Republic and a missile interception system in Poland, which it claimed is needed to protect itself against a potential missile threat from Iran.

The Return of Great Power Rivalry and History

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Putin's accusation was about Bush's unilateralism, the use of "hyper power" disregarding the established laws of international relations. "The United States has overstepped its borders in all spheres—economic, political and humanitarian—and has imposed itself on other states," he said. "Today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force—military force—in international relations, force that is plunging the world

into an abyss of permanent conflicts. As a result, we do not have sufficient strength to find a comprehensive solution to any one of these conflicts. Finding a political settlement also becomes impossible…".In a moment of unusual Cold War style bluster, he berated the United States on NATO expansion, accusing it of having nothing to do with modernising alliances, but rather just eroding mutual trust with Russia, by moving military hardware closer to Russia's border.

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Within months from the Munich Conference, Russia resumed long distance bomber patrols across the Atlantic. Just after the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's (SCO's) Peace Mission 2007, Putin announced on August 17, 2007, the resumption on a permanent basis of long-distance patrol flights of the Russian Air Force Tu-95 and Tu-160 strategic bombers that had been suspended since 1992. Russia also started naval sorties with carrier groups and submarine patrols, stopped since the Soviet times. "The aim of the sorties is to ensure a naval presence in tactically important regions of the world ocean" said Defence Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov. Russia started to be increasingly assertive in dealing with its neighbours and meddling in their personal affairs, especially Ukraine and Georgia. Relations with Georgia in particular deteriorated, over the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which culminated in a brief war between Russia and Georgia in 2008, where the Russian Army routed the Georgians in five days and declared the independence of the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

From then to now, Russia has been following a copybook pattern of confrontation with the West, with regards to vetoing intervention in Syria, asylum to Edward Snowden, and the Ukraine crisis. Russia seemed to have

drawn a line in the sand, that it will not allow any encroachment in its traditional spheres of influence any more, and in case it cannot control the situations on the ground for unforeseeable and uncontrollable circumstances, it will act unilaterally to create a buffer zone, as evident from the Georgian intervention in 2008 and the Crimean annexation in 2014. Russia is increasingly suffering from a classic "security dilemma", whether it understands it or not, where it feels threatened by the increasing Western leanings of its former satellites, and militarises and uses hard power more and more, which, in turn, makes these Western leanings even more inevitable.

The final conclusion which can be drawn from this recent Crimean crisis is that it is about time to realise that the post-Cold War order was just a momentary lapse; in the tide and ebb of great power balancing, a quarter century is just an insignificant speck of dust in the history of time. The world has always seen patterns of relative liberal peace, short-lived till the next great power confrontation or balancing occurs. From Greece and Sparta, Rome and Carthage, to the Middle Ages in Europe, Persia and the Arabian powers, the Mughals in India to European and Japanese colonial great power rivalry and a subsequent Cold War, history is littered with such examples. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which bewildered the realists as much as it bewildered the followers of other paradigms, liberals and constructivists have heavily discarded state interests as the ultimate defining factor in international relations. In my humble assertion, that is a folly which needs to be corrected. The quarter century post-Cold War order should be looked at just as it is, a mere gap in time, when a heavily nuclear-armed adversary with very different political, ideological and civilisational values returns to Cold War form and balancing, and feels not the slightest restraint in acting on its own perceived self-interest.Varied philosophers like Thucydides, Kautilya and Sun-Tzu have told us how interest triumphs over everything else when it comes to states and empires. It would be foolish to disregard that age-old wisdom.