

Jets, Flags, and Sovereignty

Demystifying Russia's Arctic Intentions

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Introduction

Russia's interest in the Arctic really shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone. From independence, post-Soviet Russia pursued a foreign policy course that was based upon a narrow calculation of its immediate national interest. By necessity, Russia has had to forego grand discussions of its new identity and place in the world in favour of a more practical assessment of its basic economic and security needs in a world that, arguably, still has not figured out what it wants from Russia.

Most accounts of Russian foreign policy in the 1990s under President Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999) note the pragmatic nature of foreign policy decisions.¹ Foreign policy decisions were often made on an issue-by-issue basis, rather than according to some grand design or a clear conceptualization of Russia's national interest. On the surface, little appears to have changed; foreign policy has arguably become *more* pragmatic² but is now accompanied by an unapologetic tone that has not gone unnoticed by western governments. In fact, Russia's perceived assertiveness – aggressiveness by some accounts – has led some analysts to decry a new era of Russia-West relations akin to a new Cold War.³ A couple of recent incidents – the placing of a Russian flag on the Arctic seabed in 2007 and the presence of a Russian strategic bomber aircraft conducting a surveillance flight near Canadian airspace in 2009 have underscored this idea. The “flag incident” in particular has raised the eyebrows of some of Russia's Arctic neighbours, and even prompted then Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Peter McKay to decry, “You can't go around the world these days dropping a flag somewhere. This isn't the 14th or 15th century.”⁴ More recently, Canada's current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lawrence Cannon, responded dismissively to Russian plans to drop paratroopers at the North Pole in commemoration of the first Russian scientists to parachute there in 1949. Cannon scoffed, “it seems to me that the Russians are just pulling stunts.”⁵

¹ Russian foreign policy making in the 1990s was influenced by competing ideas of Russian identity. The presence of competing “schools of thought” about Russia's place in the world was widely documented. While the specific labels differed (i.e. some were pro-western and others anti-western in orientation), many embraced the need for Russia to be realistic in its foreign policy goals. Such pragmatism was reflected in Yeltsin's 1996 decision to replace Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev (a liberal-minded, pro-western ideologue) with Yevgeny Primakov (a “Russia-first” pragmatist who rejected the “romantic internationalism” that motivated his predecessor). For an elaboration of these foreign policy “schools of thought” see Michael McFaul, “Russia's Many Foreign Policies,” *Demokratizatsiya* 3 (Summer 1999): 393-412.

² See Tom Casier, “Putin's Policy Towards the West: Reflections on the Nature of Russian Foreign Policy,” *International Politics* 43 (2006): 384-401; Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Leaves the West,” *Foreign Affairs* 85:4 (Jul/Aug 2006): 87-96.

³ See: Stephen Cohen, “The New American Cold War,” *The Nation* 10 July 2006; Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Dmitri K Simes, “Losing Russia,” *Foreign Affairs* 86:6 (Nov/Dec 2007): 36-52. Such predictions were even being made prior to the turn of the century. See M. Ehsan Ahrari, “The Beginning of a New Cold War?” *European Security* 8:3 (Autumn 1999).

⁴ “Russia Denies Plane Approached Canadian Airspace,” February 27, 2007. CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/02/27/arctic-russia.html>.

⁵ “Russians ‘playing games’ in the Arctic: Cannon,” *The National Post*, April 8, 2010. Available at: <http://www.nationalpost.com/story.html?id=2779237>

This paper asserts that, while the jet and flag incidents have been worrisome for some western nations, Russia is behaving somewhat predictably. There is little compelling evidence to suggest that Russia is being “sneaky” or is trying to incite suspicion or fury in western capitals. Instead, Russia is operating in a reasonably transparent manner, consistent with its national agenda. Both former President (and now Prime Minister) Vladimir Putin and current President Dmitry Medvedev have been pragmatic in identifying Russia’s national interests and have not shied away from pursuing them assertively. Putin has referred to Russia as a “sovereign democracy,” which implies its ability to pursue its goals on the basis of elite calculations of the national interest, rather than be pressured externally to conform to certain standards or expectations.⁶ Russian officials have suggested the West will simply have to “get used to this.”⁷ This paper identifies just what Russia’s broad foreign policy goals are in general, and as they relate to the Arctic, and concludes that Russian foreign policy - and specifically its actions in the Arctic - do not alone justify the assertion that we are witnessing the start of a new Cold War.

Pragmatic Pursuit of the National Interest

For Russians, great power status is not disputed. What was in dispute for the better part of the 1990s was exactly what Russia’s national interests were, how these could be promoted, and how to re-gain the country’s diminished international status after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These were difficult questions for two principal reasons: first, there was little consensus on Russia’s national identity and relatedly, on just who its natural allies were (if it had any) and how its foreign policy should be oriented; and second, President Yeltsin was more pre-occupied with maintaining his own tenuous grasp on power domestically, opposite a hostile State Duma, than he was with identifying a concise foreign policy agenda for Russia that reflected a careful and strategic assessment of its national interest.⁸

Not so under Putin. Gone are the competing visions of Russia’s place in the world - was it more at home in Europe or Eurasia, facing east or facing west? - as well as hesitations about promoting Russia’s interests. Upon assuming the presidency on December 31 1999, Putin was sharply focused upon returning Russia to its “rightful place” among the world’s major powers. While he retained Russia’s *Foreign Policy Concept* of 2000, he was prepared to assert Russia’s national interests in stronger language than his predecessor did.

Neither the West-obsessed foreign policy of the early 1990s, nor the “zero-sum” thinking that followed later that decade, benefitted Russia. Putin therefore adopted a foreign policy guided instead by domestic and international realities and constraints. Put simply: pragmatism won the day. Russian foreign policy since 2000 can best be described as a calculation of how best to

⁶ Jeffrey Mankoff, “Russia and the West: Taking the Longer View,” *The Washington Quarterly* 30:2 (Spring 2007): 128.

⁷ Ibid., 128.

⁸ Yeltsin’s battles with parliament are well-documented. For an in-depth account of Yeltsin’s domestic political situation, see Michael McFaul, Nikolai Petrov and Andrei Ryabov, *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004); Roy Medvedev, *Post-Soviet Russia: A Journey Through the Yeltsin Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Stephen White, *Russia’s New Politics: The Management of a Postcommunist Society* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

achieve results while minimizing conflict.⁹ There was - and is - no guiding ideology, no value system with which to identify national interests in the traditional sense. Russian foreign policy has no ideological anchor, and, as Tom Casier notes, is used as a tool to promote or achieve domestic economic goals and to address Russia's perceived isolation and American hegemony.¹⁰

Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev have opted to approach foreign policy in a way that allows each the flexibility to be pragmatic in posture, without the burden of ideological constraint. Two years into Medvedev's tenure as president, we remain, as analysts, unclear as to the power dynamic between the two. However even without an intimate knowledge of the working relationship, public statements and government documents support the view that the two share in common some basic ideas about the sources of Russia's strength as well as its vulnerabilities.

Broadly defined, the term "national interest," in the Russian context, appears to mean simply "whatever is good for the nation-state." However critics have expressed concern about the absence of clarity in the ideas that govern foreign policy decision making in Russia. Prominent Russia analyst Dmitri Trenin worries that in Russia, "tactics prevail, medium-term thinking is just emerging, and no national interest worth the name has surfaced."¹¹ The absence of value-driven foreign policy has meant the national interest is defined on a case-by-case basis depending upon what is deemed good for the country at any given moment.

It should be noted, however, that Russian foreign policy is not entirely without substance. There are some common themes that present themselves in presidential statements and government documents; one of the most persistent is concern about American power. Both Putin and Medvedev have identified the emergence of a uni-polar world as posing a challenge to Russia's interests.¹² Neil Macfarlane notes that both the 2000 *Foreign Policy Concept* of the Russian Federation and the 2000 *National Security Concept* worryingly identified the "systemic tendency toward uni-polarity and American unilateralism" as well as the eastern enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Association (NATO), as "significant threats" to Russia.¹³ For this reason, Russia places significance on the United Nations (UN) as an instrument of multilateralism in world politics; this is undoubtedly due to its own place in the UN Security Council which affords Russia a voice it might otherwise be denied among the major powers.

Macfarlane claims that what motivates Russian foreign policy is both a desire to reverse the decline it suffered between 1991 and 2000 "without external hindrance," and to reassert its influence over the former Soviet republics. Beyond these specific goals, he argues, Russia's foreign policy is pragmatic. It embraces traditional definitions of sovereignty which have been challenged by a collective re-conceptualization of human rights, and it promotes the UN as the legally appropriate international body to manage international affairs. It does these, arguably, as

⁹ Tom Casier, "Putin's Policy Towards the West: Reflections on The Nature of Russian Foreign Policy," *International Politics* 43 (2006): 386.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia Redefines Itself and Its Relations With the West," *The Washington Quarterly* 30:2 (Spring 2007): 104.

¹² Andrew Monaghan, "'An enemy at the gates' or 'from victory to victory'? Russian Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 84:4 (2008): 717-733.

¹³ Neil S. Macfarlane, "The 'R' in BRICs: is Russia an emerging power?" *International Affairs* 82:1 (2006): 48.

a means of remaining relevant. However, Russia has moved away from calling for multi-polarity; while it favours this, its approach has been to advocate for what is possible, not for what is preferred.¹⁴ True multi-polarity is unlikely, as Russia has recognized it may not be able to “balance” American power in the traditional sense. Instead, it can use what influence it does have to prevent the further empowerment of American hegemony. In this sense it is intensely pragmatic. Macfarlane wisely notes that, “Russian foreign policy is a holding game. It is designed to limit further losses and to sustain or promote conditions that - in the longer term - will permit Russia to re-emerge as a great power.”¹⁵ This desire to act pragmatically and to limit losses can be seen in Russia’s decision to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Laura Henry and Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom assert that ratification occurred, not because of some elite or mass commitment to reversing climate change, but because President Putin saw some measurable benefit to pleasing its international partners and improving Russia’s image.¹⁶

There is some disagreement among Russia scholars about the extent to which this pragmatic approach to foreign policy making is rooted in a calculation of Russia’s strength or in an assessment of its weakness. Andrew Monaghan claims Russia is influenced by its own perceived weakness - that Russia confronts enemies at its gates. This creates a “siege mentality” of sorts that inflates concern about American power and the extent to which it will exercise its power unilaterally. The further east NATO expands and the closer western weapons systems are to Russia’s borders (Russia now shares direct borders with NATO countries), the greater the security concern. The less Russia perceives it can counter NATO’s presence there, the more vulnerable Russians will feel.

Some of this vulnerability may be shifting following President Barack Obama’s attempt to “reset” Russia-US relations, to reduce the spectre of the American nuclear threat diplomatically and through changes to American nuclear weapons policy. In fact, a recent Russian edition of Newsweek publicized a Kremlin program designed to use foreign policy more effectively as a tool to support the “long term development of Russia.” The article noted the Medvedev-approved plan to shift foreign policy in a more pragmatic direction to “improve ties with the West and attract greater international investment.”¹⁷ This shift may already be evident in the arms reduction treaty signed by Obama and Medvedev in April 2010, and in the language used by the president in describing the “reset” or “re-load” of Russia-west relations. Whether a warming of the relationship is actually occurring, it appears as though a common theme in Russian foreign policy making continues to be how Russia views itself *vis-a-vis* the US.¹⁸

This emphasis on the West in Russian foreign policy is not surprising. So much of Russia’s identity as a great power was wrapped up in its ability to balance American power during the Cold War. Both the Americans and Russians appear to have viewed the Cold War as something to be won or lost, and victory was easily assigned to the United States. For Russians, it has been a long, steep climb back to greatness; by many measures the climb continues. This journey has

¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹⁵ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶ Laura A. Henry and Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom, “Russia and the Kyoto Protocol: Seeking an Alignment of Interests and Image,” *Global Environmental Politics* 7:4 (November 2007): 65.

¹⁷ Stuart Williams, “Russia plans shift to pro-West policy,” AFP, May 11, 2010. Cited in Johnson’s Russia List 2010-#92, May 11, 2010.

¹⁸ Alfred B. Evans, Jr., “Putin’s Legacy and Russia’s Identity,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 60:6 (August 2008): 899-912.

not been aided by the United States. In the early years of Russia's independence, an ambivalent White House conducted its relations with Russia with a "paternalistic" and "self congratulatory tone," asking Moscow to adopt policies favoured by Washington with little concern for what was best for Russia.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, this helped to drive Russia to value a more Russia-centric world for itself in which it could pursue its interests more freely, and to continue to be concerned with the West. Therefore, in the absence of an ideas-driven conception of the national interest, restoring Russian greatness has become the most consistent priority of Russian foreign policy. Some analysts, like Dmitri Trenin, claim this issue-driven foreign policy parallels the fact that Russia has no permanent allies and is "essentially friend-less."²⁰ He notes, the Kremlin is "prepared to deal with its partners on the basis of interests or agree to disagree and compete when necessary."²¹ It is hard to imagine a more pragmatic approach than that. When Russia does find common ground with other nations, it is often as a result of specific shared interests. For example, as Dmitri K. Simes notes, "US-Russian cooperation on counterterrorism came into existence because of shared fundamental interests, not a common ideology or mutual sympathy."²²

In the absence of ideology, pragmatism dominates Russian foreign policy. Russia wishes to be a respected presence in the international community and sees the achievement of this goal rooted in its economic development. What is best for the long term development of Russia are secure borders and a secure supply of energy, which enables Russia's economic growth and global influence. The following section discusses briefly Russia's use of its energy resources to buttress its foreign policy goals.

Resources and Foreign Policy

While it is easy to view Russian foreign policy toward the West as rooted in perceptions of its own weakness (as mentioned above), this is not the whole story. Russia's tremendous endowment of energy resources and its ability to harness these assets and translate these riches into continuous economic growth, have afforded its political leadership greater freedom in conducting foreign relations. Energy exports have become a key pillar of Russia's foreign policy and even its own energy strategy of 2003 links its energy resources with diplomacy.²³

Russia possesses the world's largest mineral and energy reserves (its proven oil reserves are somewhere in the neighbourhood of 60 billion barrels and proven natural gas reserves top 1600 trillion cubic feet) and is the largest natural gas exporter in the world.²⁴ The Russian economy has experienced tremendous growth since 2000, driven primarily by its increase in oil production and an increase in global energy prices. Not only does Russia control 30 percent of the world's gas reserves, it influences the export of energy from the former Soviet Union.²⁵

¹⁹ Dmitri K. Simes, "Losing Russia," *Foreign Affairs* 86:6 (Nov/Dec 2007): 36-52.

²⁰ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia Redefines Itself and Its Relations with the West," 96.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Dmitri K. Simes, "Losing Russia."

²³ Carol Saivetz, "Russia: An Energy Superpower?" *AlterNet* (1 Feb 2008): <http://www.alternet.org/world/75413/>

²⁴ United States Energy Information Administration, Country Analysis Briefs, Russia, May 2008. Available at: <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Russia/Profile.html>

²⁵ Robert Legvold, "The Russia File," *Foreign Affairs* 88:4 (Jul/Aug 2009): 78.

The Kremlin has proven itself to be an apt administrator of Russia's energy sector, all the while managing the production and export of oil and gas through its tight control over state owned, or partially owned, resource companies. Entire volumes could be written about Russia's management of its energy resources, therefore a full account will not be attempted here. Highlights surround the Kremlin's ability to influence decision making in the sector and retain a strong state role in production and transmission. Gazprom, in particular, has a monopoly in the gas export market and is tightly controlled by the Kremlin. There is some concern about whether Russia has invested enough in renewing its gas infrastructure to meet growing demand.²⁶

The manner in which the Kremlin has managed to exert control over the oil and gas sector underscores the assertion that in the absence of ideology informing the worldview of Russian elites, other priorities have filled this space. Separate, but linked to, concerns about the decline of Russian power in the international system are calculations of Russia's financial interests. The development of Russia's energy sector has enabled Russia's overall economic growth, but has also afforded it more leverage in its dealings with its neighbours, both in the East and in the West. This is felt in Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries and also the European Union where concern exists about the security of the supply and transmission of Russian energy.

For some elites, Russia's "energy hand" trumps the appeal of its military power as a determinant of its international influence. This has led the Kremlin to become increasingly dominant – and unapologetic – in its management of Gazprom, the country's largest energy firm. Dmitri Trenin labels this management style, "Russia, Inc."²⁷ This aptly reflects the intent to govern the business of Russia as a business, with attention paid to little beyond the bottom line. For Trenin, this kind of blatant economic pragmatism is worrisome because it suggests that, "whatever is good for Gazprom is good for Russia."²⁸ Gazprom officials, as well as some members of the Boards of Directors of a number of Russian energy companies are Kremlin insiders or appointees. This affords the Kremlin a major role in company decisions and effectively turns these companies into agencies of the state. Jeffrey Mankoff expects that "the success of these bureaucratic clans will further entrench a foreign policy that essentially seeks to maximize profits for state-owned companies at the expense of broader political and ideological goals, a process already visible in Moscow's energy diplomacy."²⁹ While Mankoff rightly notes that the link between money and power in Russia is not new,³⁰ the extent to which it influences foreign policy is new.

It is little surprise then that Russia's energy resource strength has bolstered its profile in international affairs. As Trenin observes, "fluctuating energy prices, not nuclear warheads, are what really matter to Moscow."³¹ William Zimmerman notes that Russian foreign policy quickly became about energy when the price of oil topped \$100/barrel.³² At last, Russia was finally

²⁶ Carol Saivetz, "Russia: An Energy Superpower?"

²⁷ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia Redefines Itself and Its Relations with the West," 95.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia and the West: Taking the Longer View," 47.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia Redefines Itself and Its Relations With the West," *The Washington Quarterly* 30:2 (Spring 2007): 95.

³² William Zimmerman, "Russian National Interests, Use of Blood and Treasure, and Energy Price Assessments: 2008-2009," *Post Soviet Affairs* 25:3 (2009): 186.

sovereign and fiercely independent, supported by a strong economic foundation that enabled a “residual superpower mentality” to “manifest (itself) in energy power.”³³

Putin himself stated simply, “Russia enjoys vast energy and mineral resources which serve as a base to develop its economy; as an instrument to implement domestic and foreign policy. The role of the country in international energy markets determines, in many ways, its geopolitical influence.”³⁴ His orchestration of a careful marriage of politics and economics has helped to finance the revitalization of Russia’s foreign influence (among other things).³⁵ Because Russia’s natural resources guarantee its international prominence and position, and support the country’s further economic development, the state justifies its role in setting “the priorities of the energy sector and the companies involved to benefit both the state and the Russian people.”³⁶ From there, the view is supported that “the state shall use the energy sector to promote national security.”³⁷

Unsurprisingly, this has not been well received by Russia’s allies, neighbours, and energy customers. Dmitri Simes notes that “Russia is simply rewarding those who enter into special political and economic arrangements with it by offering them below-market prices for Russian energy resources.”³⁸ This behaviour was labelled by former US Vice President Dick Cheney as “using energy resources as ‘tools of intimidation and blackmail.’”³⁹ Certainly Ukraine and Belarus have been on the receiving end of precisely the kind of threats and manipulation Cheney refers to. However in reality, Russia does not appear to be in the business of becoming an energy bully. In fact, Medvedev’s orientation toward the west seems to be deliberately more congenial in order to smooth energy transactions and Russia’s continental energy relationships. This will be discussed in the next section.

Yet, in as much as Russian foreign policy has been emboldened by high oil and gas prices, the “swagger in its foreign policy is less pronounced” since the country was engulfed in the global economic crisis.⁴⁰ Robert Legvold notes that the Kremlin no longer promises to make Russia’s the 5th largest economy in the world; its rhetoric appears to have been tempered by a healthy dose of reality.⁴¹ Yet, because energy is so integral to Russia’s economic security, the Kremlin “tends to regard as threats any actions that would deny it access to energy resources.”⁴² It has also zeroed in on other ways to ensure its energy wealth. Enter its interest in the Arctic.

³³ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Redefines Itself and Its Relations with the West,” 97.

³⁴ Putin is quoted in Roman Kupchinski in “Energy and the Russian National Security Strategy,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6:95 (2009).

³⁵ Pranas Ciziunas, “Russia and the Baltic States: Is Russian Imperialism Dead?” *Comparative Strategy* 27 (2008): 291. Ciziunas offers the example of the Kremlin’s ability to influence Baltic energy companies formerly partly owned by Yukos, after the Kremlin seized its assets in 2003 during the Mikhail Khodorkosvky affair.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 295.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Dmitri K Simes, “Losing Russia,” *Foreign Affairs* 86:6 (Nov/Dec 2007): 36-52.

³⁹ Cheney is quoted in Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Leaves the West,” *Foreign Affairs* 85:4 (Jul/Aug 2006): 87-96.

⁴⁰ Robert Legvold, “The Russia File,” 20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Threat Perception and Strategic Posture,” *Strategic Studies Institute* (November 2009): 42.

Earlier this year, President Medvedev asserted Russia's plans to "defend its claims to mineral riches in the Arctic in increasing competition with other powers" and indicated an intention to develop the Arctic as Russia's "top strategic resource base" by 2020.⁴³ Russian estimates project approximately 9-10 billion tonnes of fuel equivalent in the seabed and have thus designed an Arctic strategy around ensuring Russia's access to it. According to the Kremlin's National Security Strategy to 2020 (written by the former head of Russia's Federal Security Service), and released publicly in 2009, Russia would be prepared for a potential conflict in the Arctic over access to resources and would not rule out the use of military force to resolve "emerging problems."⁴⁴ It should be noted that this document was approved by President Medvedev at a time when Russia-US relations had sunk to their lowest point in recent memory.

Simply put, the Arctic represents an untapped supply of hydrocarbon reserves – somewhere in the neighbourhood of 15 percent of the world's total. With the melting of the ice caps and much of this area becoming more accessible, Russia has launched a claim to a portion of the Arctic seabed beyond its legally allocated 200 coastal miles, arguing that it is really just an extension of its Siberian continental shelf. Russia has not yet been able to make this claim successfully, but has until 2011 to substantiate this bid.

Russia's 2008 *Foreign Policy Concept* specifically mentions Canada, notes the stable relationship between the two countries and promises to "interact" with Canada in the Arctic.⁴⁵ The specifics here are unclear. In support of its Arctic interests, Russia has pledged to strengthen its border guard forces in the Arctic region and tighten its security in response to "various military-political circumstances."⁴⁶ Taken together, these two documents note the importance of the Arctic for Russian security, take a tone that suggests the West is responsible for many of the key threats facing Russia (notably NATO and its consideration of membership for Ukraine and Georgia), and explicitly links Russia's national security to energy security, promising energy security by 2015. Russia is interested in the Arctic, concerned about potential "energy wars," and is willing to defend its access to hydrocarbon resources.⁴⁷ It is certainly understandable that western governments are sensitive to Russia's actions and language. However, Russia is not alone among nations that link energy security with broader security interests. Both the United States and the European Union have done so, as the security of energy supply has become a serious issue. So much of Russia's recent economic success, as well as its future economic sustainability, are tied to its energy resources. It is little wonder that, like other Arctic nations, Russia is interested in a fair process for determining the limits of Arctic sovereignty.

Discussion

⁴³ "Medvedev: Russia must push claim to Arctic resources," *The Associated Press*, March 17th 2010. Available at: http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20100317/russia_arctic_100317/20100317?hub=World

⁴⁴ Luke Harding, "Energy conflicts could bring military clashes, Russian security strategy warns," *The Guardian* (May 13, 2009). Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/13/russia-security-strategy-energy-warning>.

⁴⁵ *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, President of Russia, July 12, 2008. <http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Roger McDermott, "Russia's National Security Strategy," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6:96 (May 12, 2009).

It is hardly a surprise that Russia promises to defend its access to Arctic hydrocarbon reserves. In light of the resource potential of the region, disputes over the rights to the seabed will likely continue among Arctic nations. Russia's flag-planting and bomber flights were little more than "crimes of opportunity," and, ultimately, should not so much be considered acts *against* Canada or against Russia's Arctic neighbours, and more of an opportunity for Russia to assert its national interest. Its actions do not appear to symbolize some reversion to Cold War thinking in Russia or an attempt to assert Russian power. Putin's strong words in recent years about balancing power and the way in which Russia was treated unfairly by the west, as well as fears of a uni-polar world,⁴⁸ have been tempered by Medvedev's quiet assertions of sovereignty and his outreach to the West, noted by his arms treaty with President Obama and his stated objective of moving Russia's ties with the West in a more constructive direction.

Planting a flag and authorizing strategic flights near Canadian airspace may appear symbolic, but it might be worth considering that these incidents themselves are not inherently aggressive. Rather, it is the perception of these events that is instructive. If western governments perceive Russia's actions through a Cold War lens, this elevates them to distorted levels of importance. Certainly the flag on the Arctic seabed *recalls* the Cold War era space race, and the bomber flights are seen as "muscle flexing" by the second largest military in the world. But could these not be viewed as the actions of a great power simply looking out for its interests among nations that have heretofore been unprepared to recognize Russia as a legitimate force in international politics? For years, post-Soviet Russia has struggled to retain its credibility as a great power, while much of the Western world looked on with polite condescension, offering critiques of Russia's political, economic and social challenges. But a lot has changed in Russia, notably a leadership that will no longer tolerate a back seat role for Russia in the international system. Russia has become stronger, more influential, and more strident, yet it has not threatened anyone. It has simply asserted its desires and refused to be chided by Western governments or to apologize for its politics. Is this emblematic of a new Cold War? Why is an empowered Russia *inherently* a re-emergent threat?

It is worth recalling that the Cold War had two adversaries. Russia's actions may from time to time raise questions in western capitals (they certainly have in Canada after the jet and flag affairs), but how the West responds to Russia is the other half of the story. Moreover, to speak of Russia's actions as symbolizing a return to the Cold War is factually incorrect. This would imply geopolitical, strategic and ideological conflicts that are simply not present. First, there is no obvious ideological divergence: Putin and Medvedev do not appear to possess a governing ideology at all. Russia's constitution proclaims Russia to be a democracy, though it is well documented and accepted that it is not a liberal democracy. Putin himself has repudiated the notion of ideology (consider where it got them in the past), and referred to Russia as a sovereign democracy, implying an electoral democracy that supports a strong state. Even though Russia does not have a free press and a rule of law in the Western tradition, its politics do not position Russia as inherently antagonistic to American ideals. Second, the recent START treaty signed by Obama and Medvedev, made possible upon Obama's announced changes to US nuclear policy surrounding first use and the abandonment of a ballistic missile defence program, signifies not a renewal of strategic and geopolitical competition, but rather a shared desire to reduce the spectre

⁴⁸ Putin's 2007 to the Munich Security Conference is a good example of some of his harsher rhetoric.

of nuclear weapons (and a realistic assessment of the disutility of nuclear weapons with respect to combating the real threats both countries confront).

Perhaps on some level the tendency to process developments in Russia-US relations through a Cold War lens stems from an appreciation for the stability the Cold War brought. Soviet behaviour was predictable, but at times it has been difficult to say the same about post-Soviet Russia-US relations. To the extent that this is true, this may be due, in part, to Russian foreign policy. In the absence of values and ideas guiding Russia's actions, perhaps decisions have been harder to understand in the West. On the other hand though, pragmatism could make things a whole lot easier for the West. What might we expect from Russian leaders who appear to value a foreign policy agenda designed to accommodate Russia's economic interests? This paper suggests that western audiences can continue to expect an emboldened Russia, looking to promote a multi-polar world in which Russia enjoys its rightful position among the world's major powers and is interested in leveraging its energy resources to grow its economy in order to enable these objectives. Russia analysts disagree on the degree to which this really reflects a foremost desire to *balance American power* and is therefore symbolic of a new Cold War.⁴⁹ This author suggests that perhaps the tendency to use "Cold War" language is because this is an easier, established way to translate Russian behaviour. It is true that Putin did not bend over backwards to build confidences among western leaders (despite being the first to call President George W. Bush after the tragedy of 9/11). He spoke in harsher tones about what Russia would or would not "accept" or tolerate" and accused the United States of "overstepping its bounds in all areas."⁵⁰ He frostily received western commentary about Russia's internal political affairs and made it clear that Russia will not be moved by reason, by appeal, or by outrage.

Let us return for a moment to the discussion of ideology in Russian foreign policy making. While it has been suggested in this paper that ideology does not govern politics in Russia, nor does it enable the distillation of a clear national interest that sets the parameters of foreign policy, it may not be entirely fair to suggest that decision making in Russia is value-less. Alfred B. Evans argues that Putin's decisions can, on some level, be considered value-based because Putin has made active choices about Russia's identity. Evans argues that Putin's values are said to reflect a "Hobbesian view of the world" in which strength comes only from economic power.⁵¹ If Russia is to regain its status as a major international power, and if it wishes to do so at the level of the US and not among the BRICs (assuming it is not content simply to operate at the level of Brazil and India)-then its ability to leverage its strong economy is its ticket there. Orienting Russia toward Europe seems to have been a goal identified by Putin, and Evans convincingly asserts that this, in concert with a strong state that enables elites to themselves determine the national interest, enables Russia to enjoy the advantages of globalization while still protecting itself from the vulnerabilities of the global market.⁵²

⁴⁹ Stephen Cohen, "The New American Cold War," 136.

⁵⁰ Putin is quoted in Mankoff, "Russian Foreign Policy and the United States After Putin," *Problems of Post-Communism* 55:4 (July/August 2008): 43.

⁵¹ Alfred B. Evans Jr., "Putin's Legacy and Russia's Identity," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60:2 (August 2008): 899-912. Readers should note the publication date of Evans' article. Certainly the 2008/2009 global financial crisis and the downward pressure on energy prices affected Russia considerably. Still, the intention to enable a strong state for the purposes of close economic management remains.

⁵² *Ibid.*

The privileging of practical considerations above ideas places Putin squarely in the realist camp, according to many analysts, including noted Russia scholar Richard Sakwa. Putin's brand of *realpolitik* reflects a "conscious effort to match ambitions to resources."⁵³ In other words, Russia has not done away with its desire to be a great power, but instead recognizes that the definition of great power has changed.⁵⁴ If the past twenty years have shown us anything, it is that Russia will not be handed anything: it has had to work for its international recognition and needs to prove, more than any other nation (including China, for example) that it deserves to be seen, and treated, as a major power. It has had to re-build its influence as a voice to be heard, an authority to be consulted with. Nuclear weapons aside (which guarantee Russia a voice), it has had to climb back up to the top tier of global powers.

Sakwa argues that what Russia desires is not to be an alternative to the west, but to finally achieve autonomy: he calls Putin the de-Gaulle of today in that, "Russia, like France, wants to be part of the west, but on its own terms."⁵⁵ It has sought to achieve this by growing its economy through the careful management of its energy resources. Russia wants to re-enter the big power club, a club it was "kicked out of" upon the USSR's collapse. Russia's objections to the treatment it has received from western nations, notably from NATO, are not entirely unreasonable. NATO acknowledged that its former enemy was gone, the USSR was no longer a threat, and the countries of the former USSR were now friends of the West. The Warsaw Pact was gone, yet NATO remained, expanded, advanced, and continued to "contain" Russia.⁵⁶ NATO "established bases in Romania, Bulgaria, and in Central Asia, sent military personnel to train and equip the Georgian military and exercised regularly with Ukrainian forces in Crimea and Western Ukraine,"⁵⁷ all the while promising it was not meant to be threatening, and reminding Russia that its membership in their club was never to be. Is it any wonder that Russian leaders were unsettled by this?

That its objections are finally being heeded is more a tribute to Russia's economic strength than to some great awakening on the part of western leaders. It is fair to say that Russia played its hand extremely well. The tougher foreign policy stance, enabled by strong oil and gas prices, played well domestically and came at a time when the United States was distracted and weakened by two wars.⁵⁸ Russia has been able to advance an economic agenda by ensuring the Kremlin had a hand in Russia's strategic sectors. Russia's economic strength afforded its leaders the luxury of being taken more seriously as an international player, which could be used to advance other objectives, one of which was/is the continued development and modernization of the energy sector. Foreign policy has taken a backseat to "ensuring that Russia's oil reserves continue to bring the state, and its servitors, as much revenue as possible."⁵⁹

⁵³ Richard Sakwa, "'New Cold War' or Twenty Years' Crisis? Russia and International Politics," *International Affairs* 84:2 (2008): 245.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 246.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 257.

⁵⁷ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Threat Perception and Strategic Posture," *Strategic Studies Institute* (November 2009): 39.

⁵⁸ Mark Katz, "Assertive, but Alone," *The World Today* (November 2007).

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia and the West: Taking the Longer View," 48.

It remains an open question exactly what Medvedev's foreign policy leadership style will be, although there is little evidence to suggest a shift away from the privileging of Russia's energy sector. It appears that Medvedev shares Putin's vision for Russia as a great power in a multi-polar world. But, as Mankoff notes, it may take him some time to figure out how to manage his relationships and to gain some foreign policy credibility.⁶⁰ His successful negotiation, with President Obama, of a replacement to the START treaty suggests he is learning the game, as does the fact that his rapprochement with the West appears to be growing more popular at home. Recently it seems the Russian leadership is seizing the opportunity to use to its advantage President Obama's desire to "reset" Russia-US relations. Russia's priorities have not changed – energy sector development remains paramount – however its tactics may be shifting. What better way to encourage needed foreign investment dollars to ensure modernization and development than to create an environment of trust in which foreigners are not afraid to do business in Russia. It appears as though the Kremlin's messaging is changing: "take us as we are, and we will be reliable partners."⁶¹

This shift, though it may be a tactical one, suggests that warnings of a new Cold War are largely overstated. Sure, Russia wants to be a great power, and sees this distinction largely in economic terms with its energy both a means for achieving this, and an end goal in itself. However, the Russian leadership has also expressed a desire to normalize its relations with the world, a goal it has gone some lengths to pursue, given its engagement with international institutions.⁶² As Richard Sakwa notes, the trick will be to figure out what a "normal" relationship would look like.⁶³ Nearly twenty years have passed since the end of the Cold War and "our" western view of Russia remains wrapped up in Cold War images.

Conclusion

Russia's claim of entitlement to explore the energy potential that lies beneath the Arctic seabed, and the symbolic ways in which they have conveyed their intention to pursue and defend this claim have posed some concern for Western governments, notably Canada. If viewed through a "new Cold War" lens, the jet and flag incidents may appear more alarming than they actually are. This paper has argued, however, that this may not be an appropriate translation of Russia's intentions. Russian national security is closely tied to its economic wealth, which is itself tied to energy resources. Russia has made no secret of its view that its energy resources and national security are intimately connected. Russia does not have some hidden agenda in which it hopes to pursue an anti-Western agenda of domination. Understood in the appropriate context, Russian foreign policy is motivated by a desire to be taken seriously among the world's powers and to develop, modernize and enjoy the maximum benefit of its energy endowment. The Cold War must remain in the history books and not be conjured up when Russia asserts itself on the world stage. The Arctic should not be considered a new frontier of East-West confrontation, though it does pose challenges for Northern nations that wish to explore its energy potential. Russia's

⁶⁰ Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy and the United States After Putin*, 44.

⁶¹ Andrey Ryabov, "Russia Exhibiting Westward Shift in Foreign Policy," *Gazeta.ru* (May 17, 2010). Cited in Johnson's *Russia List 2010*-#97, May 18, 2010.

⁶² Richard Sakwa, "'New Cold War' or Twenty Years' Crisis?" 243.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 267.

claims in the Arctic, and the ways in which they have asserted their claims, should be considered in the appropriate context.