

Russia's Return To The World Stage: The Primakov Doctrine - Analysis



The Russian Flag

International power balance is primarily based on claiming ascendancy on the world stage, which in turn is driven by political imperatives, the prime mover in all initiatives towards claiming power. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia assumed the mantle of Soviet power but struggled to prove itself as a world power of consequence. Its gradual rise back to a position of influence has been a long journey, guided by influential thinkers. Since the initiatives that Russia undertook to return to the world stage were based on military actions, there is a prevalent belief that its international dealings were based on a military doctrine that has been attributed to General Valery Gerasimov, the current Russian Chief of General Staff. This belief is a fallacy.

If a nation tends to project power based purely on military actions, it would amount to the military doctrine driving national security policy. The Soviet/Russian tradition does not support this process since the military has never been the driver, but only the implementer in Russia. Russia's current national security policy is firmly based on a concept, a doctrine, which is gradually being recognized and labeled as the Primakov Doctrine, named after Yevgeny Primakov who became the Russian Foreign Minister in December 1995.

Who was Yevgeny Primakov (1929-2015)

Primakov was born in Kiev in 1929 and initially worked for the Russian broadcasting authority. Subsequently, he was trained by the KGB as an Oriental scholar, becoming multi-lingual, proficient in Arabic and English. During Leonid Brezhnev's government, he became an expert on the Middle-East and was prominently involved in formulating the Soviet Union's Middle-East and South

Asian policies during the 1970s and 80s. He was a special adviser to Gorbachev and made a last-minute attempt to prevent the 1991 Gulf War, going against the then Soviet policy of cooperation with the United States.

In September 1991, Primakov supervised the seamless transition of the KGB to what became known as the Foreign Intelligence Service of the then-emerging Russian Federation, the SVVR. In 1995, he became the Foreign Minister of Russia and then became the Prime Minister during 1998-99. During his years in power, he drove Russian foreign policy imperatives and was lauded by all domestic institutions as a realist who was wedded to Russia's strategic goals. It was under his aegis that Russia condemned the US-led intervention in Yugoslavia, Operation Allied Force (March-June 1999) and also lodged a symbolic protest against the unilateral action of the US, without UN sanction.

Evolution of the Current Russian Foreign Policy

Prior to Primakov coming to prominence, Russia had sought accommodation with the West. Primakov initiated actions to move on an independent track in its foreign relations, consciously demonstrating to the West that Russia was unwilling to be causally consigned to the proverbial 'dust heap of history'. Primakov envisaged a Russia-led bloc that would emerge as an alternative to the then-emerging US-led unipolar world and create a truly multi-polar world order. The initial concept was of a trilateral group—Russia, China, and India—that became the foundation and trigger point for the emergence of BRICS.

Primakov's concept started as a balance to neutralize the immediate threat to Russia, which was the international pressure being brought to bear after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He formulated the doctrine as the connecting bridge between policy objective and the strategy to preempt political backlash to Russian initiatives. This objective was to be achieved by exploiting the enemy's weakness and upgrading Russian military maneuvers.

Primakov Doctrine - Fundamentals

The doctrine is premised on Russia being able to prevent the world from

becoming unipolar, which is another way of stating that the international power and influence of the US has to be diluted. The insistence on developing a multipolar world went directly against the post-Cold War initiatives of the US to create a unipolar world order with its own assured primacy. Such a multi-polar world was postulated on the strength of Russo-Chinese partnership, with the wider, and informal, view that this coalition would challenge the US-led alliance in the Persian Gulf and the Taiwan Straits. Further, Primakov also wanted to create an exclusive Russian sphere of influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

For a little over two decades, based on the Primakov Doctrine, Russian foreign policy has insisted on five fundamental factors or concepts, which has been supported to a limited extent by the slow economic recovery in Russia. The five concepts are:

- Russia is an indispensable actor in global politics, pursuing an independent foreign policy;
- Russia's foreign policy is surmised within a broad vision of a multipolar world managed by a group of nations;
- Acceptance of Russia's primacy in the post-Soviet space and in Eurasia is fundamental to all diplomatic overtures to the nation;
- Russia is fundamentally opposed to any expansion of NATO; and
- Partnership with China forms a cornerstone of Russia's foreign policy.

With the expansion of NATO into the old Soviet bloc nations, the line of contact is barely two hours from major Russian cities. This strategic repositioning has altered the threat perception in Russia, especially since the earlier 'buffer-zone' of the near-abroad between NATO and the Russian heartland has vanished. The current situation has instilled a new sense of vulnerability in Russia's strategic security thinking.

Russia's Recent Initiatives

As soon as Russia stabilized its economy and put in place a strong and centralized government, Russia initiated actions to reclaim its perceived international status. It also became prone to taking calculated risks to move forward the nation's strategic agenda. These initiatives could be seen from the early 2000s, starting with its opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Even though Russia opposed the invasion in principle and voiced it, two factors combined to make it choose to

remain in the sidelines and permit Saddam Hussein, its long-term client, to be deposed. First, the Russian economy was still in the process of recovery and its military forces were still to build-up their capabilities after the implosion of the 1990s; and second, the might of the US military machine and the resolve of that nation to go to war, embodied in the President, combined to make Russia accept the inevitable.

However, it took only another five years for President Putin to warn NATO to ‘stay away’ from former Soviet states, a remarkable display of confidence. In 2008, while Georgia was a prime candidate for NATO membership, the Russian military defeated the Georgian Army. This was a calculated risk that Russia took, but by demonstrating its willingness to go to war if required to assert its regional primacy over former Soviet space, Russia unequivocally signaled its return to global politics. In an overarching manner, this was confirmation of Russia coming back into the regional equation in Europe.

In another sphere, the conflict in Georgia was an eye-opener for Russia—it clearly pointed to the severe gaps that existed in its military capabilities. This realization led to the initiation of far-reaching military reform that resulted in a fundamental change in the thinking from designing the force in preparation for a large-scale, great power conflict to one of a leaner force meant to protect Russia’s immediate sphere of interest. Essentially, the focus of the Russian military became the limits of the Russian periphery, the old Soviet ‘near abroad’. The reforms were instituted with vigor, even though the Russian economy was contracting, and resulted in the visible upgrade of the military’s hard power capabilities.

By 2010, Russian military doctrine had also started to echo the same message—noting the decline in the chances of a large-scale war, assuming the mantle of enforcing the Primakov Doctrine in order to ensure Russian primacy in the post-Soviet space and its area of interest in Eurasia.

Realigning the Military Doctrine

By 2014, Russian military forces were revising their doctrine to align it more seamlessly with the Primakov Doctrine. The revised doctrine reiterated the belief that large-scale war against Russia was highly unlikely and emphasized the deterrent capability resident incapable military forces. While the Russian military

is gradually moving away from the concept of large-scale wars, the US Army is consciously stating that soldiers who have been in the army for less than 18 years do not know what a large-scale combat operation would entail. Accordingly, the US Army has initiated the process to reset its training to prepare for the 'big fight', indicating that a near-peer, great power competition is back in the reckoning of the future. There is obviously a difference of view between Russian long-term thinking and that of the US Army.

Although discounting the chances of a large-scale war against a near-peer power, Russian military doctrine accepts the emergence of a more dangerous world that will be driven by increased global competition; inter-regional rivalries; and an inherent political instability that will impact economic developments at both the global and regional levels.

The fundamental difference in the military doctrine that was articulated in 2010 and the new iteration in 2014 was that while the earlier version was aligned towards the feasibility of peaceful coexistence, the revised doctrine of 2014 accepted that confrontation with the West could not be avoided in the long term. Accordingly, the military posture and structure started to reflect this inevitability—a confrontation was the new paradigm, which in turn brought acceptance of the role of hard power within the national security calculations. Emerging geographic realities and the fielding of highly evolved advanced precision-guided systems by the Western military forces reinforces Russia's sense of vulnerability and makes it focus further on the development of matching hard power capabilities.

In the past five years, after the 2014 overhaul of its military doctrine, the Russian military concept of operations has been focused on denying NATO any advantage through embracing hard power capabilities and emphasizing small-scale, hybrid warfare. One of the major objectives has been to deny NATO the advantage of air dominance, the basis on which the Western forces develop their concepts of operations, through the development and fielding of sophisticated air defense systems deployed at vital points and critical areas. Based on these parameters, Russia has moved along a path of taking calculated and deliberate risk-taking; almost taunting the West to react.

The Annexation of Crimea

In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and launched an incursion into eastern Ukraine. The conflict with Georgia in 2008 had brought to light the shortcomings of the Russian military forces. The Crimean episode now demonstrated the effectiveness of the reforms that had been initiated since then and without a doubt emphasized the fact that Russia had now returned to the ranks of major military powers. The immediate aftermath of the Russian action in Ukraine signaled an altered relationship between Russia and the Western world. Even though it had been promised NATO membership in 2008, Ukraine was not a NATO member when Crimea was annexed, and so was not covered by any security guarantee. The Western reaction to the invasion was only statements with no military assistance or intervention.

Russian military actions in Georgia and Ukraine prevented the states within the old Soviet sphere of influence, which Russia now considered its own sphere of influence, from obtaining NATO membership or security guarantees. From the annexation of Crimea onwards, the Primakov Doctrine became the underpinning principle for all Russian politico-strategic initiatives, which were focused on improving Russia's position as an independent power of global influence.

Russia in the Middle-East

In 2015, Russia intervened militarily in the Syrian Civil War, in support of and at the request of Bashar al-Assad's faltering regime—surprising observers both at home and internationally. This was the first time since the break-up of the Soviet Union that Russia was intervening in a theater, not within its close geographic proximity. Most observers predicted military overreach, high casualties, rapid failure, and retreat; none of which came true. Instead, Russia emerged as the most competent player in the confused Middle-East for the first time after the early 1990s.

The Syrian intervention was a classic example of the Primakov Doctrine in operation. The objectives of the intervention were very clear—prevention of the US-led/sponsored regime change; and questioning and putting an end to unilateral US military interventions. Russian actions confirmed to its military activities of the past decade; enabling a well-crafted campaign while accepting

calculated risks and ensuring minimum casualties. The intervention was also ensured that there was no direct confrontation with the US, which was in any case already attempting to scale-down in Syria. Within a few months of the start of the military campaign, it became obvious that Russia had gained far in excess of the limited risk that it had accepted. It had saved a long-term client regime and in the bargain also established itself as a major influence in the Middle-East, using Syria as a springboard to reach out to other countries in the region. By a calculated and limited military intervention, Russia had demonstrated its willingness to employ its military forces to support a client regime, irrespective of its hue and without any overt caveats being placed on the regime. Russia cannot be ignored anymore and has regained its military-strategic influence as an influential power—the Primakov Doctrine had proved its veracity.

In Syria, Russia used a judicious mix of military power projection and diplomacy to gain ascendancy and dominance in an unstable region and has rapidly filled the vacuum that the US left when it hurriedly and rapidly exited the scene. There are many reasons for the Russian success in the Middle-East. First, it learned from US mistakes and realized that ‘sanctions’ would not work against brutal regimes, the corollary being that military interventions must be sufficiently low key while also being decisive. Second, the politico-military strategy has to be backed by diplomacy and the capacity to carryout multi-lateral negotiations. The Astana Process, started in 2017 to discuss the rebuilding of a broken Syria is an example and could be seen as a successful alternative to the US-led Geneva talks that is stagnating. Third, the success of any intervention is dependent on the ability of the nation to bring together all elements of national power in a concerted manner, effectively and decisively. The fourth reason is the old-fashioned concept of loyalty. Russia demonstrated that it was a committed partner to its allies, even when the allied government was autocratic in nature.

Conclusion

In the past decade, it has become obvious that Russia puts national interests above the pursuit of ideology and does not attempt to restructure the region of its interest. Instead, the effort is always to increase stability while adherence to ideology and values is kept on the back burner. This is pragmatism in the new world at its best. Perhaps more importantly, in a region broken-up by ancient and bitter rivalries and fragmented by religious, ideological and geopolitical fault

lines, Russia has emerged as the new power broker, an influential and essential partner to any discussion that takes place. Russia is still playing the 'Great Game' and achieving better results than ever before.

Within Russia, the Syrian intervention is seen as a great success and therefore an internal debate is shaping up between the older generation leadership and the younger and emerging strategists. The one, ever mindful of the bitter experience of the Soviet Union and therefore risk-averse, and the other more robust and harboring global ambitions for their nation, clamoring for their place in the international sun. While the grey beards seem to be holding sway, for now, the new generation, as is their wont, are impatient and not unduly heedful of history. Sooner, rather than later, Russian ambition will break the restraints of the past and riding on the back of the Primakov Doctrine, it will create global consequences.

First published in Blog sanukay.wordpress.com



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Source:

<https://www.eurasiareview.com/05112019-russias-return-to-the-world-stage-the-primakov-doctrine-analysis/>

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