



Policies & Perspectives



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Understanding the Semantics behind Russian Resurgence: Why Understanding Russia through Western Narrative is Problematic

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Winston Churchill once said, “Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.” It seems that the West remains oblivious of Churchill’s advice. Understanding Russia can be an uphill task as it is a country of paradoxes. It has been one of the Great powers with its huge landmass, resource base and military might but with inherent weaknesses like resource dependent non-diversified economy, ethnic conflicts and terrorism, ageing populace, corruption and inequality etc. This fuels the “insecurity syndrome” among the elites which further complicates its foreign policy approach.

The mainstream media in a typical western propagandist outlook presents a rather simplistic view of Russian adventures calling it “with all sound fury but not much clout”. Judging capabilities just on the basis of economy or demographics can be problematic as in the sphere of International politics; diplomatic astuteness, hard power strength and capitalizing on opportunities do matter. Several write-ups have argued about Russia gaining diplomatic influence at the cost of goodwill but again goodwill is such a subjective term. Such goodwill talks were unheard of when unilateral interventions violating the sovereignty of Middle East countries were made. Thus, Russia looks ‘cheesy’ as per western narratives but instead today the socio-political environment of the West looks much fragmented as compared to Russia. But let’s come out of the black box of West-Russia binaries and try to understand what really guides the Russian Foreign policy goals.

Crisis of History

Russia has seen alternate phases of turmoil and resurgence beginning from the Tsarist era of Peter the Great. The mighty Tsarist Empire fell after the 1917 revolution and saw its resurgence in the Soviet Union only to be doomed by its disintegration and further decadence under Yeltsin. The post-disintegration era under Yeltsin saw economic crises, internal dissensions in republics like Chechnya and Dagestan and the rise of oligarchs. Most importantly, the very idea of Russian identity was at stake as Yeltsin, in his attempts to appear pro-West, took hastily crafted political and market reforms.

Meteoric Rise of the Bear



The Russian crisis of identity and security problems in late 20th century gave rise to Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, who quickly rose from the ranks of KGB to Kremlin. Under Putin, Russia has seen a remarkable turnaround. He led a blistering campaign against Russian oligarchs and checked separatist tendencies among various ethnic groups. The economy, which was reeling under Yeltsin's Shock therapy improved owing to rise in oil prices and renationalisation reforms. By 2014, per capita GDP in PPP terms had more than doubled compared to 1999.

In Global arena, Russia regained the lost ground by silencing Chechen rebellion and going at war against Georgia to check its pro-West leanings. It made clear its reservations regarding US adventurism, NATO expansion and proposed military systems in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Subsequently, we saw reintegration of Crimea, Syrian intervention and as a purported peace broker. The recent Syria peace talks led by Russia-Turkey in Kazakh capital shows that Russia is willing to go ahead without the US in finding a solution to Syrian crisis. In the Eurasian front, Russia has become articulate of its plans like Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization and appears to be loosely allied with China to checkmate the West.

A cursory read of recent Foreign Policy Concept of Russia 2016 makes it aptly clear that Russia seeks a dominant role for itself in "global deal making". Putin has been an ardent critic of Western democracy and its universalization and has enunciated his own version of Sovereign democratic model. Russian bear appears to grow stronger with the rise of Trump and far right parties in Europe which some see as "globalization of Putinism". So what explains this new grown alacrity?

Why Mainstream Fails to understand Russia?

The mainstream approach to gauge Russia's Foreign policy behaviour has been through the lens of 'Russophobia'. This folly blinds most of the commentators as they fail to appreciate what noted Russian expert Richard Sakwa calls as Russia's legitimate interests. Such an approach can be destructive as it creates buzz about ideas like New Cold War, Great game etc.

Determinants like huge landmass extending from Far East Asia to Europe, historical dominance over Eurasian region and ethnic dissensions in and around its territory automatically fuel a sense of pride, responsibility and ambition in Russia. Putin articulates that his foreign ventures are defensive in nature to protect its national interests. In fact, he has time and again recognized the limits of Russian power vis-à-vis west. In one of the interviews, he clarified that "Moscow is not trying to resurrect the empire but



will never be a vassal of the United States". Russia has also asked for joint partnership with US to curb Islamic terror in Middle East.

Thus, to understand Russia's foreign policy orientation, one has to dissuade from the propagandist view and delve deeply into Russia's nationalistic debates, role played by various stake holders and institutions and the domestic politics of Russia.

The Rise of Nationalist Discourse

Russian nationalist discourse has strengthened under Putin's regime. The old Slavophiles-Westernizers debate regarding Russia being part of West or having a distinct identity has re-emerged and the most prominent of these has been Alexander Dugin's idea of "New-Eurasianism". Dugin enjoys considerable influence among Russian elites and has argued for Russia's assertiveness especially in its sphere of influence i.e. Central Asia, Caucasus and Caspian region. Similarly, another philosopher Ivan Ilyin, popularly called as Putin's philosopher has find himself in official documents of Russia.

The Russian Orthodox Church too supports the President and in return Putin has taken the state further towards conservative Christian faith. Several laws approved by like on LGBT issues, decriminalizing domestic violence etc. shows Russia's move towards traditionalism. Putin, like a true pragmatist has skilfully exploited these nationalistic tendencies to bolster his domestic legitimacy and justifying Russia's assertion. His approval ratings remain high and analogies like Russia's new Peter the Great have been drawn vis-à-vis Putin.

Putin's Iron Grip on Domestic Politics

Russian political system represents a "Super Presidentialism" as the 1993 constitution of the Russian federation gives immense powers to the President with respect to issuing decrees, making important appointments etc. Putin has consolidated the regime around him. His united Russia Party enjoys considerable majority in the State Duma facilitating easy legislation. Through a string of legislations, Putin has controlled opposition. State sponsored propaganda remains strong and his web of loyalists governs Russia's top economic and political spheres. In the foreign policy sphere, the foreign minister Sergey Lavrov guards well. With tinge of realism, Russia Foreign Policy approaches and discussions in Valdai Clubs have made it clear about the global role Russia wishes to play.



The Negative Side

But then, not all is well in Russia. Critics have called that a silent opposition is brewing against the excesses of ruling regime especially after the Panama leaks and economic crisis. As per Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Report 2016, Russia is the most unequal country in the world and with slowing economy owing to fall in oil prices and economic sanctions, the future doesn't look too bright. Similarly, Russian resources doesn't commensurate with its grand plans as it can't afford a sustained struggle against the West.

Talks of Putin-Trump 'bromance' may be far-fetched as the US elections are long over and the rhetoric will stop. Similarly, both differ on many fronts like Iran and Syria and the political stakeholders in the US too will keep a check over the ties. Similarly, its relationship with China has its limits as the increasing Russian dependence over China would only mean Russia losing its supremacy in Eurasia. Although their interest converges on many fronts but China has emerged as the biggest player in Russia's near abroad especially with its OBOR project. Its massive investments and trade with Central Asia means Russia is no more the only player in the region.

Thus, a deep insight is needed to get a nuanced understanding about Russia's moves. Russian resurgence is justified on such grounds but then all this doesn't absolve Russia from its aggression and alleged meddling in elections of the West but that's how the Great power politics work in the international system. As one scholar puts it, now the West is witnessing their own "Colour Revolutions".

Vladimir Putin has done justice to Russia's desire for a strong leader and catapulted Russia once again in the world stage. Western criticism of Russia being under authoritarianism appears hollow especially at a time when their own democracies are in shambles. But the biggest question is will this resurgence under Putin sustain?

Now that's a complex question but one thing is certain; one can ignore Russia at its own peril. The Country is full of surprises!!!



About VIF

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