

UNWRAPPING RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics

Jeffrey Mankoff

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A typical outsider's concept of Russian foreign policy might envisage Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin seated comfortably in the Kremlin, deciding what they want to accomplish, then skillfully selecting from an array of policy tools readily at their command: the military and security services, Gazprom's collections department, state-controlled media (i.e. drivers of public opinion), and state businesses ready to ship arms and build nuclear power plants wherever needed.

In his book *Russian Foreign Policy*, Jeffrey Mankoff, adjunct fellow for Russia studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and associate director of International Security Studies at Yale University, challenges this image. He posits that Russia lacks a clear idea of its foreign policy goals and questions whether or not Russian state and state-influenced institutions follow leaders' interests rather than having agendas or priorities of their own.

For Mankoff, Russian foreign policy is hardly a fixed idea implemented by all-powerful figures in the Kremlin, but rather the product of a constantly changing tableau of leadership intent, official institutions' rival interests, and the ups-and-downs of the Russian economy. The frequently mixed signals from western nations—sometimes treating Moscow as an equal partner, sometimes warning that Russia still needs to be encircled and contained—also impact Russia's behavior.

Mankoff captures the nuances of each of these factors in his book, a *tour d'horizon* of the world as viewed from Moscow and of the forces that shape Kremlin policy. Gazprom and companies that build nuclear power stations emerge as international actors themselves, interested in maximizing profits regardless of whether the issue is gas supplies to Ukraine or a nuclear plant in Iran. The implications of their actions for the European Union—concerned about Ukraine's political independence—or the United States—worried by Iran's nuclear program—are not their leading concern. Meanwhile, the Kremlin cannot manipulate public opinion as easily as an outsider might think; Mankoff describes the latter as more isolationist than elite opinion and as a functioning restraint on Russian policy. The army and security services, for their part, also have a significant voice in defining policy.

Russia's basic political philosophy seems to be constantly evolving. Mankoff describes pressures on top policymakers from Russian nationalists, centrists,

Eurasianists (whose beliefs, though varied, see Russia as the center of a new Eurasian power that reunites the former USSR and directly challenges the West), and liberal Atlanticists. At times, Russia's government has acted to satisfy each group. For instance, it has enforced tough action against illegal immigrants (a policy sought by the nationalists); raised military spending and intensified pressure on Ukraine and Georgia (a demand of the Eurasianists); and moved toward WTO membership and stronger relations with the United States after 9/11 (desired by liberals). Until Russia settles on its political identity and foreign policy goals, its policy will remain erratic and influenced by contradictory currents.

Mankoff traces the roots of foreign policy under Medvedev and Putin to a key period—a decade earlier, under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin. At that time, he states, “With Russia’s own instability and the West’s inability to make a Russia after its own image, Kremlin leaders began laying the foundation for Russia to return to its accustomed international position as one pole in a system of shifting, competitive states.”¹ The prospect of Russia as an integral part of the West was buried.

This world view persisted throughout the Putin presidency and is likely to characterize the remainder of Medvedev’s as well. Some might challenge Mankoff’s very idea of a Medvedev foreign policy given Putin’s role in determining Russia’s actions. Mankoff acknowledges that Medvedev’s role, even in such a major decision as sending Russian troops to Georgia, is unclear. He is careful, however, not to make the leap of assuming Medvedev is some kind of Putin *marionetka*. Although he doubts Medvedev is on the brink of proclaiming any fundamentally new foreign policy, Mankoff holds open the possibility that Medvedev may yet bring his own emphases.


The book contains relatively few references to Soviet history and might well have benefited from more. The contradictions that comprise Russian foreign policy today recall similar tensions during the Soviet period. The Soviet Union’s efforts to be a “reliable partner” of the West in energy supplies while also being a Cold War rival echo similar issues today. The contradictory actions of supporting opposition movements in the Third World while stifling Soviet dissidents required some deft propaganda footwork from the Soviets. Equivalents of today’s internal interest groups existed then as well. A longer look at how Soviet policy managed to steer through these contradictions could inform our predictions of how Russia will deal with its own varying policy currents now.

Russian Foreign Policy is a well-organized book, beginning with the internal factors affecting Russian policy and then moving on to detail relations with the United States, Europe, and Asia. Along the way it includes clear, extensive descriptions of the economic and mechanical issues involved in delivering Russia’s oil

and natural gas; the recent history of Russian relations with the “near abroad”; and Russia’s diplomacy in the Far East, including the maneuverings of Russia and China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In his conclusion, Mankoff lays out avenues of diplomacy that might prove fruitful in the West’s relations with Russia. The United States and the West, he argues, “Need to show Russia that it can have what it most craves—respect, recognition and responsibility for upholding order around the world—without having to resort to force or threats of force to make itself heard.”² At the same time, the West must hold firmly to its principles of democracy and rule of law.

However nimble and wisely conceived the West’s policies may be, the book recognizes that a stable role for Russia in the world also depends on Moscow’s own still-unfolding process of defining its national goals. It also depends on both sides trying to get past Cold War thinking: “suspecting the other of expansionist designs and responding in ways that contribute to mutual distrust.”³

Professor Mankoff’s book is a wide-ranging, thoughtful view of Russian foreign policy today. 

NOTES

¹ Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: the Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 4

² *Ibid.*, 305.

³ *Ibid.*, 402.