

The Role of Leadership in Foreign Policy: A Case Study of Russia under Vladimir Putin

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Abstract

International Relations has been preoccupied with the paradigmatic clashes between different theorists who rarely accommodate the role of beliefs, personalities, emotions, perceptions and decision-making processes of individual political leaders. Yet the history of international politics includes many leaders who have left a profound mark on its course, and many explanations of historically consequential events point towards the significant role of individual political leaders. The focus of this study is to understand the influence of leaders in foreign policy decision-making and the subsequent impact of the choices that they make at the international level. Towards this end, this article takes the case of Russian President Vladimir Putin and tries to assess the extent to which Russian foreign policy is a product of his inspiration and studies the impact of his policies internationally.

Key words: Russia, Personality, Leaders, Vladimir Putin, Foreign Policy.

Introduction

For the most part, the theoretical history of International Relations was dominated by the research programmes that were largely seen to be system, state and society centred. Even the constructivist project, with its inclusionary nature and flexibility, failed to take the emotional and cognitive aspects of individual human agency into account. It is only recently that these aspects have gained credence. An important reason

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behind this acceptance is the prevailing uncertainty in the post-Cold War era. Falling influence of systemic constraints such as the notion of balance of power has given individual leaders more maneuvering space and authority in the course of their state's external actions and agendas.

This exercise of individual power and authority in international affairs is most potently visible in Russia with Vladimir Putin at the helm of its affairs. The newfound focus and professionalism in Russian foreign policy as well as Russia's reassertion as a great power under Putin has spurred interest in understanding the leader from all quarters. It is a widely held belief that Putin is the face of Russia's foreign policy and everything stems from him. He is considered Russia's supreme leader with a high popularity rating that persists even in his third term as the President of Russia. It has, therefore, become important to study the individual behind Putin in order to better understand the underpinnings of his policy choices and to formulate predictions about his future decisions.¹

Theoretical Framework

Understanding a leader's role and influence constitutes the *individual levels of analysis* in International Relations. This level of analysis primarily takes an actor-specific approach to IR based upon the premise that all state actions and interactions are grounded in human decision-makers acting singly or in groups.² Within this level of analysis, various perspectives exist ranging from the rational actor perspective focusing on the idea of individual rationality common to the realist and power politics tradition, to the cognitive approach emphasising the importance of personality and beliefs put forward by political psychologists. From amongst the various approaches within this level, this research uses the cognitive approach to foreign policy analysis.

¹ Since the focus of the study is to examine Putin's foreign policies for his third presidential term, the rest of his tenures are not looked at. His domestic ascendance to power and details of his tenures are not being discussed because the main focus is on external policies. The domestic context is only described in the study to examine how it affects Putin's power in the external policy domain.

² Valerie M. Hudson, "Foreign Policy Analysis: Actor-Specific Theory and the Ground of International Relations," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1, no. 1 (2005): 1-30 (1).

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Cognitive analysis considers the role of beliefs and images in the policies of a leader.³ It primarily deals with questions that focus on exploring a policymaker's worldview, the changes that occur in the beliefs and images of the policymaker overtime, and the effect that these beliefs have on his/her foreign policy decisions.⁴ This approach significantly differs from the traditional *rational actor perspective* and challenges much of Western thought based on the assumption of individual rationality. The *rational actor approach* presumes open-mindedness in individuals that capacitates them to adapt to new and changing environments, whereas, the cognitive approach posits that individuals are generally more closed-minded and tend to hold on to their predisposed beliefs. The nature of cognitive mechanisms through which individuals process new information makes them more prone to resisting change.⁵ The cognitive approach adheres that since individual experience varies, it is not wise to employ overarching generalisations but to examine individual political leaders as separate 'units'.

Various theories and concepts are used in cognitive analysis. For the sake of this study, the *Operational Code (OC) Framework* is applied. The idea of *operational code* was originally coined by Nathan Leites in 1951, but was later revised and updated by Alexander L. George in 1969.⁶ In his words, *operational code* refers to 'a small set of master beliefs around which the whole belief system of a person is hierarchically organised.'⁷ In the domain of IR, defining an operational code involves identifying the core political beliefs of a leader regarding the nature of conflict in the world, the leader's ideas about his/her own power, position and image in the world as well as discovering the specific means that the leader adopts to pursue set goals.⁸ Operational code can be broadly categorised into *philosophical beliefs* and *instrumental beliefs*; the former being the leader's beliefs and images about the nature of politics and political conflict, and

³ J.A. Rosati, "A Cognitive Approach to the Study of Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy Analysis: Continuity and Change in its Second Generation*, eds. L. Neack, J.A.K. Hey and P.J. Haney (Cambridge: Prentice Hall, 1995), 49.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁶ Stephen G. Walker, "The Evolution of Operational Code Analysis," *Political Psychology* 11, no. 2 (1990): 403-418 (404).

⁷ Rosati, "A Cognitive Approach to the Study of Foreign Policy," 56.

⁸ Ibid.

the latter dealing with the instrumental means that are used in pursuit of those beliefs.

Keeping in mind the scope of this study, two variables from the operational code scheme are utilised: *nature of the political universe* and *image of self*. *Nature of the Political Universe* deals with the actor's perceptions regarding the nature of conflict in the world and belongs to the category of philosophical beliefs. It measures the degree to which the actor perceives enmity and friendliness in the political environment. *Image of self* measures the extent to which actors present their own selves as cooperative or antagonistic. This is considered the core instrumental belief in the OC scheme.

The task of both the foreign policymaker and foreign policy scholar becomes daunting when they are confronted with the appearance of a new actor on the international stage, about whom very little is known.⁹ The dearth of information makes it difficult to explain, understand and predict the foreign policy choices of that actor. Employing the Operational Code Framework can increase knowledge regarding such an actor's worldview and consequently help in understanding the foreign policy choices that he/she makes.

Vladimir Putin aptly fits the criteria of a 'new actor' around whom an air of ambiguity exists. In order to assess the impact of his policies on the international front, it is important to understand the source of these policies, in other words, Putin himself. For the sake of this article, Putin's worldview and 'operational code' is derived from content analysis of his public speeches and addresses regarding five actors, namely, the United States (US), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Ukraine, Turkey and Germany. The study is only taking into account Putin's last presidential term (2012 - present) and the most significant events during this time period make these actors highly relevant. Russia's actions in the foreign domain were most visible and dominant with respect to these actors. Regionally, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent Ukrainian crises brings relations with EU (Germany) and Ukraine to the fore. On the international front, this event has important repercussions; evoking the world order debate and consequently impacting relations with the US and the role of NATO in this new scenario. The emerging Syrian

⁹ Stephen Benedict Dyson, "Drawing Policy Implications from the 'Operational Code' of a 'New' Political Actor: Russian President Vladimir Putin," *Policy Sciences* 34, no. 3 (2001): 329-346 (329).

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crisis also has the greatest impact on Russia's relations with these countries. Relations with Turkey have seen ups and downs during this period and hold an important place in Russia's foreign policy.

Keeping in mind the scope of the study, 25 speeches, dating from 2012-16 were consulted (Annex 1). In other words, his foreign policy postures during his third presidential term are taken into account. *Nature of the political universe* is measured by assessing the number of times Putin publicly addressed other actors as hostile or cooperative. The final nature of the political universe is identified by calculating the number of times other actors were referred to as hostile versus the number of times they were described as cooperative. *Image of self* is measured by assessing the number of times Putin pronounced himself and Russia as conflictual or cooperative. The balance between both the themes is calculated to identify the overall nature of the image that Putin poses and how he largely projects himself and his stance when confronted with these actors. In tracing both the variables, apart from the quantitative count, the common words and themes used by Putin for the above mentioned actors is also extracted and assessed. The outcome of this exercise helps in outlining broad generalisations about the overall nature of Putin's worldview and the underlying principles that drive his conduct with respect to the five identified actors. It also contributes towards substantiating the claim that beliefs and images of a leader play a role in the state's external conduct and must not be written off so easily.

Why Leaders Matter?

As discussed earlier, explanations of many historically consequential events reside in the actions and policies of individual political leaders, which necessitates the examination of their beliefs, personalities, emotions, perceptions and decision-making processes. Few would assess the events of World War II without mentioning Hitler, Soviet policy in the 1930s and 1940s without Stalin, abolition of the apartheid system without Nelson Mandela, Chinese foreign policy without Mao or Russia's foreign policy without Putin.¹⁰ Individuals like Woodrow Wilson, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Mikhail Gorbachev

¹⁰ Jack S. Levy, "Psychology and Foreign Policy Decision-Making," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 2nd ed. eds. Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears and Jack S. Levy (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

and Margaret Thatcher not only enjoyed a strong domestic political standing but also proved influential internationally. The actions and policies of these leaders were single-handedly responsible for changing the course of their country's position and also had spillover effects on the regional and international stage. Studying their personal characteristics, belief systems, decision styles and preferences can provide insight regarding important historical decisions and serve as useful case studies for comparative and analytical purposes.

The historical contributions of leaders paved the way for their recognition in the theoretical field. These and countless other contributions of leaders led some scholars to concede that 'Who leads matters' and that more emphasis should be given to psychological factors in decision-making.¹¹ Increasingly, scholars began to question validity of the longstanding system and state-centred theories. A comparison between the systemic theories of IR and the actor-specific theories highlights many strengths of the latter theory. The proponents of the actor-specific approach adhere that their approach might appear incoherent and fragmented in terms of findings but this diversity provides a more detailed and intensive portrayal of events than systemic theories of IR. By emphasising the role of a leader and by accommodating their subjectivity, one can come to understand not only the outcomes of state policies and interactions but also the internal workings and processes that went behind their formulation; it not only deals with the question of how states act but also why states act the way they do. This kind of an approach focuses on both process and outcome validity. According to Robert Jervis, the world is extraordinarily complex, fragmented and volatile, while the human ability to comprehend its complexity is limited and does not fully satisfy the standards of ideational rationality.¹² It is, therefore, important to try and delve beneath the surface of objective reality and focus on individual experiences and cases for a more nuanced understanding of realpolitik. Different experiences of the objective reality create differences that exist in the choices made by different leaders. Hence, ignoring them in the assessment of state policies and interactions would greatly undermine the diversity they bring to the table as well as erode the individuality of state policies.

¹¹ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 32.

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Others believe that studying individual leaders does not imply discarding the systemic approaches. Instead, they adhere that this individual centred approach can facilitate the knowledge of systemic theories.¹³ The world context if studied in conjunction with the role of leaders can generate more useful insights than only taking the broader system and state into account. To substantiate the claim that leaders do matter, Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack argue that, ‘the goals, abilities, foibles of individuals are crucial to the intentions, capabilities, and strategies of a state.’¹⁴ Implicit in their words is the idea that individuals are part and parcel of the state’s capabilities, and therefore, wield considerable influence on state policies and actions.

Apart from the historical and theoretical salience of leaders, practical realities and dynamics of the world also render leaders and their role important. For instance, in the post-Cold War era, there is more ambiguity as to the nature of the world order, which has resulted in more interpretation, miscommunication and misunderstanding. In such an environment of uncertainty, decision-makers can influence policies more. International constraints on foreign policy are increasingly becoming ambiguous, hence making room for individual leaders to rise.¹⁵ Increasingly, attention is diverted to individual leaders that are not only influential within their own state but also have an impact beyond the borders of the country they lead. Previously, such discussions were discounted by scholars who proposed instead to focus on international constraints that curtailed the acting capacity of leaders. In their view, the systemic imperatives of anarchy and interdependence are so clear that leaders are left with a limited range of foreign policy strategies. However, ambiguity in the world order at post-Cold War and the ambiguity that exists in today’s near multi-polar world with the emergence of regional and non-state actors, has allowed individuals to be at the helm of international affairs.

¹³ Alex Mintz and Karl DeRouen Jr., *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

¹⁴ Ariel Ilan Roth, *Leadership in International Relations: The Balance of Power and the Origins of World War II* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹⁵ Margaret G. Hermann and Joe D. Hagan, “International Decision-Making: Leadership Matters,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 110, special edition (1998): 124-137 (124).

Moreover, the way in which a decision-maker perceives the world, himself, or his enemy is vital to the understanding of why certain decisions are taken and others bypassed. Analysing the policies and actions of leaders in the international realm allows for useful predictions to be made regarding their future policies and course of action. This can, in turn, help reduce the unpredictability that prevails in the international realm. The importance of a leader's role can also be discerned by exploring instances where similar states (expected to react to events in a similar fashion), act in different ways. Democracies all over the world are thought to be similar in their orientation towards postures in world politics; however, discrepancies in their international actions exist, pointing towards the existence of internal explanations.

Moreover, a certain fascination also prevails regarding political leaders, especially those with charismatic mass appeal. Apart from that, another reason for curiosity about the personal characteristics of such leaders is the realisation that their preferences, the things they believe in and work for, and the way they go about making decisions can influence their lives. So these practical imperatives have paved the way for individual political leaders and their role in the external workings of the state.

Therefore, it can be said that the importance of leaders is recognised in all three domains - historically, theoretically and in current world dynamics. This threefold salience of leaders is increasingly reflective in the emergence of influential political figures coming out to head governments. The popular emergence of Donald Trump and the ascendancy of Narendra Modi and Vladimir Putin to power are some examples of this emerging trend. Akan Malici emphasises that:

...refusing to theorise about the impact of ideational variables on politics is not justified. To consider actors as amorphous entities and to rob them of any consciousness is equivalent to denying the socio-psychological character of politics. Such an understanding of international interactions is impoverished and can only be enriched by an effort to develop a better understanding of the agents of political action.¹⁶

¹⁶ Akan Malici, *When Leaders Learn and When They Don't: Mikhail Gorbachev and Kim Il Sung at the End of the Cold War*, SUNY Series in Global Politics (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009), 17.

Domestic Context of Putin's Foreign Policy

It is a widely held belief that political leaders enjoying a strong authority base domestically have a freer hand in international affairs as well. In other words, the idea is that strong, centrist and autocratic political cultures usually give birth to populous leaders. This in no way implies that democracies do not generate popular leaders. It only shows that democratic leaders are unable to exert individual power as freely as the leaders of authoritative governments because their political cultures give primacy to institutions and not individuals. This, in turn, impacts their capacity to unilaterally influence state actions. Hence based on the above arguments, it can be said that leaders can only come out strongly in the international domain and prove influential if they have a conducive and suitable domestic base at home. In order to understand Putin's influence in international politics, it is important to first establish him as the major driver of Russia's foreign policy. Doing so requires studying the domestic context and the procedures of foreign policymaking in Russia.

Policy Landscape

The decision-making domain is the most important aspect of policymaking and is characterised by the identity of those who are responsible for carrying it out. In Russia, this obviously includes President Putin, but also other figures, namely Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Sergei Ivanov, CEO of the Russian state oil giant Rosneft Igor Sechin, and Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Nikolai Patrushev.¹⁷ Putin is at the epicentre of this decision-making hierarchy and is considered to be the supreme decision-making authority. Other members have limited influence as they are in a subordinate position to Putin and also because they all are entrusted with narrower domains and agendas. Steven Myers in his study on Putin related an occasion after the September 11 attacks, where Ivanov's opinion was overruled by him when he (Putin) stormed into the Defence Ministry and ordered the Russian

¹⁷ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2015), 5.

commanders to work with the Americans.¹⁸ Despite the Defence Minister's disapproval and inhibitions regarding American operations in Central Asia, he obliged quietly and dropped his public opposition to American operations in Central Asia.¹⁹

Political Culture

Political culture is a loose concept that constitutes a number of things. It comprises the institutional habits of a political set-up, describes its commitment to certain principles and is usually associated with one or the other regime type.²⁰ A centralised and authoritative government characterised by personalised decision-making usually gives rise to aggressive foreign policies.²¹ The domestic style of maintaining control more often than not translates in their international conduct and results in them focusing more on projecting military capabilities and a strong power image and status. Though debatable, the political culture of Russia is seen to be one that favours strong, autocratic rule. Russia's history is marked by strong political figures at the helm of affairs. Autocratic style of government remained the constant feature of Russian governments starting from the ironclad hold of Tsars till the Politburo-centred Communist rule. Russia's transition to democracy is a relatively recent phenomenon and is still in the process of evolving into a government that is both modern and democratic. In the current scenario, even if various interest groups and political elite at the national level disagree with Russia's policies, especially in the foreign policy domain, the final say rests with the Executive - Putin. He has created something that his advisers call 'managed democracy' that only provides a semblance of popular will but where opposition parties are neutered and Russians lost the ability to vote in direct elections.²² The legacy of the Tsarist and Communist rulers lingers in the political culture of present-day Russia in the words of Putin who once told a group of foreign journalists:

¹⁸ Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2015), 210.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 246.

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The Russian people are backward...they cannot adapt to democracy as they have done in your countries. They need time.²³

Political and Institutional Context

On coming to power, Putin had to grapple with an agitated public dissatisfied with the instability and impoverishment of the Yeltsin²⁴ years. The public desire for order and stability within government was at its peak. Putin, on coming to the fore, was viewed as a new actor with few bad legacies to his name. He seized on the popular desire for order and ‘legality’ which helped him in securing wider legitimacy and popularity amongst Russia’s masses. Putin aptly demonstrated that a central or statist control could yield dividends for diverse groups.²⁵ Putin banked on this need for stability and consolidated his own power in an astounding way:

In his first two terms, from 2000 to 2008, he brought down the oligarchs, thereby regaining total control of the news media and orchestrating the breakup of Yukos, the giant oil company (and jailing its chief executive, Mikhail Khodorkovsky), which returned two important power sources to the state. His loyal friends now run most of Russia’s important industries.²⁶

His personal animosity towards the financial-industrial interest groups further helped him in securing trust and support of the public that equally detested the group. This wide and popular support base gave him more maneuvering space in domestic affairs and once his legitimacy was strengthened at home, it paved the way for freer control in the international domain. By restoring discipline in Russia’s foreign policymaking process, Putin strengthened his own say in external matters. Hence, existence of a stable political context has provided Putin with significant safety margin if and when things go wrong in Russia’s external relations. Just as critically,

²³ Ibid., 262.

²⁴ Editor’s Note: Boris Yeltsin was the first President of the Russian Federation from 1991 to 1999.

²⁵ Bobo Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, Chatham House Papers (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 20.

²⁶ Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*, 283.

it provides the regime with the political space and latitude to pursue long-term strategic policies.

In the institutional context, Putin's convincing mandate from the 1999 Duma and 2000 Presidential elections has emasculated the Parliament's ability to materially influence the Kremlin's conduct of foreign affairs.²⁷ In addition, economic actors are dependent on the Executive rather than the other way round. In his second term, President Vladimir Putin has continued transfer of power from the regional to the federal level. He is a manager, a type of technocrat, and although he is not directly anti-democratic, his dislike for uncertainty and instability has led to the creation of what we earlier discussed as 'managed democracy' in which Kremlin's power has increased at the expense of Russia's other democratic institutions.²⁸ In the future, this effort to consolidate power is only likely to intensify. Moreover, Russia's Parliament (Federal Assembly) passed a law extending the presidential term from four to six years. If Putin wins in 2018, he would surpass Leonid Brezhnev (18 years) and Stalin's time in power to be the longest head of state in the history of the country. The increase in powers of the federal government and its control over the country's economy, law-enforcement agencies and courts has almost made the Executive authority in Russia invincible. Institutionalisation of Executive power gives the President legal authority to employ free hand not only domestically but in his foreign policy as well.

Use of Media

The Russian government believes it has the right to protect its citizens across the world and its media trajectories work towards promulgating this idea. Putin has intensively worked to improve the media and communications field that presents a favourable view of his country in the eyes of the domestic as well as international audience. With regards to the domestic audience, Putin is largely seen to be promulgating a particular view of the West that is confrontational in nature. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion eastwards, 'the dual and hypocritical role' of the West are recurrent themes in his public statements.

²⁷ Ibid., 23.

²⁸ Nikolay Petrov and Michael McFaul, "How Much has Federal Power Increased under President Putin?" (meeting, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Moscow, September 8, 2004).

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It is generally believed that for leaders to have optimum impact on foreign policy decisions, it is important that the public holds ambiguous, partial or incomplete knowledge about the situation. Putin's 'information campaign' steers public opinion about external issues in his favour. Lack of knowledge on part of the public makes it almost impossible for them to challenge him in his foreign policy decisions.

Putin: The Face of Russia's Foreign Policy

Russia's current foreign policy is widely associated with the personality of Putin. Whatever the formal institutions of Russia's national security and diplomatic decision-making machinery, Putin's word has been decisive on all issues that interest him. Time and again, he has undertaken dramatic moves, never hesitating to go against deeply entrenched institutional interests.²⁹ For example, he supported America in their War against Terrorism by letting her establish bases in post-Soviet Central Asia, despite differences and opposition from Russia's national security elites.

His words, tone, actions, demeanour and postures are as much scrutinised as the actual content of his policies. He exudes an air of importance that has uplifted Russia's game in the international domain. Policies during his time have strongly brought Russia back into great power politics. Putin's actions in Crimea and Georgia, regaining influence in the neighbourhood, revising major agreements of the 1990s with the West, Russia's role in the Syrian crises, steady expansion of ties with China, have all brought Russia back in the Great Game.³⁰

Discipline in the voice of Russia's government is not only associated with Putin's policy preferences, but is also a result of how he manages business.³¹ His calm self-confidence evident in the public has been transferred more generally to the exposition of his government's positions on international issues. The insecurities are still there but Moscow has become better at putting a brave face on its fears and disappointments. Complaints about lack of respect and attacks to dignity are now rare under

²⁹ Allen C. Lynch, *Vladimir Putin and Russian Statecraft*, Shapers of International History Series, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011), 95.

³⁰ Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Putin since in the general public Russia is no longer seen as toeing Western lines and is rather perceived as looking out solely for Russia's interests.³²

Like any world leader, Putin absorbs information and takes advice from a range of sources³³, and the expanse of his foreign policy agenda means that there are many issues which, even if he felt so disposed, he could not possibly hope to cover alone. Putin is the ultimate controller, he determines the country's strategic direction, and involves himself selectively in the management of high-profile issues.³⁴ He exerts influence on individual policies. In fact, there are certain policy areas that he prioritises and keeps a close eye on such as Ukraine, Eurasian integration, Russia's energy ties and handling of international crises such as the Syrian conflict. Areas such as relationships with the US, Europe, and China hold significant interest for Putin.³⁵

But like any good senior manager, he delegates. While keeping key policy issue decision-making cards close to his chest, he assigns lesser important issues and every day administration to others. Hence, it can be concluded that the Putin's systemic influence on Russia's foreign policy is not contestable. He is the face of Russia's foreign policy. The important thing to understand is the nature and character of this influence; to understand the roots where his foreign policy is emanating from; and to understand the influences that have shaped his foreign policy choices.

Nature of Putin's Influence

In order to understand the effect of Putin's worldview on his policies, it is first important to identify what it is. Towards this end, the *Operational Code Scheme* is utilised. His public statements are taken from various sources, such as, his public speeches, interviews and articles. For the sake of this article, two variables from the *Operational Code Framework* are traced in all the 25 public statements with respect to five actors. Discussed below are the findings of this exercise:

³² Ibid.; Stent, "Restoration and Revolution in Putin's Foreign Policy".

³³ Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, 43.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 7.

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United States of America

Out of the 16 times that United States was mentioned in the speeches, 12 times the US was referred as having a hostile posture against Russia and the world in general. There were only four instances where he deemed the US actions as cooperative and conciliatory. So if the balance of verbs indicating hostility and friendliness of the US are calculated, it is seen that, for the larger part, Putin's *political universe* with respect to the United States is hostile. He largely believes that the US posture towards Russia is marked with distrust, non-cooperation and arrogance. As for the second variable, *image of self*, for all the 16 times that he talked about US, he declares himself and Russia as cooperative and conciliatory. Putin portrays Russia as the friendlier of the two actors in US-Russia relations and acts in a hostile or unfriendly manner only when provoked or in retaliation. That is what Putin's own references to US-Russia issues revealed during this study.

It is equally important to substantiate these statistical figures by a thematic discussion. More than once, he has talked about US hegemonic ambitions and disregard for international law and the UN Charter. On one occasion, he is quoted as saying that:

We all know that after the end of the Cold War, the world was left with one centre of dominance, and those who found themselves at the top of the pyramid were tempted to think that since they are so powerful and exceptional, they know best what needs to be done and thus, they don't need to reckon with the UN, which, instead of rubber-stamping decisions they need, often stands in their way.³⁶

He explains US antagonism by mentioning, in almost all instances where he was asked about confrontation with the US, its ambitions to develop Anti-Ballistic Missile System (ABMS) and their decision to abandon the ABM treaty. On many instances, he lashed back at the inquirer for suggesting Russia as the aggressor:

Now, US bases are scattered around the globe – and you're telling me Russia is behaving aggressively? Do you have

³⁶ Vladimir Putin (speech, 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 28, 2015), President of Russia Website, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.

any common sense at all? What are US armed forces doing in Europe, also with tactical nuclear weapons? What are they doing there?³⁷

He is also seen to be repeatedly accusing the US for meddling in Russia's domestic affairs and its sphere of influence. On countless occasions, he lambasts the US for its 'impunity, arrogance and exceptionalism.' Putin demonstrates that his fears regarding the US hostility towards Russia were confirmed when the US President declared 'Russian aggression in Europe' amongst the three threats that the world faces. On the other hand, he is largely seen as portraying his country's position and actions as reactionary. On most of occasions, he talks about a conciliatory and accommodative stance where Russia is willing to work with its Western partner towards bringing more peace and stability in the world. He repeatedly mentions that Russia has no interest in becoming a super power and is only striving to protect its vital interests. Aggression and confrontation in Ukraine, Syria and Georgia are all deemed reactionary policies on Russia's part. So his overall stance stipulates that Russia is willing to cooperate with the US only in that instance if its national and security interests are respected.

Ukraine

Out of the 15 times that he mentioned Ukraine, in 12 instances he views the Ukrainian authorities and their aiders as hostile and non-cooperative and only twice does he talk about them being cooperative. This clearly shows that his *political universe* regarding Ukraine is hostile. As for the *image of self*, he views Russia's position to be conciliatory on 13 occasions and only declares Russian stance as hostile twice. In totality, once again his self-image and that of the Federation comes out as more cooperative than hostile.

With regards to Ukraine, he largely sees his government's actions as reactionary and as responses made in self-defence. On most occasions, he is seen as declaring the annexation of Crimea, the will of the people. He adheres that the entire process of the referendum was peaceful and in line with international law - the right of self-determination prevailed. On only two occasions is he seen as losing his calm and declaring it to be a

³⁷ President of Russia Website, "News Conference of Vladimir Putin," December 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47250>.

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reactionary hostile action on Russia's part to protect its wider interests threatened by foreign hands in Ukraine. For most part, he aims his displeasure at 'foreign hands' instigating Kiev authorities. He usually addresses the people of Ukraine as brothers of Russia who are tricked and fooled by their leaders and those who are instigating them.

NATO

In all six times Putin mentions NATO in his speeches, he views its actions towards Russia as antagonistic and hostile. In the same breath, he displays Russia as the protagonist. NATO's expansion towards the East and its inclusion of Eastern European states is portrayed as the biggest sin committed by NATO and is the major reason why Putin views it as hostile. In his view, 'Sooner or later, this logic of confrontation was bound to spark off a major geopolitical crisis.' He asserts that the end of the Cold War brought arrogance in the West:

They decided they were the winners, they were an empire, while all the others were their vassals, and they needed to put the squeeze on them. This is the problem. They never stopped building walls, despite all our attempts at working together without any dividing lines in Europe and the world at large.³⁸

Germany

Out of the four times Germany was mentioned in his speech, all four times he views German actions towards Russia as cooperative. With all his disagreements with NATO and EU, Putin is seen to place Germany in the friendly domain. In all instances, he characterises Germany as a state which has disagreements with Russia but is sincerely willing to work towards removing the contentions that exist between both states, whether those are with reference to Ukraine or with reference to economic relations. He specifically views German Chancellor Angela Merkel in favourable light and views her as a beacon of hope for good German-Russian relations. During one instance, he is quoted as saying:

³⁸ Ibid.

I am certain that she is a very sincere person. There is a framework within which she has to work but I have no doubt that she is sincere in her efforts to find solutions, including to the situation in southeast Ukraine.³⁹

As for the image of self, he paints Russia's efforts with regards to Germany as cooperative. He is repeatedly seen as welcoming cooperation on issues of mutual economic concern as well as finding solutions to the Ukrainian crisis.

Turkey

Out of the nine times that Putin mentions Turkey, four times he declares Turkish actions as hostile and five times as cooperative. His view regarding Turkey's position on Russia is massively affected by the pre-and post-Syrian crisis. Turkey is viewed as cooperative and friendly before both countries' involvement in the Syrian crisis. In his words:

Due to the common efforts we took in recent years, our relations have been developing constructively on the basis of mutual confidence, good neighbourliness, equality and mutual respect of interests. Due to such intensive multidimensional ties, Turkish–Russian relations remain stable, not depending on the current situation and maintaining continuity.⁴⁰

However, deeper involvement of the two in the Syrian war culminated in the downing of a Russian plane on November 24, 2015 by Turkey that became the game changer in their relations. Putin viewed this Turkish act as not only 'unfriendly but a hostile act.'⁴¹

The image of self with respect to Turkey is also divided along these two lines. Out of nine times, six times he declares his own position as cooperative and three times he openly shows his hostility towards Turkey. All six times he refers to Russia's conciliatory position towards Turkey before the plane incident. Open hostility was exhibited after the incident took place by publicly giving out statements that condemned the act in

³⁹ Vladimir Putin, Interview to the German Newspaper Bild., Part 1, *President of Russia Website*, January 11, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51154>.

⁴⁰ Vladimir Putin, Interview to Anadolu Agency, *President of Russia Website*, November 28, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47104>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

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harsh words. Putin responded by calling Turkey's actions a 'stab in [Russia's] back,' and blamed the country for enabling ISIS's 'barbarous, heinous ways' by allowing it to sell oil on Turkish territory. Most ominously, he threatened 'serious consequences' for relations between Russia and Turkey, a NATO ally. Russia also displayed its hostility by levying economic sanctions on Turkey.⁴² He was repeatedly seen as saying that Russia would do everything and anything in its power to defend itself and also supported the sanctions as a befitting response to Turkish hostility.⁴³

If all the five actors are taken in totality, it is seen that beneath Putin's policies and actions towards them lie a worldview that is dominated by nationalistic values. He has an image of Russia wherein the country has the same pomp and power as an epicentre of the global political arena like it did during the Soviet era. In his words, 'anyone who does not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union has no heart and anyone who wants to see it in its former shape has no brain.'⁴⁴ When it comes to Russia and its interests, he is seen to be uncompromising. George W. Bush Jr. said during the Slovenia Summit in 2001:

I was able to get a sense of his soul: a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country.⁴⁵

This is in line with his view that Russia is a great power and must not be disrespected, ignored or taken for granted. Implicit in his words is the idea that Russia should not bow down on its values and principle stances and should not be subjected to bullying or threats. Putin's sense of nationalism and patriotism is explained by Steven Myers, which he explains in the impact which the fall of Soviet Union had on Putin, who at that time was a KGB agent stationed in East Germany helplessly

⁴² Kareem Shaheen, Shaun Walker, Julian Borger, and David Smith, "Putin Condemns Turkey after Russian Warplane Downed Near Syria Border," *Guardian*, November 24, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/24/turkey-shoots-down-jet-near-border-with-syria>.

⁴³ Putin, Interview to Anadolu Agency. These sanctions affected Turkish tourism, construction firms and food exports. Russia banned the import of Turkish fruit and vegetables, poultry and salt, banned charter holidays for Russians to Turkey and the construction projects with Turkish firms in Russia unless a special exemption was granted.

⁴⁴ Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*, 208.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

witnessing the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁴⁶ According to Myers, the experience of this watershed moment and blow to the integrity of the state remained wedged in his mind and shaped his policies and decisions after becoming the President of Russia. It convinced him that Russians needed a strong leader, such as Ivan the Terrible or Stalin, rather than Mikhail Gorbachev.⁴⁷

The strong adherence to nationalist tendencies is witnessed in his stance on the Ukraine crisis. In the analysis of the authors, Putin considers it his duty to protect and defend Russia's counterparts in Ukraine, especially in Crimea. He considers them and their contributions as a symbol of Russia's heritage and legacy. He is seen to exhibit a certain sense of pride in the culture, arts, history and heritage and also shows great pride in being the President of Russia. Especially, with regards to United States, where Russian pride is seen to be most threatened, he takes up a competitive stance. He advocates cooperation with the United States in all fields but is not willing to act on their terms or in their image.⁴⁸ Putin is aiming for a place for Russia where it is in a position to seek out relations with other countries on the basis of equal footing keeping in mind national interests. Given changing global power dynamics, he does not see his country as the sole super power of the world, but wants other countries to not undermine its interests and is especially unwilling to take dictation from the United States.

Similarly, his policy towards Turkey also exhibits this very same view. He levied sanctions on Turkey and bore the brunt of breaking off mutually beneficial relations just to prove to the world that Russia must not be taken lightly. Similarly, he is willing to accept economic sanctions that were levied on Russia after its actions in Ukraine. These sanctions have

⁴⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁷ Ibid.; Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 6; David Cadier and Margot Light, eds., *Russia's Foreign Policy: Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 42; Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2005): 132-158, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2747/1060-586X.21.2.132>.

⁴⁸ Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4; Isabelle Facon, "The West and Post-Putin Russia: Does 'Russia Leave the West?'" (Paris: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008), 4, <https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/notes/web/documents/2008/200810.pdf>; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Russia Says No: Power, Status and Emotions in Foreign Policy," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47, no. 3-4 (2014): 269-279; Angela E. Stent, "Restoration and Revolution in Putin's Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no.6 (2008): 1089-1106.

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crippled Russia's economy, but Putin is unbending in his stance because doing so gives Russia an image of a power that is not willing to tolerate meddling in its sphere of influence as well as sending a message that it does not bow down to patronisation.

He is seen to hold a relatively softer image of European countries, especially the Germans. Although the confrontation in Ukraine directly impacts Russia's relations with the EU, he is still seen to be more flexible towards them. As analysed by the authors, implicit in his statements regarding Germany and EU is the idea that they are being played up by the United States and if it is not for the US led NATO expansions in the East, relations with western European states could get better. He finds the US to be the bone of contention in the larger European unity.

Therefore, to conclude Putin's overall worldview, it can be said that it generally holds a conciliatory view of Russia's actions in the post-Soviet era but deems them to be largely compromising its integrity and stature in the world. He wants Russia to be compliant of international rules and laws working towards a more peaceful, stable and just world. He is willing to work with both friends and foes but not at the expense of Russia's interests. As to his view of other states, he largely asserts that they invoke Russia into taking a confrontational stance. He is wary of the United States when it challenges Russia's power but is seen to welcome its partnership in eradicating terrorism and world threats. That is the reason he is seen as willing to work with them in instances like Syria but is seen to be challenging them when it comes to bilateral exchanges and issues like the NATO expansion and the ABM treaty. The contradictions in his policy towards the US are seen where at one point in time he offers unflagging support to the US in the War against Terrorism and at another point he blatantly adopts an antagonistic stance in his policy in Crimea, Georgia and bilateral issues. This demonstrates that Putin does not hold an inherent bias against the US or any other state for that matter.⁴⁹ For him, ensuring the

⁴⁹ Putin showed flexibility towards the US by supporting them in the WoT because it coincided with Russia's larger interest and agenda-terrorism (Russia faces the same threat in its North Caucasus region). The same Putin was seen confronting the US in the Ukrainian crisis because here the national interest (in Putin's view) lay in taking a strong stand. Putin saw NATO enlargement and the Orange Revolution as US actions that incited Russia to adopt an antagonistic stand. The fact that, in different situations, Putin is friendly and confrontational with the same actor (US) indicates that there is no inherent bias against US. Putin acts in Russia's national interest which leads to different policies in different times regarding different issues. Since this article is focused on

Federation's national interests and integrity is the primary objective when dealing with other states - the actor is irrelevant. In Myers view, Putin is a man swinging from crisis to crisis with one goal - projecting strength and raising Russia's game and stature in the world.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Russia's policies under Putin have been driven in a nationalistic direction which has made him take certain policy actions (e.g. levying sanctions on Turkey in 2015, bearing the brunt of sanctions by the West after the annexation of Crimea in 2014) that may not make sense to a pragmatic realist⁵¹, but can be understood by those who share his sense of nationalism. Despite adverse repercussions of his policies on the strategic relationship Russia has had with Turkey and Ukraine, he still enjoys popular rating at home.⁵² Internationally, his policies have successfully reasserted Russia as a great power and have helped push the world towards multipolarity. In line with his nationalistic ideology, he has been successful in carving out a relatively deserving place of Russia in the world community that has not compromised the Federation's integrity or interests.⁵³

Putin's last presidential term, it has not focused on the period where Putin had a more congenial stance (like in his earlier years) towards the US. During his current term, his relationship has remained confrontational.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 6; Cadier and Light, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations*, 42; Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power"; Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 4; Facon, "The West and Post-Putin Russia: Does 'Russia Leave the West?'" 4; Larson and Shevchenko, "Russia Says No: Power, Status and Emotions in Foreign Policy"; Stent, "Restoration and Revolution in Putin's Foreign Policy."

⁵¹ Russia stands to economically lose as a consequence of these actions, but Putin persisted on these courses of action because for him Russia's integrity, pride and security are more important interests to be secured.

⁵² Philip Bump, "The Lesson of Vladimir Putin's Popularity isn't the one Donald Trump Seems to be Taking," *Washington Post*, September 8, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/09/08/the-lesson-of-vladimir-putins-popularity-isnt-the-one-donald-trump-seems-to-be-taking/?utm_term=.6c23f8e60286. 'Russian President Vladimir Putin is very popular in Russia. Polling from the Levada Center puts him at an 82 per cent approval rating as of last month. He hasn't been beneath 60 per cent since he rose to national attention in 1999.'

⁵³ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 6; Cadier and Light, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations*, 42; Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power"; Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 4; Facon, "The West and Post-Putin Russia: Does 'Russia Leave the West?'" 4; Larson and

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The Russian President's impact on the international front is most evident in his policies in Ukraine and Syria. In the latter, he became the game changer by filling the vacuum left open by the US that shouted to the world that Russia is no longer a regional power. The September 2015 military intervention by Russia on behalf of the Assad regime has made it a central military actor in Syria's war. America is only acting through a coalition and not getting involved unilaterally. This gives Russia a freer hand in the Syrian crisis and how it is shaped.

In the former case, Putin successfully sent a message to the world that Russia is a force to be reckoned with and does not bend to bullying. Putin's policy in Crimea marks the beginning of a multipolar world.⁵⁴ Forbes nominated him as the world's most powerful leader⁵⁵ and can easily serve as an apt example of a leader who has effectively impacted and shaped international politics.

Shevchenko, "Russia Says No: Power, Status and Emotions in Foreign Policy," 269-279; Stent, "Restoration and Revolution in Putin's Foreign Policy"; Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of the Russian Foreign Policy*.

⁵⁴ Alec Luhn, "15 Years of Vladimir Putin: 15 Ways He has Changed Russia and the World," *Guardian*, May 6, 2015; Kristina Spohr and David Reynolds, "Putin's Revenge," *New Statesman*, January 16, 2017; Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (2016): 30-37.

⁵⁵ David M. Ewalt, "The World's Most Powerful People 2016," *Forbes*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidewalt/2016/12/14/the-worlds-most-powerful-people-2016/?ss=powerful-people#1344d9cc1b4c>.

Annexure 1

List of Putin's Speeches, Addresses and Interviews

	Titles	Dates	Links
1	Interview to German newspaper Bild part1	January 11, 2016	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51154
2	Interview to German Newspaper Bild part 2	January 12, 2016	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51155
3	Vladimir Putin's Address following adoption of a Joint Statement by Russia and US on Syria	February 22, 2016	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51376
4	Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference	December 17, 2015	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50971
5	Press Conference on Paris Climate Change Meeting	November 30, 2015	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/trips/50859
6	Answers to Journalists Questions Following the Crash of a Russian Military Plane in Syria	November 25, 2015	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50777
7	70 th session of the UN General Assembly	September 28, 2015	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385
8	News Conference of Vladimir Putin	December 18, 2014	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47250
9	Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly	December 3, 2015	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50864
10	Statement by President of Russia	July 21, 2014	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46262
11	Interview to American Channel CBS and PBS	September 29, 2015	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50380
12	Interview with VGTRK	February 23, 2015	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47730
13	Interview to Anadolu Agency	November 28, 2014	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47104
14	Interview to TASS News Agency	November 24, 2014	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47054

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15	Interview to German TV Channel ARD	November 17, 2014	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47029
16	Interview to Politika Newspaper	October 15, 2014	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46806
17	Vladimir Putin's interview with Radio Europe 1 and TFI TV Channel	June 4, 2014	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/45832
18	Interview to Channel One and Associated Press News Agency	September 4, 2013	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19143
19	Interview to the German ARD	April 5, 2013	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17808
20	Interview to Russia Today TV Channel	September 6, 2012	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16393
21	Conference of Russian Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives	July 1, 2014	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46131
22	Address by President of the Russian Federation	March 18, 2014	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603
23	Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly	December 4, 2014	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173
24	Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly	December 12, 2013	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825
25	Interview to Interfax and Anadolu News Agencies	November 13, 2015	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50682

Source: Authors' own compilation. ■