Russia’s Foreign Policy Over the Past Three Decades: Change and Continuity

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Abstract: From 1991 to 2021, Russia’s foreign policy has evolved through six stages: Pro-Western Diplomacy (1991–1995), Multipolar Diplomacy (1996–2000), Great Power Pragmatism (2001–2004), Neo-Slavism (2005–2008), Stability and Cooperation Diplomacy (2009–2013), and Great Power Diplomacy (2014–present). A combination of factors including changes in Russia’s domestic political and economic development, the vagaries of the international landscape as well as the diplomatic philosophy of Russian leaders has resulted in the changes of Russian foreign policy. Three diplomatic theories, i.e., Westernism, Eurasianism, and Slavism, have also had a significant impact on Russian foreign policy decisions. Over the past three decades, Russia’s foreign policy has been characterized by continuity in changes and its continuity is manifested in the pursuit of great power status, the emphasis on national security, the pursuit of international power, the utilization of international mechanisms, and the focus on economic diplomacy. For a long time to come, Russia will continue to pursue the Great Power Diplomacy.

Keywords: Russia, foreign policy, the West, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Sino-Russian relations

1 Introduction

Russia’s political, economic, and diplomatic transformations began in late 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Russia and other constituent republics. Over the past 30 years, Russia’s foreign policy has been occasionally adjusted in response to changes in domestic and international situations and has gradually established its own characteristics: independence, all-sidedness, and the image of a great power. Russia’s foreign policy, while safeguarding its own national interests, has had a significant impact on both global politics and regional situations. On the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is of great academic value and practical significance to explore
in depth the evolution of Russian foreign policy during the 30 years and its internal and external motivations, probe into its continuity, and analyze its impact on the international landscape.

2 The Evolution of Russia’s Foreign Policy From 1991 to 2021

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, influenced by a series of factors, including dramatic changes in the international landscape after the Cold War, the volatility of the international situation, changes in domestic political, and economic development, and the diplomatic philosophy of Russian leaders, Russia’s foreign policy has undergone a process of evolution from exploration to establishment, which can be divided into six stages, namely Pro-Western Diplomacy (1991–1995), Multipolar Diplomacy (1996–2000), Great Power Pragmatism (2001–2004), Neo-Slavism (2005–2008), Stability and Cooperation Diplomacy (2009–2013), and Great Power Diplomacy (2014–present).

From 1991 to 1995, Russia has been committed to a Pro-Western Diplomacy. The halt of the Cold War put an end to the military, political, and ideological confrontation between Russia and the West, and Moscow not only inherited Gorbachev’s Pro-Western Diplomacy, but also strove to develop closer relationship with the West.

(1) Pursuing integration into the West. Russia was keen on joining Western international organizations and was admitted into the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the G7.

(2) Seeking partnership and even alliance with the West. Russia aspired to a strategic partnership with the United States and to this end has always followed the U.S. in international affairs. It also attached great importance to developing partnerships with European countries, Germany, France, United Kingdom, and Italy in particular.

(3) Abandoning the principle of reciprocal Russian-U.S. reductions in nuclear arms control and signing the Treaty on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (the START II Treaty) with the U.S. in January 1993. Under the Treaty, Russia had to destroy all of its SS-18 multi-warhead intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) which the U.S. feared most, while the U.S. only had to cut half of its submarine-launched missiles. At the same time, regarding the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as a burden, Russia hoped to get rid of them and showed no interest in developing relations with Asian, African, and Latin American countries.
The main reasons for implementing the Pro-Western Diplomacy include: the ruling Russian democrats were similar to the West in ideology and diplomacy and they hoped to obtain large-scale economic aid from the West to finance Russian economic and political reforms; the U.S. and Europe supported political democracy and market economy reform in Russia in an attempt to transform it into a “normal nation-state”. However, actions taken by the West, including accelerating the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have seriously damaged Russia’s interests, leading to the end of the honeymoon phase between Russia and the West. Although the Pro-Western Diplomacy has strengthened Russia’s relations with the West, it has failed to truly integrate Russia with the West and has, to varying degrees, undermined Russia’s long-standing interests in CIS countries, Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

From 1996 to 2000, Russia has been committed to the Multipolar Diplomacy, the main goal of which was to restore Russia’s status as a great power and promote a multipolar world.

(1) Opposing NATO’s eastward expansion and seeking to minimize its adverse effects. In May 1997, Russia and NATO signed the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security, which specified NATO’s commitment to a number of Russian concerns (Liu, 2012).

(2) Objecting to NATO’s use of military force against other countries. Russia expressed strong opposition to NATO’s brazen air strikes against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in March 1999 and contributed to the political settlement of the Kosovo War under the UN framework through diplomatic mediation.

(3) Opposing the establishment of a national missile defense system by the U.S. After the passage of the National Missile Defense Act by the U.S. Congress in March 1999, Russia advocated upholding the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty) (Cerniello, 1999).

(4) Promoting the establishment of the CIS Free Trade Area, building a regional collective security system and leading the establishment of a customs union (later reorganized as the Eurasian Economic Community) and the Russia-Belarus Community (later upgraded to the Russia-Belarus Union State).

(5) Establishing a strategic partnership with China in 1996 and with India in 2000 to counterbalance the U.S.

The main reasons for implementing the Multipolar Diplomacy include: NATO’s eastward expansion posed a direct threat to Russia’s security; the U.S. attempted to create a unipolar world of hegemony and forced Russia to accept this international system (Примаков, 1996); the West was wary of Russia for its “imperial ambitions”; the rise of Russian nationalist sentiment, etc. The Multipolar Diplomacy, to a certain extent, demonstrated Russia’s status as a great power and made Russian
diplomacy more comprehensive. However, this policy failed because Russia was not strong enough to change the world order (Совет по внешней и оборонной политике, 2000).

From 2001 to 2004, Russia was committed to the foreign policy of Great Power Pragmatism, the core of which was to create a favorable external environment for its economic and social development and to restore its great power status. The September 11 attacks provided an opportunity for the Putin government to end the cold relations with the West since the Kosovo War and to pursue the foreign policy of Great Power Pragmatism.

1. Forming a counter-terrorism partnership with the U.S. and cooperating with it in the fields of counter-terrorism, nuclear disarmament, economics and trade, while maintaining opposition on issues such as NATO’s eastward expansion and anti-missile defense. By allowing U.S. troops to be stationed in Central Asia and providing counter-terrorism intelligence, Russia played a major role in helping the U.S. win the war against terrorism in Afghanistan.

2. Strengthening cooperation with NATO. In May 2002, the two sides announced the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council, which transformed the dialog between the two from a “19 to 1” to a “20-nation” approach.

3. Enhancing relations with the European Union and its key member states. In May 2003, the Russia-European Union (EU) St. Petersburg Summit set long-term goals for creating four common spaces in economics, domestic security and justice, external security, and science, education, and culture. Nevertheless, the two were still divided on issues including Russian democracy, the Chechnya situation and the EU’s New Neighborhood Policy.

4. Focusing on the Collective Security Treaty and the Eurasian Economic Community and developing bilateral relations with CIS countries while continuing to advance multilateral cooperation in the CIS. In May 2002, Russia, together with partner countries, formed the Collective Security Treaty Organization based on the Treaty.

5. Developing economic cooperation with Asia-Pacific countries, downplaying its attempts to counter U.S. and shifting the focus of Sino-Russian strategic cooperation to the bilateral level and to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The main reasons for the Putin administration to implement the Great Power Pragmatism foreign policy include: Russia’s urgent need to solve its domestic political and economic problems; prevention of the U.S. policy of containing Russia after the 911 incident, when the U.S. made counter-terrorism the priority of its foreign policy; Putin’s belief that the most important national interests were Russia’s modernization and its economic growth instead of the containment of the U.S. (Цыганков, 2008).
From 2005 to 2008, Russia was committed to the foreign policy of Neo-Slavism. Responding to U.S. and European interference in Russia’s internal affairs as well as “color revolutions” in the CIS region, President Putin embarked on a democratic path suited to Russian conditions domestically and diplomatically pursued a policy of cooperating with the U.S. but firmly countering it in areas of core interests to Russia (Liu, 2012).

(1) Cooperating with the U.S. while countering U.S. repression in areas of core interests to Russia. Russia opposed the U.S. deployment of a national missile defense system and its plans to deploy an anti-missile system in Eastern Europe (Putin, 2008) and objected that Ukraine and Georgia were included by the U.S. in NATO’s eastward expansion. Meanwhile, the Putin government continued to cooperate with the U.S. on counter-terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, and economics and trade.

(2) Developing cooperation with the EU in multiple fields. The two sides continued to carry out political dialogs and economic, trade and energy cooperation. Due to contradictions over Putin’s political reforms to strengthen centralization, the “color revolutions” and the EU’s New Neighborhood Policy, Russian-European political relations remained stagnant with no progress made in the program of creating four common spaces. After the expiration of the Russia-EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in December 2007, the two sides failed to agree on a new relationship agreement.

(3) Continuing to develop the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Community and strengthen bilateral relations with CIS countries. Russia actively helped CIS countries resist “color revolutions”.

(4) Strengthening diplomatic ties with Asia-Pacific countries to counterbalance the U.S. and improving strategic collaboration with China, India, and other countries.

The main reasons for the Putin government to implement the foreign policy of Neo-Slavism include: the “color revolutions” launched by the West in the CIS region directly threatened Russia’s political stability and geopolitical interests; the U.S. military security policy posed a threat to Moscow; Putin believed that Russia must autonomously determine its process of democratic development in the light of its history, geopolitics, and national conditions (Путин, 2005), etc. This policy safeguarded Russia’s national security, maintained its long-standing influence in the CIS region and, to some extent, consolidated its great power status, but meanwhile complicated its relations with the West.

From 2009 to 2013, Russia was committed to the Stability and Cooperation Diplomacy, the main goals of which include: maintaining Russia’s great power status and Russian-American strategic stability; keeping stable relations with the
West; safeguarding stability in the CIS region and domestic socio-political sta-
bility; advancing the foreign policy of cooperation and avoiding conflicts with
other countries (Liu, 2012).

(1) Further advancing the integration of the CIS to maintain stability in the region.
In August 2008, Russia’s armed intervention in Georgia’s armed reunification
of South Ossetia led to a feud between the two. To promote economic inte-
gration within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Community, Russia
established a customs union and a unified economic space with Belarus and
Kazakhstan in 2010 and 2012 respectively. Through anti-crisis cooperation,
Russia got 11 CIS countries, except Georgia, to sign a free trade area treaty in
October 2011 (Совет глав правительств СНГ, 2011). Besides, Russia also
developed military security integration under the framework of the Collective
Security Treaty Organization.

(2) Maintaining practical partnership and cooperation with the EU. The armed
conflict between Russia and George had a serious impact on Russian-EU
relations and it was only after the global financial crisis that the EU resumed its
partnership with Russia. In response to the shocks brought about by the global
financial crisis, Russia and the EU have developed practical cooperation on
trade, economics and energy, but the two failed to implement the program of
creating four common spaces and to sign a treaty on strategic partnership.

(3) Resetting Russian-U.S. relations. In July 2009, President Obama visited Mos-
cow, marking the reset of Russian-U.S. relations. The results of the reset are
shown mainly in three aspects: the signing of the START III Treaty in April
2010, which maintains cooperation on nuclear disarmament between Russia
and the U.S.; the continuing cooperation between the two countries on nuclear
non-proliferation; the expansion of economic and trade ties. But at the same
time, the two countries are at odds over the European ABM system, U.S.
interference in Russia’s internal affairs and Ukraine’s involvement in EU
integration.

(4) Deepening all-round strategic coordination with China, and in 2011, together
with China, upgrading the Sino-Russian strategic partnership of coordination
to a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination.

The reasons for implementing the Stability and Cooperation Diplomacy include:
the modernization of Russia required a cooperative foreign policy; Russia recog-
nized that the gradual improvement of its international status in the current
international system was in its interests; It was necessary for Russia to carry out
economic cooperation with other countries around the world against the backdrop
of economic globalization and the global financial and economic crisis.
Since 2014, Russia has been committed to a Great Power Diplomacy (Liu, 2019), which was prompted by the Ukraine Crisis in February 2014 and the consequent confrontation between Moscow and the West.

(1) Confronting the West and maintaining cooperation only in extremely limited areas such as nuclear disarmament. From March 2014, the United States and the European Union imposed economic sanctions on Russia and then extended them to Russian banks and energy and military companies, while in August, Russia imposed counter-sanctions on the U.S. and Europe and the "sanctions war" between the two sides has been prolonged. Both the U.S. and NATO have increased their troop deployment on the Eastern European front to contain Russia, and as a result, the two sides were locked in a military-political confrontation. Meanwhile, the anti-missile competition between Russia and the U.S. has intensified and a land-based short and intermediate-range missile race kicked off in August 2019, with the two countries maintaining only nuclear disarmament cooperation.

(2) "Turning east", that is, developing political and economic cooperation with Asia-Pacific countries and integrating into the Asia-Pacific region. Russia has been actively deepening its cooperation with China in various fields and in 2019 the two countries upgraded their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era. Russia has strengthened its preferential strategic partnership with India, its comprehensive strategic partnership with Vietnam and its strategic partnership with ASEAN, while only Russian-Japanese relationship has been progressing slowly. Since 2016, Russia has been dedicated to building the "Greater Eurasian Partnership" with the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and ASEAN member states (Путин, 2016b).

(3) Maintaining Moscow’s dominant role in the CIS region. The Putin government led partner countries to establish the Eurasian Economic Union in January 2015 to promote economic integration within the framework of the Union. It has also been developing political, economic, and anti-epidemic cooperation with CIS countries to resist U.S. and European expansion in the region.

(4) Returning to the Middle East. The Putin government’s military involvement in Syria in September 2015 consolidated Russia’s dominance in Syria and expanded its influence in the Middle East.

The main reasons for the Putin administration to implement the Great Power Diplomacy include: the West’s attempts to pull Ukraine into its geostrategic orbit, which crossed Moscow’s red line; the intensification of geopolitical and military competition between Russia and the West; the deep-rooted Russian great power mentality. As a result of this foreign policy, Russia has annexed Crimea and
strengthened its relations with Asia-Pacific countries, but the loss of Ukraine has slowed down its modernization (Liu, 2019).

3 The Rotation of Russian Diplomatic Theory

In the Russian history of national development and foreign exchanges, diplomatic theories including Westernism, Eurasianism, and Slavism have been formed successively. And in the three decades of contemporary diplomacy, these theories, while self-evolving and competing with other schools of theories, have had a profound impact on Russian foreign policy making at different times.

Westernism (западничество) advocates following a Western (European) path of development and integrating with the Western world. After Peter the Great carried out Westernization, this school of thought has spread all over Russia and the Soviet Union, and its influence has once reached the peak at the early stage after new Russia’s independence. The Westernizers believe that: Russia has historically been a part of Western civilization, the connection of which was only broken off by Bolshevism and the Soviet system, so now an independent Russia should return to Western civilization; the long-standing confrontation between the Soviet Union and the West has brought disastrous consequences, thus Russia must return to the “big family of civilized nations” to put an end to such confrontation forever; there is no need for Russia to seek a “special Russian path” again, but an open market economy system should be established and a truly democratic society should be formed. In terms of foreign policy, the Westernizers see Western Europe and the United States as their main political and ideological allies and sources of economic aid and advocate that Russia should make a Western-oriented economic policy and seek to join the community of Western market economies. The main task of Russia’s international strategy is to establish a partnership with the West and join its economic, political, and military mechanisms—EU, NATO, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the Group of Seven (G7), etc. (Цыганков & Цыганков, 2005). And the Westernizers hold the view that the other former constituent republics of the Soviet Union are both an economic burden (Торкунов, 1999) and an obstruction that prevents Russia from returning to the Western civilization as soon as possible (MacFarlane, 1993), and should be got rid of. During the period from 1991 to 1995, the Westernizers has played a leading role in Russia’s foreign policy making and the then Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev was one of their representatives. Just as mentioned earlier, the Westernizers chose to base diplomacy on ideologies, which in fact neglected Russia’s national interests, while the U.S. and Europe made their
policy decisions based on realism and took advantage of Russia’s weakness to seize Central and Eastern Europe to the detriment of Russia’s international interests and status, finally leading to the end of Russia’s pro-Western policy and the decline of Westernism.

Eurasianism (евразийство) advocated the re-establishment of a Eurasian Empire in Russia and uniting Asian countries to fight against the Unipolar hegemony of the United States. This theory arose among the Russian intellectuals in exile in Europe after the October Revolution, reflecting their thinking and exploration of Russia’s development path. Its basic ideas included: Russia was neither a European nor an Asian country, but a Eurasian one with its own special ethnic, cultural, and socio-historical characteristics and thus a unique Eurasianist development path should be followed; Eurocentrism was denied and the “Tatar roots” of the Russian national concept, i.e., the strong Asian elements that made up Russian uniqueness were acknowledged; Russia should serve as a bridge between Eastern and Western civilizations (Liu, 2012). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eurasianism reemerged in Russia. The basic idea of the Neo-Eurasianists is that Russia is a continental power whose mission is to oppose maritime (Atlanticism) civilization and its leader, the United States, rebuild the “Greater Eurasian Empire” and create an equal Slavic-Turkic alliance and an Orthodox-Muslim alliance (Колосов, 2000). The Neo-Eurasianists diplomatic ideologies can be summarized as follows: Russia’s main mission is to maintain stability across the whole Eurasian continent, including restoring a unified military-political and economic space of the Soviet Union; opposing Russia’s Pro-Western Diplomacy, advocating that Russia gives priority to cooperating with the Third World countries and taking Russia’s military cooperation with India and China as an important basis for a new Eurasian security system; implementing a policy of differentiation between the United States and Europe: treating the U.S. as the main geopolitical opponent and opposing its policy of containing Russia; improving relations with the EU and eventually integrating into the European economic and political system step by step (Цыганков & Цыганков, 2005). The then Foreign Minister Primakov was an exponent of Eurasianism and the Multipolar Diplomacy implemented from 1996 to 2000 was based on this theory. Later, as Russia improved its relations with the West, the political influence of this theory has waned, but in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, Eurasianism has flourished again.

Slavism (славянофильство) proposes that Russia should revive an empire with the three East Slavic Countries of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus at its core and act as a balancer between the Eastern and the Western civilizations. The Slavophiles appeared in the 1840s during the great controversy with the Westernizers over the path of Russian development. Their basic ideas could be summarized as
follows: Russia should follow the unique path of development of ancient Rus’, which is based on the rural communes and Orthodoxy; the Russian monarchy should live in harmony with the people and it could also free Russian society from political struggle; the Russian nation has a “salvation” mission that Russia should not only take its own path of social and political development, but would also bring the gospel of harmony and rescue to the discordant and dying West (Riasanovsky & Steinberg, 2007). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Slavism was back again, actively contributing to the construction of the Russian nation. The main ideas of the Neo-Slavophile include: Russia should keep and promote its cultural traditions and historical characteristics and oppose the “total Westernization”; it should become a strong power and maintain the balance of power between the East and the West; it should establish a unified state or an alliance of states that includes Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as well as the northern Kazakhstan where ethnic Russians live (Li & Zheng, 1998). The Neo-Slavophiles propose that Russia establish a strong centralized power and they publicly advocate the revival of the Russian Empire. They oppose Russia’s western-oriented foreign policy and advocate that Russia should take its southern and eastern neighbors as the diplomatic priority (Цыганков & Цыганков, 2005). The Neo-Slavophiles include politicians from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, as well as some Russian nationalists. From 2005 to 2008, Neo-Slavism was implemented as Russia’s foreign policy. At that time, Russia strongly defended the independence and legitimacy of its development path, protected its sovereignty and prevented or resisted the “color revolutions” at home and in the CIS region. From then on, Russia has been increasingly determined to follow its own path of development.

The three theories above are not only Russian diplomatic thoughts, but also explorations of the country’s path of development. The Eurasianist and Slavophile are similar in many respects (both opposing the Westernizer), but they also have great differences on issues such as the unique “Russian path” and the priorities of Russian diplomacy. In terms of their influence on Russian foreign policy making, all the three theories have only dominated decision-making at a certain time or another, but in the long run they have contributed rational elements of their own theories to the formation of an increasingly mature Russian foreign policy.

4 The Continuity of Russian Diplomatic Policy

Over the past three decades, although Russian foreign policy has been constantly evolving in response to changes in domestic and international situations, a number of foreign policy guidelines, concepts, and strategic consensus have
gradually emerged and been inherited by subsequent Russian governments in the course of long-standing debates among Russian diplomatic decision-makers, government agencies, political parties, academia, large enterprises and the public, and in the continuous evaluation and adjustment of the previous governments’ foreign policy. These foreign policy consensuses mainly include:

Firstly, Russia has always adhered to the great power mentality and has strived to maintain its great power status. Russia believes that it is a big power or a great power and that its international status as a great power should be respected. And President Yeltsin has declared that Russia is a great power and Russian foreign policy should always meet this high standard in his 1994 Address of the President of the Russian Federation to the Federal Assembly. During the reign of Yeltsin, Moscow has taken many measures to maintain its status as a great power, first by integrating into the family of Western civilization and then, in the opposite way, by adopting the Multipolar Diplomacy against the unipolar hegemony of the U.S. Although neither of them succeeded, they still demonstrated to the world Russia’s determination to pursue its great power status, which has had a great impact on some international situations. Since 2000, all editions of *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* have set the maintenance of Russia’s status as a great power and one of the world power centers as the fundamental goal. After the Ukraine crisis, the Putin government, in its tenacious confrontation with the West, has insisted on “consolidating Russia’s status as a world leader” (Путин, 2015). Russia’s great power consciousness and great power diplomacy goals mainly include: keeping its status as one of the multipoles in the contemporary world and building a fair and democratic international system based on the principle of collective decision-making; promoting the formation of a just and rational global economic, trade, and financial system; safeguarding international strategic stability; maintaining its influence on world affairs, etc. And Putin has also implemented the “Greater Eurasian Partnership” initiative, hoping to build a new model of Eurasian-Asian regional integration. The proposal and implementation of this initiative show that even in the situation of confrontation with the West, Russia still wants to create a new regional mechanism, both to compete with the international order dominated by the West and to hedge against China’s Belt and Road Initiative in order to maintain its own status as a great power (Liu, 2019).

Secondly, Russia attaches great importance to its national security. For Russia, national security is more important than anything else and security goals take precedence over any other goals. And its national security includes securities in political, economic, social, military, diplomatic, ecological, and cyber aspects. Russia has long regarded maintaining the territorial integrity and security, sustaining the Russian-American military balance, and retaining Russia’s military and political superiority in the Eurasian region as the primary objectives of its
foreign military and political security. Over the past three decades, in order to keep the military balance with the United States, especially the strategic stability, Russia has invested a large number of economic, diplomatic, military, and technological resources and has conducted long-lasting and difficult negotiation, competition, and cooperation with the U.S. Although Russia and the United States extended the START III Treaty in February 2021, allowing for the continuation of cooperation on nuclear disarmament, conflicts over ABM, INF and other strategic weapons remain unresolved. So, in the future, Russia will strive to solve the above conflicts with the U.S. and then sign the START IV, and at the same time be ready to engage in a strategic arms race with the U.S. Moscow will continue to resolutely resist NATO’s attempts to expand into Eurasian countries such as Ukraine and Georgia and prevent the U.S. and its allies from turning the Eurasian region into a frontier to contain Russia or creating chaos in the region to interfere with its domestic development.

Thirdly, Russia pursues international power. As one of the key elements of the foreign policy of successive Russian governments, the objectives of “power” include: safeguarding its sphere of influence in the CIS region and its “special interests”; consolidating Russia’s influence on international issues such as Syria, the nuclear program of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Iran’s nuclear program; maintaining the Russian-U.S. strategic balance and stability, etc. Russia usually uses political, economic, and diplomatic means to realize these “power” objectives. However, when political and diplomatic means fail to work, Russia does not rule out the option of resorting to force. And nowadays Russia has become more and more inclined to use or threaten to use force since the Russian-Georgian War. After the crisis in Ukraine, the Putin government’s means of safeguarding rights became hardened: it did not give up the threat of using force against Ukraine and terrorists in Syria and it was not afraid to engage in economic and military-political confrontations with the U.S. and Europe. In 2021, Russia stationed 100,000 troops on the Russian side of the Russian-Ukrainian border to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and to stop NATO deploying offensive weapons in Ukraine, as well as to deter NATO’s military build-up in Ukraine and other countries near the Russian border.

Fourthly, Russia seeks to maintain and shape international mechanisms in its own favor. Whether as a declining power in the 1990s, as a rising power in the first decade of the 21st century, or as a realistic power since the Ukraine crisis, Russia has focused on relying on the established international mechanisms to shape a new one to safeguard its rights and interests. Russia advocates reinforcing United Nations’ influence as a center to regulate international relations, opposes unilateralism and the use of force, supports multilateral diplomacy instead of bloc politics and proposes to establish a new system of regional security in Europe.
based on the principles of equal security and indivisible security rather than on the principle of bloc (NATO) security (Путин, 2016a). Russia also advocates building the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe into a Europe-wide security mechanism and opposes NATO’s domination of European security affairs. In the CIS region, Russia asserts its dominance through the establishment and development of mechanisms such as the CIS, the Collective Security Treaty/Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Community.

Fifthly, Russia attaches great importance to economic diplomacy. Russia has always stressed that diplomacy should be used to create a favorable external environment for domestic economic and social development, to safeguard its interests in international market and to promote its economic modernization, which can help lay a solid economic foundation for maintaining its great power status. In addition, Russia is adept at using its energy leverage and other economic resources to pursue geopolitical interests.

5 Conclusion

Over the past three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, influenced by domestic and international situations and other factors, Russia’s foreign policy has gone through the stages of Pro-Western Diplomacy, Multipolar Diplomacy, Great Power Pragmatism, Neo-Slavism, Stability and Cooperation Diplomacy, and Great Power Diplomacy. Russia’s foreign policy has changed in response to the situation, but continuity is seen in those changes and is manifested in its pursuit of great power status, the priority given to national security, the chase for international power, the utilization of international mechanisms, and the focus on economic diplomacy. Russia has already developed an independent foreign policy based on national interests, which has played an important role in maintaining national sovereignty and security and promoting economic and social development, and has had a significant impact on the international situation as well. Now Russia has rebuilt its relations with the outside world, but such relations are not yet mature or even stable, which is prominently reflected in Russia’s relations with the West, with the CIS and other regions or countries.

After Russia amended its Constitution in 2020, Putin can theoretically serve as president continuously until 2036. Considering the difficulties in reconciling the contradictions between Russia and the West and in resolving the Ukraine Crisis between Moscow and Kiev and many other factors, it can be assumed that for quite a long time in the future, the Putin government will continue to pursue the Great Power Diplomacy. Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility of another major international emergency similar to the 911 incident that would reverse the course of
Russia’s relations with the West, and only under such a premise can Russia fundamentally change its anti-Western and pro-Eastern foreign policy.

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