



From cooperation to confrontation: US-Russia relations since 9/11

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Abstract

Relations between the US and Russia during the George W. Bush era were marked by a dramatic shift from cooperation to confrontation. Russia's unequivocal support for the US-led War on Terror in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001 gave way to a sustained rise in anti-Western sentiment in the Russian political narrative. This article analyses US-Russia relations during the presidency of George W. Bush through the lens of great power relations and status. It explores the distinctive aspects of the Bush administration's foreign policy approach and how they impacted the US-Russia relationship: notably increasing US unilateralism and its apparent rejection of multilateralism, liberal interventionism and the pursuit of democracy promotion around the world. These continue to shape the Russian view of the US, its intentions and attitude towards international order.

Keywords Russia · United States · Great power · Unilateralism · Democracy promotion

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has resulted in a transformation in US strategy, bringing an end to the complex blend of cooperation and confrontation that had characterised relations between Moscow and Washington for the past two decades. US policy towards Russia is no longer seeking to incentivise change in Moscow's behaviour through cooperation; instead, it is explicitly focussed on degrading the capabilities of a strategic competitor. This shift in US-Russia relations has been underway for some time: a number of issues have their roots in policies initiated during the George W. Bush era when relations between the US and Russia were marked by a dramatic move from cooperation to confrontation, setting the tone for the ensuing decades. As part of a Special Issue evaluating the foreign and

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security policy legacies of the George W. Bush administration, this article traces some of the enduring issues that have contributed to the deterioration in relations between the US and Russia in the post-Cold War era, focussing on the impact of US foreign policy on Russian perceptions of great power status.

Relations between the US and Russia during the George W. Bush era were marked by a dramatic shift from cooperation to confrontation, setting the tone for the ensuing decades. Russia's unequivocal support for the US-led War on Terror in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001 gave way to a sustained rise in anti-Western sentiment in the Russian political narrative, reflected in President Vladimir Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, and war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 over the latter's desire for NATO membership. This transformation was driven to a large extent by the approach of the Bush administration to foreign and security policy, notably its increasing unilateralism, liberal interventionism and the pursuit of democracy promotion around the world, as well as active support for the enlargement of NATO into the post-Soviet space, and missile defence, all of which challenged Russian conceptions of its own status in the international system. These issues have become persistent obstacles in US-Russia relations, with cooperation the exception rather than the rule. During the early decades of the twenty-first century US-Russia interests had increasingly diverged, culminating in Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

This article analyses US-Russia relations during the presidency of George W. Bush through the lens of great power relations and status. It explores the distinctive aspects of the Bush administration's foreign policy approach and how they impacted the US-Russia relationship, notably increasing US unilateralism and its apparent rejection of multilateralism, which continues to shape the Russian view of the US, its intentions and attitude towards international order. To undertake this task, the article proceeds in three parts. The first part sets out the centrality of great power status in Russian foreign policy, emphasising the crucial role played by the perception of others. The approach of the Bush administration to foreign and security policy challenged Russia's self-identity as an indispensable great power, and also challenged its reading of international society, publicly undermining Russia's conceptions of its global role and prompting one scholar to describe Bush's leadership as catastrophic (Shakleina 2012). The second part explores the initial cooperation between the two states and why this changed. The cooperative spirit that blossomed in the aftermath of the 2001 terror attacks on the US was facilitated by the belief that Russia was on equal terms with the US: prior to 2001 Russia itself had endured attacks by Islamist terrorists for a number of years; thus, the cooperation was based on common experience and a mutual enemy, contributing to the sense that Moscow was on an equal footing with Washington. However, the 2002 US National Security Strategy (NSS) indirectly (and perhaps unintentionally) emphasised relative Russian weakness, declaring that the US possessed unprecedented and unequalled strength and influence in the world (National Security Strategy, 2002). US unilateralism demonstrated apparent indifference to powers such as Russia, signalling that US dominance ensured it was powerful enough to be able to do what it believed to be in its own national interest, regardless of the views of others. Finally, the article examines those policies that have represented continuities in the US approach, in



particular support for democracy assistance around the world and the enlargement of NATO into the post-Soviet space.

In spite of Russian fears of irrelevance stemming from the Bush administration's approach, this article argues that Moscow's position on the international stage became increasingly assertive, as it sought to challenge US hegemonic practices and counter what it perceived to be its damaging unilateralism. A lack of recognition from the US stimulated Russian assertiveness, as Moscow strove to be acknowledged as a great power and impose its own views of international society, which prioritise sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of states. Consequently, Russia became a vocal critic of Western moral interventionism. Thus, the policies of the George W. Bush administration fuelled Russian status-seeking behaviour, which persisted throughout the Obama, Trump and Biden presidencies, demonstrated by the interventions in Ukraine and Syria, and the pre-eminence of anti-Western sentiment and criticisms of US power in Russian foreign policy discourse, culminating in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Challenging status

At the heart of Russia's relationship with the US are fundamental differences over notions of power, security and international order. The Bush administration's approach challenged Russia's self-perception as a great power and underscored enduring differences in the two states' conceptualisation of what a great power is. Russia's belief in the inviolability of state sovereignty, spheres of influence in its neighbourhood and its own indispensable role in global affairs contrasted with the US emphasis on values and its unprecedented structural and material power in a unipolar system. During the 2000 presidential election campaign, Bush and his team emphasised the importance of relations with other great powers (Zaborowski 2008). Subsequently, the 2002 National Security Strategy referred to a new era of relations with great powers, stating that the US would preserve peace through the pursuit of 'good relations among great powers'. Russia was specifically referred to as one of the world's great powers (along with the US, EU, China and India). In his introduction to the 2002 NSS, President Bush stated that the 'world's great powers' found themselves on the same side, united by shared threats from terrorism and by common values, describing Russia as a partner (National Security Strategy, 2002). Thus, there was perhaps an expectation from the Russian government that it would be treated as a near-peer by the Bush administration.

It quickly became clear how superficial US commitment to this grand realignment with great powers actually was, and how far American views diverged from Russian conceptions: as the predominant power in the international system, the US wanted and expected support for its policies, even if they challenged the position of others. The US possessed unprecedented strength and influence in the world, and the actions of the Bush administration underscored the country's dominance of the international system. It also became clear that the political structure of power was important to the Bush administration, which was increasingly critical of great powers with illiberal regimes and advocated the spread of US values such as liberal



democracy. This fuelled Russian fears about the possibility of foreign interference in its internal affairs: indeed, during the first two decades of the twenty-first century the promotion of democracy came to be viewed as part of a new US-led approach to warfare, which involved the internal destabilisation of rival states through largely non-military means, using democratisation and regime change to achieve fundamental security objectives (German 2020).

Although the NSS provided no developed definition of what constituted a great power, describing them as ‘centres of global power’, the direct reference to Russia as a great power inferred it was perceived to be one. This mattered to Putin, who had been rebuilding Russia’s national identity around the notion that it *was* a great power. Having witnessed the loss of Soviet hegemony and superpower status in 1991, Putin’s long-standing objective has been to ‘establish Russia as a nation that acts in accordance with formal and informal norms of traditional great power politics and is recognised as a major state by the outside world’ (Tsygankov 2015). Speaking when he was prime minister, on the eve of the new millennium, Putin emphasised that Russia ‘was and will remain a great power’, a status that was, according to him, preconditioned by geopolitical, economic and cultural realities. Nevertheless, he warned that the country was in the midst of one of the most difficult periods of its history, and for the first time in several centuries it was ‘in danger of falling to the second or third tier of states’ (Putin 2000, p. 214).

The notion of being treated as an equal partner infused Russia’s foreign policy rhetoric under Putin’s leadership: Moscow was looking to develop its relations with a number of actors around the world as ‘equal partners’, including the US and NATO, as long as its interests were taken into account (National Security Strategy, 2015), a position that was challenged by the approach of the George W. Bush administration, and indeed subsequent US administrations. By 2021, the notion of equal partnership was no longer a Russian priority, abandoned in its revised NSS (National Security Strategy, 2021). During the 1990s and early 2000s, it was clear that Russia lacked the economic base and military capabilities seen by some scholars as fundamental to the achievement and maintenance of great power status (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2003). Nevertheless, it still *conceived of itself* as a great power and sought recognition of this from others, in particular the US. Levy (1983, p. 16) characterises a great power as a state that ‘plays a major role in international politics’ *vis-à-vis* security-related issues, emphasising their military strengths, interests, behaviour and the perception of others. This last point is vital, underscoring the fact that great power status is not reliant solely upon material capabilities, but also the perception of others.

Volgy et al, (2011) distinguish between ‘being’ a major (or great) power and ‘being attributed’ great power status by other states, making it plausible that states may continue to be attributed that status when it is no longer warranted by capabilities, or denied it even when demonstrating the capacity and willingness to act as one. Their definition of a great power is based on Levy’s conceptual approach, noting three broad characteristics: the state in question has unusual capabilities with which to pursue its interests in interstate relations; it uses those capabilities to pursue unusually broad and expansive foreign policies beyond its immediate neighbourhood or region; and seeks to influence the course of international affairs relatively



independently of other great powers (Volgy et al 2011, p. 6). According to their framework, a state is attributed great power status ‘if it is perceived by the policy-makers of other states within the international community as being unusually powerful and willing to influence the course of global affairs, and if they act towards it consistent with that perception’. States can also self-identify as great powers, which is particularly the case in those where power status is valued domestically. While Russia may not have possessed all of the capabilities of a great power in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it nevertheless conceived of itself as one and expected others to do so. Freire (2011) aptly describes Russia in this context as a ‘status overachiever’ with more status than capabilities.

Russia’s sense of *derzhavnost*, its belief that the country is destined to always be a great power (*derzhava*) based on factors such as its history and territorial size, has been a consistent feature of Russian foreign policy since the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Mankoff 2011). During the 1990s, Russian foreign policy sought to adapt to the geopolitical uncertainties prompted by this dissolution. Initially, there was optimism that Russia would continue to shape international order, despite its reduced circumstances. This optimism stemmed partly from US policies: in 1990 President George H.W. Bush had proposed the concept of a ‘new world order’, in which the international community would work together, predominantly through the United Nations (UN), to tackle international security challenges. According to the elder Bush, the concept would be based upon international law and would demonstrate a more cooperative approach to problem-solving. Speaking on 11 September, 1990, Bush hailed the apparent emergence of this ‘new world order’:

[A] new era, freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony.....
[A] world quite different from the one we’ve known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak (Bush 1990).

This focus on cooperation and multilateralism, centred around the UN and international law, was inclusive and ensured a key role for states such as Russia (as a permanent member of the UN Security Council). Although Bush’s successor, Bill Clinton, pursued policies such as the promotion of democracy around the world, he maintained a very good personal relationship with his Russian counterpart, Boris Yeltsin. The Clinton administration was deemed to favour the pursuit of international consensus on global problems, focussing on multilateralism and non-military means, where possible (Rogov 2003). It was during Clinton’s presidency that Russia joined the G7 (subsequently the G8), group of leading industrialised states, acknowledgement of its status as a major power, despite its ongoing economic issues.

Thus, the George W. Bush presidency represented the first time in the post-Cold War era that Russian foreign policy and the country’s status would be challenged by a US president. During this period, American behaviour did not legitimate Russia’s great power status aspirations; in fact, US foreign policy ultimately demonstrated indifference to Russia’s status concerns, signalling that it did *not* consider



the country to be a near-peer, a situation that has continued under subsequent US presidents (Larson and Shevchenko 2010).

Initial cooperation

Relations between George W. Bush and his Russian counterpart got off to an unpromising start. NATO's 1999 Kosovo campaign, led by the US, had brought an end to the post-Cold War optimism that had prevailed since 1991, prompting a renewed period of strategic competition (German 2019). During his 2000 election campaign, Bush had been very critical of Russia's second intervention in Chechnya that began in 1999. Questioned during a television interview on what the US could do about Chechnya, Bush suggested halting International Monetary Fund (IMF) aid and export/import loans (Goldgeier and McFaul 2003).¹ This was highly provocative on a number of counts for Moscow: emphasising Russian dependence on external (particularly Western) sources of funding, whilst involving itself in Russia's internal affairs. Condoleezza Rice, who would become Bush's national security advisor, wrote several articles during the election campaign warning that American security was threatened by Russian weakness and incoherence, and criticising Putin for using the conflict in Chechnya to bolster his political position. She also described Russia as a state that had many of the attributes of a great power, such as a large population, large territory and military potential, but was at risk of being overwhelmed by economic frailty and a national identity crisis (Rice 2000).

The future national security advisor was disparaging of the Clinton administration's personalised approach to Russia and indicated that the incoming Bush administration would take a new approach, centred on 'universal' American values such as democracy. There were also early indications that US unilateralism would become problematic, whilst the thorny issues of NATO enlargement and national missile defence were enduring points of disagreement in the bilateral relationship. Rice had indicated that the new Administration would shift from a focus on multilateralism, stating that 'multilateral agreements and institutions should not be ends in themselves' and criticising the Clinton administration for signing agreements such as the Kyoto protocol that were not in the US interest (Rice 2000). Bush confirmed in March 2001 that he would not support ratifying the 1997 Kyoto protocol on climate change. He also signalled impending US withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, saying it was important to think 'differently about missile defences, to think differently about the Cold War doctrine that is codified' in that agreement (Office of the Press Secretary 2001b). Finally, during a visit to Poland in the summer of 2001, President Bush made his support for NATO enlargement clear, stating that it was not a question of 'if' the alliance would enlarge further, but

¹ An apparently tough stance towards Russia on this issue continued once Bush took office. In March 2001, the US expelled nearly 50 Russian diplomats, accused of being spies, and the State Department held a meeting with Ilyas Akhmadov, the Chechen 'foreign minister' in exile—thereby sending a strong signal to Russia that Washington harboured some support for the Chechen cause.



‘when’. The enlargement of NATO and its deepening ties with states in the post-Soviet space—Russia’s identified zone of ‘privileged interest’—has been a persistent irritant for Moscow since the end of the Cold War, reflected in, for example, Yeltsin’s 1995 admonition that further enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic alliance would mean a ‘conflagration of war throughout Europe’ (Erlanger 1995).

Nevertheless, despite these warning signs, the early months of George W. Bush’s presidency witnessed a renewed sense of optimism in the bilateral relationship. Bush summarised the first face-to-face meeting of the two presidents held in Slovenia in June 2001 in glowing terms, describing Putin as a ‘remarkable leader’ and an ‘honest, straightforward man who loves his country’, also declaring that ‘we share a lot of values’ (Office of the Press Secretary, 2001c). This personal rapport between the two leaders came to the fore following the 9/11 terror attacks later that year, when they presented a united front in the face of a perceived common enemy: international militant Islamist terrorism. The link between the US terror attacks and Islamist terror groups bolstered Russia’s defence of its renewed military operation in Chechnya, seemingly vindicating its response.² In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Putin made reference to the conflict in the North Caucasian republic, which had been widely condemned by the international community, including the US as noted. Russia’s former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov (2004) described Chechnya as ‘the front line in our own war on terror’, stating that the US terror attacks of 11 September, 2001 should help ‘the rest of the world understand what we are up against’. President Bush acknowledged the connection between the US attacks and Russia’s experience, describing the Russian president as a ‘stalwart in the fight against terror’:

He understands the threat of terror, because he has lived through terror. He’s seen terror first-hand and he knows the threat of terrorism.....I view President Putin as an ally, [a] strong ally in the war against terror. And his actions..... speak louder than words. He has been a man of action when it comes to fighting terror, and I appreciate that very much (Office of the Press Secretary 2002).

The US president’s language implied respect and equality, depicting Putin’s Russia as a vital ally and partner of the US. Russia had immediately denounced the 9/11 attacks, pledging support for global initiatives that sought to combat terrorism. Putin was the first international leader to react publicly to the disaster, speaking to his American counterpart to discuss possible collaboration. He offered wide-ranging Russian assistance to the emerging ‘War on Terror’ including the promise of intelligence sharing and the use of Russian airspace. Most significantly, Putin did not block the establishment of American military bases in Central Asia. This constituted a significant compromise in Russian foreign policy, facilitating a US military presence in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which both lie within Russia’s traditional

² The Russian government constantly justified the military operation on the grounds that the country was defending itself against the threat from Islamist terrorism in the North Caucasus: Moscow launched its second campaign in Chechnya in October 1999 on the basis that it was a counterterrorist operation, widening the scope of the conflict to become part of Russia’s war against international terrorism.



sphere of influence. It was not just in Central Asia that Russia appeared to tolerate a US military presence: in May 2002, American military trainers arrived in Georgia as part of a \$64 m ‘Train and Equip’ programme (GTEP) to train Georgian troops in anti-terrorist techniques.³

The perception that Moscow ‘permitted’ the US to establish military bases in Central Asia, facilitated the notion that Russia was both an indispensable great power and that it had a specific sphere of influence in which it played a managerial role. The US, however, subsequently responded to these concessions with a series of policies that ignored Russian concerns and status, such as democracy promotion, intervention and unilateralism. Consequently, the post-9/11 US-Russia partnership did not last long, largely because of differing understandings of the identity and status of the parties in the relationship (Larsen and Shevchenko, 2010, p. 90).

There were voices of dissension within Russia regarding its support for the US, portents of the future direction of relations. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, laid responsibility for the attacks on American foreign policy and accused the US of seeking to dominate the world. Others said that the attacks should be a lesson for both the US and Russia, warning that such events occur when large, powerful countries interfere in the affairs of other countries and pay too little attention to domestic matters. Russian officials also cautioned against unilateral action by the US, warning that retaliatory strikes would not solve the long-term challenges posed by international terrorism (O’Loughlin et al 2004). These themes of opposition to US hegemony, unilateralism and interference in the internal affairs of other states would increasingly come to dominate the Russian political and diplomatic discourse *vis-à-vis* global affairs.

An illusory partnership?

The divergence in understanding of the status of each side, as well as indications of what would become some of the enduring tensions in the bilateral relationship, were already evident in the discourse of Russian and American officials in early 2002. Then-Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, wrote an important article in the *New York Times* in January 2002 entitled ‘Organising the World to Fight Terror’.

³ Furthermore, in 2002 Georgia signed a military cooperation agreement with the US, granting American military personnel visa-free entry, exemption from criminal prosecution and permission to carry weapons when off-duty. The US was also granted overfly rights and the unimpeded deployment of military hardware in the country. This agreement boosted tension with Russia, as it put US military personnel on a par with the diplomatic corps and was far more than was granted to Russian troops based in Georgia. Russia was also upset by at least three flights by American U2 spy planes over Georgia in March 2003. Although the planes remained within Georgian airspace, they travelled the length of its border with Russia. It should be noted that US support was not limited to Georgia—it also provided military aid to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia has been the US’s traditional ally in the Caucasus region and in the wake of 9/11 it offered the use of its airspace, intelligence sharing and other confidential support. See *The Caucasus and Caspian Region: Understanding US Interests and Policy*. Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 107th Congress, First Session, 10 October, 2001. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, p. 5.



Referencing the persistence of US-Russia relations playing a central role in global affairs, Ivanov's article gave the impression of the two powers working together, joined by 'common democratic values', to play a decisive role in the construction of a system of international security capable of countering the threats of the twenty-first century. Ivanov (2002) maintained it was commonly accepted that Russian-American relations 'have been and remain one of the main factors determining the state of world politics, especially on security issues'. The principle of equality was referenced in a section on NATO and there was strong emphasis on the central role of the UN in resolving global challenges. Both the equality of states and the centrality of the UN endure in Russian notions of its place in the international system. The belief that Russia has foreign policy interests beyond the post-Soviet space and that it should play a central role in international affairs, was underscored in Ivanov's article by the statement that both the US and Russia will have a 'significant impact' on contemporary challenges such as conflicts in the Middle East. Ivanov's article represented an authoritative statement of Russia's claims to great power status and, crucially, assumed acknowledgement of this status by the US.

Russian great power claims were boosted in May 2002 with the agreement of a strategic partnership between the US and Russia, which declared that the two states would cooperate to jointly counter global challenges (Guardian 2002). Russia was also part of a new multilateral framework, the Quartet, established to help mediate the Israel-Palestinian peace process.⁴ Nominally at least, this accorded Russia equal status with the US and signalled that its involvement was necessary to resolve enduring issues across the Middle East, thus emphasising its indispensability in this vital region. Finally, the Bush administration initiated the basis for a qualitatively new relationship between NATO and Russia, with the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002, which gave Russia a seat at the table within the alliance and extensive—though not untrammelled—consultation rights, confirming its status as a significant power.

However, Russia's status claims had been challenged barely a month after Ivanov's article was published, when the US ambassador to Moscow, Alexander Vershbow, gave a speech in St Petersburg in which he declared that the two countries were closer—in political, economic and military terms—than at any time in history. This superficially highly positive assessment of US-Russia relations was underpinned by an assumption running throughout his speech that Russia would be changing, that it would integrate into the 'family of democratic nations'. He emphasised that Russia needed to adapt in its relations with NATO and 'develop a new culture of cooperation', whilst accepting further enlargement of the alliance, and criticised its approach to the insurgency in Chechnya and media freedom (Vershbow 2002). Below the surface therefore, Vershbow's remarks resembled an implicit reprimand, rather than acknowledgement of an equal: telling Russia what to do, whilst simultaneously the US was doing what it wanted. Taken together, Ivanov's *NYT*

⁴ For further details see <http://www.quartetoffice.org/category.php?id=a374y41844Ya374>, accessed 19 May 2021.



article and Vershbow's St Petersburg address manifested very different conceptions of international society and the envisioned roles of their respective states.

The Bush doctrine: unilateralism and pre-emption

The illusion of cooperation and partnership between two great powers in the wake of the 2001 terror attacks was undermined by a series of US actions, which had a cumulative effect on trust between Moscow and Washington. It became clear that 9/11 had merely overshadowed and not derailed Bush's contentious plans, such as for national missile defence and support for NATO enlargement, and that initial optimism was only a brief interlude before relations returned to a more confrontational stance. On 13 December, 2001, Bush announced that the US intended to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, giving Russia the requisite six months' notice. Withdrawal from this treaty, the first time the US had ever withdrawn from a major international arms control pact, enabled it to proceed with construction of a missile defence system (initially with a purely national focus) and laid the groundwork for continuing tensions between Moscow and Washington. Speaking in May 2001, Bush had asserted that the ABM Treaty was not a 'cornerstone of stability', rather it was an 'adversarial legacy' of the Cold War and perpetuated a relationship based on distrust and mutual vulnerability (Office of the Press Secretary 2001a). Krauthammer (2001) hailed the Bush administration's return to the 'unabashed unilateralism of the 1980s', arguing that the US did not require Russian permission to build defensive weapons:

In the liberal internationalist view of the world, the US is merely one among many—a stronger country, yes, but one that has to adapt itself to the will and the needs of 'the international community'. That is why the Clinton Administration was almost manic in pursuit of multilateral treaties.....This is folly. America is no mere international citizen. It is the dominant power in the world.....Accordingly, America is in a position to reshape norms, alter expectations and create new realities.

The rejection of a multilateral approach in favour of unilateral action accentuated the unprecedented power of the US, as well as relative Russian weakness. Rogov (2003) argues that Washington's actions demonstrated that the US was no longer interested in the appearance of strategic parity and had embarked on a course intended to ensure absolute military superiority, with no intention of recognising any other state's 'equal strategic status'. Consequently, US plans for a national missile defence system were perceived to be a significant strategic threat to Russia. Although the initial focus of the planned system was on homeland defence, a European pillar was unveiled in 2006 with the announcement of plans to install interceptors in Poland and a radar control centre in the Czech Republic. Moscow rejected US assurances that this expansion of the missile defence system posed no threat to Russian forces, viewing the move as a deliberate attempt to consolidate its global dominance and intimidate potential challengers (Rogov 2003). The perceived American failure to acknowledge Russian concerns was considered to be further evidence



of the absence of equality in the ‘partnership’, a view underpinned by long-running concern about Russia’s technological inferiority and the gap between the two states in all fields other than strategic nuclear weapons.

A further inflection point in US-Russia relations was the publication of the US NSS in September 2002. The first consolidated foreign policy document published by the Bush administration, this delivered a positive assessment of relations with Russia, stating that the two countries were no longer adversaries and were building a new relationship based on overlapping strategic interests. However, it also emphasised Russia’s weaknesses, noting that opportunities for cooperation were limited by Russia’s ‘very weakness’, thus underscoring the asymmetrical nature of a bilateral relationship in which Russia is portrayed as the junior partner. Critically, the 2002 NSS also placed the promotion of democracy at the heart of US foreign policy and referenced encouraging change when opportunities arose, which resembled a promise of support for regime change.

This constituted a continuation of policy begun under the Clinton administration: during the 1990s the centrepiece of American foreign policy was the claim that promoting the spread of democracy would also promote global peace and security. Clinton’s 1994 NSS was the first explicit post-Cold War articulation of democracy promotion, a theme echoed and indeed reinforced in Bush’s 2002 document, which was premised on the need to promote democracy in all countries and ‘a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interest’, emphasising non-military forces of power (National Security Strategy, 2002). Thus, a central plank of US foreign policy articulated in the 2002 NSS—that of democracy promotion or the ‘democratisation of the world’ (Shakleina 2012)—became an enduring impediment in US-Russia relations. Russian observers such as Rogov (2003) and Shakleina (2012) noted that the 2002 NSS also introduced a doctrine of pre-emption, prompting fears that the overall strategy outlined within it was a means of pursuing externally sponsored regime change in order to achieve strategic objectives: encouraging the overthrow of regimes deemed unfriendly to US interests.

The invasion of Iraq in March 2003, which circumvented the UN, confirmed in Russian minds that the US was seeking to establish a norm of ‘unsanctioned military intervention’ under cover of the promotion of democratic values (Shakleina 2012, p. 43). Deep concern was expressed about externally promoted regime change and the promotion of democracy, with one observer noting that ‘they tried to impose democracy by force, deciding that it was enough to overthrow the dictator and democracy would grow by itself’ (Khranchikhin 2018). President Putin highlighted the concerns of many states in a speech on 20 March 2003:

If we allow the law of the first to replace international law, according to which the strong are always right, have the right to everything, and when choosing the means to achieve their goals, are not limited by anything, then one of the basic principles of international law will be called into question: the principle of inviolability of the sovereignty of the state. And then no one, not a single country of the world will feel safe (Gareev 2003).

As discussed above, the Russian government has consistently expressed strong support for an international society that privileges multilateralism centred on the UN



and based on the principles of international law. Russian observers asserted that the US-led military operation against Iraq signalled the demise of the UN and respect for international law. There was widespread concern about the impact of the intervention on the concept of state sovereignty, with some claiming it was now obsolete (Gareev 2003). Russian leaders consistently considered sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of states to be inviolable principles of international relations, and consistently made it clear that they would not tolerate any form of perceived challenge to Russia's own sovereignty.

Bilateral relations became even more problematic during Bush's second term, as his Administration sought to consolidate its policy of democratisation in the president's so-called 'Freedom Agenda', outlined in his 2005 Inaugural Address. The ensuing 2006 NSS reconfirmed the promotion of effective democracy as a primary pillar of the US pursuit of national security, as it 'worked to end tyranny' in the world (National Security Strategy, 2006). Public criticism of apparent democratic backsliding in Russia increased: speaking at a joint press conference with Putin at the 2005 US-Russia summit in Bratislava, Bush implicitly censured growing illiberal trends in the country, pointedly noting that democracies have 'a rule of law and protection of minorities, a free press and a viable political opposition' (Office of the Press Secretary 2005a).

Moscow's increasingly negative attitude towards the US and its foreign policy behaviour was unambiguous. In a speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin launched a stinging attack on US foreign policy and the impact of the country's dominance on international security, noting that while Russia was 'constantly being taught about democracy.....those who teach us do not want to learn themselves' (President of the Russian Federation 2007). Criticising US unilateralism and 'illegitimate' use of force, Putin called for the renewal of the central role of the UN in global affairs. Since then, criticism of the predominance of US power and anti-Western sentiment have continued to dominate Russia's foreign policy discourse. In a 2014 speech, for example, Putin censured the US for throwing the international system into 'sharp and deep imbalance' through its actions:

The very notion of 'national sovereignty' became a relative value for most countries. In essence, what was being proposed was the formula: the greater the loyalty towards the world's sole power centre, the greater this or that ruling regime's legitimacy (Putin 2014).

NATO's coercive action against Serbia in 1999 was the first of several US-led discretionary operations or 'wars of choice' that are perceived by some to have led to greater global instability and raised questions about the efficacy of using force for humanitarian purposes. The interventions in Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), as well as the lack of action over the conflict in Syria, were deemed by Moscow to be more about self-interest than international security, increasing instability and insecurity in pursuit of tenuous liberal norms and objectives. Angered by what it felt was an 'abuse of the UN mandate by the West, as a cover-up to achieve principally different goals' in Libya, Moscow took an uncompromising stance towards Western attempts to impose sanctions on Syria (Valdai Discussion Club 2012). It continued to support the Assad regime, launching air strikes in Syria in



October 2015. Its military intervention bolstered Russian claims that it is a major power with a key role to play within the international system and also drew attention to the apparent ineffectiveness of Western efforts to date.⁵ The apparent erosion of state sovereignty by Western interventionism has become a common refrain in the discourse of Russia's political elites. Over the past two decades a tension has developed between those states that take a narrower traditional view of sovereignty and those (particularly Western liberal democratic states) who support intervention and the suspension of state sovereignty when states threaten their own populations, within the framework of a perceived international 'responsibility to protect'.

Colouring Russian views of democratisation

The publication of the US NSS in late 2002 and intervention in Iraq in March 2003 were followed by a wave of popular protests across the post-Soviet space, calling for democratic change and protesting corruption: these triggered the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Russia had, as noted, opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq largely on the basis of its opposition to, and concerns about, international interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state in pursuit of regime change, and these 'colour revolutions' renewed Russian concerns about possible interference in its own internal affairs, as well as its sphere of interest, by external actors. They coincided with (and contributed to) a growing sense of insecurity within Russian political and security circles, as they took place around the same time that Russia was facing a growing number of terror attacks from Islamist insurgents, culminating in the Beslan school siege in September 2004. A sense of vulnerability and insecurity was evident in Putin's statement in the wake of the Beslan school attack in 2004:

We stopped paying the required attention to defence and security issues.... We need to admit that we did not fully understand the complexity and the dangers of the processes at work in our own country and in the world... We showed ourselves to be weak. And the weak get beaten. (President of the Russian Federation 2004)

A number of Russian analysts and politicians interpreted the colour revolutions to be part of a deliberate policy fostered by the US to undermine a country from within in order to install a regime sympathetic to American interests (Filimonov et al., 2016; Belsky and Klimenko 2014; Dugin 2015). Shakleina (2012, p. 99) asserts that the Bush doctrine of pre-emption was 'clearly manifest in US policies towards a range of C[ommonwealth of] I[ndependent] S[tates] countries, leading to the revolutions of 2003–05'. As the colour revolutions were targeting illiberal

⁵ For example, during the UK parliamentary debate on Syrian airstrikes in 2015, David Cameron described Russia as a 'key player', along with the US, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Patrick Wintour (2015), 'Britain carries out first Syria airstrikes after MPs approve action against Isis', *The Guardian*, 3 December, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/02/syria-airstrikes-mps-approve-uk-action-against-isis-after-marathon-debate>.



regimes they were perceived to be part of a wider US strategy of democratisation and, consequently, regime change. Certainly, they took place in countries that had received democracy assistance from the US, particularly through American non-governmental organisations such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI). Nevertheless, while US democracy assistance programmes may have indirectly encouraged events, there is scant evidence of any specific ‘plot’ developed by Washington to overthrow illiberal regimes across the post-Soviet space, although this did not prevent the securitisation of the popular protests by political and military elites in Russia (German 2020).

In the wake of Georgia’s 2003 Rose Revolution, President Bush travelled to the South Caucasus state and gave a speech in Tbilisi:

The path of freedom you have chosen is not easy, but you will not travel it alone. Americans respect your courageous choice for liberty. And as you build a free and democratic Georgia, the American people will stand with you.....You are making many important contributions to freedom’s cause, but your most important contribution is your example.....Your courage is inspiring democratic reformers and sending a message that echoes around the world: freedom will be the future of every nation and every people on earth (Office of the Press Secretary 2005b).

Bush’s expansive rhetoric could be construed as an incitement to further uprisings and the overthrow of unpopular regimes. His overt support for those who had overthrown incumbent regimes in Georgia and Ukraine was later reflected in the 2006 NSS. The document hailed the colour revolutions across the post-Soviet space as bringing ‘new hope for freedom’ across Eurasia and encouraged Russia to respect freedom and democracy. Mearsheimer (2003) contends that great powers strive for hegemony within their own region, whilst simultaneously seeking to block rivals from gaining hegemony in their regions of the world. US support for ‘effective’ democracies and popular protests across the post-Soviet space challenged Russia’s status, failing to acknowledge its sphere of influence and regional dominance, as well as Russian interests and concerns. This was exacerbated by overt American support for NATO enlargement into the post-Soviet space, with the accession of the three Baltic States in 2002–2004. As noted earlier, enlargement has been a continual irritant for Moscow since the end of the Cold War, evidenced by a cautionary statement by Russia’s then-Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov in the 1990s:

We do not want the old bloc divisions to be replaced with new ones that would divide the world into two parts. That is why Russia is against NATO expansion.....We have taken a negative position on this and we will stick to it. Of course, this does not mean that we can veto new admissions.....But we have the right to protect our national interests, and if NATO advances to our territory, we will take adequate measures in terms of military construction and will try to remedy the geopolitical situation (Black 2000).



NATO's growth, both in terms of new member states, as well as its territorial and operational remit, was perceived to be intended to limit Russia's foreign and domestic ambitions. The US was accused of being unable to escape a Cold War mentality, continuing to encourage the eastwards enlargement of the alliance, as well as placing American military equipment and bases along Russia's periphery (Voenno-promyishlenniye kur'er 2008). The Bush administration had consistently supported the enlargement of the alliance and was a keen advocate of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, which put it at odds with certain Western European allies (notably France and Germany) who had doubts about the ability of the two countries to contribute to security in the transatlantic area.

The visible splits between the European and US pillars of the alliance were very visible at the Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008. Although the summit's final statement did stress that Georgia and Ukraine 'will become members of NATO' at some undefined point in the future, neither was offered a specific membership action plan. This confused message emphasised the lack of alliance consensus and encouraged Moscow to increase its pressure on Georgia (and across the post-Soviet space). The Five-Day War between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 acted as a warning shot to other post-Soviet states, such as Ukraine, and to the West, that Russia would not stand by and let countries in what it considers to be its strategic sphere of influence integrate more closely with Western security institutions. It sought to reconfirm the post-Soviet space as its sphere of exclusive influence where the interests of Moscow should be prioritised over those of external powers such as the US, highlighting once more the concern that Russia was not being recognised as great power by the US (Gareev 2008). Moscow's reaction after the 2008 Bucharest summit and its subsequent military intervention in Georgia surprised many within the international community, including NATO, and reinforced growing concerns about an increasingly assertive Russia that would take all possible steps to maintain its traditional sphere of influence. Until then, there had been a prevailing assumption in the West that Russian expressions of unease about enlargement were essentially rhetorical, meaning that warnings such as the one in March 2008 from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that there would be a 'substantial negative geopolitical shift' (Izvestiya 2008) if either Georgia or Ukraine became a NATO member state, were downplayed or disregarded altogether.

Thus, as the Bush era concluded, US-Russia relations reached a new low. Incoming president Barack Obama's attempts to 'reset' the relationship had limited results, as a number of enduring concerns took on new dimensions. The 2011 Arab uprisings, which were followed by protests in Russia during the run-up to the Duma elections of December 2011, reinforced Russian concerns about US support for democratic change to illiberal regimes. In 2013 General Valery Gerasimov accused the US of deliberately destabilising the international environment with new, predominantly non-military, methods to advance its own national interests 'under the pretext of spreading democratic values' (Gerasimov 2013). Nevertheless, where interests did converge there was some cooperation, including on Afghanistan, notably the development of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), established in 2009 to facilitate the transportation of military personnel and equipment via Central Asia, responding to the increased risk of sending supplies through Pakistan. Russia also



supported tougher sanctions on Iran and agreed to cancel its contract to sell S-300 air-defence systems to the country.

Emulating the US ?

As discussed above, Russia has been a vocal critic of Western humanitarian interventions and the notion of a Responsibility to Protect (R2P) since 1999, viewing them as both a pretext for the use of force against a sovereign state and an attempt by the West to pursue its own national interests under the guise of protecting civilians (Baranovsky & Mateiko 2016). However, US unilateralism and support for military interventions potentially emboldened Russia to follow suit. In spite of Moscow's suspicion of R2P, it employed similar arguments to defend its actions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014: the protection of Russian citizens and 'compatriots' was an important stated rationale for Moscow's 2008 intervention in Georgia, its annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Čanji and Kazharski (2022) posit that Russia's mimicking of humanitarian interventionist discourse was an attempt to win recognition as a great power actor, one that is not only able to dominate its perceived sphere of influence through its material superiority, but is also building a normative order. This builds on Morozov's notion of Russia as a 'subaltern empire' that mimics the coloniser (in this case the West) in order to become more like them (Morozov 2015).

A further example of Russian emulation of Western behaviours is evident in its growing use of, and reliance on, private military and security companies (PMSCs) as a flexible, cost-effective and unattributable tool of foreign policy. The US example of depending on PMSCs to sustain concurrent, long-term operations in Afghanistan and Iraq was watched closely by Russian analysts; there was considerable interest in the case of Blackwater and other Western PMSCs.⁶ PMSCs only really came to prominence in Russia at the beginning of the twenty-first century, lending weight to the argument that their evolution was influenced by observation of the Western experience. Over the past decade there has been an increasing use of, and reliance, on PMCs in a range of interventions, both within the post-Soviet space and further afield, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. Syria constituted a key testing ground for the Russian use of contractors in a conflict situation and one of the most notable features of Russia's war in Ukraine has been Moscow's increasing reliance on private forces; groups such as Wagner have dominated headlines. The Russian state has been relying on them as a cost-effective force multiplier, reflecting global trends and Western behaviours, in particular the outsourcing of risk and cost to private companies and the market.

⁶ Fontanka, a Russian investigative online news site, conducted a number of analyses on both Blackwater and PMCs in general. For example: Denis Korotkov, 'Kukhnya chastnoi armii', *Fontanka*, 9 June 2016, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/06/09/070/>.



Conclusions

When George W. Bush took office, Vladimir Putin had been Russian president for less than a year, having inherited a Russia that was weak: economically, militarily and politically. Under his leadership the chaos of the Yeltsin years was replaced by Russia's return to the international stage as a strong state capable of exerting global influence, one that is determined to re-establish its authority, both domestically and on the international stage, and be recognised as a great power. The Bush administration's approach to Russia was broadly comparable to that of the Clinton administration during the 1990s. However, Russia was not the same country: there had been significant changes in wider Russian foreign and security policy since Putin came to power as president in 2000. Consequently, the initial post-9/11 positivity quickly soured and 2002 represented a turning-point in bilateral relations.

The foreign policy approach of the Bush administration challenged Russia's understanding of itself as a great power and its global role. Cooperation in the fight against international terrorism and support for the US-led War on Terror, which saw Moscow accept the establishment of US military bases in Central Asia, was superseded by a renewal of anti-Western rhetoric. This shift encapsulates a number of enduring issues in relations between Washington and Moscow, including Russian concerns about strategic encirclement by the West, particularly NATO, criticism of the predominance of US power within the international system and suspicion of US efforts to promote democracy around the world. Russia has been a vocal critic of Western interventions since the Kosovo crisis in 1999, viewing them as both a pretext for the use of force against a sovereign state and an attempt to manipulate behaviour and weaken strategic competitors. Under Bush, the increasing unilateralism of the US and apparent rejection of multilateralism, its liberal interventionism and the pursuit of democracy promotion around the world, as well as active support for the enlargement of NATO into the post-Soviet space, challenged Russian conceptions of its own status within the international system, highlighting Russia's relative inability to shape international affairs and fuelling a deep sense of mistrust.

In spite of Russian fears of irrelevance stemming from the Bush administration's approach, Moscow became increasingly critical of US foreign policy. The lack of recognition from the US stimulated Russian assertiveness on the international stage, as Moscow strove to be acknowledged as a great power and impose its own views of international society, which, as noted, prioritise sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of states. Consequently, Russia has become one of the principal advocates of a pluralist international society and vocal critic of Western moral interventionism. At the same time, it has also emulated US behaviour, launching military interventions into neighbouring countries on the pretext of protecting 'compatriots', and becoming increasingly reliant on private military contractors as a tool of state power.

Thus, the policies of the George W. Bush administration continue to have a profound impact on US-Russia relations, marking the beginning of a period of



fracture and alienation that continues to shape international relations, and fueling Russian status-seeking behaviour, which continues today. Furthermore, the foreign policy behaviour of the Bush administration validated the Russian narrative of competition and the belief that powerful states will exploit whatever means possible to undermine their adversaries, including subversion, in what is perceived to be an ongoing, covert struggle for global power and dominance. Subsequently, the Obama administration's efforts to 'reset' relations with Russia in 2009, just months after Russia's invasion of Georgia, signalled a return to 'business as usual' and apparent acceptance of Russian occupation of Georgian territory. President Joe Biden's 2020 election promise to return to a foreign policy grounded in Western democratic values, along with his description of Russia as the 'biggest threat' to US security, prompted further disquiet in the Kremlin, as the US is perceived to have sought to promote democracy around the world in the controversial pursuit of international security and stability at the expense of state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Russia has spent several decades observing Western actions and assessing the implications for its national security – much Russian behaviour evident prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine is the result of the application of these 'lessons learned', both in terms of how powerful states are deemed to pursue their strategic objectives and critical vulnerabilities that can be exploited.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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