

**BOOK REVIEW**

Foreign Policy of Russia 1991-2000

by Zafar Khan

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The new state of Russia emerged as an independent and sovereign entity out of the debris of the erstwhile Soviet Union in the early nineties. One finds three influential schools of thoughts so far as Russia's role in international affairs is concerned. According to one school of thought cultivating friendly and close relations with the West meant for Russia going back to 'civilization'. A second one asserts that Russia should recognize and reconfirm its roots in the Asiatic cultural stock and historical experience. A third school of thought represents a blend of ideas promulgated by the two others and stresses the unique nature of the Russian geo-political, historic and cultural position as a bridge between Europe and Asia. These conceptions of Russia's foreign policy, which are dominant at the elitist level, determine the attitude of Russia to the past Soviet phase. The actual policy of Russia contains all approaches mentioned above, which are combined in different ways at every new stage of development. A constant struggle of these divergent views and the forces behind them affects the executive power and makes Russian foreign policy eclectic.

The book under review deals with the foreign policy of Russia during the Yeltsin period and immediately afterwards— the years 1991-2000. It is an attempt to cover the entire panorama of new Russia's foreign policy during the first decade of its existence.

The book is divided into six unequal chapters. The first chapter explores the origins of Russia's foreign policy, its emerging framework and its formative years. It focusses on the international environment in which the new independent state of Russia had to organize and activate its external behaviour. The imprint of foreign policy of the past was so strong that the process of transition of foreign policy of the new state turned out to be long and tardy. The international environment had turned conducive, if not friendly and this was a welcome change from cold war days for the new Russian leadership. The West, particularly the US had gone out of the way in supporting the new system in Russia under Yeltsin. In the realm of foreign policy, Yeltsin and his associates had no plans, little coherent ideas, except slogans like promoting democracy, civil society and building a prosperous civilized Russia.

During the early formative years several factors made the operationalisation of a new type of foreign policy for Russia more problematic. During early years, the operational aspect of foreign policy of the new Russian State was essentially the continuation of the basic approach of Gorbachev with a whiff of change by an assertion of the importance of nationalism. It began to shed its traditional linkage with military power, a traditional feature of the Soviet era. It took about a year after the collapse of the Soviet Union to make a real beginning in foreign policy. As the entire Russian polity had begun the process of transition from Soviet typology, its foreign policy was in transition. By the beginning of 1994, the transitional character started giving way, albeit very slowly, to acquire some semblance of performance. It was the actual experience of conducting, itself in international relations that brought the realization in Russia but its foreign policy must not preoccupy itself only with the West and that it must also pay its attention to the East, particularly to its close Asian neighbours.

The next chapter discusses Russia's relations with the USA in the initial formative phase, the chief direction of the Russian policy was towards evaluating and promoting close friendly ties with the USA. In practice, Russia's foreign policy began with a total orientation towards the USA and the West. However, the priority agenda of the two countries for conducting their mutual relationship did not actually coincide. The obvious divergence in their priority agenda soon become apparent when actual policies and objectives were sought to be implemented and promoted. The clash of interests and motivations between Russia and USA was bound to occur and both sides appeared to recognize this ground-reality despite their proclaimed essential commonality. By 1996 the honeymoon period of their relationship of early formative years was rapidly being left behind. However, it would not be correct to assume that relations with the USA were kept on backburner. The Yeltsin era ended with a number of issues in Russia-US relations unresolved. These relations had generally lost the euphoria of the earlier period.

Russia's relations with Europe is the theme of the third chapter. Right from the outset, Russia had demonstrated great enthusiasm in developing friendship and amity with Western Europe on the basis of shared values. Europe was the natural space of foreign policy of Russia. However, despite the talk of encouraging and supporting a democratic new Russia, West European leaders were reluctant to lower various restrictions and barriers in promoting trade and commerce with Russia. Economic assistance and capital investment from EU members were far less than Russian's expectations. Towards the ends of Yeltsin's era, Russia thus appeared to have settled down for bilateralism in pursuing its policies in West Europe and Scandinavia. The successful march of East and Central Europeans towards integration with West Europeans was indeed logical. But the manner in which it was accomplished, surely unnerved Russia. Thus, it revived its traditional fear of security and of being treated as less than a big power.

The fourth chapter throws light on Russia and CIS. Dealing with new independent and sovereign states in its neighbourhood on an equal basis was totally a novel experience for Russia. Russia had covered a new term for these states in international politics, "Near Abroad". Initially, it appeared that Russia regarded itself as a legitimate guarantor of the defence of CIS member states and promoter of their political stability. On the other, central Caucasian members viewed the CIS essentially as a means to keep Russia in check from its traditional dominance. Russia found it more effective to take up bilateral issues with each of the countries involved. On the other, it utilised the CIS for common issues. From the very beginning of the second term (1996-99) Yeltsin and his

new Foreign Minister had launched an exercise of striking a balance between the West and the East. An aspect of this exercise was more involved attention and close relationship with states in the New Abroad. By the end of 1994, a separate ministry for dealing with CIS was established. Russia's bilateral relationship with other CIS states vary, essentially without forming a common pattern. This reflects transitory as well as flexible nature of Russia foreign policy.

Russia's relation with Asia are highlighted in the next chapter. In the heydays of triumph over Soviet Union and the crusade of disowning the immediate past, Yeltsin made a conscious turn-away from the third world. However, increasing strain in relation with the USA and West as well as by the emergence of communist-nationalist political force after 1993 election to the Russian parliament resulted in the reassessment process of Russia's foreign policy. Apart from growing disenchantment with the West and increasing democratic pressure, two major conditions were important. One was the lucrative arms bazaar and the other was the recovery of substantial Soviet era debts owned by the third world country. China had the top priority among Asian countries. Close bilateral relations developed fast within a few years. After China Russia's priority in Asia was India. The ties began to get normalised after Yeltsin's India visit in 1993. Russian foreign policy in essence appeared to avoid any type of commitment to sustain India's long term or short-term interests.

The last chapter analyses Russia's foreign policy after Yeltsin. Continuity in Russia's foreign policy was ensured by the fact that Putin was Yeltsin's choice right from the day when he was appointed Prime Minister. All evidence during the first year of Presidency of Putin appears to suggest that the legacy of the Yeltsin era could not be wiped out in a hurry. The transitory character of Russian foreign policy may well evolve further and be stable in the coming days, when democratic scenario heads towards stability and grows out of its present transitional phase. Russia's foreign policy is bound to be characterised by contradictions and inconsistencies for a considerable period in future.

The book is a pioneering work. Significantly it is written in a communicative style and in keeping with the reading habits of our time. It is strongly recommended not only to the post-graduate students of international politics but to all those who want to understand Russia's foreign policy in the post-cold-war days.