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Russian Foreign Policy: The Kremlin Has Learned to Bide Its Time

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: During simultaneous crises in Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan, Moscow faced challenges that contained opportunities to reap geopolitical benefits. Moscow's handling of these crises demonstrates that its policy toward its neighbors has evolved away from direct intervention and toward careful maneuvering, which is both face-saving and more geopolitically rewarding.

Over the past year, Russia has faced crises of varying degree along its borders. Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan stand out, as they are Russian allies that continue to experience internal turbulence. Dealing with them effectively has been the Kremlin's primary goal. A single misstep would—and still can—jeopardize Russia's interests, push pro-Moscow forces into a corner, and increase anti-Russian sentiment among the local populations. This in turn would invite a greater Western economic push, as with economics comes political influence.

Instead of taking aggressive military steps and delivering the kind of harsh political rhetoric Russia traditionally employed in its dealings with its neighbors, it made notable adjustments in these three cases that reflect an evolution in its approach.

In the South Caucasus, Russia's moves during the recent Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict reflected the longstanding geopolitical importance the Kremlin attaches to the region. Though there seemed to be a measure of ambivalence in the Kremlin's initial approach to the war, the trilateral agreement and the stationing of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) showed the holes in the then emerging idea that Russia was losing its grip on the region.

In Belarus, though the mood of protest against Alexander Lukashenko has dwindled significantly, overall antipathy toward the ruling government is at an all-time high. This indicates a rebirth of Belarusian nationalism and a path toward the radicalization of opposition forces, both of which are worrying signs for Moscow. This could explain why Russia abstained from harsh anti-Western or anti-demonstration rhetoric. Military support for Lukashenko might have been discussed covertly, but Moscow tried to navigate between the two sides by avoiding radical moves that could push the opposition to cast the demonstrations as pro-Western. But abandoning Lukashenko completely would have come at a heavy price. After all, Russia has been consistent in its efforts to shore up embattled leaders facing popular revolt.

In Kyrgyzstan too, where yet another revolution swept the country and could have easily jeopardized Russia's influence (both economic and military), Moscow avoided sharp moves, bided its time, and approached the situation with a more *realpolitik* perspective.

Moscow abstained in these three states from the kinds of grandiose moves and direct military force it exercised in Ukraine and Georgia, causing some to suggest that Russian foreign policy has entered a post-post-imperial period in which the Kremlin has become more mindful of its policy actions. Russia may now be relying more heavily on a mixture of economic, political, and propaganda measures to ensure the continuity of its geopolitical ambitions.

It took years of learning from past mistakes to push Russia to evolve and adjust to the changing geopolitical situation on the ground along its borders. A more moderate response to the various crises could also be seen as a sign of geopolitical maturity: the Kremlin no longer see changes, however radical, in neighboring states as *a priori* anti-Russian in nature.

Russia learned this the hard way. The events of 2008 in Georgia and 2014 in Ukraine—developments that resulted in the effective seizure of sovereign territories of these states—provided Russia with hefty immediate gains, but nevertheless produced long-term troubles for Moscow. The methods the Kremlin used to exert pressure on Georgia and Ukraine had unintended consequences: the seizure of territories by Russia pushed Kyiv and Tbilisi closer to the West, anti-Russian sentiment among both populations became the norm, and pro-Russian forces were marginalized.

In contrast to that approach, the more evolved Russian foreign policy has brought results. In all the crises discussed, Moscow maintained its core strategic interests and even managed to use those states' internal difficulties to increase its own influence. The post-war crisis in Armenia made Yerevan far more dependent on Moscow, particularly as Russian peacekeepers are now stationed in Karabakh. A similar growth of dependence is observable in

Lukashenko's case, and the new Kyrgyz leadership is also seeking active Russian economic and political support.

Another reason why Russia is gaining momentum is the changing nature of international relations. Liberal internationalism has come under great stress. The norms that governed the world, or at least large parts of it, since the end of the Cold War are no longer tenable. The US has lost ground and is trying to regain it. Still, the best Russia can hope for is to rebalance the rise of illiberal states whose power is buttressed by capitalism with elements of protectionism.

Russia's moderation can also be explained by another point. In none of the crises mentioned above did Moscow face the threat of the "bandwagon" effect. Unlike in Ukraine and Georgia, Western influence in Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan has been meager. Had anti-Russian sentiments grown dangerous to Moscow's core interests in those three states, it might have opted for more traditional active military responses. In these cases, the post-post-imperial phase is not as evident as some have argued. Russia responded moderately simply because it did not face a direct threat.

Though the crisis-stricken states have increased their dependence on Moscow, there is still a persistent distrust between Russia and its neighbors. Russian politicians have a hard time striking a balance between cooperation and domination in bilateral ties with the neighbors as well as within Russia-led alliances. This sets limits on any cooperation between Moscow and neighboring states and requires constant diplomatic balancing. Like the US-led world, Moscow has a hierarchical element in its relations with its neighbors, and it tries to establish a semblance of inclusiveness with those neighbors via the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Rebuilding Russia's image as a global power runs counter to what Moscow needs most: trust. This explains why the EEU and CSTO have been particularly successful. Indeed, the Kremlin has been more successful using bilateral rather than multilateral mechanisms to promote its core interests. Bilateralization of relations is likely to remain a cornerstone of Moscow's policymaking for foreseeable future.

Russia learned the hard way that it has to bide its time. So far, it has done so with some success, but structural problems with its neighbors will hamper its efforts to build an inclusive order without undermining the trust of smaller states. Even the US has had difficulty maintaining that kind of balance within the fragile liberal internationalism.

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