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It is evident from the start that this paper has been written by someone who comprehensively understands Russian history, the instruments and machinery of the Russian state and the political mindset of President Putin. The paper is a serious and wellresearched

commentary on modern post-Soviet Russia that analyses the problems facing the state, the nature of their aspirations of greatness and the means by which they might achieve them.

The author is a Ph.D candidate in Political Science at the National School of Political Studies in Bucharest and he has addressed the issue in the following ways. He looks first at President Putin's vision of Russia in the 21st century, he then characterises Russia's contemporary foreign policy and looks at Russia's attempts to secure a special role in the new international order. His final observations are on what he terms the "impossibility of Russia's strategic independence" and offers possible scenarios for Russia's way forward. It is 15 years since the break-up of the Soviet Union following the loss of the Cold War. At that time Russia was faced with profound changes in the entire international political framework as well as severe domestic problems. Whereas previously Russia had relied on super-power politics in its international relations, post Cold War and with its military capability emasculated, Russia had to discover and develop a new non-conflict based strategic identity.

The initial efforts in the 1990s all failed dismally for a variety of reasons that the author argues are attributable to the continuous decline of the main sources of power, an immense identity vacuum and the disorientation of the political establishment. Russia discovered the hard way the old geopolitical approach did not work in the new world of partnerships and alliances.

President Putin has adopted a different style of presidency to that traditionally recognised by western governments. The paper traces the development of his personality as head of state from when he recognised that, similar to the earlier "time of troubles" that demanded strong leadership, the role of the new and strong leader had again become pivotal following the end of Yeltsin's atrophied presidency. It is clear that Putin took a risk by putting his personality and vision at the centre of his leadership but he won wide approval from the people and

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capitalised on the power vertical of Kremlin decision-making machinery. The author emphasises the different approach of Putin in that he has effectively marginalised the Politburo although the Dumas retains its role (it is unsaid but there is an implication that Putin manipulates the Dumas to his own ends).

Putin is the sole driver of strategy and he has established a coterie of advisors that are drawn from former colleagues in the KGB, the St Petersburg town hall (Putin served in the mayor's office) and from his university. He also delegates to individuals who are responsible for delivering elements of his programme. The author brings together the ideological

elements, the major influences and life experiences to demonstrate quite vividly how Putin has developed both personally and politically, and adapted to post-Soviet democratic trends. It is apparent that Putin is a pragmatic man who recognises that Russia has to win its place in the new international order. The paper identifies the key aspects of his political beliefs. He believes that it is too early to bury Russia as a great power given the nation's advanced technologies and vast natural resources. He lacks sentiment where ideology is concerned and understands the need for flexibility and expediency when matters of power are paramount.

Furthermore, he does not regard a strong state as an anomaly but more as the source and guarantee of order and the initiator and driving force of change. This change can be seen in the restoration of the power vertical as the state takes over the more competitive private enterprises and maintains the natural monopolies as economic and political instruments of government. The author suggests that Putin's vision is based on the Russia concept of samoderzhavie that has been a principle of Russian statehood for 500 years. More usually it has applied to the nation, but now when it is relevant to an individual it implies the concentration of power in a single person's hands for the good of the nation.

Russian foreign policy has been called the 'new realism' as aspects of geo-politics and geoeconomics

have been merged in the form of non-aggressive balancing acts. Inevitably this has caused changes in foreign policy decision-making and the author provides an in-depth and analytical look at the presidential foreign policy and in particular at its geo-economic emphasis. This emphasis carries with it the expectation that the energy providers (Gazprom and Lukoil) will not only be the main providers of state revenue but will also be used as economic tools of Russian foreign policy. The new policy has learnt the lessons from the failures of the 1990s and acknowledges that 21st century power politics is a blend of geopolitics and geo-economics with a continuous of military capabilities.

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The paper recognises that confrontation with the US is dangerous and while a symmetric relationship with the US is not possible it is inconceivable that Russia should become a junior partner. The expansion of the EU is seen as a serious challenge. NATO's role as in international security is judged to be diminishing but it is still regarded as potentially hostile and that in turn could affect Russia's future strategy. Putin has rejected the idea of an Oriental or Western orientated foreign policy on the basis that the geo-political position of Russia has national interests everywhere.

The paper traces the derivation of the basis of Putin's 'third way' in international relations described as 'a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing'. As Putin put it to a meeting of his federation ambassadors, "Russia does not want confrontation of any kind and will not take part in any kind of holly alliance". Having surveyed this multivector approach of Russian foreign policy the conclusion is that Russian foreign policy is of a complex nature that is neither simplistically pro- or anti-Western. Russia does not seek membership of NATO or the EU but does seek close association as this would be beneficial to Russia, as long as that does not prejudice its independence or any other relationship with a centre of power.

Five years after the financial crisis of 1998, there was optimism in the Kremlin that the decline had been arrested and Russia was set to reclaim great power status. But as the paper demonstrates this was premature self-confidence on the part of the Kremlin that had

misinterpreted the longevity of gains and improvements. Despite the high oil prices that stabilised the economic situation, the Kremlin failed to develop a workable strategy for sustainable development to address Russia's underlying structural problems regarding economic, military and governance issues. Furthermore, they discovered that the multivector approach had distinct limitations in that its various associations failed to develop to the extent desired and 2006 represented a low point in US-Russia relations. The author analyses the range of difficulties Russia faces in this area and concludes that its maintenance of strategic independence is not only improbable but also impossible.

Moreover, international integration is unattainable unless Russia accepts the rules already established, and that by holding on to great powers of autonomy the key strategic decision on the nation's role and place in the world order will be delayed.

The author offers detailed arguments for Russia's future based on 3 evolutionary scenarios. However, the optimistic and pessimistic scenarios are extreme in their characterisation so it is not surprising that the author concludes that the hybrid scenario is most likely over the
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next 5 to 10 years. Essentially this scenario assumes that Russia will persist in its pursuit of greatness and a proper place in the international system. The author identifies a number of aspects that Russia will need to address and suggests that the Ukraine will become a critical issue in the ongoing political and economic contest between Russia and the West.

This is a well-researched analytical paper on probably the greatest challenge currently facing Russia. The paper is recommended to anyone who has an involvement or interest in highlevel international relations and Russia's future role therein.