Uncertainty in a changing international system: Russia’s ‘westphalianism’ challenged?

Maria Raquel Freire and Licínia Simão
_University of Coimbra_
rfreire@fe.uc.pt
lsimao@fe.uc.pt

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Abstract:

This paper analyses Russia’s state and power conceptions and how these are projected in its foreign policy, at times of much uncertainty in the international system. Traditional concepts of borders and sovereignty, for example, have become increasingly strained in face of transnational movements, demanding flexible approaches and challenging westphalian conceptions of the state. In its process of modernization and in its interactions with global partners, are Russia’s views being challenged, or instead is Moscow creating mechanisms of response that simultaneously assist in its adjustment to uncertainty and entail the tools for the maintenance of westphalianism as the dominant paradigm? The paper seeks to discuss how uncertainty in a changing international system has, or has not been, affecting Russian policies and practices, particularly with regard to international security within the Federation and in its relations with its wide neighborhood.

Keywords

Foreign Policy; Great Powers; International System; Russian Federation; Uncertainty; Power; Sovereignty

Introduction

Change in the international system has been implying the reorganization of power distribution and status recognition, both in territorial terms, with the emergence of new states and new boundaries, as well as in immaterial terms, on the basis of transnational
movements and communities that challenge traditional westphalian conceptualizations about the world order. It should however be highlighted how the imagined westphalian system evolved over time, artificially recreating an asymmetrical configuration of powers in the system, with kingdoms, protectorates, principalities, grand duchies, confederations, and smaller groups of militias, for example, drawing the map of power at the time of the peace of Westphalia (1648). The treaties instituting the Westphalian system sought to institutionalize the nation state as the main unit in the system, clearly defining it as separate from religion, thus bringing secular order to the forefront of international relations, abandoning the medieval project. The international order that developed from this arrangement in the 17th century did go through many changes, but the asymmetries in terms of power configuration remain, with many challenges to the national state persisting. Secessionist movements, illegal militia groups seeking power control, the power of multinational corporations and finance in the international order are just a few examples. Thus the state, as a modern construction, remains challenged in its absolute sovereignty.

The acceleration of modernity processes such as industrialization, urbanization, mass-media development, global education and what has come to be termed globalization – understood as a set of socioeconomic, political and financial expansion and homogenization processes – have all affected how these Westphalian principles have been applied in the practices of international politics. Thus, the respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, as two central concepts of this order, has been subdued to power dynamics. During the Cold War decades, the bipolar power system sustaining international (dis)order dictated a subordination of Westphalian principles to ideology and alignment. Interventions in the post-colonial world became routine violations of these principles by the two global powers in the name of global security and order. In the post-Cold War context, the relativization of these principles, which had emerged following the tragedy of the two World Wars, was perceived as a necessary step to redesign and assure order and security in a uni/multipolar world. Centered on the United Nations, a new promise of internationally regulated protection of state sovereignty and territorial integrity on the one hand, and of the rights and security of individuals on the other, developed. It is in this context that the analysis of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy will be developed, in order to understand how political leaders in Moscow have addressed these changes and how they adjusted their narratives and practices to the new contexts taking shape.

In a changed and changing international system, Russia positions itself as a sovereignist power, i.e. the primacy of sovereignty and the respect for territorial integrity are perceived by Russian decision-makers as fundamental principles of the global order. However, the concepts of sovereignty and boundaries have been elastic, when applied to Russia’s foreign policy, and have been used and misused according to different end-goals. The instrumentalization of debated concepts only adds to the blurring of their meaning and usefulness in a complex context. This has been translated into policies of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity globally, whenever these are favorable to
Moscow’s policies, implying eventually the violation of the integrity of other state units in the international system. But the political discourse justifies actions on the basis of self-protection and, especially, the protection of vulnerable and threatened groups, reflecting the nuances of the new debates and interpretations of international humanitarian law, which emerged in the post-Cold War context. Principles that have been evolving trying to respond to the growing complexity of the international system configurations with many non-state actors gaining prominence, but that have flexibility enough to allow for innovative designs in international relations, along with perverse effects of justification of illegal movements.

It is in this context of change and simultaneously very much (pre)westphalian types of actions and reactions, that this paper seeks to analyze how Russia conceptualizes the state and power and how these are projected in its foreign policy. In its process of modernization and in its interactions with global partners, are Russia’s views being challenged by the multiple processes associated to a post-state order, or instead is Moscow creating mechanisms to respond in a traditional manner to these challenges, reinforcing the concepts of state, sovereignty and borders that simultaneously assist in its adjustment to uncertainty and entail the tools for the maintenance of westphalianism as the dominant paradigm? The paper seeks to discuss how uncertainty in a changing international system has, or has not been affecting Russian policies and practices, particularly with regard to international security within Russia and in its relations with its wide neighborhood.

Our main argument is that Russia has been unable to develop a narrative of global order that challenges the dominant hybrid system – combining Westphalian principles and an increasing number of exceptions to its observance –, despite very effectively denouncing its limitations and contradictions. This is visible in Russia’s constant accusation that, it has been under the unipolar leadership of the US and through its unilateral actions, that the westphalian principles have been undermined, without being replaced by equally effective ones. Although this critique resonates with others, what Russia is proposing through its discursive articulation and its practices is a return to Westphalianism à la carte, effectively structured in imbalances of power, and very much centered on material resources rather than immaterial or normative advancement.

The outcome has been the positioning of Russia as a direct challenger of the existing hierarchical and what it perceives as an oppressive global order, by reproducing a mirroring order in its area of influence. This choice has undermined Russia’s positioning globally and has exposed the limitations of the domestic and international political projects of Russian leaders since the 1990s. In the process, Russia has become a more aggressive global player and its very valid critique to the existing global security order has lost validity, due to the contradictions of Russian actions. The international system and global security have not benefited from this state of affairs and Russia is today perceived as (a big) part of the problem, rather than a viable alternative.
Power, agency and sovereignty: the evolving nature of conceptual meaning and practical application

The two World Wars have been understood as turning points in the global political understanding of sovereignty and state power. Whereas the pre-1945 order was based on the acceptance of a hierarchy of states and of the resort to violence and war as means to assure national interests; the massive atrocities of the Holocaust and the scale of death in Europe –affecting, nevertheless, communities worldwide – provided the opportunity to redesign a global order that sought to create mechanisms for limiting state power. The post-Second World War order, under the leadership of the emerging global power, the United States and its European allies, despite the Cold War divide, was redesigned following mainly western standards. The last seven decades have witnessed the establishment of global governance structures, including the United Nations and its Security Council, mirroring the world war outcomes in terms of representativeness, with the explicit purpose of regulating the main instrument of state power – the monopoly of war.

The right to self-determination, conceived as a means to end colonialism, became institutionalized as a form of community rights, acknowledging that human communities have a right to self-rule and to be recognized as legitimate and sovereign members of the international community. This process instituted a fundamental contradiction in international legal principles, namely between territorial integrity and self-determination and conferred on the so-called international community the right to arbitrate and manage the disputes arising from this contradiction. Whereas the independence of colonized territories was accepted as a moral obligation of the UN and global powers, subnational independence was irrevocably rejected and borders were considered to be more important than the principle of self-rule. This was the prevailing understanding in African and Asian contexts of decolonization, but also later in the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav Federation.

The establishment of a regulated world order and the pursuit of self-determination have nevertheless to be conceived in a context where asymmetries of power exist. They are visible in the existence of a directory of powers in the UNSC, with special rights and responsibilities; they are visible in the ways through which certain states and other global actors have sought to circumvent this regulated order and have positioned themselves as fundamental agents in the international system. Examples of this include the resort to insurgency and the privatization of war as a means to overcome UN sanctioning; or the privatization of economic production and financial power, as a means to overcome state responsibilities towards its citizens, which would require policies of social-economic development and wealth redistribution. Thus, the established system needs to be assessed in the context of its historical development and in light of its many contradictions.
The acceleration of modernity processes such as industrialization, urbanization, mass-media development, global education and what has come to be termed globalization – understood as a set of socioeconomic, political and financial expansion and homogenization processes – have all affected how these Westphalian principles have been applied in the practices of international politics. These processes have also enlarged our understandings of concepts like power, agency and sovereignty, reflecting the many changes in how knowledge is produced and how reality is apprehended.

Power is one of the most elusive concepts in international relations. It is both a means and an end in itself; it can be hard (material) and soft (immaterial); it can be absolute or relative, structural or based on human agency. Most realist understandings of power focus on material aspects, especially military elements. The Cold War system was marked by an exponential growth of the industrial-military complexes in both the US and the USSR, fueling many conflicts worldwide in the name of ideology. Thus, there was also a clear immaterial dimension to power sustaining the Cold War confrontation. After 1991, power concepts changed, especially because traditional military forces became less relevant to tackle the new challenges to international security. The proliferation of weapons was identified as a major contribution to international conflicts and a process of demilitarization, at the strategic level, developed between the two former superpowers, whereas the UN sought to reinforce its capacity to respond militarily to the new humanitarian crisis. Overall, however, the peace dividend was never fulfilled and levels of military spending remained high. After 9/11 this trend has increased sharply, and Russia remains one of the main producers of military equipment side-by-side with the US. Thus, the military remains still a central form of global power and at the basis of power projection. New dimensions of power include economic performance (the EU or the rising economics of the BRICS illustrate this) and ideational dimensions like democracy and human rights, or the capitalist free societies of the west (including the economic and juridical dimensions associated to this capitalist model of development). These are areas where Russia lags behind the West and has been unable to present viable alternatives and where Russia sees also one of the greatest threats to its influence in the near abroad, as the concerns with the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine illustrate. Additionally, the normative adaptation the western model has been promoting, more than the human rights critical rhetoric, has been object of concern in Russia for the deep changes it implies in terms of legislative, economic and political adaptations to this particular model of development, implying distancing from Russia.

Such understandings about power are also relevant to understand agency in the international system. Who is a relevant actor? Who has power to shape the international system? Although states remain central actors, endowed with prerogatives and legitimacy that other actors do not enjoy, they are not the only relevant actors. Intergovernmental organizations and regional integration processes have created limitations to state action on the one hand, but on the other hand they have also provided the most powerful states with useful tools to impose certain structures and principles in regional or global multilateral settings (ex: UN, Council of Europe, G8,
Globalization trends have reinforced centrifugal dynamics, forcing the state to ‘share’ its power. Thus, economic actors, such as multinational corporations, are central actors controlling economic and financial power, which remain fundamental assets of state power. Speculators in the international financial markets and criminal organizations, which control large financial resources, have also become important agents, shifting power and security dynamics globally. Both undermining and/or potentiating state authorities, these transnational flows constitute simultaneously sources of opportunity and threats to the traditional conceptualizations of power and state authority. The financing of terrorism or state capture by organized crime are but two examples of these dynamics, along with the wealth resulting from commercial dealings at the global level or the control of fundamental natural resources. Another set of actors with agency are social movements and civil society organizations. Although often dependent on the legal and territorial ordering defined by the state, the transnational nature of these actors provides them with important alternatives in the face of repression. Russia’s relations with financial and economic agents and with socially-based ones are complex aspects of its foreign policy, since formally Russia promotes the Westphalian view of a state-based order, but its practices reflect a pragmatic view of the importance of (state-controlled) corporations or the dangers inherent in social movements and NGOs.

Sovereignty thus emerges as a protective concept for state power, but highly dependent on material forms of power and self-reliance. A state is secured in its sovereignty not by the protective action of the international community and multilateralism, but by its ability to fence off other states’ offensives against its sovereignty. Critiques of this realist view of sovereignty underline the self-fulfilling promise of such views based on self-help as well as the security dilemmas inherent in military competition and unilateral action. Although post-IIWW multilateralism has been increasingly marginalized and undermined, it still represents a source of diffusion of insecurity and a form of dialogue with well established rules. Russia has been a strong supporter of this order and has sought to participate in it, but has done so from an instrumental perspective, where multilateralism needs to reflect power balances derived from material capabilities. This is because ultimately, state sovereignty cannot be limited by other normative considerations, which can be instrumentalized for interference in domestic affairs. Russia has been therefore reluctant to accept humanitarianism as a valid source of intervention, even if it has itself resorted to these arguments, when it suits its goals.

**Russian views on power, agency and sovereignty**

Russian policies after the end of the Soviet Union have been demonstrating a continuous search for affirmation in identity and power-status terms. The changes brought about with the end of the Cold War and the redefinition of Russia’s borders and power status implied the redesign in internal policies as well as its readjustment to a changed geographical map. Borders and sovereignty were challenged. Nevertheless, from the very first day after the break-up of the Soviet Union, sovereignty has been
affirmed as a foundational pillar of the Russian Federation, along with the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and respect for territorial integrity. The opening paragraph of the Russian Constitution (1993) is clear in its wording:

We, the multinational people of the Russian Federation, united by a common fate on our land, establishing human rights and freedoms, civic peace and accord, preserving the historically established state unity, proceeding from the universally recognized principles of equality and self-determination of peoples, revering the memory of ancestors who have conveyed to us the love for the Fatherland, belief in the good and justice, reviving the sovereign statehood of Russia and asserting the firmness of its democratic basic, striving to ensure the well-being and prosperity of Russia, proceeding from the responsibility for our Fatherland before the present and future generations, recognizing ourselves as part of the world community, adopt the CONSTITUTION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION. (Russian Federation Constitution, 1993. Capslock in the original)

Russian official documents throughout the last two decades and a half underline these principles as constitutive of the state development and modernization. The understanding that consolidation of internal stability and growth is fundamental for an active foreign policy is clear, demonstrating a clear linkage between domestic and external factors in policy formulation. Power projection and Russia’s influence in the international system, including changes favorable to its policy goals are part of its actuation. However, although these changes should fit in this pattern of westphalian traditional state-centered organization of the international order, where sovereignty is inviolable, Russia has been playing differently to what could be expected in terms of the rhetoric-action matching. The recent events in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea officially on March 21, 2014 (BBC News, 2014), the outcomes of the 2008 Georgia War when Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (RFE/RL, 2008), and its critical voice towards Kosovo’s independence (February 2008), which preceded the hot summer in Georgia, show some unbalance in Russian responses to fundamental events taking place, with implications for international order.

Before discussing into detail Russian approaches and discourse on these different issues, two remarks should be made: first, that Russia has been reading the international system as a multipolar one, which became particular clear after the Georgia war in 2008. If until then, the Russian discourse was aligned very much against US hegemony and the unipolar outlook of the international system, Georgia constituted a turning point in Russian discourse regarding multipolarity, a concept that was later on (Foreign Policy Concept 2013) updated to ‘polycentrism’. The war in Georgia and the fact that Russia was able to achieve its main strategic goals in this context, renovated Russia’s belief that the unipolar system was effectively limited and a multipolar restructuring was inevitable.

Second, in this interpretation of the international order where different powers weigh differently, Russia acknowledges states as the main actors but underlines the role of the United Nations as fundamental in the promotion of international security and stability,
even if from an instrumental perspective. This means the westphalian asymmetry that existed in the medieval context remains very much present in the configurations of the international system, where more traditional actors such as international organizations or multinational corporations co-exist with new actors such as non-state organizations, transnational organized movements and groups, etc. – a neo-medieval system is developing. Considering these changes, it is relevant to assess how Russia has selectively recognized and engaged with the possibilities of this new configuration of the system (it regards the nation-state as the central actor in the system, but it acknowledges the ability of other actors to undermine this state-centered order).

Also it should be noted that in view of increasing challenges to the centrality of the state, in particular, and to its inability under specific circumstances to fulfill its basic functions, some new principles of intervention were put forward, in order to respond to massive atrocities and human rights violations. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle was outlined having in mind extreme cases of genocide and massive violations, according to which intervention by third parties is allowed without the consent of the national authorities (UN, n/d).

This principle has been claimed as justifying intervention actions, both by Russia as well as by other players in the international system, reflecting a misappropriation of the concept in its original formulation, and having the perverse effect of artificially legitimating illegitimate actions. The formula non-intervention in internal affairs and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and the self-determination of people’s principle along with R2P became, thus, intricate principles that have been used and misused to different purposes. This section will address in detail two main issues: first, how Russia understands these different concepts and second, how the interplay of these concepts with political (re)actions has played out in terms of implementation of policy goals and their legitimation in domestic and international terms. This will be done through a close look at foreign policy documents of Russia and how these materialize Russian understanding about sovereignty and power, as well as through statements and official declarations by Russian senior officials. The cases of Kosovo, Georgia and Ukraine will provide the evidence for how these concepts have been rendered operational and which implications these have been having in Russian readings about the international order as well as others’ positioning towards flexibly shaped configurations of international relations.

Some ideas for discussion:

1) Russia defines itself as a sovereignist power, pursuing a traditional westphalian understanding of the role of the state, where centrality of authority and governance are fundamental to control any challenges to the status quo.
2) Russian policies follow a principle of assertion of Russia as a great power, thus, Moscow does not understand the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia or the annexation of Crimea as illegitimate actions according to international law. In fact it talks about ‘reintegration’ of Crimea in Russian territory and it claims for massive human rights abuses in all these cases along with the principle of self-determination of peoples. Thus, Russia does not see its actions as pursuing double-standards, according to its very own policy goals.

3) Russian actions are justified in light of international principles and the UN Charter, according to Russian sources, as well as framed by its foreign policy aims of reassertion and recognition as a great power in the international system. Acting when it expects no reaction has provided Russia ample room to pursue with this strategy of ‘defending’ what it calls vital interests in its area of influence. This is the most visible application of westphalianism à la carte. Ultimately, what structures the system is not the international principles, but rather, the great power states and the hierarchy of power underlying the international system.

4) Russia defines the international system as polycentric, arguing it plays a fundamental role in this system, with the most recent events in Ukraine further reinforcing Russian understanding of its power, though in effect becoming more isolated internationally, as evidenced by the fact it was ousted from the G8, for example, or in view of the international sanctions it has been object of (independently of the real reach of these). Thus, the balance between demonstration of force and isolationism internationally has been difficult to manage by Russian authorities, and it might play unfavorably to Russia’s quest for status recognition in the international system. This implies both material and immaterial dimensions, and how Russia is perceived by the others, including now this trend in isolation, is fundamental in this regard to understand where it sees in the international system, and where the others perceive it to be.

Bibliography


