

France's Russia Policy: Balancing Interests and Values

France's Russia policy is at the end of an arc that began in 1998. At that time, France and Germany paired with Russia diplomatically in what is known as the Yekaterinburg Triangle, named after the Russian city where it was initially formed, to accommodate Russia's unique position in Europe and sustain its domestic transformation. The French-German alliance ambitiously hoped to stabilize "Grand Europe" with Russia while preparing for the enlargement of NATO and the European Union toward Russia's borders.

Eight years later, the goals of this triangle and the environment around it have changed significantly. Shifting their focus to transatlantic relations, the three countries opposed the U.S. and British intervention in Iraq, creating major tension with new NATO and EU member states that preferred U.S. and European to Russian leadership. Meanwhile, Russia itself has changed from its status as an "assisted country" in 1998, when the talk was of Russian debts. Now it is of Moscow's September 2006 acquisition of a stake in the French-German defense company EADS.

For French president Jacques Chirac, Russia is a strategic partner that is vital to his vision of not just a multilateral world, where decisions are shared, but a multipolar world, where power is shared. He has consequently sought a close relationship with Russian president Vladimir Putin, despite initially cool relations following Putin's arrival in the Kremlin.¹ In the eyes of the French government, Putin was the leader "who [was] ready to go furthest, realistically speaking, in his relationship to the West,"² of all the names on the short list of

Thomas Gomart is head of the Russia/Newly Independent States center at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) and a lecturer at the military school of Saint-Cyr-Coetquidan. Adrian Dellecker, a junior research fellow at IFRI, was very helpful in producing the final version of this article. This article was translated by Victoria Brian. A French version is available in *Politique étrangère* 72, no. 1, as "La politique russe de la France: fin de cycle?"

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President Boris Yeltsin's potential successors. In other words, even if attitudes toward Moscow are shifting due to recent events, for the French authorities "Putin remains the least worst solution."³

Russia views itself as an autonomous vector of power. For Moscow, multilateralism is simply a means to extend its influence rather than to manage international strain. In other words, Paris seeks common positions through multilateralism, whereas Moscow seeks to buttress its own strategic autonomy. Indeed, Russian foreign policy is driven by the perception that the West has ceased to exist, especially as a role model.⁴ Based on a perception of its own uniqueness, Moscow intends to develop without a model or outside help, using ad hoc groupings to defend its immediate interests. This tactic raises the question, has the multipolar French policy reinforced Russia's perception of a dismembered West?

French policy, like that of its partners, is rooted in contradictory interpretations of Putin's Russia, perceiving it both as a democratic regime in progress and as an authoritarian one in regression. This contradiction makes defining policy priorities difficult and requires balancing interests and values. Is the end goal to anchor Russia in Europe, or is it to use the specter of a resurgent Moscow to give France more leverage in the EU, the transatlantic dialogue, and beyond?

French Interpretations of Putin's Russia

There are, broadly speaking, six interpretations of Russia in France. Three schools of thought converge in openly criticizing Putin's Russia: defenders of human rights who fear a domestic crackdown, those who fear a revival of imperialism, and those concerned about Russia's ambiguous position on proliferation and arms sales. These camps are predominantly prevalent in the French press and academic community, which remain fundamentally hostile toward the former KGB Russian president, unabashedly comparing him to a new Peter the Great or a soft Stalin.⁵

Three other French groups applaud Russia's recent stabilization and are optimistic about its long-term evolution. Those minding the global balance of power see Russia as a valuable strategic partner. Those looking to boost the economy see Russia's emerging market as a major opportunity. A final group admires Putin, considering him the ultimate defender of Russian interests and independence in the mold of Charles de Gaulle—the last "real statesman" on the international stage.⁶ Despite their appeal in some French circles, these characterizations of Putin as a former KGB official or as a Russian de Gaulle are not entirely relevant to policy. Yet, they clearly influence global perceptions of the Russian president and consequently of Russia as a country.

Putin's power is argued to be grounded mainly in his close links to the *siloviki*,⁷ who hold top positions not only in the Kremlin and government ministries but also in the second tier of the bureaucracy, state-owned enterprises, and private companies, as well as in his ties to big business and liberal-minded technocrats.⁸ Putin and his entourage defend the status quo, defined by a bureaucratic and authoritarian regime that is self-centered and out of touch with society, with the redistribution of the country's riches and padlocked institutions intended to guarantee that power will remain within the ruling group. These Russian oligarchs are quietly amassing personal fortunes in a series of confiscations not intended for the greater good. This informal *dirigisme* is not that of a state following a coherent development strategy or great statesmanship; it is not diversifying its economy but enriching certain clans bent on maximizing power as quickly as possible.

Where a French analyst sits among these six groups helps define how he or she views the Elysée's special relationship with the Kremlin, either as a secure gate of entry to Russia or as a dangerous association in light of the Kremlin's interests. French policy seeks to multiply high-level personal contacts and engage the Kremlin on sensitive issues such as frozen conflicts in Transdnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh or the Kyoto Protocol or to sign large contracts.⁹

Among those latter three groups who view Moscow more favorably, the relationship has helped Paris fuel its multipolar vision. As a global partner, Moscow has widened the range of diplomatic options available to Paris. For instance, bilateral relations with Moscow are seen as a means to orient the EU-Russian dialogue. Paris also considers Moscow to be a key partner in Iran. The sustained personal bond between the two presidents has helped to diffuse tensions and in some cases initiate processes outside of their bilateral relationship. French exports to Russia have grown since 2000, albeit at the price of widening the commercial deficit because of rising energy prices. In 2004, France was the ninth-largest exporter to Russia with a 4 percent share of the market.¹⁰ It is the eighth-largest direct investor in Russia and the fourth-largest European investor.¹¹ Although it supports small and medium-sized enterprises and industries, the French authorities have mainly sought to sign major contracts, particularly in the fields of energy and aerospace.¹²

On the other hand, this politicization of the relationship is a source of division with those in the first three French camps who consider involvement with the Kremlin to be a dangerous association. Even if trade has benefited

Russia is vital to Chirac's vision of a multipolar world.

from the shared desire to create a favorable business climate, it is difficult to establish a direct connection between the quality of the political relationship and the growth in trade. The stake acquired in EADS by Vneshtorgbank and the decision of Gazprom to close the Shtokman field to foreign operators were surprises for French authorities.¹³ These decisions provoked concern in Paris over the true intentions of Moscow, which some believe is trying to upset French-German solidarity while distancing Paris and Berlin from Washington.

From Iraq to Ukraine: The Illusion of Common Values

In 2003 the joint stance of Paris, Berlin, and Moscow on the U.S. invasion of Iraq served as a basis for discussion of redefining EU-Russian relations and developing the four “common spaces” of cooperation—economics, freedom, security, and justice—as well as cooperation in the fields of external security, research, education, and culture. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs reasons that the subsequent French-German-Russian dynamic has enabled the EU-Russian partnership to cross a qualitative threshold, even on the verge of EU and NATO enlargement. In fact, the most vociferous critics of this three-way partnership come from the new EU and NATO members in eastern Europe, particularly Poland. French and German diplomats are perfectly aware that they must reassure the new post-Soviet satellite states of their policies on Russia, while refusing to bow down to any anti-Russian hysteria.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Warsaw’s opposition during the November 2006 Helsinki summit to the opening of negotiations on a new EU-Russian agreement highlights their ongoing concern.

Paris and Moscow, however, do not interpret the U.S. intervention in Iraq in the same way. For Moscow, the incident is to some extent similar to the NATO intervention in Kosovo, which was led without a mandate from the United Nations. For Paris, Iraq is the perfect expression of the unilateralist U.S. inability to listen to its allies. Three years after the invasion, this difference might be causing confusion between values and interests, and Paris is beginning to feel the consequences.

The Elysée does consider the Kremlin and consequently Russia to be on a democratic path. For former French prime minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis, in addition to playing an economic role, has the capacity to “defend a certain number of values.”¹⁵ Although the arguments in favor of opening Russia’s market and seeking to align it with Western standards are understandable, bundling them with the values intended to guide France’s policy is not. Russian authorities do not necessarily share common values with France and are not willing to compromise theirs, even if at times Moscow shares certain interests with Paris.

The Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis was useful during the Iraq debate because the three shared common interests, and it consolidated a joint diplomatic stance toward Washington, supported international law, and promoted Paris's multipolar vision. Yet, French authorities have always had trouble overcoming the contradiction between the Russian-U.S. alignment on the concept of the global war on terrorism with Moscow's stance against the Iraqi invasion and its domestic as well as international behavior, on Chechnya in particular. The French authorities, in other words, overestimated the French-German-Russian alignment after Iraq by misjudging two crucial post-September 11 perceptions in Moscow: the fact that Russia is a country that considers itself to be at war and the heavy hand that Putin's "counterterrorism" policy implies for Russia's foreign and domestic policy.¹⁶

Is the goal to anchor Russia in Europe?

Soon after this misinterpretation of Russian motivations on Iraq, the 2004–2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine forced Paris further to consider the Russian-European disparity of values. Because of Western influences, Russia reacted to the revolution by supporting pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich, later appointed as prime minister in August 2006. Undoubtedly, Paris was more careful than other Western capitals, probably because the French elite hold contrasting views on the existence of a Russian "sphere of influence" and is critical of the democracy promotion agenda advocated by Washington and the new EU members. For Paris, the problem of values is more significant to Russia's domestic development than to its attitude in the post-Soviet space. Indeed, Paris did not openly question the Russian regime until after the September 2004 Beslan tragedy and the stagnation of internal reforms.

In retrospect, two opposing interpretations exist in France of the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis. The first interpretation sees this axis as a potential basis for a multipolar system. For some, this is mainly a way to counterbalance U.S. unilateralism, which they see as the main source of international destabilization. Other supporters reason that extending the French-German core to Russia would offer great industrial, technological, and energy potential, especially once the axis is not considered hostile by London and Washington. It could also be a framework to contain the rise of Chinese power safely while creating a global coalition against radical Islam.

The second interpretation, firmly critical, emphasizes the damage done to European cohesion. By favoring Moscow, Paris and Berlin have neglected the new member states, which fought hard to gain their new European status, as well as emerging democracies such as Ukraine and Georgia. The relationship between Paris and Moscow is too unbalanced, mainly benefiting Moscow. This interpretation, promoting a pan-European position, holds that this axis

panders to Moscow's position as an energy giant, thus exploiting international tensions rather than resolving them and reinforcing negative trends in the centralization of power in Moscow. This interpretation probably underestimates major changes in Russian society, desperate for normality and deeply hostile to neocolonial experiments, which may indigenously constrain the worst fears of Russian centralization.¹⁷

An Unpredictable but Unavoidable Partner

Paris, like other Western capitals, is faced with the difficulty of building a strategic partnership with a regime that is unpredictable, unavoidable, and unreceptive to foreign advice. On the eve of France's May 2007 and Russia's March 2008 presidential elections, France must weigh the costs and benefits of its almost systematic support for the Russian regime. Vexation and disillusion are percolating on the French side.

The Kremlin is far from reciprocating such steadfast support, as it tends to see partnerships as a last resort. Moreover, the recent assassination of journalist Anna Politkovskaya, one of Putin's most powerful critics, and crackdowns in the energy sector, notably shutting out foreign investors from the Shtokman natural gas project, not to mention Sakhalin-2, have increased concerns about Russia being a less conciliatory and more self-interested associate.

The Russian election period, a source of instability, is now underway, and the major internal players will begin to quarrel over energy income and access to the Kremlin. On the foreign front, Moscow's desire for international recognition has lately been demonstrated by a frenzy of diplomatic activity, characterized by a double obsession: maximizing the energy issue and exaggerating its sovereignty.¹⁸ It is only a matter of time before Russia's hardening of its domestic policy is transferred to its external action.¹⁹

Russia's recent behavior could be interpreted as setting out on a neoimperialist path,²⁰ aggressively investing in foreign markets and seeking to dominate its near abroad in places such as Georgia.²¹ An undemocratic regime is a threat not only to its own citizens and neighbors, but also to its partners. Abnormal politically, economically, and strategically, Russia is not, from this perspective, able to pursue a "normal" foreign policy according to Western criteria.²² The problem becomes cyclical: the more the West criticizes Russia for its values, the more Moscow adopts an imperial stance. Russia is reactive to Washington's concept of democracy promotion because it is a source of destabilization. Moreover, the more Moscow is perceived to be standing up to foreign criticism, the more popular it becomes at home.

Alternatively, Russia's recent actions could be interpreted as transitional postimperialism, a phase during which Moscow is attempting to redefine its

system of influence.²³ This redefinition uses a mixture of isolationism and interventionism. The Russian elite are torn between their obsessive individualism in foreign policy and the extreme difficulty of shedding the legacy of intervention inherited from the post-Soviet transition. They appear split on what kind of relationship should be established with the West.²⁴ Many are having difficulty reconciling their individual desire to be integrated with the world's broader elite and their collective aim to maintain a perception of external threats to justify the status quo. Furthermore, Russia hopes to be able to show that the model of state-society relations promoted by the West is not as universally applicable as the West believes. Although Moscow is not confronting the West, such as it was during the Cold War, it has picked up on divisions within the West on issues such as the ratification of the Energy Charter, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Iran and is acting accordingly in its own interest.

Paris is also critical of the democracy promotion agenda.

Putin's first rupture with traditional Russian foreign policy was to perceive the state as a tool to enhance the country's resources, reversing Soviet practice and breaking with imperial logic. Normally, foreign policy should support domestic development, not vice versa.²⁵ Being at war and having regained a world-power status through energy, however, Russia has entered a phase of aggressive economic expansion and political assertiveness. Part of the problem is knowing whether this evolution will eventually feel the constraints of global market governance and durable partnerships. Essentially, Putin's Russia needs to avoid direct confrontation. Nevertheless, Putin and his successor have to confront the tensions between aggressively promoting Russia's interests and being seen as a reliable partner.

Redefining the French-Russian Partnership

In order to gain new momentum, Paris and Moscow must rethink their bilateral habits. France must move away from talk of a "special relationship" with the Kremlin, which has contributed to its awkward position within the EU and has failed to produce any tangible results. Despite this special relationship, Paris is incapable of influencing the situation in Russia anyway. It must thus link its Russian relationship to the broader EU-Russian dialogue, acting with Berlin and London and realigning with its new European partners, such as Warsaw, and focusing on the real geostrategic issues at stake, such as the South Caucasus and Central Asia, notably Afghanistan and Iran.

Policies regarding the role of Russia in the Eurasian sphere could be a catalyst to align transatlantic as well as pan-European policies and could help crystallize a common Eurasia policy, which has not otherwise found form. This strategy would define Russia as an indispensable pivot in any effort oriented toward Europe's east, the Caucasus, and Central Asia and as a component in the future China, India, and Iran equation. Seen from this angle, the debate on Russia's imperial nature and on its real or supposed zones of influence is highly relevant. Simply put, Paris must begin to see Russia not as a European country, but a Eurasian one, extending far beyond the Urals.

Notes

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3. French diplomat, interview with author, Moscow, March 2006.
4. See Yury E. Fedorov, "'Boffins' and 'Buffoons': Different Strains of Thought in Russia's Strategic Thinking," *Chatham House Briefing Paper*, Rep BP 06/01 (March 2006), <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/pdf/research/rep/BP0306russia.pdf>.
5. See Daniel Vernet, "Le désordre règne à Moscou," *Le Monde*, October 17, 2006.
6. French diplomat, interview with author, Paris, September 2006.
7. For one perspective, see Olga Khryshtanovskaya and Stephen White, "Putin's Militocracy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19, no. 4 (November–December 2003): 289–306; Olga Khryshtanovskaya and Stephen White, "Inside the Putin Court: A Research Note," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 7 (November 2005): 1065–1075. For another viewpoint, see Ian Bremmer and Samuel Charap, "The *Siloviki* in Putin's Russia: Who They Are and What They Want," *The Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2006–07): 83–92; Bettina Renz, "Putin's Militocracy? An Alternative Interpretation of *Siloviki* in Contemporary Russian Politics," *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 6 (September 2006): 903–924.
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13. See Virginie Malingre, "L'offensive politique de Russie SA," *Le Monde*, September 18, 2006, <http://www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1-0@2-3232,36-814043,0.html>; Laure Mandeville, "Paris mal à l'aise face à son partenaire russe," *Le Figaro*, September 22,

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14. German diplomat, interview with author, Moscow, March 2006.
 15. Jean-Pierre Raffarin, "Intervention lors du petit-déjeuner avec les représentants des milieux économiques français à Moscou" (speech, Moscow, October 6, 2003), http://www.archives.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/raffarin_version1/fr/ie4/contenu/40884.htm#.
 16. See Pavel Baev, "Putin's Counter-Terrorism: The Parameters of a Strategic Dead-End," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 17, no. 1 (March 2006): 1–21.
 17. See John O'Loughlin and Paul Talbot, "Where in the World Is Russia?" *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 46, no. 1 (2005): 23–50.
 18. On the domestic front, see Thomas Gomart, "Russie: trop-plein d'énergies ou d'inerties?" *Ramses* 2006, eds. Thierry de Montbrial and Philippe Moreau Defarges (Paris: Dunod, 2005), pp. 79–93. On the foreign front, see Thomas Gomart, "Politique étrangère russe: l'étrange inconstance," *Politique étrangère*, no. 1 (2006): 25–36.
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 22. See Lo, "Evolution or Regression?"
 23. See Thomas Gomart, "Quelle influence russe dans l'espace post-soviétique?" *Le courrier des pays de l'Est*, no. 1055 (2006): 4–13.
 24. See Andrei Tsygankov, "Projecting Confidence, Not Fear: Russia's Post-Imperial Assertiveness," *Orbis* 50, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 677–690; Andrei Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2005): 132–158.
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