Multilateralism in Russian Foreign Policy: Some Tentative Evaluations*

Hongsub Lee**
Korea National Defense Univ

Abstract

Russia’s pursuit of multilateral approach has dual characteristics. As a medium-sized great power in world politics, Russia tends to perform rhetorically as a proponent of the kind of multilateralism embodied in the United Nations. On the other hand, Russia has revealed stronger ambitions to assert itself as a regional power in its immediate neighborhood. Here, it tends to act either unilaterally or as an ‘instrumental multilateralist’, predominantly making use of regional institutions to legitimize its actions. In this context, Russia can be seen as both an instrumental and a principled multilateralist, in other words, multilateralism in Russian foreign policy is both a tool and a value.

Key words: multilateralism, foreign policy, Putin, Russia, SCO, CSTO

I. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the concept of multipolarity (mnopopolyarnost’) has been reiterated as Russia’s top foreign-policy concern. Just as the character of Russia’s foreign policy shifted from word-oriented to action-oriented, Russia’s multilateral engagement became more substantial and extensive under the Putin’s presidency. Goals have been defined more narrowly, but strategies for achieving targets have been defined more effectively.

The Russian leadership concerns over the influence and presence of EU countries and the USA in the former Soviet space. This concern was significantly enhanced by the prolonged presence of US military bases in Central Asia, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The ‘color revolutions’ in Georgia(2003), Ukraine(2004) and Kyrgyzstan(2005) further aggravated Russia’s

* This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2009-362-B00005)
** Korea National Defense University.
concerns about outside encroachment, since the new leadership in Ukraine and Georgian (less so in Kyrgyzstan) sought to strengthen ties with Europe and the USA at the expense of Russia. Both occurrences shaped Moscow’s overall policies towards the states in the region and towards the outside countries engaging in the post-Soviet area. Most importantly in this context, these incidents led to Russia to intensify its multilateral institution in Eurasia.

Moscow’s pursuit of multilateral approach has dual characteristics. As a medium-sized great power in world politics, Russia tends to perform rhetorically as a proponent of the kind of multilateralism embodied in the United Nations. Indeed, Moscow’s language on the central role of the UN is exactly that of a ‘principled multilateralist.’ However, Russia remains a rather conditional supporter of multilateralist approach in international relations: it mainly seeks to use existing institutions to restrain US policy, showing a lukewarm attitude towards cooperating with the already established international organizations. On the other hand, Russia has revealed stronger ambitions to assert itself as a regional power in its immediate neighborhood. Here, it tends to act either unilaterally or as an ‘instrumental multilateralist’, predominantly making use of regional institutions to legitimize its actions.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rebirth of Russia as a state in 1991, there has been an increase in Russian multilateral relations compared to the Soviet times. What does this explain about multilateralism in Russian foreign policy? Why did Russia rush to join multilateral organizations? Why has multilateralism became a catchphrase of Russian foreign policy since 1991 despite the Soviet legacy with its mistrust of international institutions? These questions are examined in this paper.

II. What is Multilateralism?

Multilateralism refers to institutions and issue areas that involve multiple countries working in concert in a sustained manner. This multilateral cooperation has been used as a tool for managing Russia’s international relations. Russia regards multilateralism as a value as well as a tool, and its multilateral engagement is shaped by its political, economic and security interests specific to certain areas and institutions in question. Moscow’s emphasis on multi-polarity means that Russia no longer sees international relations as a zero-sum outcome. For example,