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## **The uses of sovereignty in 21st century Russian foreign policy**

Of all the areas of friction between Russia and the US (and its allies), few are proving to be more significant than the dispute over sovereignty – its meaning and its limits. A radical rethinking of the theory and practice of sovereignty in the post-Cold War world, informed by the liberal political values deriving from the hegemonic influence of the US, and evident in several US-led interventions, has called into question the primacy of state sovereignty in contemporary international relations. Outside the boundaries of the former Soviet Union, Russia has responded by strongly reasserting the principle of state sovereignty as the basis of international law and international relations.

At the same time, however, Russia has shown an entirely different approach to state sovereignty within the post-Soviet space. Russia has demonstrated a fundamental disregard for the state sovereignty principle in its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states in 2008 and its incorporation of Crimea in 2014, in both cases despite the opposition of the states (Georgia and Ukraine) in which these regions were located. This clearly contradicts the Russian position on state sovereignty in relation to Iraq, Serbia, Syria, and other cases, and which is set out in key policy documents and governmental statements.<sup>1</sup>

While this is obviously a significant inconsistency in the Russian view of sovereignty, it would be wrong to assume that this is either a mistake or a recent development. Analysis of key Russian foreign policy documents, statements by Russian governmental actors, and Russian diplomatic and military activity suggest that although the content of sovereignty varies across cases in Russian foreign policy, any characterisation of the differentiated Russian approach as merely inconsistent and hypocritical misses the core function of sovereignty in Russian foreign policy. Outside the region of the former Soviet Union, a ‘Westphalian’ state sovereignty model – where mutual recognition of sovereignty by states and acceptance of the principle of legal equality of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Voennaya doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 5 February 2010, available from:

[http://news.kremlin.ru/ref\\_notes/461](http://news.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/461), accessed 16 October 2012; *Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi*

*Federatsii*, 15 July 2008, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/acts/785>, accessed 28 August 2014; *Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 12 February 2013, available at:

<http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/nsosndoc.nsf/e2f289bea62097f9c325787a0034c255/c32577ca0017434944257b1600>

51bf7f!OpenDocument, accessed 31 July 2013; *Statement at the 67<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly*, 28

September 2012, available at: [http://russiaun.ru/en/news/ga\\_lavrov\\_67](http://russiaun.ru/en/news/ga_lavrov_67), accessed 22 May 2014.

states are both assumed – is evident in Russian foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Inside it, however, the approach combines the legacy of Soviet ideas about state sovereignty with a discursive adaptation of the ‘post-Westphalian’ model that has underpinned debates about Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and intervention since the late-1990s.<sup>3</sup>

This article suggests that the principal significance of the idea of sovereignty in Russian foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is instrumental, not ideational – in other words, that although ideas about the character of state sovereignty have been set out frequently by members of the Russian political elite in speeches, interviews, and other public forums and appear to be central to the articulation of Russian foreign policy in official documents, their primary purpose is to advance particular elements of Russian foreign policy rather than to develop a consistent position on sovereignty which would inform governmental practice. As a result, this article also suggests that while Russian governmental discourse and practice in relation to state sovereignty has not been consistent in its content across time or cases, it has been consistent both in its functions and in its differentiation between states outside and inside the post-Soviet space. It is possible to identify what could be characterised as two working models of sovereignty in Russian foreign policy: a ‘Westphalian’ and a ‘post-Soviet’ approach. In both approaches, the point of sovereignty ideas in Russian foreign policy remains the same: to enhance Russian security; to challenge, at both conceptual and practical levels, US primacy and the extension of influence in the post-Soviet region by the US and its ‘Western’ allies;<sup>4</sup> and to enhance Russia’s position as both a regional power and a significant power in an emergent multipolar order.

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<sup>2</sup> This article does not, of course, suggest that ‘Westphalian’ sovereignty is a concept explicitly adopted in Russian foreign policy discourse; rather, it suggests that the term – widely, if not unproblematically used in Western International Relations theory – describes one of the positions adopted on sovereignty by the Russian government.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘post-Soviet’ is used here to refer all the successor states of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) other than the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) which, as members of both the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU), have political, economic, and security relationships to Russia, the rest of Europe, and other parts of the former Soviet Union, that are radically different from the other Soviet successor states’ relationships to these actors.

<sup>4</sup> Although problematic in several respects, the term ‘West’ is used here to refer to the US and its European allies (members of NATO or the EU) because it is a term widely used by the actors themselves, including members of the Russian political elite.

This article, then, argues that a dual approach to state sovereignty – Westphalian sovereignty outside the region of the former Soviet Union and a post-Soviet model inside it – performs three functions in contemporary Russian foreign policy: firstly, it helps to secure Russian national interests at domestic, regional, and international levels; secondly, it acts as a form of balancing against the US and its allies, the states Russia most strongly associate with the shift towards a post-Westphalian model of sovereignty; and thirdly, it acts as a marker of ‘non-Western’ power identity in an emergent multipolar order. Given the variety and strength of domestic and international interests at stake, Russia is unlikely to abandon its use of a dual approach to state sovereignty in the near term, which means that the concept and practice of state sovereignty will continue to be a source of dispute between Russia and the West. However, the conflict between these two models, while effective in advancing the two objectives of national interests and balancing in the short term, is likely to cause significant problems in the longer term for the third objective because of the concerns of other group members, above all China. Since this objective intersects with the others, the friction produced by differences between these two models represents a challenge for Russian foreign policy in the longer term. Thus both the disputes between Russia and the West over sovereignty and the tension between Russia’s own working models of sovereignty are likely to remain significant sources of instability and uncertainty in global politics.

### *The sovereignty problem*

Sovereignty emerged as a particular issue of dispute between Russia on the one hand and the US and its allies on the other, at the end of the 1990s and grew significantly in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the Russian government’s position on sovereignty was one aspect of a broader shift towards foreign policy assertiveness, the dispute itself is, to a significant extent, a product of the deeply contested shift in Western and international institutional understandings of, and discourse about, sovereignty in this period.

Following a series of cases when the international community failed to act (or to act in a timely fashion) in response to gross human rights violations, and after the 1999 military intervention in Kosovo, debates about humanitarian intervention led to a reconceptualization of the role and meaning of sovereignty. This re-evaluation appeared to critics to pose a serious challenge to the foundations of international law, the conduct of peaceful inter-state relations, and to the possibility of global governance through international institutions because it challenged the traditional primacy of the sovereign state in international relations.

Recognition of state sovereignty, in this new conception, was understood to be contingent on the conduct of states towards their populations. Whereas traditional conceptions (Hinsley 1966, James 1986) emphasised the state as the ultimate holder of sovereignty and, in consequence, viewed sovereignty as unrelated to the conduct of states within the legally recognised boundaries of their territories, these new conceptualisations located sovereignty, ultimately, with the populations of states, rather than the states themselves. In Kofi Annan's well-known assessment, 'state sovereignty, in its most basic sense, is being redefined [...] states are now widely understood to be instruments at the service of their peoples, and not vice versa' (Annan 1999). Given the responsibility of the international community to prevent serious human rights abuses, and the seemingly increased willingness of some states and international organisations to intervene in other states to achieve this, the external dimension of sovereignty – a state's sovereignty in relation to external actors – thus became explicitly dependent on external perceptions of a state's domestic conduct.

This shift in thinking about sovereignty was central to the development of the R2P concept, later accepted in modified form at the 2005 World Summit.<sup>5</sup> Although not envisaged by its promoters primarily as a challenge to state sovereignty, a weakening of the state sovereignty principle was generally understood to be implicit in R2P, and concerns about this formed the basis for Russian and Chinese objections to its reaffirmation via a 2005 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution (Bellamy 2010, p. 145). While analysts have debated the extent to which this was new to R2P given the pre-existing powers to intervene under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (Hehir 2010); the continued requirement of UNSC authorisation for any military intervention; and historic understandings of the responsibilities associated with state sovereignty (Glanville 2011), and despite Glanville's (2013) challenge to the idea that the 'traditional' state sovereignty norm in respect of intervention is as long-standing as commonly asserted, the perception of many actors involved in the debate about R2P was that it signalled a new willingness to set aside the state sovereignty principle in international affairs. This perception – evident amongst both proponents and critics of R2P – drove both the debate about the principles of sovereignty and intervention, and the response to intervention in practice.

Although this rethinking of the concept of sovereignty was international in character, and its most important articulation was in the documents and structures of the United Nations (UN), the principle and, in particular, the

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<sup>5</sup> *2005 World Summit Outcome Document*, 24 October 2005, available at:

<http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/pdf/World%20Summit%20Outcome%20Document.pdf#page=30>, accessed 18 April 2014.

practice invoking the principle was, for Russia and a number of other states, strongly associated primarily with the United States acting in its capacity as global hegemon and standard bearer of liberal political values, and secondarily with its Western allies. This was evident despite the fact that as Allison (2013b, pp. 65-66) notes, US government concerns about R2P and its potential to both limit desired US action and compel its involvement in unwanted interventions contributed to the weaker, modified variant accepted at the 2005 World Summit. Both this association and the shift in sovereignty thinking itself can be traced to the development of an international, liberal order under US hegemony, most notably developed in recent literature by Ikenberry (2011). Rejection of the automatic primacy of state sovereignty relative to the rights of the individual; the responsibility of the state to the individual; and the responsibility of an international community of states to assist in the protection of human rights within states – if necessary, without those states’ consent – are all clearly liberal in character. Thus, the emergence of ideas challenging the primacy of state sovereignty was linked to the growing importance of liberal political ideas and, in consequence, to the global dominance of the liberal hegemon after the end of the Cold War

The association between the US as hegemon and the perceived conceptual and practical erosion of state sovereignty as a foundational principle of inter-state relations was reinforced by the case of Kosovo and by the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. The 2003 invasion of Iraq raised significant questions about the status of international law and state sovereignty in a US-led, liberal order. Although not an action that fell within the parameters of R2P, the principle was invoked in relation to it by participants (Bellamy 2010, p.152); as the then-US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice observed in 2009, this appropriation of R2P to justify the Iraq War ‘still casts a shadow on efforts to deepen the consensus around the R2P concept’.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, it appeared to indicate, as with Kosovo four years earlier, that the US and its allies were willing to disregard the UNSC, international law, and the primacy of state sovereignty while citing humanitarian reasons for doing so. After the invasion, the repeatedly-stated aim of the US and UK governments to ‘return sovereignty to the people of Iraq’ or George W. Bush’s pledge to ‘transfer full sovereignty’ to the Iraqi president (US Department of State 2004) reinforced the impression that sovereignty was a condition that could be removed or restored to populations and

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<sup>6</sup> *Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative, on the UN Security Council and the Responsibility to Protect, at the International Peace Institute Vienna Seminar, 15 June 2009, available at:*

<http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2009/125977.htm>, accessed 21 March 2015.

governments of weaker states by the hegemon, and that state sovereignty was, in consequence, becoming a fragile and threatened principle.<sup>7</sup>

Tensions over the divergent views about the sources and primacy of state sovereignty manifested themselves most acutely in relation to the case of Kosovo. Predating the formalisation of the R2P principle, and different from it in conception,<sup>8</sup> the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo nevertheless seemed to critics to demonstrate the problems with this model of intervention, since the US and allies appeared both to break international law by bypassing the UNSC and to disregard Serbian sovereignty. As analysts have noted, intervention in Kosovo was seen by Russian political elites as an attempt to pursue NATO, and specifically US, interests using the pretext of humanitarian intervention (Averre 2009 p.581, Asmus 2010, p.91). The military intervention itself was, however, a less significant threat to the sovereignty principle than the 2008 recognition of Kosovo's independence by the US, its allies, and others. Advocates for Kosovo's independence argued that Serbia had forfeited the right to territorial integrity because of the Serbian government's conduct in Kosovo. Significantly, for Charles Kupchan (2007), the forfeiting of sovereignty over Kosovo also had a punitive function; loss of territorial integrity was viewed as the punishment for ethnic cleansing and other actions by Serbian nationalists and as a warning to Serbians to move to the political centre ground. Debates about the future of Kosovo highlighted the sharp disagreement between proponents of Kosovo's independence, who argued that Kosovo was an exceptional case and thus not one that undermined the state sovereignty principle, and those, including members of the Russian government, who disputed the exceptional status of the Kosovo case and viewed recognition of its independence as an assault on Serbian sovereignty and on state sovereignty as a structuring principle of international order.

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<sup>7</sup> On Bush's promise to the Iraqi president, see *Remarks by the President and Prime Minister Blair of the United Kingdom in a Photo Opportunity*, 9 June 2004, available at: <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/rls/rm/33338ptf.htm>, accessed 2 December 2004. On the transfer of sovereignty back to the Iraqi people see, for example, *PM Welcomes Iraqi Governing Council Announcement*, <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/print/page4842.asp>; *Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee*, 21 April 2004, <http://www.state.gov/p/31719.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> As Evans (2008, p.285) and Hehir (2010, p.224) suggest, Responsibility to Protect developed precisely in the context of many states' dissatisfaction with the model of humanitarian intervention utilised in the Kosovo case and from the perceived need to formulate an alternative international response to humanitarian crises.

By the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then, a shift in the sovereignty norm, widely understood to be formalised in the R2P principle, linked by actors to interventions in Serbia and Iraq, had challenged the accepted position of state sovereignty in the international political and legal order. Although reflecting the shared view of many in the West and elsewhere, for opponents of this change – most notably Russia – this shift was principally associated at both conceptual and practical levels with the political values and foreign policy agenda of the US, and with its hegemonic role in the post-Cold War world. As a result, Russian concerns about the threat to state sovereignty posed by this change were closely connected to concerns about the role and intentions of the US. Both these sets of concerns have been reflected in Russian governmental articulations of ideas about sovereignty, and appear to have reinforced the dual approach to state sovereignty evident in Russian policy and practice.

### *Russia and Sovereignty: Two Approaches*

The idea of state sovereignty has been central to Russian foreign policy since the collapse of the USSR. As thinking about, and practice in relation to, the sovereignty norm changed in Western states and key international institutions, the Russian focus on sovereignty intensified. The Russian governmental approach has not been uniform, however, with two opposing models of sovereignty evident in Russian foreign policy discourse and practice: one is the traditional, or ‘Westphalian’, model of sovereignty which has been applied to Russia itself and to states outside the post-Soviet space; inside it, what may be termed a ‘post-Soviet’ approach has developed, in which the sovereignty of the states is treated as inviolable in the relation to ‘external’ actors but permeable in relation to Russia, on grounds that reproduce the normative justifications of the post-Westphalian approach opposed by Russia elsewhere. Although both have been evident since the early 1990s, both have strengthened significantly since the turn of the century.

### Russia and Westphalian Sovereignty

Since the collapse of the USSR, but particularly as the primacy of state sovereignty has come under pressure from shifting international norms, Russian governments have viewed state sovereignty as a foundational principle in the organisation and conduct of international relations. This position conforms to what might be termed a classical or ‘Westphalian’ model of state sovereignty (Krasner 1999), where sovereignty implies recognition and acceptance of legal equality by other states, as well as non-interference in states’ internal affairs



and respect for territorial integrity.<sup>9</sup> For the Russian government, this model of sovereignty constitutes the foundation of relations between states and underpins the wider network of international law and international institutions which form the legitimate framework for interstate relations. Challenges to the principles of territorial integrity and non-interference in domestic affairs are regarded not just as threats to the particular states in question but to the entire international political and legal order.

Since the turn of the century, the Russian government has become the most prominent defender of the Westphalian model in response to the Western-led shift to a post-Westphalian conception of sovereignty. Outside the post-Soviet space, the Russian governmental position on state sovereignty was strengthened in response to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which the Russian government condemned as a violation of the principles of state sovereignty and international law, asserting that none of the UNSC resolutions on Iraq ‘had authorized the violent overthrow of the leadership of a sovereign state’.<sup>10</sup> This differed from the Russian governmental position on the US-led invasion of Afghanistan; as Allison (2013b) notes, the US’s decision to go to war in Afghanistan was not regarded as challenge to the established international legal order because the UNSC permanent members, including Russia, accepted the argument that it was a case of self-defence in the face of a severe and continuing threat of terrorism; an argument that also enabled the Russian government to link the threat in Afghanistan to the threat to Russian state sovereignty in Chechnya. After 2003, concerns about US action in Iraq, which had been shared by some NATO members, notably France and Germany, became absorbed into Russia’s wider critique of hegemonic disregard for international law and sovereignty, and of the perceived

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<sup>9</sup> This article uses an expanded form of Krasner’s ‘Westphalian’ model of sovereignty, incorporating what he terms ‘international legal sovereignty’ – in other words, recognition of a state’s sovereign statehood and legal equality by other states (see Chapter 1, ‘Sovereignty and Its Discontents’, in Krasner 1999, pp. 3-42). These are two aspects of what much of the sovereignty literature has traditionally categorised as external sovereignty and together represent the key aspects of sovereignty relations between states in what might be termed classical thinking about state sovereignty.

<sup>10</sup> *Security Council concludes two-day debate on military action in Iraq*, 27 March 2003, available at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2003/sc7707.doc.htm>, accessed 25 July 2014.

attempt to create a world with only ‘one master, one sovereign’;<sup>11</sup> it acted as a key reference point for Russian governmental statements about the threat to the state sovereignty principle and to international order posed by US-led military action.

The Kosovo case was even more significant, since it involved the recognition of a secessionist region without the consent of the sovereign state. As Antonenko (2007, p.10) noted prior to Kosovo’s recognition, this was regarded by the Russian government as setting a dangerous precedent and as a challenge to the international legal order. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov observed in 2007 that ‘attempts are being made to solve the Kosovo problem at the expense of the international community – that is, by creating a precedent that would go beyond the frameworks of international law’ (Lavrov 2007), later describing recognition as involving ‘the subversion of all the foundations of international law [and] the subversion of those principles [...] laid down in the fundamental documents of the UN’.<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Putin asserted that ‘to support a unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo is amoral and against the law. Territorial integrity is one of the fundamental principles of international law’.<sup>13</sup>

Inside the post-Soviet region, the perceived challenge posed by the ‘Colour Revolutions’ increased the Russian governmental discursive commitment to the primacy of state sovereignty, an approach shared with authoritarian governments in Central Asia (Averre 2007, Ambrosio 2008); in the Russian governmental narrative, the ‘Colour Revolutions’ in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004-05) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) were the product of Western (principally US) interference in the internal affairs of the states in question, designed to advance US national interests and undermine those of Russia under the cover of democracy promotion. Thus although, as discussed below, the Westphalian sovereignty model does not, and has never, been understood to apply to the relationship

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<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Putin, Munich Security Conference speech, 10 February 2007, available from: [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138\\_type82912type82914type82917type84779\\_118123.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml), accessed 31 December 2013.

<sup>12</sup> *RIA Novosti*, ‘Lavrov makes emotional plea for sanity over Kosovo independence’, 12 February 2008, available at: <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20080212/99052344.html>, accessed 22 November 2012;

<sup>13</sup> *Transcript of Annual Big Press Conference*, 14 February 2008, available from: [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2008/02/14/1011\\_type82915\\_160266.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2008/02/14/1011_type82915_160266.shtml), accessed 1 August 2013.

between Russia and the other states of the post-Soviet region, it has always been understood to apply unequivocally to the relations between post-Soviet states and other states.

This commitment to state sovereignty as the foundational principle of international relations has been established repeatedly in policy documents and public statements, emphasising several aspects of the Westphalian model including the fundamental and historic importance of state sovereignty as the central feature of a stable international order defined by the primacy of international law; the critical importance of defending the state sovereignty principle for Russia's national security; the threat posed to the principle by the actions of the US and its NATO allies (though particular states are rarely mentioned); and Russia's leading role in defending the principle, a position that is understood to reflect global majority opinion.

The 2010 Russian military doctrine places the defence of Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity first in its list of the Armed Forces' peacetime responsibilities, and identifies territorial claims and interference in internal affairs, and domestic threats to Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity as, respectively, key external and internal threats.<sup>14</sup> The 2008 and 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concepts both identify strengthening Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity as primary foreign policy objectives, and the 2008 Concept attacked 'attempts to depreciate the role of the sovereign state as the fundamental element of international relations' and 'the division of states into categories with different rights and responsibilities' which creates the dual threat of 'undermining the international rule of law, and arbitrary interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states'.

<sup>15</sup> This was reiterated in the 2013 Concept which, in a direct attack on the application of shifting sovereignty principles, states that Russia will 'oppose the attempts of individual states or groups of states to subject to revision universally recognized norms of international law reflected in universal documents' and condemns as 'particularly dangerous to international peace, law and order' what it characterises as the arbitrary reinterpretation of core international legal principles including state sovereignty and territorial integrity to suit the interests of individual countries. It asserts that:

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<sup>14</sup> *Voennaya doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 5 February 2010.

<sup>15</sup> *Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 15 July 2008.

It is unacceptable that, on the pretext of implementation of the ‘responsibility to protect’ concept, military interventions and other forms of foreign interference have been carried out, undermining the foundation of international law, based on the principle of sovereign equality of states.<sup>16</sup>

This position has been frequently reiterated by members of the Russian government in speeches and other public fora, emphasising that shifts in the sovereignty norm are not only illegitimate but destabilising to the international order. Addressing the UN General assembly in September 2012, for example, Sergei Lavrov argued that ‘world order is threatened by arbitrary interpretation of such essential principles as non-use or threat of force, peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of states and non-interference in their domestic affairs’.<sup>17</sup> Writing shortly before the 2012 Russian presidential election, Vladimir Putin asserted that, ‘a string of armed conflicts under the pretext of humanitarian concerns has undermined the principle of national sovereignty, which has been observed for centuries. A new type of vacuum, the lack of morality and law, is emerging in international affairs’ (Putin 2012).

The Russian view of state sovereignty as fundamental to international order, and its opposition to a shift in the sovereignty norm in a US-dominated international political environment, has had significant consequences for the management of questions of international peace and security. The most significant, recent example of this has been the dispute over the international response to the crisis in Syria. Russian opposition to external intervention in the Syrian crisis was widely characterised by non-Russian commentators and media reports as the product of a desire to protect a government friendly to Russia and, in particular, to protect Russian interests in Syria, above all the Russian naval base at Tartus (Triesman, 2012). As Trenin (2013), and Allison (2013a), have noted, however, the Russian government’s opposition to intervention in Syria is profoundly connected to concerns about sovereignty and intervention.

This position, reflecting Russian governmental views on the ‘Arab Spring’ more broadly, was incorporated into the 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept, which asserts that Russia promotes peace in the Middle East ‘on the

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<sup>16</sup> *Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 12 February 2013.

<sup>17</sup> *Statement at the 67<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly*.

basis of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity of states and non-interference in their internal affairs'.<sup>18</sup>

Russian statements on Syria consistently made clear that the question of possible intervention in Syria had wider consequences for the principle of sovereignty and the shape and stability of international order. Military intervention in Syria without the consent of the Syrian government would have compounded the threat to state sovereignty generated by the three interventions in Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya, further undermining the legal and institutional foundations of international order. Addressing the UNSC in 2012, for example, Lavrov cited Putin's assertion that 'the primacy of international law must be ensured in the international arena in the same way as within states' and stated that events 'confirm once again the need to respect the key principles of the Charter of the United Nations, above all the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, non-interference in their domestic affairs and the non-use or threat of force'.<sup>19</sup> This principle of non-interference in other states' internal affairs is one that has been stressed repeatedly in Russian governmental statements on Syria; in November 2012, for example, Lavrov claimed that Russian practice was not to work with another state's domestic opposition against the authorities, since 'this is a principle of inter-state relations and we adhere to it'.<sup>20</sup> The Russian government maintained the position that US intervention in Syria was not compatible with Syrian sovereignty and international law even after the object of that intervention had shifted to addressing the threat posed by Islamic State (IS); condemning the September 2014 US bombing of IS positions in Syria without either UNSC or Syrian consent, the Russian Foreign Ministry asserted that:

Russia would like to note that such actions can be carried out only within the framework of international law. This implies not a formal unilateral notification of the strikes, but the existence of explicit consent of the Syrian government or a relevant decision by the UN Security Council. [...]

Attempts to pursue geopolitical objectives and violations of the sovereignty of states in the region can only aggravate tensions and further serve to destabilise the situation. Moscow has repeatedly warned

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<sup>18</sup> *Kontsepsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 12 February 2013.

<sup>19</sup> *UNSC 6841<sup>st</sup> Meeting*, 26 September 2012, p. 7, available at:

[http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6841](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6841), accessed 29 August 2014.

<sup>20</sup> *Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova informgentstvu "RIA Novosti", gazete "Moskovskie Novosti", zhurnalu "Rossiya v globalnoi politike"*, 8 November 2012, available at: [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/newslines/529CA5B554AC387244257AB00020405F](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newslines/529CA5B554AC387244257AB00020405F), accessed 13 November 2012.

that those who initiate the unilateral use of force bear full international and legal responsibility for its consequences.<sup>21</sup>

As members of the Russian political elite have made clear, responses to the Syrian crisis were a reflection of concern about the conduct and outcome of the 2011 intervention in Libya which has been, in turn, seen through the prism of Iraq and the wider pressure on state sovereignty. The Libyan intervention was particularly significant because it was, as Bellamy notes, ‘the first time that the [UN] Security Council has authorised the use of military force for human protection purposes against the wishes of a functioning state’ (Bellamy 2011, p.263). The Libyan intervention was thus the first in which the UNSC authorised military action that posed a direct challenge to state sovereignty on R2P grounds. Russia’s decision not to veto the resolution appeared to indicate a change in attitudes on intervention and a reduced anxiety about threats to the sovereignty principle. This proved not to be the case.

The escalation of military action by NATO states in Libya and the extra-judicial killing of President Muammar Gaddafi by Libyan fighters raised, once again, the problem of the relationship between humanitarian intervention and the state sovereignty principle. In the period since the intervention, members of the Russian government have characterised the action in Libya as intended to effect regime change for the purpose of NATO states’ self-interest masquerading as disinterested humanitarian intervention, and as an action recalling the invasion of Iraq in its duplicity and disregard for the state sovereignty principle. The linkage between the Iraq, Libyan, and Syrian interventions, and the perception that they posed a fundamental challenge to state sovereignty, was repeatedly emphasised by key actors including Putin (2012), and then-President Dmitri Medvedev who stated that Russia would not support ‘a dead-ringer for Resolution 1973 on Libya, because I am firmly convinced that a good resolution was turned into a scrap of paper to cover up a pointless military

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<sup>21</sup> *Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the strikes on the Syrian territory*, 23

September 2014, available at:

[http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/2dc5b556c23ac4f044257d5c005ce420!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/2dc5b556c23ac4f044257d5c005ce420!OpenDocument), accessed 15 May 2015.

operation [...] the Syrian resolution will not be like that'.<sup>22</sup> In vetoing a 2011 UNSC resolution on Syria, Vitaly Churkin, the Russian Ambassador to the UNSC, asserted that:

The situation in Syria cannot be considered [...] separately from the Libyan experience. The international community is alarmed by statements that compliance with Security Council resolutions on Libya in the NATO interpretation is a model for the future actions of NATO in implementing the responsibility to protect.<sup>23</sup>

As this indicates, the pre-existing Russian governmental commitment to a Westphalian model of sovereignty has strengthened both discursively and practically in response to the conceptual and practical pressure on the state sovereignty principle in the 21st century. For the Russian government, state sovereignty appears to be the most fundamental element of international order and law, the basis for inter-state relations and for the existence of international institutions such as the UN. The assertion of this position has been central both to the development of Russian foreign policy thinking in general and to diplomatic interactions on key contemporary questions of international peace and security, most notably Syria. This is, however, a model of sovereignty which has applied only to Russia itself and states outside the post-Soviet space; inside it, an entirely different approach to sovereignty – one that runs directly counter to it – has been evident.

### **Russia and post-Soviet Sovereignty**

If Russia has emerged since the turn of the century as the pre-eminent global defender of traditional conceptions of state sovereignty, its approach to state sovereignty within the space of the former Soviet Union has been radically different. At the same time as the Russian government's commitment to the primacy of state sovereignty strengthened significantly in the face of challenges to the Westphalian model, its position on the sovereignty of its neighbours, evident since the collapse of the USSR, also strengthened. The effect of the widening difference between the two approaches to sovereignty has been most obvious in the Russian

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<sup>22</sup> *Financial Times*, 'Interview with President Dmitry Medvedev', 19 June 2011, available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4bfa1f38-9a90-11e0-bab2-00144feab49a.html>, accessed 15 June 2012.

<sup>23</sup> *Minutes of the UNSC, S/PV.6627*, 4 October 2011, p. 4, available at [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6627](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6627), accessed 29 August 2014.

intervention in South Ossetia and the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, and in the absorption of Crimea in March 2014.

Like the commitment to a Westphalian model of state sovereignty outside the borders of the post-Soviet space, the commitment to a different approach inside it has been a consistent feature of the period since the collapse of the USSR. In its dealings with other ex-Soviet states in the 1990s, Russia displayed a view of their sovereignty that owed less to the traditional framework of inter-state relations and more to the legacy of the Soviet constitutional model. The Soviet constitution nominally recognised the sovereignty of its constituent republics, including their right to secede and their sovereign authority on a number of policy areas. In practice, however, the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) had little sovereignty in relation to the federal centre; the constitutional order established a simulacrum of republic sovereignty in relation to Moscow in some, limited issue areas but no sovereignty on foreign policy in either theory or practice. The re-drawing of SSR boundaries by the federal centre, including the movement of sub-units such as Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) between them, indicated that despite the nominal sovereignty of the republics, their territorial limits were determined by the federal centre.

In significant ways, this conception of republic sovereignty as nominal but not actual persisted in the relations between Moscow and the former republics – now independent states – to produce a post-Soviet model of sovereignty (Deyermond, 2008). Also reflecting the difference between the sovereignty of the SSRs and the Soviet centre, this approach to the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states has been sharply differentiated in character, with Russian state sovereignty treated in discourse and practice as inviolable, and with any interventions in the domestic affairs of the other post-Soviet states by states or institutions outside the region regarded as threats to the sovereignty of the states concerned, and to Russian security. This has clear echoes of the Soviet structure, where the sovereignty of the federal centre and of the constituent republics was, in effect, Westphalian in its outward-facing character, but internally limited and contingent, despite assertions to the contrary. This claim has persisted in the post-Soviet period and is a particularly striking feature of the Russian governmental statements about state sovereignty in the region. As discussed below, interference in neighbouring states' internal affairs has been characterised by the Russian government as evidence of Russian commitment to the sovereignty principle – a characterisation that also strongly reflects the language and arguments of the liberal, post-Westphalian approach to sovereignty.



Throughout the period since the USSR's collapse, this post-Soviet conception of sovereignty has been evident in a wide range of Russian interactions with other states in the region, including the division of Soviet military assets (Deyermond 2008), the problem of 'frozen conflicts' and Russian peacekeeping in the region (Lynch 2000), and the supply of gas. In the last decade, however, this approach has been manifested in more extreme ways, notably in Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and in Russia's recognition of Crimean secession from Ukraine and its incorporation into the Russian Federation in March 2014. Both the events in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 run directly counter to the Westphalian conception of sovereignty so central to Russian foreign policy outside the post-Soviet space. The decision to recognise the independence from Georgia of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was clearly incompatible with a commitment to the primacy of state sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states. The war in Georgia which preceded this recognition, and which saw the incursion of Russian forces over the South Ossetian boundary line into the rest of Georgia, was also obviously incompatible with these principles. This was even more strikingly the case in 2014, with the Russian government not only recognising the secession of Crimea from Ukraine but absorbing it into the territory of the Russian Federation – the first time since the end of the Second World War that a European state has annexed the territory of another European state, and the most complete rejection possible of the Westphalian sovereignty model.

Despite this, however, the decision to recognise Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence was framed in terms of Russian concern for both Georgian sovereignty and that of the regions themselves. In interviews and speeches, then-President Medvedev stressed that the Russian military presence in the regions – which lasted until 2008 and was viewed by successive Georgian governments as a mechanism for undermining Georgian independence from Russian control – was an attempt to preserve Georgian territorial integrity. In an interview with CNN he claimed that Russia had spent the entire post-Soviet period attempting to protect Georgian territorial integrity;<sup>24</sup> elsewhere, he claimed that Russia's involvement in the separatist conflicts had always

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<sup>24</sup> *Interview with CNN, Sochi, August 26 2008, available at:*

[http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/a9598af14937e88cc32574b200227](http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/a9598af14937e88cc32574b200227)

b9b!OpenDocument, accessed 18 April 2014.

‘proceeded from the recognition of Georgia’s territorial integrity’.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the Russian government argued that Georgian independence had itself violated the Abkhaz and South Ossetian republics’ rights to determine whether or not to secede from the USSR – in other words, Georgian independence had violated Abkhaz and South Ossetian sovereignty.<sup>26</sup> Medvedev’s address on 26 August 2008 characterised the actions of the Georgian government as an attempted annexation of South Ossetia; the Russian military action, in this account was an attempt to prevent the annexation of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>27</sup>

While attempting to present Russian military action in Georgia and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as compatible with the state sovereignty principle (in the case of the republics, with the principle of the sovereignty of the constituent units of a federal state), these actions were also represented in terms which directly reflected the Western-led shift in the sovereignty norm. Thus, Russian action in August 2008 was presented as a humanitarian intervention, and as a means to facilitate the self-determination of the regions’ populations. In Russian governmental accounts, reiterated many times in late August 2008, Russian military intervention was required to avert Georgian-instigated genocide in South Ossetia – a term which implied a moral and legal obligation to intervene. Georgian aggression, in this account, compelled the regions to secede to ensure their national self-determination and security.<sup>28</sup> Recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was held to conform to international law because it was a response to a formal request for recognition made by the regions’ parliaments, following referendums that were, in turn, a response to the threats to security and self-determination posed by Georgian aggression.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the recognition of their independence was, in the Russian governmental narrative, grounded in both democratic practice in the regions themselves and therefore in international law because:

A right to self-determination [...] is provided for in the provisions of the UN Charter, the relevant international conventions and the Helsinki Final Act. And if another state believes that a people has

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<sup>25</sup> *Zayavlenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii D. A. Medvedeva*, 26 August 2008, available at: [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/newsline/5A25D3A9082FB6E7C32574B1003DAF8D](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newsline/5A25D3A9082FB6E7C32574B1003DAF8D), accessed 18 April 2014.

<sup>26</sup> *Zayavlenie MID Rossii*, 26 August 2008 available at: [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/newsline/6E758FAF78A475AFC32574B100545BD9](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newsline/6E758FAF78A475AFC32574B100545BD9), accessed 18 April 2014.

<sup>27</sup> *Zayavlenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii D. A. Medvedeva*, 26 August 2008.

<sup>28</sup> *Zayavlenie MID Rossii*, 26 August 2008.

<sup>29</sup> *Zayavlenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii D. A. Medvedeva*, 26 August 2008.

expressed its will to have an independent existence and conducts a referendum, which actually was the case in both of these two republics, any other state in the world has the right to recognize this independence.<sup>30</sup>

In the Russian government's most widely reported discursive appropriation of the intervention practices about which it was so sceptical elsewhere, Lavrov claimed that Russian military action in Georgia was necessary because Russia had a 'responsibility to protect' Russian citizens living in South Ossetia.<sup>31</sup> The claim was criticised as an incorrect and distorted invocation of the 'R2P' principle (Evans 2009, Bellamy 2010); significantly, however, this responsibility was claimed to derive not from the UN's 'R2P'(which Lavrov mentioned as another instance of the principle, additional to the one being invoked by Russia) but from the Russian constitutional obligation to protect Russian citizens abroad.

This approach has been repeated in relation to the March 2014 absorption of Crimea into the Russian Federation. Again, the legitimacy of the decision to recognise Crimea's secession was held to derive from the right to self-determination; the democratic and legal process by which the secession occurred; and its basis in international law. Putin and Lavrov both stressed this argument, asserting that the UN Charter and other documents ensured the right of the Crimean population to self-determination. This was held to derive not just from the explicit provisions of these documents but from what Lavrov asserted to be an underlying assumption embedded in them that the territorial integrity of states is contingent on the fact that they permit the self-determination of the populations inside their borders. What Lavrov identified as the failure of the provisional Ukrainian government on this issue thus undermined Ukraine's entitlement to territorial integrity.<sup>32</sup>

As in the cases of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in relation to Georgia, the Russian governmental narrative on Crimea has invoked the illegality of a prior decision as a basis for considering the region not legitimately part of

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<sup>30</sup> *Interview with CNN, Sochi, August 26 2008.*

<sup>31</sup> *Interview by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergei Lavrov to BBC, August 9 2008, available at: [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/newslines/C4367C2B715EDA6DC32574A2005548AC](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newslines/C4367C2B715EDA6DC32574A2005548AC), accessed 17 May 2013.*

<sup>32</sup> *Vistuplenie I otveti na voprosi senatorov Ministra inostrannix del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v xode 390-go vneocherednogo zasedaniya Soveta Federatsii Federal'nogo Sobraniya, 21 March 2014, available at: [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/newslines/8009FE80B48FCDDDB44257CA2003AC683](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newslines/8009FE80B48FCDDDB44257CA2003AC683), accessed: 26 May 2014.*

an independent Ukraine. In his March 2014 address, Putin asserted that the 1954 decision to transfer Crimea and Sevastopol to Ukraine violated the USSR's constitutional norms and was done without the consent of the Crimean population.<sup>33</sup> The absorption of Crimea by Russia thus represented the correction of an illegal and undemocratic decision in respect of Crimea. Further justification, in this account, derived from the illegality of the temporary Ukrainian government which was unconstitutional, installed by means of a violent coup, and posed a threat to the security of the Crimean population. At the same time, however, a continued commitment to Ukrainian state sovereignty was emphasised; in his address on the absorption of Crimea, Putin asserted that 'we want Ukraine to be a strong, sovereign [...] state' and that in contrast to those (presumably both the provisional Ukrainian government and Western supporters) who sacrificed Ukrainian unity for political gain, 'we have always respected [Ukrainian] territorial integrity'.<sup>34</sup>

While the approach to Crimea was justified by reference to international law and to the sovereignty claims of the region, as in the Georgian case, the language and arguments of humanitarian intervention were also deployed. Thus, Putin's speech on the incorporation of Crimea into Russia alleged actual and threatened human rights abuses against the Russian population of Crimea, including 'forced assimilation' in the post-Soviet period, and post-Yanukovich threats to minority rights.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, the threat to Ukrainian state sovereignty was asserted to be from Western sources, not Russian ones, with a Foreign Ministry spokesman claiming that the threatened sanctions against the former Yanukovich government constituted 'economic pressure on a sovereign state' and citing other 'examples of the active connivance of the United States and the EU in the coup d'état in Kiev, acting against the political independence and sovereignty of Ukraine'.<sup>36</sup>

As the cases of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 demonstrate, and in direct opposition to the Russian position on sovereignty outside the space of the former Soviet Union, the approach to sovereignty inside it dispenses with the Westphalian model in favour of what could be termed a post-Soviet model. This approach

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<sup>33</sup> *Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 18 March 2014, available at:

<http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/20603>, accessed 27 March 2014.

<sup>34</sup> *Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 18 March 2014.

<sup>35</sup> *Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 18 March 2014.

<sup>36</sup> *Comment regarding the Budapest Memorandum of 1994*, 19 March 2014, available at:

[http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/3461172e18a7ef3544257ca10032c515!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/3461172e18a7ef3544257ca10032c515!OpenDocument), accessed: 26 May 2014.

places a high value on the idea of sovereignty, but does not assume that in the case of neighbouring states it implies sovereignty in relation to Russia. Indeed, Russian concern for the sovereignty of neighbouring states is demonstrated by their intervention in the domestic political affairs of those states. It also places a shifting value on the sovereignty of neighbouring states relative to the sovereignty claims of their constituent regions, the merits of which can be determined by the Russian government. All this occurs, however, as part of a commitment to the primacy of international law and to the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. This appears 'post-Soviet' not just in the sense that it applies to the other successor states of the USSR but because it appears to reflect aspects of the Soviet constitutional relationship between Moscow and the republics. At the same time, contemporary Russian governmental discourse on sovereignty in the region clearly draws on the language and principles of R2P regarding intervention and sovereignty.

### **The Functions of Sovereignty**

These two approaches, radically opposed in their characterisation of the meaning and limits of state sovereignty, and reflecting a view of sovereign statehood in the non-Russian, post-Soviet space as entirely different from that elsewhere, appear fundamentally inconsistent with one another – the product of a reactive, incoherent foreign policy. This view, however, obscures the overwhelmingly instrumental function that sovereignty discourse plays in contemporary Russian foreign policy. Thus, ideas about sovereignty are not a starting point or basis for Russian foreign policy, they are a means of articulating and advancing it, particularly in relation to the post-Soviet region and to the US and its allies. Reflecting anxieties about the shifting sovereignty norm as a product of assertive, hegemonic behaviour by the US, the dual approach to sovereignty is also a mechanism for responding to it and for securing and enhancing Russia's position in international relations; seen in this light, the differentiated position on sovereignty appears to be a more coherent and effective aspect of Russian foreign policy. Both individually and together, the two approaches perform three particularly important functions for the Russian government: protecting core Russian national interests; acting as a mechanism for both hard and soft balancing against the US and its allies; and acting as a marker of Russia's 'rising power' identity.

### *Sovereignty and Russian National Interests*

The first function of the Russian government's dual approach to sovereignty is the protection of what it appears to view as core Russian national interests.<sup>37</sup> The liberal shift in the sovereignty norm has been understood as profoundly problematic because it appears to threaten both Russia's domestic security and its international status. This shift affects three issues in particular, all perceived to be critically important to Russia.

Firstly, contemporary challenges to the primacy of state sovereignty have appeared to threaten Russian territorial integrity. Although Chechnya no longer presents the prospect of imminent territorial loss, the long secessionist conflict and the continued instability in the North Caucasus more widely are powerful reminders of the threat to this aspect of Russian state sovereignty. More generally, anxieties about territorial integrity have been a long-standing feature of Russian governmental thought and extend beyond the specific threats of the North Caucasus to other regions, including the underpopulated Russian Far East (Graham 2010). These concerns are evident in statements and documents, including the most important public statements of Russia's security and foreign policies. Thus, the 2010 Russian Military Doctrine identified as one of the main internal threats to the Russian state the 'undermining of state sovereignty and violation of the unity and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation';<sup>38</sup> the first foreign policy priority identified by the 2013 foreign policy concept is the 'preservation and strengthening of [Russia's] sovereignty and territorial integrity'.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the commitment to a Westphalian model of state sovereignty must be understood, in part, as a reflection of anxieties about Russian territorial integrity.

A second reason that contemporary shifts in the sovereignty principle appear threatening concerns Russia's domestic political character. Russia's turn towards a more authoritarian model of government; restrictions on aspects of civil society including the 2006 law restricting the activities of non-governmental organisations and the forceful response to election protests in 2011 and after; high profile incidents including the Pussy Riot and

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<sup>37</sup> The term 'national interests' is used here to refer to the priorities identified in core foreign and security policy documents such as the foreign policy concept, the national security concept, and the military doctrine, and in speeches and other statements given by senior governmental figures. While acknowledging that, from a theoretically-informed position, the term appears imprecise and problematic (Burchill 2005), the emphasis placed on it by the Russian government, including in these core foreign policy and security documents, means that it needs to be understood as a significant concept informing policy and practice.

<sup>38</sup> *Voennaya doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 5 February 2010.

<sup>39</sup> *Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 12 February 2013.

Magnitsky cases; and the historic record of human rights violations, not least in Chechnya, created a perceived vulnerability to challenges to its state sovereignty. The link, established most obviously in the case of Kosovo (but reinforced by the wider rhetoric of US, and other Western states' political elites) between democracy promotion, the desire to protect minorities and other groups from human rights abuses committed by their government, and hegemon-led breaches of the state sovereignty principle has appeared to be understood as a threat. As one analysis suggested, the Russian position on sovereignty 'is informed by a concern that if these principles were further eroded, Russia or its close allies in the former Soviet space could themselves be subject to external intervention';<sup>40</sup> Charap suggests that this has been the principal reason for opposing intervention in Syria (Charap 2013, p.37). As Allison argues, the Russian government's position on the primacy of state sovereignty thus 'remains to a large extent an external expression of [Putin's] preoccupations with Russian domestic order' (Allison 2013b, p.818); indeed, Allison suggests that this preoccupation has shaped Russian post-Cold War responses to changes to the practice of intervention and the broader changes to global norms (Allison 2013a). Members of the Russian political elite have repeatedly argued that double standards and the promotion of US national interests have characterised Western applications of the principle that state sovereignty is contingent on respect for human rights. In the Russian governmental narrative, the risk to Russia thus stems not from any domestic flaws (the Russian government has frequently sought to repudiate the portrayal of Russia as undemocratic and a human rights violator) but from the manipulation of the arguments about the sovereignty principle and intervention in order to advance US interests in weakening Russia. Both this issue and the concerns about territorial integrity indicate that for the Russian government, the preservation of the Westphalian model of state sovereignty in relation to Russia is an existential question; for this reason, as Krastev suggests, sovereignty has 'absolute primacy' in Russian foreign policy (Krastev 2009, p.77).

Some similar factors appear to be at stake in Russia's dual approach to the sovereignty principle in relation to other states. Outside the post-Soviet space, the strength of the Russian government's commitment to the Westphalian model of sovereignty appears to be linked, in part, to the nature of its relationships with states whose domestic conduct has made them vulnerable to intervention. The strongest expressions of Russia's commitment to the Westphalian model of sovereignty have been made in relation to states with longstanding

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<sup>40</sup> *Russia's Syrian Stance: Principled Self-Interest*, Strategic Comments, International Institute for Strategic Studies, September 2012, available from: <http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/past-issues/volume-18-2012/september/russias-syrian-stance-principled-self-interest/>, accessed 20 November 2012.

political, cultural or security links to Russia; concerns about threats to the sovereignty of states with weaker relations with Russia have been notably more muted. Thus, Russian opposition to the undermining of Serbian sovereignty through recognition of Kosovo was greater than its opposition to the invasion of Iraq. Russia's relationship with Syria has been frequently identified as a factor in the Russian defence of Syrian sovereignty (Dannreuther 2011, Allison 2013a), which contrasted with its position on intervention in Libya (although, as noted above, the position on Syria was also evidently a reaction to events in Libya).

Inside the region of the former Soviet Union, the differentiated, post-Soviet approach to sovereignty appears designed to protect Russian national interests in these states. A view of 'outward-facing' state sovereignty (in other words, the sovereignty of other post-Soviet states in relation to states outside the post-Soviet space) as inviolable has been evident in Russian governmental attacks on US and EU intervention. Bilateral and multilateral relationships with the other post-Soviet states have always been critical to Russian national security and foreign policy strategies, and 'external' threats to the sovereignty of these states appear to threaten Russian regional influence and therefore (for the Russian government) its security. Both a reduction in Russian influence and a corresponding US or EU growth in influence appear to threaten Russian national interests in a number of ways, particularly by bringing Western states closer to Russia's borders and by undercutting one of the key pillars of Russian claims to 'great power' status – its position as a regional power. Thus, as widely noted, US support for the 'Colour Revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan was attacked by the Russian government as illegitimate interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, by a hegemonic state using claims regarding democracy as a cover for the advancement of its interests.<sup>41</sup> Russian comment on US and EU activity in Ukraine in 2014 has followed a similar pattern, as noted above, with claims that economic sanctions against the Yanukovich government represented an attack on Ukrainian state sovereignty and that its collapse was orchestrated by the US and its European allies. At the same time, the sovereignty of these states in relation to Russia has been treated as limited and contingent, again for reasons of national interest. Georgia, for example, has always been regarded as an area of Russian geopolitical interest; similarly, Ukraine has been viewed throughout the post-Soviet period as central to Russian national interests in many areas. The assertion of Russian military, economic, and political power in a way that undermines its neighbours' political independence and territorial integrity is a means of both securing its own interests and excluding (or attempting to exclude) 'external' states.

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Wilson 2009.



Finally, a dual approach to sovereignty acts as a mechanism for the protection of Russia's international status, specifically its status as a great power. As Andrew Hurrell (2006) has argued, Russia, as a second-tier state, places great emphasis on the role of international institutions and on its position within them. For Russia, lacking the economic power of states such as the US or China, permanent UNSC membership, in particular, is central to its continued great power status. As a result of the military actions in Serbia and Iraq, the shift to a post-Westphalian model of sovereignty has been associated with the weakening of the authority of the UN. More broadly, a challenge to the state sovereignty principle poses a challenge to the validity of the UNSC and other international organisations whose membership is constituted on the basis of sovereign statehood. Thus, the challenge to the primacy of state sovereignty posed by both the reconceptualisation of sovereignty and actions that reflect this shift appear to undermine the authority of – indeed, the organisational principles of – the international structures that helps to constitute Russia as a great power.

If a commitment to a Westphalian model of sovereignty outside the region of the former Soviet Union helps to strengthen one pillar of Russian great power identity, a post-Soviet approach to sovereignty inside it appears intended to strengthen another: its position as a regional power. In addition to permanent UNSC membership (and its continued status as a nuclear superpower), Russia's international standing is closely connected to its role as the leading state in the large region of the former Soviet Union. An approach that treats the sovereignty of neighbouring states as inviolable in relation to extra-regional states but porous in relation to Russia obviously works to strengthen Russian dominance in the region, although the extent to which this has been a successful strategy appears increasingly questionable, as Russian dominance through various forms of coercion – most obviously in Ukraine – has acted to undermine Russian international standing among other powerful states and alarm its European neighbours.

### *Sovereignty Models as Balancing Device*

The dual position on state sovereignty and the resistance to the rethinking of sovereignty and intervention norms which emerged at the turn of the millennium thus appear to be closely connected to immediate questions of Russian national interests. There are, however, additional explanations for the Russian governmental approach to sovereignty which concern broader questions of power distribution and identity in international politics. For Russia's political elites, the question of sovereignty – its meaning and application – appear to be an important conceptual and practical mechanism for the exercise of resistance to US global leadership and for the

development of alternative centres of political authority in the contemporary international system. One of the principle functions of the Russian position on sovereignty thus appears to be a means of balancing against the US.

The theoretical literature on balancing identifies two forms: hard balancing (what has traditionally been understood by the term ‘balancing’, which implies the use of military instruments) and soft balancing. Soft balancing is a concept referring to the use of diplomatic and other non-military measures to balance against a hegemonic state without risking a direct challenge through the use of military force (Pape 2005). It was developed to explain then-current and likely future responses to assertive, unilateralist US foreign policy, and was particularly linked by one of its early formulators to the formation of short-term, diplomatic coalitions in the UN (Paul 2005). In the discourse and practice relating to Russian sovereignty models, both forms of balancing are observable: soft balancing in the Westphalian approach to sovereignty outside its region; a harder form of balancing in the post-Soviet approach inside it.

In their assessment of other states’ responses to a US-led, unipolar system, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth (2008) asserted that soft balancing, and the existence of balance-of threat tendencies, did not exist in the contemporary international system. This, they concluded, was because other states are only willing to risk the costs of balancing against the unipolar power when their core national interests are at stake, and that balance of threat rests significantly on the perceptions of other states in respect of the unipole. This may not have been a factor in other states’ responses to the US, they suggest, because it is ‘possible that great powers’ perceptions of US intentions have not, in fact, changed at all’ (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, p.66). Their more recent work concedes that soft balancing has occurred but the extent to which it has done so is unclear because it is ‘difficult to distinguish from standard diplomatic bargaining and competition’ (Brooks *et al.* 2012-13, p.22). Many analysts take a less sceptical view, arguing that evidence of soft balancing has indeed begun to emerge, particularly on the part of Russia and China (Ferguson 2012, Posen 2013).

This assessment – that states had not been engaging in hard balancing or significant levels of soft balancing against the US because their core interests were not at stake, and because perceptions of US intentions may not have changed – appears particularly problematic in relation to Russia, and particularly on questions of state sovereignty. A number of more recent analyses of US hegemony have recognised the importance of ideational and normative factors in the exercise of, and challenges to, hegemony (Kupchan 2011, Ferguson 2012). This is particularly the case when the hegemonic state is strongly associated with global norm setting and promotion,

and where those norms are explicitly linked to the hegemon's domestic political values. The role of the US as a global promoter of a particular set of liberal political values, and the tendency of its government, particularly during the George W. Bush presidency, to link the promotion of those values with a sometimes assertive, interventionist foreign policy, means that those states concerned by US dominance are likely to identify norms as area of resistance to US hegemony and a mechanism for soft balancing. This is made even more likely when a hegemon-led shift in norms (or one that is perceived to be hegemon-led) is thought to threaten both national interests and the core conceptual ground on which a state's foreign policy rests.

Russian disagreements with the US have frequently taken the form of disputes over international norms or domestic political values (and the distinction between them). US objection to Russian authoritarianism and anti-democratic practices is discursively reciprocated by Russia on issues as diverse as decision-making in international institutions (where US conduct is held to threaten attempts to create democratic international relations), and adoptions of Russian children by US citizens (suspended on grounds of human rights violations). The dispute over sovereignty fits clearly into this pattern. It is however, more substantive than these frequently rhetorical gestures. Resistance to shifts in the sovereignty norm represents not only a ground of difference between Russia and the West, it presents a challenge to US foreign policy ambitions in key areas. It also clearly seeks to protect Russian state sovereignty, power, and authority, in the face of the hegemon's preferences. It thus acts as a form of soft balancing.

In recent years, Russian diplomatic practice and foreign policy discourse in relation to sovereignty have together acted as a mechanism for soft balancing against the US in particular and secondarily against the US's European allies. Strong criticism of the US's destabilisation of the state sovereignty principle has been a central feature of Russian governmental discourse in the last decade. As noted above, assertions regarding the threat posed by other states – explicitly or implicitly, the US and its NATO allies – to state sovereignty and thus to international security and order are prominent in both the foreign policy concepts released in the last decade, and in numerous speeches and other public statements by key figures including Putin, Medvedev, and Lavrov. These documents and statements emphasise the illegitimacy of the US's approach towards sovereignty, stressing the inconsistency of application; the destabilising effect on international order resulting from the undermining of this core principle of international law and institutions; and the hypocritical use of this new approach to sovereignty in order to advance US national interests under the cover of humanitarian intervention and support for national

self-determination. The discursive pushback on sovereignty clearly appears intended to challenge the credibility of the US's position in international diplomatic forums.

This discursive challenge has not, of course, been confined to the rhetoric of Russian foreign policy documents and statements. Most significantly, it has also been used to challenge the US and block the approval for their preferred course of action in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) where those actions appear to threaten the Westphalian sovereignty principle. As noted above, both during and after the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, Russian opposition focused on the illegitimacy of the action as a breach of state sovereignty. More recently, intervention in Syria was blocked on the same grounds – that an intervention in Syria without the consent of the Syrian government would be illegitimate because it would disregard state sovereignty principles. In both cases, opposition to intervention by the US and its allies on sovereignty protection grounds has been linked by Russian governmental statements to opposition to US hegemony and the destructive effects of US foreign policy – to the idea that, as Lavrov remarked in the context of Syria, ‘we should not allow irresponsible actions dictated by expedient interests to shatter the system of international law’.<sup>42</sup> This use of the sovereignty principle to block the advancement of US foreign policy objectives in diplomatic forums exactly meets the definition of soft balancing.

If support for the Westphalian model of sovereignty in international affairs is a means of soft balancing against the US, Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, reflecting a post-Soviet approach to sovereignty, are examples of a newer, and harder, approach to balancing. While disregard for the territorial integrity of both states and the interference in their internal affairs had the most direct and traumatic consequences for the states themselves, the target of Russian action should also be understood to be external actors. Russian action appeared to be triggered by, and a mechanism for resisting, changes to the external orientation of Georgia and Ukraine and their inclusion in Western institutions. Russian recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence from Georgia and its August 2008 military intervention in Georgia are widely understood to have been, in significant part, a response to the proposed extension of NATO membership to Georgia earlier in the year.<sup>43</sup> Although not supported by some European NATO members, the

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<sup>42</sup> *Statement at the 67<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly*, 28 September 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Some analysts, for example Cornell, Popjanevski, and Nilsson (2008, p. 27) argue that the trigger for Russian military intervention in Georgia was the failure to agree a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia at the

inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine in NATO was strongly promoted by the US government, which took the position that ‘NATO must make clear that it welcomes the aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine for membership in NATO and offers them a clear path forward toward that goal’.<sup>44</sup> Regarding the further expansion of NATO to include two post-Soviet states as an attempt to widen the US sphere of interest at the expense of Russia, the Russian government responded with actions that formalised the longstanding *de facto* lack of Georgian territorial integrity in relation to Russian military incursions into Georgian territory and their recognition of Georgia’s secessionist regions. In addition to extending Russian influence in the regions, the evidence of Russia’s willingness to engage in military action in Georgia; the increased, longer-term presence of Russian troops in Georgian territory (in South Ossetia and Abkhazia); and the end of any prospect for Georgian territorial integrity all combined to render impossible Georgia’s accession to NATO. The assertion of Russian authority over matters of internal Georgian sovereignty such as the assumption of responsibility in relation to specific population groups; *de facto* military control over territory; and the recognition of secessionist regions acted as a form of hard balancing – using military force and recognition of secessionist regions in a third party in order to halt the expansion of a US-led security institution into a region the Russian government regarded as part of its sphere of influence.

The use of a post-Soviet approach to sovereignty as a means of hard balancing against the West also appeared to be at work in the case of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014. The collapse of the Yanukovich government was a consequence of Ukrainian withdrawal from the proposed Association Agreement with the EU; the agreement itself, the public protests against Ukraine’s withdrawal from negotiations, and the government’s collapse were all linked to an alleged US and EU desire to extend influence as a means both of advancing national interests and containing Russia. Evidence of this view was widespread, including claims by Lavrov that the protests were promoted by the US and EU and that the EU’s Eastern Partnership programme was created by the US’s most

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NATO summit in April 2008. This, they suggest, encouraged Russia to act to prevent the possibility of a MAP renewal.

<sup>44</sup> *Fact Sheet: the 2008 NATO Summit*, available at: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080402-1.html>, accessed 26 May 2014.

loyal European allies to block the possibility of EU-Russian cooperation, which would threaten US primacy.<sup>45</sup> Russian military activity in Eastern Ukraine and the absorption of Crimea may therefore be understood, in part, as a means of blocking the expansion of Western influence in Ukraine and the post-Soviet region more broadly, including (as in Georgia) rendering future NATO accession impossible through a permanent breach of Ukrainian territorial integrity. Russian control over Crimea, and its possession of the Ukrainian Black Sea Fleet bases also significantly increased Russian naval strength in the Black Sea region and rendered a large proportion of the Ukrainian coastline potentially vulnerable to Russia; this has inhibited the ability of Ukraine to join NATO in the future, and is likely to act as a check on other forms of Western security engagement in Ukraine and elsewhere in the region. Russian governmental action in Ukraine, above all the absorption of Crimea, represents the hardest form of balancing against the US and its allies that it has utilised since the collapse of the USSR.

#### *Sovereignty as emerging power identity marker*

The use of sovereignty as a balancing tool against the US and its allies has not occurred in isolation. Closely linked to it, and reinforcing it, has been a perception that the Westphalian sovereignty model is a point of normative commonality with other non-Western states, particularly ‘emerging powers’, and above all China. A commitment to the primacy of state sovereignty in international relations, then, also appears to function for Russia as an identity marker for non-Western powers in an emergent multipolar order, and as point of normative and political cohesion within otherwise diverse groups of states. This consensus on the Westphalian model of sovereignty, however, means that the alternative Russian approach to sovereignty inside the post-Soviet space is a potentially significant problem for any attempt to consolidate an emerging power corporate identity that includes Russia. This is particularly problematic since, as noted above, the Russian governmental approach to the sovereignty of its neighbours connects in fundamental ways to Russia’s status as a regional power, on which its international status partly rests. Thus, this third function of the dual Russian approach to sovereignty appears increasingly undermined by the contradictions between the two models.

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<sup>45</sup> *Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannyx del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na vstreche s chlenami Rossiiskogo soveta po mezhdunarodnym delam*, 4 June 2014, available at:

[http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/newsline/412C7BA2A5A1E66544257CED0059D4DF](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newsline/412C7BA2A5A1E66544257CED0059D4DF), accessed 18 June 2014.

Anxiety about the shift in the sovereignty norm has not been exclusive to Russia. A number of other states – for reasons including domestic concerns about secession, global stability, and interventions designed to effect regime change in non-democratic states unallied to the US – have expressed opposition to the emergence of a post-Westphalian approach to sovereignty. Prominent supporters of the traditional sovereignty model include many of the ‘emerging powers’; their position is reflected not only in individual statements, but in shared diplomatic positions on certain issues and in documents associated with institutions connected to them, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), of which Russia and China are the most prominent members, and the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS).

The SCO, comprising four of the former Soviet states of Central Asia, Russia, and China, is an organisation characterised by a number of key, shared political values, of which respect for state sovereignty is perhaps the most important. Concerns about threats to territorial integrity deriving from separatism – one of the SCO’s so-called ‘three evils’ – have been central to the organisation’s focus on sovereignty. Since the middle of the last decade, another significant factor has been the Western-led shift in the sovereignty norm. In the SCO, all the members of which are states regarded by the US as not democratic, the impact of this shift in sovereignty discourse and practice was clearly magnified by the ‘Colour Revolutions’, alleged to be a product of interference by the US and its allies in states’ domestic affairs. This was perhaps a particular concern for the region given the US’s support for the 2005 ‘Tulip Revolution’ in SCO member Kyrgyzstan, for which, together with the Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the George W. Bush administration sometimes appeared to take credit.<sup>46</sup>

As a number of analysts have noted (for example, Ambrosio 2008, Aris and Snetkov 2013) a key consequence of this anxiety about externally promoted threats to regime stability has been a strong commitment to the Westphalian sovereignty model and an assertion of the principle that, ‘historically formed differences [...] in political and social systems [...] should not be utilized as pretexts to interfere in other states’ internal affairs. Specific models of social development should not be subject to export’.<sup>47</sup> Not surprisingly, as a result, a

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<sup>46</sup> For example, the ‘Colour Revolutions’ were listed in the White House press release, *Fact Sheet: President Bush’s Accomplishments in 2005*, <http://georgewbush.whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/12/20051222-2.html>, accessed 7 June 2016.

<sup>47</sup> *Deklaratsiya pyatiletiya Shankhaiskoi organizatsii sotrudnichestva*, 15 June 2006, available at <http://www.sectsco.org/RU123/show.asp?id=108>, accessed 22 August 2014.

commitment to state sovereignty, the primacy of international law, and non-intervention in states' internal affairs have become prominent features of SCO statements, confirming members' 'mutual support for state sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity'.<sup>48</sup> The SCO has regularly confirmed this position in relation to events outside its area as well as within it, notably in response to the 'Arab Spring' and the crises in Libya and Syria; the 2011 Astana Declaration, for example, asserted that the international response to unrest in the Middle East must observe international law, respect independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, 'observing the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of all states'.<sup>49</sup> A commitment to the traditional conception of state sovereignty is thus one of the principal factors uniting these states; as a point of resistance to potential threats from democratisation and human rights-related intervention, it appears to be an aspect of member states' corporate identity that has developed in opposition to a Western 'other' (Aris and Snetkov 2013).<sup>50</sup>

A shared position on state sovereignty has also emerged as one of the few areas of common political ground between the BRICS states, evident in both the rhetoric and diplomatic practice of the group, with summit declarations repeatedly stressing members' shared commitment to a model of international relations that respects state sovereignty and territorial integrity. In addition to general statements of principle, this commitment has been emphasised in relation to particular cases, notably Libya where, as Thakur notes, all members attacked the broadening of the UN-authorized intervention for failing to respect Libyan state sovereignty (Thakur 2013, p.70). Even on Syria, where there has not been a unified position among BRICS

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<sup>48</sup> *Deklaratsiya desyatogo zasedaniya Soveta glav gosudarstv-chlenov Shankhaiskoi organizatsii sotrudnichestva*, 11 June 2010, available at: <http://www.sectsco.org/RU123/show.asp?id=395>, accessed 10 January 2014.

<sup>49</sup> *Astaninskaya deklaratsiya desyatiletiya Shankhaiskoi organizatsii sotrudnichestva*, 15 June 2011, available at <http://www.sectsco.org/RU123/show.asp?id=474>, accessed 10 January 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Aris and Snetkov suggest, however, that while some aspects of SCO discourse and identity have developed in opposition to the West, the broader 'geopolitical identity' of the SCO is more complex than a simplistic reading of the organisation as purely anti-Western defensive structure would suggest.



states on UNSC resolutions, joint statements have stressed the need to ‘respect Syrian independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty’.<sup>51</sup>

As analysts have noted – and unlike the SCO member states, all of which have governments involving at least some elements of authoritarianism – the BRICS states are a heterogeneous grouping that includes both authoritarian and democratic regime types, populations of different size, and varied economies. Despite their differences, the member states share a common position as regional powers, each of them, as Cooper and Flemes suggest, a significant global diplomatic actor that is ‘either too big or too uncomfortable with its immediate neighbourhood’ (Cooper and Flemes 2013, p. 952). As powerful regional actors with (varying) global political importance, they have often been identified as key states in a developing multipolar order, possessing, to different degrees, the features of emerging powers identified by Macfarlane: ‘regional preponderance, aspiration to a global role, and the contesting of US hegemony’ (Macfarlane 2006, p. 41); this, in particular, is what links Russia to the other members which – unlike Russia – have often been characterised as rising economic powers. It is this aspect of the BRICS states, at least as much as the shared anxieties of some members (Russia, China, and India most obviously) about threats to their territorial integrity, that has been identified as a cause of the shared position on sovereignty. For Pant, for example, the BRICS’s commitment to the state sovereignty principle is a product of their desire for ‘a multipolar world order where US unipolarity remains constrained by other poles in the system’ (Pant 2013, p.94); in Laïdi’s analysis, the BRICS grouping, emerging as a response to the attack on state sovereignty manifested in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, ‘form a coalition of sovereign state defenders’ who seek to ‘erode Western hegemonic claims by protecting the principle which these claims are deemed to most threaten, namely the political sovereignty of states’ (Laïdi, 2012, p.615). Thus, a commitment to the Westphalian sovereignty model is the most important feature and identifying mark of BRICS membership.

The fact that the group is evidence of an emerging multipolar, post-hegemonic world and the unifying function of a commitment to the state sovereignty norm both appear central to Russian governmental engagement with BRICS. Russia has been critical to the development of the BRICS grouping, convening its first summit meeting and, as Ferdinand suggests, acting as its ‘most enthusiastic advocate of foreign policy coordination’ (Ferdinand 2014, p. 377). The 2013 official Russian concept on participation in BRICS credits Russia with initiating the

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<sup>51</sup> *Fourth BRICS Summit: Delhi Declaration*, 29 March 2012, available at: <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/120329-delhi-declaration.html>, accessed 20 March 2014.

group, asserting that its creation was one of the most important geopolitical events of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, reflecting the ‘formation of a polycentric system of international relations’; the concept also notes that one of its principal features is a shared commitment to the primacy of international law and state sovereignty.<sup>52</sup> Interviewed in March 2013, Putin stated that the grouping was, ‘a key element of the emerging multipolar world. [...] Our countries do not accept power politics or violation of other countries' sovereignty. We share approaches to the pressing international issues, including the Syrian crisis, the situation around Iran, and Middle East settlement’.<sup>53</sup>

A commitment to the Westphalian sovereignty model thus serves, additionally, as a marker of BRICS identity and, in the Russian characterisation, as a feature that distinguishes the emergent powers of a new, multipolar order, with their commitment to a lawful and stable international political system, from the declining US with its destabilising and revisionist approach to international relations. This marker of ‘BRICS-ness’ is particularly significant for Russia which struggles in other ways to fit the ‘emerging power’ model which characterises other members of the group. For the Russian government, sovereignty and the BRICS appear to reinforce the significance of one another – the BRICS are significant, in part, because they help to shore up the Westphalian sovereignty model, but at the same time the model has importance as a marker of BRICS identity, and thus of membership of the club of emerging powers in a post-hegemonic world.

The strong commitment of SCO and BRICS members to a Westphalian sovereignty model, and the extent to which that commitment is a defining feature of these organisations, means that Russia’s other approach to sovereignty is problematic for its relations with partner states in these organisations. Although a post-Soviet approach has been consistently evident in Russia’s engagement with its neighbours since the collapse of the USSR, the recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence represented a greater challenge to the Westphalian model than lower profile actions such as disputes over the occupation of military bases. The 2014 absorption of Crimea into the Russian Federation and Russian involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine

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<sup>52</sup> *Kontseptsiya uchastiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii b ob”edinenii BRIKS*, 21 March 2013, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d452a8a232b2f6f8a5.pdf>, accessed 30 August 2014.

<sup>53</sup> *Interview to the ITAR-TASS news agency*, 22 March 2013, available at: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/5152>, accessed 3 September 2014.

both confirms and escalates the earlier challenge to the primacy of state sovereignty principle as traditionally understood.

In the short term, the impact of this conflict between Russia's two approaches to sovereignty appears to have been limited. None of the other BRICS and SCO members supported the March 2014 UN General Assembly resolution calling on states not to recognise Russia's absorption of Crimea and there has been no other explicit public criticism of Russian governmental action in Ukraine by any of these states. However, the wording of some statements about Crimea have clearly implied criticism of Russia, even though this is balanced by criticism of other actors. Speaking during the March 2014 UNSC discussion of Ukraine, which took place immediately before the Crimean referendum on secession, the Chinese ambassador, who abstained on the resolution condemning Russian action in Ukraine, stated that, 'China always respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states [...] we note that foreign interference is also a significant factor, giving rise to violent clashes on the streets of Ukraine and resulting in the crisis in the country'.<sup>54</sup> Later in March, after the incorporation of Crimea into Russia, the Chinese statement on the General Assembly resolution was more critical, asserting that, 'China has always been opposed to intervention in the internal affairs of other countries and has always respected the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries'; in a similarly indirect but clear criticism, the Brazilian statement noted that 'Brazil has consistently upheld that the Charter of the United Nations must be respected under all circumstances. That position reflects our unflinching defence of an international system based on cooperative multilateralism and respect for international law'.<sup>55</sup> As this implies, Russian actions – most obviously Russian military engagement in Eastern Ukraine and the political and organisational consolidation of Crimea's annexation<sup>56</sup> – have made a continued commitment to a shared position on a Westphalian sovereignty model extremely difficult. Given that, as noted above, this has been one of the few areas of commonality between Russia and the other BRICS states, the prospects for future cooperation between Russia and other members are unclear.

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<sup>54</sup> *Minutes of the UNSC, S/PV.7138*, 15 March 2014, p. 7, available at: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.7138](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.7138), accessed 26 July 2014.

<sup>55</sup> *United Nations General Assembly Official Records, Resolution A/68/L.39*, 27 March 2014, available at: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/PV.80](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/PV.80), accessed 26 July 2014.

<sup>56</sup> For example, the creation of a Ministry of Crimean Affairs (<http://mincrimea.gov.ru/>, accessed 15 May 2015).

## *Conclusion*

In response to a hegemon-led shift in the sovereignty norm and concerns about Western threats to Russia's position as regional power, a dual approach to sovereignty, evident throughout the post-Soviet period, has become an increasingly significant feature of Russian foreign policy. Though never acknowledged as such by actors, two sovereignty models are clearly evident in Russian governmental discourse and practice. In speaking about the basis of international order at a global level; in relation to states outside the area of the former Soviet Union; and in relation to Russia itself, Russia has maintained a strong commitment to a Westphalian model of sovereignty, acting as the most vocal defender of state sovereignty as the foundational principle of international relations. Inside the former Soviet space, however, a 'post-Soviet' approach has operated, in which state sovereignty is regarded as porous in relation to Russia while remaining impermeable in relation to states outside the region – an approach that is often justified by the Russian government using the same language of popular sovereignty, self-determination, and responsibility to protect that it rejects elsewhere.

This dual approach reflects the instrumental character of the idea of sovereignty in Russian foreign policy. The sovereignty principle appears to have three functions: to secure national interests on key domestic, regional, and international issues; to balance against the West in general and the US in particular; and to act as a marker of emerging power identity. To date, this has proved to be a broadly successful approach, particularly as a means of balancing against the West and securing national interests; in both these areas, the differentiated approach to sovereignty has been helpful in securing Russian regional influence and interests while pursuing objectives at the international level.

However, if the tensions between the two models proved to be productive for Russian foreign policy in the short term, and in relation to the first two of these objectives, they appear problematic for the third – membership of the club of emerging powers in a post-hegemonic, multipolar order. The strain placed on normative commonality with fellow BRICS members is problematic for Russia not just because it raises significant questions about its already-ambiguous place in the 'emerging powers' category, but also because this in turn affects the long-term prospects for its other objectives, notably the maintenance of its international position as a great power and the ability to effectively engage in balancing against the US and its European allies. The dual Russian approach to sovereignty as a means of advancing foreign policy objectives thus increasingly appears to be caught by a self-defeating logic. Russian status as a great power relies, as is true for other second tier states,

on its role as a regional power. A desire to protect this position from Western challenges and from threats deriving from governmental changes in the region has encouraged a more explicit and coercive application of the post-Soviet approach to sovereignty. This, however, is likely to have consequences for Russia's international position, which rests, in part, on its membership of the non-Western, 'emerging powers' group that is characterised by a commitment to the Westphalian sovereignty model. Given the extent to which both approaches have been embedded in Russian foreign policy discourse and practice, and in Russian identity as a regional and (thus) globally powerful state, change in relation to either appears unlikely. The retention of this dual approach, however, may continue to damage both relations with the West and Russian foreign policy interests, not least in relation to China.

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