

# P - Pragmatism

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The concept of pragmatism rests on the primacy of advantage/benefit that a certain action may bring. The eventual practical consequences determine the expediency of specific actions and at the same time serve as a criterion of their efficiency. One of the staunchest advocates of pragmatism, American philosopher William James, wrote: “Pragmatism’s only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us.”

Pragmatism is one of the fundamental principles of Russia’s foreign policy. Although this term is somewhat abstract, its content is quite concrete. The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation envisages that diplomats’ efforts should be focused on creating favorable external conditions for the country’s sustainable internal development. Specifically, diplomats should work for ensuring the country’s security, sovereignty and territorial integrity; creating good neighborly relations with adjoining states; promoting the competitiveness of the Russian economy and its technological modernization; and facilitating the rise of the people’s living standards and quality of life.

Russia’s policy in the post-Soviet region and Eurasia (CIS, EurAsEC, SCO), aimed at forming a broad integration space (the Greater Eurasia Partnership initiative), is quite pragmatic. The positive, non-confrontational agenda

of these associations helps to avoid dissipation of resources and focus on the accelerated development of the member states. Russia's political line of action in these relatively new institutions of global governance, whose activities are consonant with the spirit of the times, is also pragmatic. For example, BRICS pursues, among other goals, a course towards creating a monetary and financial system that would serve as an alternative to the dollar-centered one. Such a "safety cushion" is of special importance for Russia as the relations with the West have sharply deteriorated since 2014 and sanctions have been introduced

From the political-military point of view, the decision on the reunification of Crimea with Russia was in those circumstances the only rational solution (consonant with the public demand and the feeling of historical injustice). The realistic, sober assessment of the situation, combined with an in-depth analysis of possible scenarios and their consequences, predetermined Moscow's active role in the preparation of the Minsk Accords. The specific succession of steps stipulated in the Accords have bound Kiev and major European players by relevant obligations that are advantageous for Russia.

Russia's policy in Syria is characterized by a high level of pragmatism, too. The Russian leadership's decision to start a military operation in the Syrian Arab Republic was prompted primarily by the national security interests. By various estimates, in 2015, up to 6,000 citizens of Russia and post-Soviet republics fought in the ranks of the terrorist groups, and there was a real danger of their return. The West's narrative ("Moscow supports an autocratic ally"), aimed to create an impression of Russia's Syria policy as irrational, contradicts the events that preceded the conflict: Bashar al-Assad visited Moscow during his fifth year as president, while his first foreign visit as head of state was to Paris and the second one, to London; before the crisis started, Russia had ranked ninth in Syria's trade turnover (3%).

The exceptional pragmatism of Russian policy in Syria manifested itself in a de-ideologized approach, which made it possible to reach agreement on specific points of the settlement (ceasefire, certain aspects of political settlement, improvement of the humanitarian situation, etc.) with all of the external players. For example, when Russian-U.S. relations were at

their worst, Moscow and Washington co-chaired the International Syria Support Group (2015-2016), coordinated the details of the ceasefire regime in Syria (February 2016), and reached agreement on the de-escalation in East Aleppo (December 2016). Considering Russia's repeatedly voiced position on the illegitimate nature of the U.S. military presence in Syria, the Russian-American arrangements on deconfliction, which for several years have ensured the nonoccurrence of incidents in the air and on the ground, can be explained precisely by pragmatic considerations.

Russia's choice of external partners in the dialogue on conflict settlement in Syria has been made for purely rational reasons. A graphic example is the Astana Format which brought together Russia, Iran, Turkey—the three states with conflicting, often directly opposed agendas. The strictly realistic approach demonstrated by these guarantor countries enabled them to reach crucial agreements on the ceasefire, create de-escalation zones (2017), and set up a Constitutional Committee (2018). Separate bilateral negotiations with major regional players having an influence on armed opposition groups—Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt—made it possible to place under the Syrian government's control such strategic territories (former 'de-escalation zones') as East Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, Hama/Homs, Eastern Kalamun, parts of the provinces of Suwayda, Quneitra, and Daraa—without undermining the potential of the Astana Format which had created these zones.

One should separately mention the Russian-Turkish dialogue track. Pragmatism once again enabled the parties to surmount a major crisis between Moscow and Ankara, triggered by the Turkish Air Force's shooting down of a Russian Air Force Sukhoi-24 bomber, which resulted in the death of pilot Oleg Peshkov. Following a tough response from Moscow and apologies made by Ankara (far from prompt though), the dialogue between Russia and Turkey was renewed and made highly fruitful: the parties managed to come to an agreement on the final solution concerning East Aleppo and to coordinate the terms of de-escalation in Idlib (2018) and in the north-east of Syria (2019).

The consistent efforts to settle the conflict in Syria, free from any dogmatism or opportunistic flip-flopping—contrary to some forecasts—not only enabled Russia to avoid a deterioration of relations with Sunni states,

but instead facilitated the strengthening of its positions in the Middle Eastern affairs, securing its image as a reliable partner.

In this context, Russia's somewhat distanced position towards the situation in Yemen and cautious balancing in Libya are also examples of pragmatism and of the consequent unwillingness to raise the stakes in situations that have little importance for Russia's national interests. However, this does not prevent Moscow from participating in multilateral formats for conflict settlement in Yemen and Libya, or from rendering tangible support to the UN efforts in this regard.

Mediation (in providing conference venue) in inter-Palestinian and inter-Afghani reconciliation processes, without which the collective efforts to stabilize the situation in the Middle East and Afghanistan largely lose momentum, is also a measure that, while not overstepping the practicable norm of involvement, allows Moscow to exert reasonable influence on the processes in question.

Pragmatism is a principle that makes it possible to pursue a flexible, nationally oriented policy meeting public demand. This is a policy that sets realistic goals based on rightly understood national interests and identifies matching means to achieve them.