H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alexander Sergunin. *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior: Theory and Practice.* Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag Haunschild, 2015. 220 pp. $36.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8382-0782-7.

Reviewed by Michael de Groot (University of Virginia)

Published on H-Russia (May, 2017)

Commissioned by Hanna Chuchvaha (University of Alberta/Independent scholar)

As tensions continue to rise between the West and Russia over issues ranging from the ongoing Syrian civil war to the annexation of Crimea, Washingtonâs relations with Moscow may be at their lowest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Given the frosty state of affairs and the particular importance of the US-Russian relationship in current European and Middle Eastern politics, interest in the study of Russian foreign policy has surged among both academics and policy analysts in recent years. In his 2016 book, *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior: Theory and Practice*, Russian international relations scholar Alexander Sergunin examines this topic of particular contemporary interest: the motivations, process, objectives, theories, and strategies of Russian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.

Sergunin, a professor at the Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg and St. Petersburg State, divides the book into four chapters. In the first chapter, the author addresses how Western international theorists have attempted to explain Russian foreign policy since 1991, concluding that Western theories fail to account for peculiarities in Russian history, culture, and current policies. The author contends, for example, that power transition theory (PTT) develops a false dichotomy between status quo and revisionist powers. Sergunin takes a middle position, arguing that Russia should be seen as a reformist power that is dissatisfied with Western geopolitical and economic dominance but does not want to destroy international legal and institutional systems. Moscow seeks to alter the international system peacefully, within the ârules of the gameâ (pp. 36-37). Sergunin characterizes existing theories as âcomplimentary [*sic*] rather than mutually exclusive,â recommending that scholars should use a particular theory âdepending on the research objectives and contextâ (p. 66). He provides thoughtful analyses of common approaches to studying Russian foreign policy, but given Sergininâs stated objective of showing how Russian idiosyncrasies defy Western theoretical approaches, this conclusion fails to satisfy.

In the second chapter, the author then addresses how Russian scholars have explained their own foreign policy. This section is perhaps the strongest of the book, and Sergunin traces how Russiansâ thinking about their countryâs place in the world has evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union. He first examines the impact of Marxist-Leninist ideology on the development of an international relations theory that emphasized the driving force of class struggle and the inevitability of a global social revolution. This narrowly focused literature diffused in the 1970s, when the scholars began to introduce

concepts such as the balance of power and spheres of influence into the lexicon. This process accelerated under Mikhail Gorbachev as Soviet academics integrated liberalism and globalism into their studies.

After the collapse of the USSR, Sergunin argues that a âtheoretical vacuumâ emerged in Russian academia. This stemmed from several factors, particularly the institutional inertia of the influence of Marxism; academics in the post-Soviet era were âsimply unable or did not want to grasp new theoretical approaches, research methods and problematiqueâ (p. 71). The lack of academic contacts with the West also impeded the development of international relations theory in the early 1990s. A variety of different strands, however, emerged that aligned with long-standing arguments about the proper role of Russia in the international system. At one of the spectrum, the Atlanticists–dominant in the 1990s–believe that Russia shares a cultural history with the West and should join Western institutions. On the other side of the spectrum are the âright radicals,â a group that plays on irredentist sentiments and advocates the reclamation of territories such as Ukraine and Belarus as well as the restoration of Russiaâs role as a global superpower. Although there exists a variety of schools of thought about the proper direction of Russian foreign policy, Sergunin concludes that a âforeign policy consensusâ has nevertheless emerged in Russia among foreign policy elites and public opinion. The most important elements of this consensus include: the prioritization of Russian interests over âallhumanâ values, the expansion of Russiaâs global role as a great power, hegemony over the ânear abroad,â a more assertive posture vis-Ã -vis the West, and a great emphasis on soft concepts of power (pp. 130-131).

The author then turns to how policymakers in Moscow have translated these ideas into practice. He dismisses Soviet foreign policy as a âmixture of ideological dogma and real political considerationsâ (p. 135), a recipe that forced Moscow to start from scratch in the early 1990s. This area may have been a missed opportunity for Sergunin. Others such as Vladislav Zubok have shown that communist ideology combined with traditional imperial Russian geopolitical ambitions to drive Soviet policy, and Sergunin might have considered ways that the Soviet legacy influenced thinking in Moscow.[1] Although Sergunin is correct to point to 1991 as a type of *Stunde Null*, he may have considered whether there nevertheless existed some continuity. Is there any value, for example, of comparing the armed Soviet response to the Prague Spring in 1968 with the Russo-Georgian War of 2008? Each seemed to confirm Moscowâs concern about danger of Western political, economic, and military encroachment into Moscowâs sphere of influence, a strand of thinking that appeared to survive the end of communism.

Drawing on official Russian documents, Sergunin contends that Moscowâs national security policy has undergone a number of shifts since 1991. In particular, Sergunin views the years of 1998 and 1999 as a particularly important. The financial collapse in August 1998 undermined the popularity of liberal capitalism and made Russians question whether globalization would benefit them. The Kosovo war in 1999 made Russia become once again âsuspicious of NATOâs real character and its future plansâ (p. 153). Despite NATOâs declarations that it would transform into a political institution, the war confirmed to Moscow that the Atlantic Alliance would remain a Cold War-era military organization. Finally, the second Chechen War increased the Russian perception of threat, demonstrating that international and domestic terrorism were linked. Russian military engagement in Chechnya drew harsh criticism from the West–which viewed the Chechen leaders as âfreedom-fightersâ and claimed that the Russians committed human rights violations. This response from the industrial democracies âcontributed to the rise of new mutual suspicions and mistrust in Russiaâs relations with its Western partnersâ (p. 154).

Throughout this section, Sergunin pays close attention to official Russian documents such as the Russian Military Doctrine of 1993 and the National Security Concept of 2000. He identifies themes about the Russian perception of threat to track the evolution of Moscowâs view of the world during the Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin eras, particularly the increasingly hostile reading of Western intentions. Although close reading of these documents allows Sergunin to trace the trajectory of official Russian thinking, he might have complemented these documents with a wider base of sources. The official statements were drafted for public consumption, and it might have been worthwhile to examine how these documents were supported by other pieces of the public record. The liability of working on a period so recent is that the archives will not be made available for research any time soon, but a greater source base of newspaper articles, speeches, and similar texts might have allowed Sergunin to add some texture to this section.

Finally, Sergunin addresses how foreign policy is made in Russia. This fourth chapter offers readers a glimpse into the administrative decision-making process

in Moscow, tracing how the Russians constructed a new system in the aftermath of the Soviet Unionâs collapse. The author notes that the Russians had to adapt the remnants of the old Soviet foreign policy apparatus to comport with the new constitutional system. Serguninâs analysis here on the ways in which the Russians dealt with the Soviet legacy is quite thoughtful, and his identification of continuity and discontinuity may have been helpful at other points in the book. Of particular interest in this section is Serguninâs explanation of the role of lobbies, political parties, parliamentary factions, and the mass media. The energy lobby, for example, holds tremendous power in Moscow because of the importance of natural gas and oil exports for the Russian economy.

The book does not provide a unifying theme to link the chapters together, but *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior* offers readers analyses of Russian foreign policy from several academic and policy perspectives. Serguninâs contention in the introduction that Russian foreign policy discourse seeks to formulate a new national identity is intriguing, but he does not sustain this argument across each of the chapters. Unfortunately, the press may have rushed the publication of the manuscript; the text contains more than a handful of typos and awkward sentence constructions that more rigorous editing might have eliminated. The authorâs tendency to use bullet points that often number ten or more may also impede the readability of the book, but Serguninâs careful organization ensures that readers will be able to follow his narrative. Readers will find thoughtful examinations about the evolution of the political science literature and a survey of Moscowâs international behavior since 1991, giving them leverage to think about what drives Moscowâs current foreign policy in recent historical and theoretical contexts.

Note

[1]. Vladislav Zubok, *The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

Citation: Michael de Groot. Review of Sergunin, Alexander, *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior: Theory and Practice*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. May, 2017.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48761