I. Introduction

The arrival of Vladimir Putin as the new president signaled a renewed interest to engaging the West. In a stunning strategic reversal, the state adopted a vision of national interest that was principally different from those of Andrei Kozyrev and Yevgeni Primakov. Although Putin insisted on Russia's priority to preserve great power status, his strategy of achieving this objective differed from that of Primakov considerably. Instead of continuing the policy of balancing against the West, Putin explicitly sided with Europe and the United States and insisted that Russia was a country of European and Western, rather than Asian, identity.

Around 2005, however, Putin's great power pragmatism obtained a new dimension - assertiveness. Russia's foreign policy has not become confrontational and has not returned to the era of Primakov's balancing the United States' power in the world. Instead, Russia has sought to capitalize on its new economic recovery and energy competitiveness and break into Western economic markets, while maintaining political stability and an essentially defensive security posture. Putin's speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy became a high point in Russia's new assertiveness and was extremely critical of the U.S. "unilateralism," yet it only meant to preserve and deepen achievements of cooperation with the West. It sent a strong signal to the Western nations that in the Kremlin's perception, the course of Russia's integration with the West was in jeopardy because of highly destabilizing policies of the United States.

This article argues that the shift toward a more assertive foreign policy can be explained by two factors: the United States' policy of regime change perceived by the Kremlin as threatening its own stability and Russia's in-

creased material ability to pursue a more independent foreign policy. Contrary to some common views that attribute the Russia’s assertive behavior to its traditionally imperialist and anti-Western political culture, the primary drivers in the Kremlin’s foreign policy are contemporary and domestic. They include new opportunities for economic growth and stability, as well as need to address increasing security threats. While taking precautions against encroachment on its sovereignty, Russia is far from isolating itself or launching imperial revenge against those vulnerable to its pressures. It is the combination of perceived security vulnerability and economic confidence that continues to drive Russia’s foreign policy. Initially the country’s leadership was hoping to develop a grand strategy out of engaging Western nations, in particular the United States, into projects of common significance, such as counter-terrorism and energy security. However, as the West turned its attention elsewhere and as Russia grew stronger, the Kremlin made important adjustments to its policy.

This article first describes defensive and assertive strategies of great power pragmatism as those have been pursued by Putin during his first and second terms. It then develops an explanation of the described shift. The concluding section offers assessment of Russia’s shift toward a more assertive foreign policy and analyzes challenges ahead.

II. From a defensive to an assertive great power pragmatism

After his arrival to power, Putin pursued an essentially pragmatic or non-confrontational foreign policy. Instead of capitalizing on the threat posed by unipolarity – one of the tenets of Primakov’s diplomacy – Putin drew attention to the world’s instabilities, such as terrorism, as well as some new economic opportunities. Although Putin was wary of the U.S. policies and intentions, for him the most important national interest was Russia’s economic modernization and security from external threats, first and foremost terrorism. Russia had to learn to defend its national interests by economic means and to engage the Western nations into common international projects. This strategy is best understood as one of a normal great power. It pursues the normal objective of moving further away from Soviet-style isolationism and wants to turn Russia into a full-fledged member of the international community. Yet the strategy also recognizes that Russia cannot join the international community at the expense of its sovereignty and great power attributes, its material and human capabilities, territorial size, and political reputation in the world. In this philosophy great power status is therefore not a goal in itself but rather a necessary condition for Russia’s internal stability and more advanced engagement with the world.