Towards Normalization?
Putin and Beyond

When Vladimir Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin on New Year’s Day 2000, Russian foreign policy was at a post-Soviet nadir. With few exceptions – the improving relationship with China being the most notable – the landscape was almost uniformly depressing, with little prospect of improved fortunes in the foreseeable future. The President-to-be faced a daunting array of problems, ranging from a volatile institutional environment and climate of demoralization, to more concrete concerns such as the deterioration in Russia’s relations with the West in the wake of Kosovo and other crises. More generally, the country’s stature and role as an international actor had declined to the point where few outside Moscow were inclined to think of Russia except in secondary and even peripheral terms. Increasingly, talk of the latter’s importance in regional and global affairs acquired a formalistic tone, motivated more by habit and a care not to exclude options than by a sincere belief that Russia mattered.

Some two years later, it is time to evaluate Putin’s management of foreign policy and assess the extent to which he has impressed his personal stamp on proceedings. Can one speak of a strategic shift following Yeltsin’s departure, or is it more appropriate instead to describe the ‘Putin era’ as a period of transition and discovery or, more pessimistically, as one of revanchism? While the Brezhnevian stagnation of Yeltsin’s second term has only heightened our keenness to establish who Putin is and what he stands for, it is no easy matter to emerge with any confident conclusions. It is testament to the elusiveness of the man and his world-view that since his accession he has been described variously as a Eurocentrist [Kremenyuk, 2001, pp. 16–17], derzhavnik [Albats, 2000], chekist [Itogi, 17 August 1999], a proponent of the primacy of economic priorities ['Vneshnepoliticheski k kurs…', p. 9], and
so on. The number and breadth of his overseas travels have communicated all sorts of signals, many of them contradictory, while a corresponding caution in public statements on international affairs has served to obscure more than enlighten. At the same time, foreign policy post-Yeltsin is very much a work in progress, a typically untidy marriage of old and new. Putin's comparative inexperience at the highest levels of government and limited past familiarity with big picture foreign policy issues\(^1\) have led to an emphasis on political consolidation and institutional stability at the expense of policy development, and on reviewing options rather than pursuing committal courses of action.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the unclear or incipient nature of much of Moscow's management of external relations, it is possible to discern some critical trends and features even in this period of transition. And in this last part of the book I propose to do so by examining the Putin administration's approach in relation to the principal themes discussed in earlier chapters – issues of identity and perception, political and institutional context, ideology, the presentation (and misrepresentation) of policy, geopolitics, and the choice and implementation of priorities. Although the picture is still evolving and many uncertainties remain, a comparative approach assists us in distinguishing between strategic shifts and revised modalities, reveals trends in perceptions of and attitudes towards the outside world, and offers clues on how Russian foreign policy might develop in the years to come.

The main conclusion is that the most significant strategic feature of foreign policy under Putin has been its 'securitization' – a term which, like so many others in the post-Soviet political dictionary, lends itself to flexible definition. In this particular context, it refers to three things. First, most literally, it describes the significantly enhanced role of the security apparatus in foreign policy-making – both at the individual level and institutionally – and the impact this has had on the conduct of Moscow's management of international affairs. The second meaning centres on the primacy of political-military over economic priorities. Despite the growing importance of the latter, it is the former which continues to dominate the agenda. Although labels such as zero-sum, balance of power and spheres of influence have become somewhat tainted, their spirit imbues much of Russian foreign policy today. Third, the more subtle and nuanced, yet assertive approach of the current administration is reflected in the interplay between overtly security objectives and economic interests. As a result, there has emerged a more balanced foreign policy – but not in the conventional Western sense. Instead, we are witnessing the intensification of the 'geopoliticizing' trends identified at the