



## NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

### Russian Strategies

By Chris Miller

#### Introduction

The date is 1917. After three years of debilitating warfare, internal revolution had thrown Russia into crisis: food was short, civil war loomed, and German troops continued to advance, pushing toward Moscow. Unable to win the Great War, the leader of Russia's new Bolshevik regime, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, had only one choice: end the war. The price of peace was dear. Germany had stripped Russia of its empire, which consisted of vast territories amassed over hundreds of years: the Baltic states, Poland, present-day Belarus and Ukraine, and spheres of influence in the Balkans and the Black Sea. The Germans seized tens of thousands of square-miles of territory, some of which had been controlled by Russian czars for centuries. An empire that in 1914 spanned from Riga on the Baltic Sea to Vladivostok in the Pacific was now, for a brief moment, a wholly Asiatic state. Ripped apart by foreign invasion and domestic **insurrection**, Russia had lost its European influence.

**insurrection**—*situation in which a nation's own citizens take arms against the government*

#### Imperial Russia: History, Culture, Crisis

Russian identity has always been continentally **ambivalent**. Its territory spans the entire Asian continent, and yet in terms of economics, politics, and demographics, it is centered in Europe. Today, this question of culture, empire, and identity once again confronts Russian decision-makers. Moscow has yet to come to a consensus on which territories and peoples truly constitute a complete Russia. Trends toward European integration, perhaps the most powerful political phenomenon in modern Europe, do little to **ameliorate** this crisis, as former French President Charles de Gaulle's vision of a Europe 'from the Atlantic to the Urals' leaves most of Russia's territory, though not its population, outside of what may be emerging as a culturally and politically unified Europe. There is a sense that Russia is currently in a state of transition, but it is unclear what will result from the transition, whether imperial resurgence, further fragmentation, or a long, rocky road toward a Russia that is comfortable with its borders and with its identity.

**a m b i v a l e n t** —  
*uncertain, lacking clear direction or motives*

**ameliorate**—*improve*

At this point, present-day Russia is weaker now than at any time in the past three centuries. General insecurity is the primary driver of Russian foreign policy. Its choices are bleak, circumscribed by Europe in the west, China in the east, and American influence all around. Russian policymakers are dealing with questions regarding the nature, and

indeed the existence, of their empire. Will Moscow let the European Union wrest away its historic sphere of influence in Ukraine and Eastern Europe? Which power, if any, will dominate Central Asia? Can the Kremlin hold together a multi-ethnic state without the promise of a broader Russian empire? Russian leaders are still devising answers to these questions; their decisions will have significant ramifications for international stability.

### *History*

Modern Russian civilization has its predecessor in the Kievan Rus state that flourished in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Part of Imperial Russia's ambivalence can be explained by its history. The state upon which Russian civilization was founded was centered in Kiev, the capital of modern Ukraine, rather than Moscow. Indeed, the boundaries of the Kievan Rus state were drawn west of the Ural Mountains, wholly within the geographic boundaries of Europe.

Culturally, however, Russia has always been unique. Adopting a different strain of Christianity, a different system of writing, and drawing from Byzantine tradition rather than Roman, Russia differs distinctly from its neighbors to the west. Even many of the lands that the **Warsaw Pact** granted to Moscow during the Cold War have greater cultural ties to Germany than to Russia. Modernizing Russian leaders such as Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and even Lenin looked to the West for ideas for improvement.

**Warsaw Pact**—*military alliance of communist nations under the direction of the*

Since the founding of St. Petersburg—Russia's window to the west—in 1703, Russia has interacted with Europe not only culturally, but also militarily and politically. Russia slowly expanded into Eastern Europe, engulfing modern day Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, and parts of other states. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, except for the brief interlude around World War I, Russian dominance over Eastern Europe was never questioned.

During this time, of course, the Czars were also expanding across Asia; Russia acquired a harbor on the Pacific before Peter the Great realized his dream of a port on the Baltic. The imperial push eastward across Asia was not resisted by any major powers, so Russian territory rapidly increased. For this reason, Russia was geographically centered in Asia, even if it was culturally, economically, and politically oriented toward Europe.

Civil war and debilitating political violence followed Russian defeat in World War I, but Russia survived both the interwar period and the Second World War, emerging as one of the world's two superpowers, and regaining its World War I losses. Despite the USSR's anti-imperialist rhetoric, many historians and observers of international relations see the Soviet Union's policy of expansion as no different from that of the heyday of Russian imperialism. Whole populations of ethnic

minorities were moved across the USSR in attempts to provide political stability.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, while certainly caused in part by economic **malaise**, might also be attributed to resurgent nationalism, especially in Eastern Europe. This trend, though, did not end with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. On the contrary, recent democratic votes—often termed ‘revolutions’—in Ukraine and Georgia elected leaders who seek closer ties with the West, and greater independence from Russian influence.

**malaise**—a general sense of depression or unease

In some ways, these recent realignments may be more significant than the Revolutions of 1989. Whereas East Germany, the Czech Republic, and others had been controlled by Moscow for only 50 years, the relationship between Moscow and the Ukraine and Georgia spans centuries. The Ukraine and Russia share a historic relationship, albeit complicated. The history of Kievan Rus, centered in modern-day Ukraine, makes this clear. The potential loss of Ukraine represents a grievous blow to Russian strength, for Ukraine’s population is one-third the size of Russia’s, making it a potentially significant member of a reconstructed Russian empire. Future Russian imperialism in many ways depends on Ukraine; and Kiev’s orientation, whether East or West, is therefore a critical barometer of Moscow’s international position.

## Modern Russia

Despite its superpower status during the Cold War, Russian weaknesses were laid bare by the collapse of its empire: poor economic performance, military decay, and social insecurity are now defining features of modern Russia. Since the deconstruction of the communist system, the Russian economy has suffered the costs of change, undergoing a currency crisis and relatively high unemployment. In terms of per capita gross domestic product (GDP), Russia’s economy is comparable to Mexico’s. Plummeting military spending has caused Russia’s once first-rate military to fall into disarray. Procurement of new technologies has all but stopped. The Russian navy is mostly confined to its harbors, and its nuclear forces, while still dwarfing Europe’s and China’s, are hardly in good condition.

### *The Crisis: Identity and Insecurity*

The crisis of Russian identity revolves around two issues: it appears that Russians are losing their historic role as rulers of northern Asia and Eastern Europe; as their power stagnates while their neighbors grow stronger. Russia’s relative weakness makes the reestablishment of their sphere of influence increasingly difficult.

The 1990s were a decade during which Russians realized—and tasted the bitterness of—their growing impotence. NATO—their Cold War archrival—expanded eastward, engulfing many former Russian protectorates. At the same time, separatism has continued to chip away at Moscow’s influence. Russia’s inability to secure a real victory in the **Chechnyan** war makes this clear. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the United States increased its interest in the Middle East and Central Asia, establishing what is essentially a NATO protectorate in Afghanistan—a country which the Soviets attempted and failed to control during the 1980s. More worrying to Moscow, several former Soviet republics in Central Asia granted the United States military bases and fly-over rights, notably Uzbekistan. To Moscow, this marked an increase in American influence on its southern frontier.

**Chechnya**—region of Russia that fought for independence after the fall of the Soviet Union, ultimately losing the struggle

The rise of China marks another concern to Russian strategists, as the emerging superpower which briefly went to war with Russia during the Cold War. China’s rapid economic growth, huge population, and modernizing military present a clear threat to Russian influence in East Asia and the Pacific. China has also made moves to consolidate its influence in Central Asia.

Potential threats to Russian security multiply as its military decays, heightening the sense of insecurity. Russia’s declining geopolitical stature contributes to an identity crisis: what does it mean to be Russian? About 20% of Russia’s population is not ethnically Russian, and many ethnic Russians live in the states of the former USSR. During the time of empire, ethnic minorities were ruled by ethnic Russians; today, events like the debacle in Chechnya throw into doubt whether ethnic Russians can still exercise their historic role as rulers over vast swaths of Europe and Asia.

Russia’s plummeting population makes these questions even more dire—Russia is losing one million citizens a year, and its population could decline by half over the next 50 years. The ethnic Russian population is declining most rapidly. The most plausible solution in terms of economics is to admit literally millions of Chinese workers, but Moscow is hardly willing to allow citizens of a geopolitical rival to stream over its borders. Nevertheless, the growing magnitude of the joint problems of identity and insecurity are forcing Russians to search for new solutions.

#### *Putin’s Strategy and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War*

Former President Vladimir Putin outlined a clear, if worrisome, answer to this dilemma: a re-establishment of empire. To be sure, Russian politicians never use that term. Current president Dimitri Medvedv, who was appointed by Putin, prefers the term “regions of privileged interest,” but the effect is the same. Over the past several years, Russia has decided to reassert its power in what many Russians refer to as its

“near-abroad”: Ukraine, the Caucasus (the countries Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), Central Asia, and perhaps even Eastern Europe.

The Russo-Georgian war during the summer 2008, along with its subsequent recognition of the independence of two separatist Georgian provinces, indicates its unwillingness to let Georgia choose to join NATO, and thus definitively exit the Russian sphere.

## **Problems and Possibilities in Russian Grand Strategy**

Russian interests are threatened on many fronts at a time of relative weakness. Competition, if not conflict, with geopolitical rivals is all but certain. Russian foreign policy over the next few years will more clearly delineate its strategy, defining Russian goals in the key areas of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and East Asia. Moscow’s strategic aims will influence its relations with other powers. For this reason, understanding Russian strategy is critical to devising an American strategy within these critical spheres.

### *The Former Warsaw Pact*

Despite the fact that Eastern Europe escaped Russian rule less than 20 years ago, it is difficult to imagine a Russian resurgence in Eastern Europe. The area is certainly oriented to the West. All former Warsaw Pact states are members of NATO, and by the end of the decade all will be in the European Union, too. It is not yet clear what form either of these institutions will take over the next few decades, though any Russian moves against these states would likely serve to unite Europe against Moscow.

### *Ukraine*

Though Ukrainians may see it differently, Ukraine is an integral part of traditional Russian identity, and it would be a shift of historic proportions were Kiev to permanently wrest itself from Moscow’s sphere of influence. If Ukraine succeeds in a break from Moscow, it would likely require a tight alliance with Western Europe, either through NATO or, farther in the future, through membership in the EU. Permanent loss of the Ukraine would threaten Russia’s status as a great power, and might cause Russia to reorient itself toward a focus on Asia. However, it cannot be assumed that Moscow will let Ukraine float easily away: Russia is Ukraine’s most important trading partner and supplies most of Kiev’s energy, giving Moscow enormous leverage over the Ukrainian economy, and thus over Kiev’s foreign policy. It is too soon to tell whether the Ukrainian re-orientation, which resulted from the Orange Revolution, will be a permanent change or merely a passing occurrence.

## *NATO*

With the end of the Cold War, many suggested that NATO was an institution without a purpose, for its initial goal of thwarting Russian expansion was no longer relevant. In a handful of years, NATO expanded eastward, inviting former enemies to join. At the same time, divisions between the United States and its European allies are stark, throwing the alliance's unity into question. Yet without NATO and associated American security guarantees along its eastern frontier, Russia would certainly be tempted to threaten its weaker neighbors. If unity is maintained, NATO will certainly serve as an important bulwark against increased Russian influence in Eastern Europe. Of course, that is somewhat of an *if*, for politicians in Germany—especially Social Democrats—and France occasionally seem willing to sacrifice East European interests for their interests—as well as energy security, as evidenced by Gerhard Schroeder's eager lobbying on behalf of Gazprom, Moscow's energy arm.

## *Central Asia*

Since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, American influence in Central Asia has grown in an attempt to meet the military demands of the War on Terrorism. The Russian response has been muted, in part because Moscow is also threatened by Islamic extremists, and in part out of impotence. Nevertheless, clashing interests in Central Asia, as well as in the Caucasus, represent a potential area of conflict. The orientation of Iran and Turkey, both influential in this region, may be important in shaping Russia's future involvement. A confluence of aims has led to close relations between Tehran and Moscow, as Russia has given Iran significant assistance toward its nuclear energy program.

## *China*

Sino-Russian relations are as complex as ever. Policymakers inside the Kremlin fear China's burgeoning power, and refuse to let ethnic Chinese fuel the Russian economy lest Beijing's influence grow. Nevertheless, since the end of the Cold War, relations between the two nations have been warm, possibly fueled by a joint mistrust of American ambitions. Whether this warmth will remain if—and probably when—China further asserts itself in East and Central Asia remains to be seen.

## *Japan*

Possessing the world's second largest economy, Tokyo's foreign policy is relatively passive because Japan is protected by American security guarantees. However, fearing the rise of China, some believe that Japan may come to question the usefulness of the American alliance and seek out other allies. A Russian-Japanese **entente** would certainly serve as a check on Chinese expansionism.

**entente**—an arrangement between nations

### *The Middle East*

During much of the Cold War, a major playing field between the superpowers was the Middle East. Egypt, Syria, and others were widely considered Soviet client states. In the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, however, Moscow's influence declined, and continued to do so for the rest of the century. In the past two years, however, Moscow has begun reasserting itself in the region through an aggressive program of arms sales, economic ties, and political support. It is Russia, after all, which most consistently threatens to veto UN sanctions against Iran. So long as Washington is tied down in Iraq and on the defensive throughout the region, Moscow's influence will be on the rise, a subtle reminder that much has changed since the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

The many questions that surround Russia's relationships with other powers make clear that Russia is at a turning point, though it is not yet clear which way it will turn. In general, though, we can posit three possible futures: resurgent imperialism, Westernization, or increasing instability. If Russia seeks to renew its empire, by increasing pressure on Ukraine or on critical states in the Caucasus or Central Asia, it will spark renewed geopolitical confrontation with the United States, Europe, and regional powers like Iran and Turkey. It may also try to use its massive energy reserves as a political tool. Moscow is a critical energy supplier to much of Western Europe. Westernization and democratization mark one potential future, but one that Russians have not found fully appealing. Increasing separatism within the Russian federation itself, à la Chechnya, could drag the world's largest state into chaos. Most important to note is that the status quo does not seem to be a tenable option. Russia's declining population and low share of relative power make it likely that Russia will be forced to make a choice between its empire and the west.

## **Conclusion: The American Response**

How, then, does an American statesman deal with Russia in an era with so many questions? We start by asking what constitutes the optimal future. Is it a liberal democratic Russia? A Russia without territorial ambitions? A European Russia, or an Asian one? A Russia that counterbalances a growing China? Or one that is split into pieces along ethnic lines—there is, after all, no certain guarantee that Russia will remain a unified state. Whatever the answer to these questions, it is clear that Russia will play a significant role in the future of world politics, in part because of its strength, in part because of its weakness, and in part because of its geography. Although no state has greater potential to damage international stability, Russia could be a pivotal ally. It is this

ambivalence that makes Russia such a dangerous threat, and such a great opportunity, for American strategy.

### **Bibliography**

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