



Russia: In Quest of Superpower Status

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Abstract

This article concludes that the foreign policy of Russia under President Putin can be explained as the quest to regain the status of superpower that was accorded to the Soviet Union during the cold war. That conclusion is based on analyses of Russia's relationships with specific members of the former Soviet Empire; major issues involving controversies such as the U.S. decisions not only to advocate the enlargement of NATO but also to establish a U.S. military presence in Central Asia and install a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. It counsels patience, tolerance, and lowered expectations as the means of forging improved relationships with Putin and his successor.

The best illustration of the position that Russia favors for itself is the status it holds in the Middle Eastern “quartet” composed of the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and Russia. In this setup Russia is equal to the United States or the European Union or the remainder of the world as represented by the UN, a claim that Moscow has not been able to make since the demise of the Soviet Union. According to Putin, the collapse of the Soviet Empire was the biggest tragedy of the twentieth century, overshadowing World War II with its millions of victims. The fact that throughout history all empires led by a dominant nation have had a limited life span is not seen in Moscow as applicable to the Soviet Union given its allegedly voluntary character.

During his visits to Moscow after the fall of the Soviet Union, Professor Richard Pipes

asserted many times that Russia was no longer a great power—the worst possible rebuff in Russian eyes. In the 1990s Russia was indeed seen as having lost its international status. Proofs were numerous: the fall of the empire and the return to seventeenth-century borders, the economic downturn and the social crisis, a variety of ecological disasters, the weakening of the state and the army, the rise of criminality and corruption, plus shaky finances and rapid inflation. All this was supposed to be temporary and compensated for by the birth of a free Russia destined to join the ranks of prosperous European democracies once it unburdened itself from the costly and unruly empire. However, the democratic reforms so much desired by the progressive elements of society were soon entangled in the difficult transition from state ownership of the means of production to a market economy, a subject absent from all textbooks. Moreover, democracy did not bring prosperity but chaos and rising criminality. The image of Russia remained that of crumbling buildings and abandoned villages. Newly appointed reformers seemed at a loss when reforms went astray; ranks of profiteers multiplied; and well-meaning foreign NGOs had difficulty grasping the situation while scores of Russian refugees poured forth from the four corners of the lost empire.

The transition from “advanced socialism” to capitalism brought so much hardship to the bulk of the Russian people that Brezhnev’s “time of stagnation” in their eyes looked like the “Golden Age” when relative tolerance of corruption allowed the middle class to acquire cars, apartments, and dachas. In contrast, the

disturbing shake-ups of the 1990s sent scores of middle-class Russians back into poverty. As a result, the majority of the population began to value order and stability above freedom and democracy and to associate ongoing difficulties with the demise of the empire and the lack of a strong *khozyain* (boss) able to bring order and restore Russia's great power status. Somehow in the mind of many Russians, there was a correlation between great power status and stability in everyday life, as well as between democracy and instability.

Parallel to nostalgia for the defunct Soviet Union with its seeming worldwide ideological appeal there began to emerge a reverence for the long gone Romanov Empire based on autocracy, religion, and nationalism. Right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a number of nationalist movements appeared on the scene. They were calling for "Russia for the Russians," advocating a return to the Russian Orthodox faith in order to counter the ongoing loss of values and expressing hope for the emergence of a strong leader, a "tsar," capable of restoring order as well as old glory. With time, the hopes of the mourners of past Soviet glory and of mourners for the remote but not forgotten Russian imperial glamour began to converge. A strange community of views emerged from the proponents of two opposite interpretations of twentieth-century Russian history, between the "Reds" and the "Whites," based on a common distaste for democratic reforms, fear of weakening the state, grief for the loss of the empire, and finally the rejection of Western values along the lines of the old "Slavophile" thinking. The ground was ready for the appearance of a leader capable of combining both currents by redirecting Russia toward a common aim—the restoration of order inside the country and of the Russian position worldwide without returning to Soviet-time massive purges or endemic shortages of consumer goods. The restoration of Russian pride, the pride of the World War II victors, would disarm both the Communist and the nationalist

opposition, isolate the democratic forces weakened by the troubles of the 1990s, and gain the support of the apolitical masses looking for stability above all. That is exactly what took place under Putin. This ability to fulfill the aspirations of such widely different political forces by providing them with common goals in line with their aspirations allowed Putin to amass the power he has now. Restoring Russia's *derzhavnost* (great power identity) became the unifying internal theme, as well as its goal on the world scene, influencing the totality of Russian foreign policy.

Several prerequisites were needed to achieve the goal of restoring Russia's historic position among the world powers despite the loss of the empire: an economic and financial revival in Russia, curtailing the superpower status of the United States, neutralizing the European Union, and obtaining Chinese support in specific conflict areas. The first goal was reached mainly because of the fast rise in oil and gas prices, bolstering Russia's financial fortunes. It allowed Moscow to pursue all other goals, including erecting obstacles to key U.S. policies in Iraq, Iran, the Caucasus, or Central Asia. The second aim was to be achieved through alienating Europe from America by playing on transatlantic discord and making Europe dependent on Russian energy supplies for more than 40 percent of its needs.¹ The third was to be achieved by putting aside current differences, even to the detriment of long-term Russian interests, in order to associate China with Russian policies in Central Asia and in the Middle East.

The most peculiar part of current Russian foreign policy is precisely the willingness to put aside the long-term interests of the country for the sake of regaining superpower status. In the long run—although conflicts with the United States are detrimental to Moscow—both countries share many aims such as forestalling Muslim extremism, containing China's expansion, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), handling migration

problems, and controlling drug traffic, just to name the principal ones. In addition, both countries have a great deal of respect for each other's culture and scientific achievements and have never fought each other directly in a "hot" war.

What is pushing Moscow to counteract American policies is not the perception that the United States poses a danger to Russia's vital interests but Moscow's desire to regain the status it lost with the demise of the Soviet Union. The fact that U.S. policies—even Reagan's policy of engaging Russia in an arms race it could not sustain or in arming the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan—were not the principal causes of the fall of the Soviet Union did not change Moscow's perception that the Soviet Union's downfall was connected with Washington's machinations. In reality, the Soviet Empire fell victim to multiple faults: the exhaustion of the communist doctrine, the inability to satisfy the basic needs of consumers, the desire of the "nomenklatura" to transmit the fruit of their labor to their own heirs, the failure to create "a new Soviet man," a selfless patriot ready to struggle for the "bright future" of society, and, obviously, the inability to persuade the non-Russian half of the Soviet population to curtail their nationalist ambitions for the sake of common aspirations.

In the absence of a unifying ideology, the recuperation of the status of *velikaya derzhava* (great power) became the unifying point of the Russian political spectrum. If only for internal reasons, Putin had no choice other than to pursue this goal. Doing otherwise might have brought back the old political struggles of the 1990s.

Russian Policy Toward the United States

The United States occupies a central position in the Russian worldview and consequently in the Russian foreign policy outlook.

It is the country of reference. During the Soviet period it was the one that Russia was supposed "to catch up with and surpass." After the demise of the Soviet Union, it became the one to imitate. And with Putin in power, armed with petro-dollars, it became the one to be contained. In Soviet and post-Soviet writings, the United States was given a multitude of labels, expressing hostility, fear, envy, admiration, and other emotions and perceptions. America was the leading capitalist country, the main imperialist, the richest country in the world, the country of endemic unemployment, the racist country, the crime-ridden country, the most developed country. Being the country of reference, the United States is seldom objectively viewed in Moscow. Even the recent term defining Russia's great power status, namely *suverennaya derzhava* (sovereign great power), underlines not only the need to be recognized as a great power but to establish its "independence" from American influence: Russia as a great power must be capable of acting in its own interests with no regard to the United States or any other country's position in any particular matter. Some Russian political analysts speak of Russia as a "revisionist power" dissatisfied with international agreements concluded in the 1990s when the country was too weak to defend its interests.²

In some of the current hot political issues involving both Russia and the United States, Moscow plays a double game of both opposing the United States and hoping that the latter will be finally forced to act alone, taking all the blame in the process. A case illustrating such attitudes involves the Iranian drive to acquire nuclear capabilities. Although Russia does not want Tehran to have such weapons, it is happy to sell Iran the needed equipment in order to boost the price of oil and create problems for Washington. But at the same time Moscow seems to be counting on the United States either to stop or contain Iran at some point, getting all the blame for undertaking "unilateral action" in the Muslim Middle East.

Russian–American Conflict Zones

Ukraine

In line with guarding its dominant influence in the post-Soviet states, Russia has consistently tried to block American inroads into former Soviet space. Ukraine, because of its centuries' old connections with Russia and cultural and ethnic closeness, is the key example. With its large Russian minority (20 percent of the population), high degree of linguistic Russification, ideological split between pro-Western Galicia and the pro-Russian southeastern provinces (the industrial Don Basin, Kharkov, Crimea, Odessa), and divided center, Ukraine remains essential to any U.S. effort to prevent the revival of the defunct empire (“no empire without Ukraine”) and to Russian efforts to reestablish Moscow’s great power status. Moscow has the advantage of being the key supplier of gas and oil and of having maintained close ties with Ukrainian industries located in the eastern part of the country, close to Russian borders. It has already curtailed deliveries and imposed price hikes for gas and oil as means of exerting direct pressure on Ukraine and will probably not shy away from doing so again.

The United States possesses a great deal of clout in the rest of the country, especially in the West, and is seen as the essential partner in trade and ecological initiatives and in helping to open the road to Europe in line with the aspirations of a good many Ukrainians.

During the last presidential elections, fought between the pro-Western candidate Yushchenko and the pro-Russian Yanukovich, Russia and the Western powers were involved in backing “their” candidates. A so-called orange revolution in support of Yushchenko took place in Kiev, and Ukraine’s aspirations for a new beginning appeared to be near

fulfillment. Now, a few years later, the country has returned to its usual self: The original enthusiasm is gone; Yushchenko has retained the presidency, but Yanukovich is the prime minister; and Ukraine remains suspended between Russia and the West.

Central Asia

In Central Asia Russia used the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO) to remove the United States from its military bases, a tactic that is not wholly in Moscow’s interests. After all, the U.S. presence is protection against both the Islamist extremists and excessive Chinese inroads. Here Russian policy is based on the principle of defending the post-Soviet space from U.S. or NATO inroads. After the demise of the Soviet Union, there was a tacit understanding between the United States and Russia that the former Soviet republics that became independent in 1991 would remain within the Russian sphere of influence. Expected exceptions were the three Baltic States, which—Moscow hoped—would remain neutral, as Finland has done, but instead they joined both NATO and the European Union.

Russia was on firmer grounds in Central Asia, where its post-Soviet policy was based on cooperation with the local leaders, most of whom moved into power positions straight from similar positions within the Communist party apparatus. Landlocked Central Asia, largely dependent on Russia for its exit routes, seemed relatively safe for Moscow. But each boss of each newly independent republic selected a different path for his country. Thus Turkmenistan chose full neutrality and isolation, Uzbekistan tilted toward the United States, Kazakhstan opted for a “multivectoral” policy of good relations with all sides, and Kyrgyzstan adopted a similar line. Even Tajikistan, where a Russian military intervention saved the government from going under during a civil war, tried to maneuver between the United States and

Russia. Thus in the 1990s Russia was unable to prevent American economic penetration and after September 11, 2001, had no choice but to accept American overflights and military bases on Central Asian soil.

But since 2003, profiting from the U.S. entanglement in Iraq, Russia, with the help of China and using the Shanghai Cooperative Organization as its instrument, managed to pull to its side Uzbekistan (already discontented with the U.S. condemnations of its regime's actions in suppressing demonstrations in Andijan). Next was ensuring the long-term supply of Turkmen gas necessary to fulfill Gazprom deliveries to Europe. Then was the success in entering into substantial armament delivery and uranium mining contracts with Kazakhstan. Efforts to limit the U.S. presence in Central Asia extend to the Caspian Sea Basin where Russia opposes the military presence of any nonlittoral power in the area, thereby posing a threat to American efforts to participate in protecting the security of Transcaspian shipping (including that of Kazakh oil to the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline).

Transcaucasus

The most visible area of confrontation between U.S. and Russian interests is in the Transcaspian. The pivot of the area is Georgia, a historical ally of Russia, whose relations with Moscow began to deteriorate toward the end of Gorbachev's rule. After the last election of President Saakashvili, the country took a decisively pro-American stand. This shift was primarily motivated by reactions to continued Russian efforts to destabilize the area through helping the separatist "quasi-states" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia maintain their independence from Georgia. Assistance ranged from direct military backing during their secessions from Georgia in the early 1990s to oversight of the entire political, social, and economic lives of these regions to the point of

distributing Russian passports to all local applicants. In addition, Russia has cut Georgia's role as a supplier of wine, fruits, and mineral waters to Russian markets on the flimsy pretext of health hazards—in reality, as a means of exerting political pressure. Most resented in Moscow is the possibility that Georgia will try to join NATO, becoming the first of the pre-World War II Soviet republics to do so, an act that would increase the already ample ill will that exists in Moscow toward both Georgia and its NATO sponsor, the United States.

Another Transcaucasian republic—Azerbaijan—has pursued close cooperation with the United States in exploiting its oil riches and directing the flow of the bulk of its oil exports mainly through the newly built Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. Russian-Azeri relations never reached the low of Russian-Georgian relations: Azerbaijan exports also through pipelines directed to Russian territory, and after the initial support of Karabagh Armenians in the early 1990s, Russia somehow distanced itself from this frozen conflict. Armenia, fearful of Turkey and in conflict with Azerbaijan, remained the linchpin of Russian policies in the Caucasus. Still, given its large diaspora in the United States, France, and elsewhere, Armenia is strongly attracted to Western values and ways of life.

The Former Warsaw Bloc

Post-Soviet Russia has consistently opposed the entry of the former Warsaw Pact countries into NATO. It tried to make the United States fulfill its alleged Gorbachev-time oral intention (restated in the Paris Charter of 1991) of not extending its influence eastward, something Washington considered nonbinding and a violation of the sovereignty of the countries in question.³ The end result, in which all of the former Warsaw Pact nations as well as all of the Baltic States became part of NATO, is seen in Moscow

as a revival of the “cordon sanitaire” of the 1920s aimed at isolating the newborn Soviet state so that it cannot “contaminate” Western Europe. The extension of NATO into the Baltic republics, sponsored by the United States, was especially painful to Moscow given their former status as union republics within the Soviet Union, acquired despite their forceful annexation in 1940.

Moscow has adopted a dismissive policy toward its former allies by trying to negotiate all outstanding issues with the big Western powers within the European Union and especially attempting to prevent the establishment of a common energy policy, which could lessen the dependence of East-Central Europe on Russian energy goodwill. Russia also uses the embargo against Polish meat (on the pretext of unsatisfactory sanitary production conditions) as a bargaining chip for future negotiations.

Kosovo

Russia has a major argument in its favor on the Kosovo issue. As a result of the Helsinki Accords of 1975, the postwar borders in Europe were considered universally acceptable and thus incontestable. When the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia collapsed, the newly independent states emerged within their existing borders. However, the right to secession applied exclusively to union republics of the Soviet Union and to republics within Yugoslavia. Other autonomous units in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were not allowed to claim independence; nor were the so-called quasi-states that emerged in the former Soviet and Yugoslav space. Kosovo has acted like an autonomous unit within the republic of Serbia (Abkhazia as an autonomous republic within Georgia, and Chechnya as an autonomous republic within the Russian federation), and none of them was entitled to independence.

Taking a strong pro-Serbian stand is to Moscow’s benefit. NATO is in the process of

consolidating the membership of all of the Balkan states. By backing Serbia, Russia can preserve at least one anti-NATO country in that area. Cooperation with the West on that issue cannot result in any specific advantage to Russia unless NATO offers serious reciprocal concessions in other areas of contention. If Kosovo is granted independence despite Russian efforts, similar moves could take place in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Karabagh, or Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina—all to Moscow’s immediate advantage.

On the internal front, Putin cannot easily drop Russia’s present stand given the high degree of popularity the Serbs enjoy among large segments of Russian society ranging from nationalists to Communists and including all of the backers of Russia’s great power status.

The Missile Defense Controversy

The American decision to secure sites in Poland and the Czech Republic in order to place a radar station and an antimissile battery capable of intercepting missiles coming from a south-eastern direction created an immediate hostile reaction from Moscow. The Kremlin sees in this project a continuation of Reagan’s Star Wars venture potentially aimed at tilting in favor of the United States the existing balance between the U.S. and the Russian missile deployments that have been frozen for years. Washington argues that the interception capacity of the planned station is much too modest to limit Russian capabilities and is exclusively aimed at rogue states in the Middle East that might acquire WMDs and threaten either the United States or its Western allies. Although arguments from both sides seem valid, the key reason for Moscow’s reluctance is the fear that the limited antimissile defense that the United States wishes to establish in the area in question may be only the first step in the direction of building a large-scale system capable of tilting mutual deterrence in favor of the United States.

Migration and Remittances: An Area Open to Russian Pressures

The issue of the migration of Central Asian, Caucasian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan laborers to Russia and of their remittances to their families at home is not directly connected to Russian–American relations but plays a crucial role in helping Russia maintain its influence in its former southern belt. It indirectly affects the outcome of competition between Moscow and Washington within the Commonwealth of Independent States. In fact Russia became the second or the third largest destination for migrants in the world (after the United States and roughly on a par with Germany). American assistance to several CIS countries pales in comparison with the amounts involved in the remittances.⁴

Millions of Azeris, Armenians, and Georgians left the Caucasus to work in Russia; millions more, including Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyzs, and Moldovans, as well as Ukrainians, followed. Home remittances from migrants flowing to the poorer of those states are larger than their state budgets and more important than revenues from foreign investments. This phenomenon allows Moscow to exert pressure on their concerned CIS partners, brandishing the menace of expelling illegal migrants or erecting obstacles to money transfers. Oil-rich Kazakhstan remains an exception: It became a recipient of migrant workers. Isolationist Turkmenistan was not involved either, at least not before the death of its dictator, “Turkmenbashi.”

American Policy Toward Russia

The U.S. policy toward post-Soviet Russia has gone through a great deal of shifts and

changes, the constant being opposition to the reconstitution of the Soviet (or Romanov) Empire. Given its experience of the post–World War II cold war, Washington was obviously unreceptive to the idea of facing renewed rivalry from a contender of comparable strength. But without its empire, post-Soviet Russia, reduced to Petrovian borders, demographically challenged, and deprived of an internationally attractive ideology, seemed no longer willing or capable of challenging the United States. This led to initial assumptions that Russia—no longer a superpower—having rejected the principle of state ownership of the means of production and in the process of switching to a market economy—would concentrate its efforts on joining Europe and becoming one of several large European powers—as it was during the nineteenth century.

Initially American projections seemed to be plausible. During the early 1990s, the only problems Russia presented to Washington were of safeguarding decommissioned weapons, keeping scientists from moving abroad to countries that could use them to produce WMDs, removing poisonous waste from Russian rivers, and so forth. Otherwise, Russia seemed out of competition, which encouraged Washington to expand its influence into East-Central Europe and even into the CIS. But after the initial period of “no competition,” things began to change. Russia showed its bad mood with each enlargement of NATO and began to resent the often patronizing attitude of many American NGOs and seek the support of other great powers on single issues involving the United States.

Russian grievances against the United States based on American inroads into the Russian zone of interest cannot be dismissed as attempts to cover Russia’s own actions. When Gorbachev was withdrawing Soviet troops from East-Central Europe, he felt assured that that action would put an end to contention with the West and especially with Washington. There was no talk about NATO’s reaching Soviet borders or about the extension

of American influence into the Soviet (and later post-Soviet) space. Now, 16 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, not only former Warsaw Pact members but Baltic countries are in NATO and in the European Union; there is an American base in Central Asia; American military advisers are stationed in Georgia; and Americans are active on the Caspian Sea coasts; especially in the oil producing areas. Even Kiev is subjected to American influence strong enough to prove effective in the competition between pro-Russian and pro-Western elements.

U.S. policy toward Russia and the CIS is based on several guiding principles that are not always in line with one another. The key one remains opposition to the reconstitution of the empire in any form. But this imperative is subjected to the necessity of achieving mutual cooperation in order to avoid a nuclear arms race; to arrest the spread of WMDs; and to fight terrorism, narco-traffic, and money laundering. Toward the CIS countries (outside Russia), the key element of the U.S. policy is to help them maintain their independence and stability while taking some steps toward democratization.

It is the subject of democratization and human rights that causes most difficulties. The U.S. Congress, rightfully, is not satisfied with the state of human rights and the progress of democratization in most CIS countries, Russia included. Russia has monopolized the media, stifled all opposition, emasculated the judiciary, punished opponents, and pokes its finger in the U.S. eye whenever feasible. Many CIS countries are outdoing Russia in stifling democratization, making Moscow appear comparatively more tolerant. The so-called color revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, born of democratic premises, have encountered major difficulties despite initial hopes and U.S. assistance. Often American insistence on democratization and free elections is misinterpreted. In oil-rich places, U.S. prodemocracy initiatives are seen as simple

attempts to bring about “regime changes” in order to establish pro-American governments more pliable to Washington’s wishes in matters of military bases and oil concessions.

All of the CIS countries, including Russia, have concluded that the efforts they have made and the results they have achieved since 1991 are underappreciated. Russia, with all of its present shortcomings, is still a better partner for the United States and for Western countries than the former Soviet Union. The planned economy is gone in favor of a market economy. Political freedoms have been curtailed, but this mostly bothers Russian liberal intellectuals without affecting the bulk of the population. Notwithstanding the lack of genuine democracy, personal freedoms involving movement, travel, business initiatives, and numerous other domains are much more extensive than during Soviet times. Despite multiple frictions, nobody seriously envisions a return to dangerous tensions between Russia and any Western country. Our present disappointments with Russia stem from the failure to realize the high hopes associated with the collapse of communism that Moscow would espouse freedom and democracy in ways similar to those advanced in postwar Germany and Japan. This did not occur. We expected better from a country that gave the world so many outstanding artists, scientists, and writers, signifying that its riches not only encompass natural resources but the genius of its people. Instead, we will probably have to wait for the strengthening of the still developing middle class, for the passing of Soviet-educated generations, and the arrival of new ones born under less restrictive conditions. History teaches that dealing with Russia requires tolerance and patience and a lowering of immediate expectations.

“Looking into Putin’s eyes” may not produce today the same positive impression that President Bush gleaned at his first meeting with the new Russian president. But we cannot ignore any approaches from or insights into Putin’s successor, if any, that will help us

determine whether he will be a more cooperative partner in international affairs. In the words of a well-known political analyst,

A world in which the United States would no longer be a dominant force just [as]... a world in which Russia would count little is self-delusion.⁵

About the Author

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Notes

1. Professpr Dariusz K. Rosati (coordinator), *New Europe. Report on Transformation*, XVII Economic Forum, Krynica Zdroj, Poland, September 5–8, 2007, Warsaw, 2007.

2. Stephen Sestanovich, Council on Foreign Relations, May 17, 2007, in www.cfr.org/publication/13354/russianamerican_relations.html

3. K. S. Gadzhiev, "Koncepcja Europy Srodkowej": historia i wspolczesnosc (The Conception of Central Europe: History and Present) in *Studia Polityczne* (Warsaw, 2000), vol. 4, 33.

4. According to Jason DeParle, "Migrant Money Flow: A \$300 Billion Current," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2007, as a percentage of GDP—Tajikistan 37, Moldova 31, Kyrgyzstan 28, Georgia 20, Armenia 19.

5. Dmitrii Trenin, "Why America and Russia Need Each Other" [translated from a Russian text] *Pro et Contra*, March–April 2007, 11.