



Asociace
pro mezinárodní
otázký
Association
for International
Affairs

Vědecký projekt RM 09/01/10

The Geopolitics of Russia/Ruská geopolitika

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Leden 2011

The Geopolitics of Russia (Executive summary)

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By many accounts Russia has over the past several years set to exercise an increasingly assertive foreign policy not only in its immediate neighborhood but also in the global arena as such. The war in Georgia in August 2008 served as a powerful reminder in that respect. Yet, one has to be cautious to jump to conclusions about Russia's new role in the world. Certainly, it does not help that the opaque nature of Russian foreign policy making clouded by domestic intricacies and raging clan rivalries continues to erect an impenetrable wall for an outside observer attempting to make sense of Moscow's actions abroad. Hence, there remain more questions than answers regarding the contemporary Russian foreign policy, which often times renders our analysis of Russia's role in the world a fine exercise in guess work at best rather than a serious piece of analysis.

Cognizant of Russia's geopolitical importance, it is pivotal to strive to understand Russian foreign policy in its wholesomeness and not just becoming pray to oversimplified generalizations.

As for Russia, in particular, four hundred years of imperial expansion resulting in almost permanent colonial wars along the periphery of Russian borders produced in Russian political mentality a paranoid image of Russia as a country surrounded by enemies and at the same time expansion as such became a strategic value for Russians and was perceived as a normal state of the country. The geographic realities have played a decisive role in shaping Russian foreign policy. The centuries of expansionism have engendered securitization of Russian foreign policy, whereby making considerations uppermost on the minds of Russian foreign policy makers.

The primacy of geography in shaping Russian foreign policy thinking has been manifested in two major ways. First, Russia has found it always quite easy to pursue expansionist policy. Throughout its history, the abundance of vast territories to conquer has provided the Russian rulers with an easy prey to satiate their imperial ambitions. Second, this advantage has at same time become a major liability for Russia in the form of successive waves of invaders. To compensate for the absence of natural barriers, the Russian state would often turn to expansionism. Paradoxically, expansionism has not made Russia feel any more secure and led to strategic overextension. Therefore, Russia's imperial pursuits have helped increase the country's sense of vulnerability, thereby firmly implanting this strategic anxiety in Russian foreign policy.

Keeping Europe at arms' length, Moscow has pursued a selective engagement with a more advanced Europe. Although Russia has found Europe as a source of economic and technological modernization, it has remained averse to adopt certain advanced social and



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political values. Often source of modernization as well as derision and suspicion, Europe has become instrumental in helping define Russia's identity either in opposition to it or as part of it. Recurring estrangement from the West has been played out in Russia time and time again and it is far from over.

Analysis of Russia's foreign policy institutions and the key actors involved in making foreign policy shows that albeit the Constitution adopted in 1993 gave the Russian president exclusive authority in shaping foreign policy his real power of in this area is limited, sometimes substantially. The president is dependent on his power base the core of which since Putin's accession to power consists of a number of former officers of Soviet and Russian secret police and intelligence, sharing similar xenophobic, neo-imperialistic and anti-Western views and values.

In addition, the Russian president is highly dependence on information coming from governmental agencies. His conceptual views of international developments, perceptions of general trends in world politics and as well positions on specific international issues are formed, at least in part, under the influence of numerous secret cables, regular news reviews and analytical reports from the Foreign ministry, the Foreign Intelligence Service, Defence ministry and its Main Intelligence Directorate, the staff of the Security Council and the Foreign Policy Directorate of the Presidential Office.

The Directorate for Foreign Policy of the President's Office is a highly important perhaps the central element in Russia's foreign policy mechanism. It not only gives the President its own assessments of international developments and proposes Russia's actions on the international arena; it also is a kind of 'filter' that controls the flow of information coming from the governmental agencies to the President. It is empowered to evaluate, comment on and correct information and proposals on foreign policy addressing to the President and to select those that are delivered to the President eyes shaping the President's 'image of the external world' and its trends.

Despite his departure from the presidency Vladimir Putin remains the real master of Russia's foreign policy. His influence on Russia's foreign policy in his current capacity of the Prime-minister results from the three main factors. Firstly, supporters of his return to the presidency occupy key positions in Russian agencies involved in formation and implementation of foreign policy. The heads of the governmental agencies responsible for foreign affairs tend to follow Putin's advices and recommendations since they believe, perhaps with all good reasons, that it will allow them to retain their positions after 2012. Secondly, Putin's views and ideas about foreign policy and international developments extensively coincide with



views and perceptions typical of majority of the Russian establishment, including most of the security sector. Thirdly, Medvedev, a possible rival to Putin in a future struggle for the presidency and the only figure in the Russian hierarchy theoretically able to overcome his influence is clearly inferior to Putin intellectually and has no weight in Moscow's corridors of power comparable to Putin's.

Since the middle of 1990s and especially after Putin's election as the President the Defence Ministry was a decisive voice in determining Russia's stances on arms control and main international military-political issues. There is a striking similarity between statements made by senior military commanders, on the one hand, and Russian diplomats and the country's political leaders, on the other on issues such as tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, the US plans for missile defence, the military implications of NATO enlargement, the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (the CFE Treaty) and so on. In interagency discussions the Russian military widely use poor knowledge of complex strategic and military-technical issues, including tactical and technical characteristics of various weapons systems characteristic of Russian political and bureaucratic establishment. They also substantiate their assertions and claims by referring to information and analyses coming from GRU which should be taken on trust as no details, sources of information and factual arguments can be disclosed for reasons of high secrecy and often appeal to paranoid perception of the 'Western threat' typical of the Russian establishment.

Putting it bluntly, here are no chances for Medvedev to rise as a true leader and implement his reformist aspirations in domestic and foreign policies if, of course, he has any (which is highly questionable); and neither the 'Sechin's coalition', nor its main rivals will be able to dominate Russian bureaucracy and economy. This scenario is most probable since it suggests that all main actors at the Russian domestic scenery may retain, of course approximately, their current positions.

In this context one can hardly expect any essential changes in Russia's foreign policy strategy. The 'Sechin's coalition', 'orthodox chekists' and military have more or less common view of the West as a threat to Russia; would be 'modernisers' understand that their attempt to stimulate substantial changes in Russia's relation with the West immediately put them at risk of a severe attack by other major elite groups; while INSOR and its group have no enough influence within Russian decision-making community. Moscow will hardly join the West in tackling an 'agenda of the future' including trouble spots, like Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea and the Middle East, climate change, WMD proliferation et cetera. It will continue to:



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- Strive for domination over the new independent states of the former Soviet Union and for influence in Central-Eastern Europe. In particular, Moscow wants to turn the countries of Central-Eastern Europe into a sort of Russian ‘agents of influence’ in NATO and the EU.
- Capitalize on discrepancies in threat perceptions and security interests between the USA and Europe and as well between different European countries.
- Endeavour to deepen the existing divergences within the Western world and to enfeeble NATO, which is seen as the symbol and the main institutional mechanism of the transatlantic solidarity.
- Take advantages of Western attempt to engage with Russia caused by the Western interest in Russia as a partner in fighting ‘common threats’ and in avoiding an opposition with it in the context of current global economic difficulties, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, unresolved Iranian nuclear issue and other acute problems that cause essential anxieties and concern.
- Play a parasitic role regarding the world’s trouble spots and Western, above all, American, involvement in them. In particular, Moscow supports American and NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan with a view to draw Western political and military resources away from the Baltic region, the Black Sea region, and other areas of the Russian ‘privileged interests’.

This study concludes that Russia’s policy jeopardises the security of the Czech Republic (and other states of Central-Eastern Europe) in three ways:

- Russia may ignite a large-scale military-political crisis in the Baltic region, initiate a new war against Georgia and/or trigger a crisis in the Black Sea area. There is an essential probability that NATO, or some of the NATO’s member-states, the USA above all, will be enforced to intervene into such crises as they will be challenged by a dilemma: either to deter Russia’s expansionism (especially in the case of the Baltic Sea region) or to lose its international significance. Even if no of the crises just mentioned escalate into actual military hostilities the very emergence of a seat of aggression nearby the Czech borders, especially in the Baltic area, will definitely has highly painful political and economic consequences for the Czech Republic.
- At the same time no one can exclude that some of the European countries may take seriously Russia’s suggestion of an informal Yalta-type deal and allow Russia to



increase its influence in Central-Eastern Europe in exchange for Russia's actual or would-be support in Afghanistan, Iran or another potential trouble-spot of the same kind. In the worst case scenario a new Yalta accord will result in 'finlandization' of the Czech Republic, its transformation into a semi-independent state under a heavy Russian pressure.

- At last, the security of the Czech Republic may be threatened by 'crippling' penetration of Russian business into key branches of the Czech economy and consequently growth of Moscow's political influence in the country.

In a view of this security interests of the Czech Republic could include:

- maximal strengthening of NATO as the only effective guarantor of the security and independence of the country;
- stimulating of NATO's policy aimed at prevention and deterring of Russian expansionism in the Baltic region, the Black Sea region and other areas where Russia's policy may affect the Czech Republic' security interests; and
- development and implementation, both within the NATO's framework and unilaterally, policy aimed at diversion of Russian political, economic and military resources from Central-Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and the Black Sea area. It means that ideally Russian efforts should be focused not at just mentioned areas but at Central Asia, eastern part of the Caspian region and the Far East.

Practically, within NATO and the EU frameworks the Czech Republic could:

- Press for making any actual cooperation with Russia, especially in military related matters like supplying Moscow with dual-purpose technologies, conditional on Russia's refusal from most odious elements of its foreign and security policy. Putting it differently, cooperation with Russia should be possible if only Moscow agrees to negotiate tactical nuclear weapons in Europe in a constructive manner; withdraws its troops from Abkhazia and South Ossetia; returns to the CFE Treaty regime; and remove its forces from Moldova. This position may be argued by the point that Russia should prove that it is trustworthy international actor.
- Insist that though NATO may discuss with Moscow European BMD issues NATO' policy towards development and deployment of the BMD system in Europe in no case can be linked with results of Russia-NATO discussion of the problem and hypothetical cooperation in this area.



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- Discuss within NATO a possibility of inviting Ukraine to cooperate in the BMD. Although the current Ukrainian government will hardly agree to deploy at its territory any future European BMD' facility, the very fact of discussion these issues by Kiev and NATO, or individual NATO country, would be essential lever of pressure upon Russia. On the one hand Moscow is highly nervous about Ukrainian military contacts and cooperation with the West, especially in such sensitive sphere as BMD, yet on the other hand it hardly ventures stationing Iskander missiles nearby Ukrainian borders.

In addition, the Czech Republic could accentuate Chinese threat to Russia in bilateral and multilateral academic and political discussions, seminars and conferences.

Finally, despite the idea of an 'early termination' of the operation of the ISAF and the American-led coalition in Afghanistan will most probably ignite acute debates in NATO, we think that it could be thought over, at least in preliminary manner.