

# The Geopolitics of Resurgent Russia

## How Medvedev's Russia Sees the World

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 60

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*September 2009*

Under President Dmitri Medvedev, Russia has begun the complicated process of redefining its role in international affairs. While this process is grounded in the achievements of the pre-Medvedev era, Russia in 2009 differs greatly from the Russia of just one or two years ago, making some of Medvedev's foreign policy initiatives appear out of place (e.g., his August 2009 open letter to Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko). To fully understand Russia's intentions and behavior, we must first understand Russia in its own context, particularly its geography (borders), demography, resources, and economic structure.

With no natural boundaries in the northwest or south, Russia's borders are an objective weakness causing Moscow to take seriously any "hard" or "soft" threats originating in these regions. Russia has always pressed westward toward the northern European plain, while Europe has always pressed eastward, most recently through the expansion of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. To the south, concern is especially high with regard to the Russia-Kazakhstan border, Central Asian borders with Iran and Afghanistan, and Russia's potential weakness along China's western border. Due to its geographical location, vast and largely unguarded borders, and relatively poor transportation, Russia faces an important strategic problem; if the country were attacked along its entire periphery, it would be nearly impossible to protect it, as the mobilization and deployment of conventional forces would be difficult and slow-moving.

Another factor driving Russian foreign and security policy is the lack of useful

seaports. Kaliningrad is not connected to the main body of Russia, while the Gulf of Finland freezes in the winter, isolating St. Petersburg. The only true deep warm water ocean ports are Vladivostok and Murmansk, but these ports are too far from Russia's core to be useful.

Geographically, Russia is perfectly situated to serve as the natural junction between East and West, South and North, but this requires a special strategy and policy. Russia has to carefully maintain and protect its communication system and to support state-controlled companies responsible for railroads, channels, and seaports. The geopolitical paradigm is both relevant to Russia and a crucial element of its strategic culture.

Demography also has a significant impact upon the strategic culture of contemporary Russia. Many experts believe Russia is facing a demographic crisis, as the current population of 144 million people is expected to decline to 125 million by 2050. Given Russia's demographic trajectory, the Far Eastern and Siberian regions will likely struggle with severe depopulation, and the relative number of ethnic Russians will also decline. This might lead to a special migration policy for China and Central Asian states. Moreover, Russia's ability to field a military may be called into question. A smaller conventional force may lead Moscow toward an increasing reliance on its nuclear arsenal in order to rebalance the military equation and ensure territorial integrity.

Natural resource abundance and the structure of the Russian economy also increase the relevance of geopolitics. 21 percent of the world's raw resources lie within Russia's borders, including 45 percent of the world's natural gas, 13 percent of its oil and 23 percent of its coal. As a consequence, since 2000, the Russian government has chosen to deemphasize industrial development, opting instead to reinvent Russia as an exporter of natural resources, minerals, lumber, and precious metals. These resources serve a dual purpose, making Russia independent of the outside world while giving it the ability to project power.

Natural gas and oil might be considered a political weapon of sorts, but the utility of this so-called weapon is limited. Although it gives Russia an economic base that can be sustained despite a declining population (since resource production is less labor-intensive), it makes Russia highly vulnerable to the whims of partners and consumers. Mutual economic dependence between producer and consumer does not help to develop a long-standing partnership, as both parties are inclined to attempt to minimize that dependency. Russia needs more reliable means for sustaining economic development and maintaining a good standard of living.

In order to deal with all these contributing factors, Russia must address such issues as buffer zones, pipelines, new consumers, and strategic nuclear weapons. Moscow should be interested, too, in supporting the status quo in neighboring Central Asia, which serves as protection against uncontrollable developments.

## **Medvedev's New Foreign Policy**

In July 2008, the new Russian Foreign Policy Concept was approved, and early in 2009, the Kremlin released the new Russian National Security Strategy. Both

documents, which replace earlier concepts adopted during Vladimir Putin's presidency, outline new priorities for Russian foreign and security policy. They state that a just and democratic international order should be based on collective decisionmaking, equal relations between states, and the rule of international law, with the United Nations playing a central role. A strong international influence is not considered one of Russia's direct goals; it is subordinate to other priorities, such as the need for domestic economic development. The economization of foreign policy, rather than power politics, is the main priority for Russia today.

Russian political elites understand that Russia is not able to achieve its interests alone; it needs cooperation and partnership. However, the question remains: who will that partner be? Russia's foreign policy doctrine does not specify that partnerships should be based on common values. Russia, unlike many Western states, does not seek to partner with like-minded countries but to create broad coalitions with varying states and institutions. Such a multi-directional Russian foreign policy is a natural consequence of the country's position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia.

President Medvedev's foreign policy appears to consist of preserving traditional ties with the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and making Russia a full-fledged member of the developed world. Russia has a potentially key role to play in Eurasia as it seeks to create parallel security structures and institutions to prevent unfriendly interference in what Moscow views as its sphere of "privileged interests."

At the same time, Russia sees the European Union as one of its key political and economic partners and thus seeks to promote intensive, sustained, and long-term cooperation with it. Unfortunately, as evidenced in recent years by a variety of asymmetric dialogues, the EU as an institution has little interest in the economization of EU-Russian relations. As a result, Russia pursues bilateral relations with individual states, particularly Germany and Italy, as a substitute to EU-Russian relations. Russia's main strategic goal today is to preserve its national, economic, and cultural identity, while maintaining its strategic partnerships with neighboring states and institutions. Medvedev has demonstrated his interest in building trustworthy relationships with any partner who puts pragmatism and economics first.

Russia's integration into reformed international and regional security structures must also be resolved in a positive way. Russia is an important partner in the pursuit of many of the West's foreign policy goals, including combating international terrorism and organized crime; stopping illegal drug trafficking; nuclear nonproliferation; conventional arms reductions; and illegal migration. Moscow believes that the time is right to start a new round of consultations and negotiations on a new European security agreement.

As a partner in trade and security, as well as a direct neighbor, Russia has a vested interest in promoting stability in Central Asia. Russia pursues two main goals in the region: keeping its allies close and continuing military cooperation within the CIS. This implies the expansion of Russia's military presence and influence in the region.

Although Russia has sought to preserve its military position in Central Asia since

the collapse of the USSR, the last decade has seen the EU and the United States undertake more active policies toward the region as well, though each for their own reasons. Russia turned its attention to the region at the start of Vladimir Putin's presidency in 2000, while the area gained significance for the United States and the EU with the beginning of military operations in Afghanistan in 2001. The policies of all key actors in the region, though, are defined by shared concerns about radical Islamic organizations, drug trafficking, and, to varying degrees, natural resources such as gas and oil. Russia is less concerned than NATO members with ideology and democratization, preferring to pay more attention to political stability and predictability. Moscow and the Central Asian capitals see any interference in the domestic affairs of the region as promoting or catalyzing the destabilization and disintegration of its states. For that reason, Central Asian regimes find Moscow a more comfortable partner than the EU or the United States, which are seen as paying too much attention to democratic transformation and liberalization.

Russia, then, has declared a special sphere of interest in the former Soviet Union built upon friendly relations with CIS countries and strengthening military cooperation within both the CIS and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO aims to create a unified special rapid-reaction force "capable of repelling any threat from outside." It is to be composed of 10 battalions, with the added protection of a unified air defense system, and financed equally by all CSTO members.

## Conclusion

An assessment of relations in Eurasia between the West and Russia prompts the question: what can each side offer the other? How can both parties contribute to the formation of a new system of international relations? Changes in the structure of the international system, particularly the emergence of new centers of influence, have altered many countries' attitudes toward traditional problems. Globalization, too, has changed the way in which states develop, as permeable borders and the movement of capital, people, and information diminishes the possibility of states and regions developing independently.

Russia's so-called "resurgence" on the international stage is a natural phase in the country's revival after one of the most significant recessions in its history. Russia's new foreign policy is not accompanied by remilitarization and aggressive policies; in fact, defense spending remains low despite an urgent need to address the decay of Russia's military and defense industry. The country's military activity beyond the post-Soviet space is far less than that of NATO, the EU, and the United States.

There is a broad spectrum of parallel and overlapping Russian-Western interests in Eurasia, which gives both sides the opportunity for a new beginning. Without an actively involved Russia, it will be very difficult and expensive to achieve stability and security in Eurasia.

*PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York.*

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