

The Multiple Dimensions of Russian Threat Assessment

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Russia's Place in the International System

The first three threats, though distinct, are closely related in assessing how the outside world is perceived in Russian foreign and security policy. Various official documents (including the national security concept, military doctrine, and foreign policy concept) state unambiguously that the primary threat to Russia's national interests is its internal economic situation, and the failure to undertake serious and responsible reform. Nonetheless, they also state clearly that opportunities to participate in international security, political, and economic forums in the international system affect whether Russia will be able to achieve its objectives for renewal and growth.

This is why, for example, Russian relations with China, India, and Iran are not merely about trading in arms for influence, but about sustaining and modernizing Russia's defense industry as a component of building the post-Soviet economy. International trade--even arms trade--is an important engine for internal economic modernization and growth. Given the link between the economy, national power, and security, Russian access to the international system is a security matter.

Therefore, the current Russian leadership views obstacles to its international access as, at best, indifference to Russian national interests and, at worst, deliberate policy to undermine its efforts to establish a sound economy on the path to consolidating its power and place in the international system. So, for example, American pressure to limit sales to Iran is not just about the loss of a given sale, but about undermining Russia's defense industries, military reform, modernization, and so on. Even Russia's emerging problems with the European Union--especially how enlargement will extend trade restrictions and visa regimes to Central and Eastern Europe--is not merely about trade, but about security and national power.

In this context, it is impossible to escape the reality that one of the main features of the international system in all its dimensions--military, political, and economic--is that American unipolarity coexists with a system of multilateral institutions (such as the World Trade Organization or WTO), regimes (such as nonproliferation), and groupings (such as the G-8) that are overwhelmingly influenced, if not quite determined, by American power and preferences. In short, Russia "wants in" for long-term national security reasons, we hold the key, and lately we have been holding the key at arm's length.

Threats Nearby

For Russia, this very modern package of national interests and elements of globalization coexists with the perceived threat of instability, primarily in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and the concrete reality of armed conflict in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Without doubt, Russian policy in the 1990s contributed to these threats through the use of force and interference to maintain Russian influence and presence in the region.

That misguided policy was largely a result of the Russian leadership's inability to distinguish between, and prioritize, two variants of the threat: 1) the danger posed by weak, underdeveloped, and even failing states in the Caucasus and Central Asia; and 2) that posed by the erosion of Russian influence and presence with the breakup of the Soviet Union. Despite its liberal and reformist credentials, the Yeltsin leadership never quite repudiated the latter, though it sought to meet the perceived threat posed by the loss of its southern sphere inconsistently. The Putin leadership has clearly rejected disentangling the two threats, and more firmly links regional instability with Russian weakness.

In addition, two new dimensions to this threat perception complicate Russia's policy in the region: Islam and international terrorism. The Chechens' separatist war, in this context, is just one manifestation of Islamic radicalism with international ties and terrorist means stretching from Afghanistan to the Black Sea. It is crucial to understand how instability, Russian weakness, Islam, and international terrorism are linked in Russian perception. In the international context, Russia perceives the West as a potential ally against this threat, because it too has been a target. This perception is the reason Russian officials have suggested joint operations against Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. However, this could change quickly, as evidenced by the suspicion with which Western support for Georgia is held (given the Russian view that Georgia contributes to terrorists' access to Chechnya).

The New Information Threat

All this is recognizable in foreign policy analysis. The new threat--information security--adds a novel, troublesome dimension. The Russian perception that information has a strong effect on politics, and that in our globalizing world international information influences can play a large role in security is astute. However, the lesson learned appears not to be that a state *cannot* control--but rather that it is all the more important to control--information, especially that which complicates government policies. Instead of learning that it cannot lie about the Kursk, the Russian leadership appears to believe that you have to lie louder and more consistently, and cast aspersions on the sources of alternative information.

This perspective sets up an intrinsic conflict of interest between Russia (or at least the state) and external influences. Good information is necessary for good policy of all sorts, including those central to international economics and investment. Western firms do not want to invest in Russia without access to good information on economic performance and corporate governance. The US Congress does not want to allocate more funds for Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) without good information about how the money is being spent and what effects the programs have. By

establishing the presumption that seeking good information about Russia is a threat to Russian security, the information security doctrine could insinuate assumptions of hostility and conflicting interests into Russia's engagement with the international system.

How These Perceptions Affect Russia

The result of these perceptions is an ambitious Russia that seeks access and engagement for the right reasons from the American perspective (that is, for economic reform and prosperity), but from presumptions that do not quite fit with the realities of the modern international system in an era of a globalizing economy and the information age. The Russian leadership's fundamental presumption that the US would prefer to keep Russia weak leads it to assume ill intent and deliberate US policy when problems or obstacles arise, such as desultory progress on Russia's WTO accession, or criticism of Russian trade with Iran. The very real threat of instability, armed conflict on its borders, and transnational terrorism reinforces the tendency for Russia to see larger forces at work that can be met only by force and toughness rather than long-term political and economic development.

Central to the Putin leadership's perception is that engagement with the international system and practical cooperation with the US are inescapable realities for achieving its national interests. The US is likely to be faced, in consequence, with a Russian foreign policy that is activist and assertive. Russian policy will be pragmatic in its readiness to make deals and to accept compromise in pursuit of its primary economic objectives. However, because these deals are likely to come in areas of Russian weakness relative to the US (and the international system it strongly influences), agreements will be seen as favoring the US (or the West) disproportionately. They are, therefore, unlikely to serve as building blocks for a general improvement in US-Russian relations.

This memo is derived from the author's talk "Moscow's Perceptions of the Outside World" for the conference "Russia in the International System" at Airlie House, Warrenton, VA, 21-23 February 2001.