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Why Russia Is So Russian

ANDREW C. KUCHINS

Certain eternal questions—“Whither Russia?” “What to do?” and “Who is to blame?”—have long vexed observers of Russia, as well as Russians themselves. They continue to do so. Russian elites have a ready answer to the question of blame (anybody but Russians), but no consensus prevails on the first two queries, either inside or outside Russia. All nations and peoples have their idiosyncratic features, yet there is something special about Russia that perplexes policy makers and analysts in capitals from Beijing to Tashkent to Berlin. Efforts to penetrate the forces driving Russian behavior are so frustrating that sometimes one can only conclude that the Russian national interest is to bewilder the rest of the world.

It would be highly presumptuous, even perilous, for me to suggest I have any convincing answers to the eternal questions. But I believe certain common themes, core features, and driving factors evident through czarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russian history can help elucidate a query that underlies these eternal questions. That is: Why is Russia so . . . Russian?

THE IMPERIAL STATE

Looking at a map of the world, one cannot help but be impressed by Russia’s sheer vastness. From the sixteenth century until the beginning of the First World War, the Russian government was in a nearly constant process of state expansion. During the 150 years from the beginning of the sixteenth century through the middle of the seventeenth, Russia added territory every year, on average,

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equivalent to the Netherlands. No state in world history has expanded so persistently or held onto land more tenaciously than has Russia.

Russia grew as a multinational and multicultural empire at roughly the same time that Western European empires came on the world stage. But at least one important difference distinguished the Russian and the Western European empires of the time. The European empires—Spanish, Portuguese, British, French, Dutch, and so forth—were multinational, but the colonies were overseas and thus clearly separated from their ruling capitals. Russia, on the other hand, was a continental empire, and there was not such a clear differentiation between ruling core and colonial periphery. While the Western European states developed national identities apart from their colonial possessions, Russia never did. In fact, many historians have argued that Russia never was a nation-state, but rather developed as an empire from the very beginning.

Historically, as one traveled east from Western Europe, regions became progressively poorer and rule more autocratic. Russian governments, in order to compete with a succession of real and potential adversaries from the West, invested much authority in the central sovereign, the czar, and later in the head of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Both of these allocated relatively large resources to the military. For much of Russian history such resources were extracted from a chiefly agrarian population that struggled just to maintain near-subsistence standards of living in climatically and geologically adverse conditions.

Whether this militarization was undertaken for offensive or defensive purposes has been a matter of considerable historical debate, but the phenomenon of a centralized and militarized state and society has distinguished Russia for hundreds of years. In addition, Russian expansion created

a self-perpetuating dynamic. Russia continually conquered and acquired territory populated by non-Russian ethnic and nationalist groups that formed a contiguous belt or frontier in regions where political loyalty to Moscow was dubious. This encouraged a real or imagined state of permanent insecurity for the core state, whose response was repression and pushing the boundaries yet further out to create bigger buffer zones.

The geography of Eurasia was conducive for the Russians—as it had been for the Golden Horde, Tamerlane, and others before—to create a huge continental empire. The Russians also developed a deeply ingrained sense of territorial security that, while not entirely unique, placed great strains on the central government, creating the need for a large state bureaucracy and military. Commercial trade, economic growth, and technological development consistently lagged in Russia, compared to its European neighbors. Yet its vast natural resources, large territory and population, and ability to mobilize a large army made Russia a formidable player in European politics beginning with the rule of Peter the Great.

After Peter the Great moved the Russian empire's capital to his newly built city near the Baltic Sea, St. Petersburg, Russia continued to expand in the Baltic region thanks to the defeat of Charles XII and Sweden; to the west with the partitioning of Poland; and to the south at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. In the nineteenth century the expansion continued to the south in the Caucasus and to the southwest in Central Asia.

The historian Edward Keenan has suggested that Moscow showed pragmatic opportunism, that it was not inherently bent on expansion but did take advantage of opportunities as they emerged. In other words, Russia expanded because it could, in an international context of anarchy, in which conflict and wars were commonplace. Keenan argued that Russia expanded more or less in the manner of normal major powers of the period.

The historian George Vernadsky further argued that the peculiar geography of Eurasia makes it a natural setting for an unusually dynamic national grouping, in this case the Russians, to extend its domination as far as possible for security reasons. “The fundamental urge which directed the Russian people eastward lies deep in history,” he

wrote. “It was not ‘imperialism,’ nor was it the consequence of the petty political ambitions of Russian statesmen. It was in geography, which lies at the basis of all history.” (Pyotr Chaadaev had written in this vein in 1837, in *The Vindication of a Madman*, declaring “Russia, it is a geographical fact.”) Keenan's views mesh well with Vernadsky's geographical determinism by suggesting that Russia's expansionism could be explained as normal behavior in an unusual geography.

MANIFEST DESTINY

Richard Pipes and others would suggest, however, that the Russians, and later the Soviets, adapted an ideology—be it “Moscow as the Third Rome” or Marxism-Leninism—that inspired an extraordinary imperial appetite. Keenan's explanation places more emphasis on the external environment that a state faces, while Pipes argues there is something fundamentally different about Russia that leads it to be inherently aggressive and expansionist.

Upon reflection these views—those of Keenan and Vernadsky versus those of Pipes—may not be so contradictory. The geography of Eurasia does present a truly Darwinian dilemma, given its susceptibility to invasion, so it is not surprising that the imperatives deriving from a territorial view of

security drove a peculiarly militarized kind of economic development in both czarist Russia and the Soviet Union. At the same time, if such extensive territories are to be dominated for such a long period, a powerful national myth is required. The Russians developed this under the czars, and after a brief “time of troubles” following World War I, the Soviet Union adopted a different but also powerful myth.

In the fifteenth century a potent national myth emerged to fuel a messianic vision for the Russian state and people. It began with the notion of Moscow as the “Third Rome,” or the historical protector and purveyor of Orthodox Christianity. The first Rome had fallen centuries before, and in 1453 the “second Rome,” Constantinople, fell. In 1472 the Russian Czar Ivan III married Sophia Palaeologina, the niece of Byzantium's last emperor, Constantine, and the marriage supported the idea that Russia was Byzantium's historical successor.

Keenan argues this myth was actually suggested by the post-Renaissance West, as part of

A contradiction exists between Russia's domestic goals for economic growth and its insistence on hyper-sovereignty.

efforts to mobilize the Russians to act as a bulwark against the Ottomans. In 1520 the monk Philotheus supposedly wrote a letter to the czar which stated: "And now, I say unto them: Take care and take heed, pious czar; all the empires of Christendom are united in thine, the two Romes have fallen and the third exists and there will not be a fourth."

In 1547 Russian rulers officially adopted the title of "czar," which was derived from the Roman Caesar; this emphasized that the succession of Christian capitals was matched by a succession of rulers. Iver Neumann has argued that, while the doctrine of the Third Rome anointed Russia as the divine successor, the temporal borders of that state were never clearly identified. This provided a powerful religious justification for the expansion of the Third Rome at the expense of territories supposedly abandoned by God in favor of Moscow.

This kind of religious imagery has reemerged on numerous occasions throughout Russian history, often invoking "Holy Russia," with Christ-like qualities, as the suffering savior of the world. Russia was imbued with a historical mission; this was the crux of the "Russian idea." The Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev wrote that the Russians and the Jews have "the most vigorous messianic consciousness of all peoples." Berdyaev attributed this messianism in Russians to the unique combination of Western and Eastern qualities that make up the Russian character:

The Russian people is not purely European and it is not purely Asiatic. Russia is a complete section of the world—a colossal East-West. It unites two worlds, and within the Russian soul two principles are always engaged in strife—the Eastern and the Western.

ENDURING INSECURITY

While the identity of the state as Marxist-Leninist was important throughout the Soviet period, Soviet leaders' perceptions of security were dominated by the more traditional dilemmas of geography and power. The Soviet Union that emerged in the 1920s from seven debilitating years of World War I and the Russian Civil War was economically devastated and physically smaller than its czarist predecessor state,

a situation somewhat analogous to the Russian Federation after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. Joseph Stalin was especially sensitive to the impact of Soviet economic and technological backwardness on military power as the European security situation grew increasingly perilous in the 1930s. In 1930 Stalin warned that if the Soviet Union did not rapidly industrialize it would be overrun once again, as Russia had been numerous times in its history:

To slow down the tempo [of industrialization] means to lag behind. And those who lag behind are beaten. The history of Old Russia shows . . . that because of her backwardness she was constantly being defeated. By the Mongol Khans, by the Polish-Lithuanian gentry, by the Anglo-French Capitalists. . . . Beaten because of backwardness—military, cultural, political, industrial, and agricultural backwardness. . . . We are behind the leading countries by fifty—one hundred years. We must make up this distance in ten years. Either we do it or we go under.

The experience of the 1930s and World War II strengthened Stalin's territorial view of international security, and his obsession with territorial security fueled the cruel symbiosis of Soviet domestic and foreign policies from the 1930s onward. An internal regime of unprecedented terror in the 1930s was justified by

the supposed prevalence and influence of capitalist spies and saboteurs who conspired to destroy the Soviet regime, just as the capitalist powers had tried to "choke the baby in its crib" with the allied intervention in 1918.

Moscow was a deeply surreal place in the 1930s, when a series of show trials condemned to death many of the leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution who were falsely accused of, among other things, espionage. Vladimir Lenin had referred to czarist Russia as "the prisonhouse of nations," but the purges and the creation of the gulag system in the Soviet Union under Stalin were far more brutal than the oppression under czarism.

With the defeat of the Nazis in May 1945, Stalin stood triumphant as no Russian leader had since Alexander I after the defeat of Napoleon in 1812. During the war the terror subsided and the leadership made ideological concessions to appeal to patriotic Russian nationalism. For the first time in its history (anticipating the immi-

Russian leaders frame their country's international cooperation in terms of realpolitik bargains.

nent defeat of Japan), the Soviet Union was not under threat from any major power. The dean of US Soviet specialists, George Kennan, wrote in May 1945 from Moscow, where he served in the American embassy:

By the time the war in the Far East is over Russia will find herself, for the first time in her history, without a single great power rival on the Eurasian landmass. She will also find herself in physical control of vast new areas of this landmass: some of them areas to which Russian power had never before been extended. These new areas (although their exact frontiers are deliberately kept vague) will probably contain well over 100 million souls—most of them in the European sector. Those are developments of enormous import in the development of the Russian state.

It was not an unconscious slip on Kennan's part that he referred repeatedly to "Russia" rather than the "Soviet Union." He strongly believed that traditional Russian nationalist goals and concerns were the most informative guide for understanding Soviet foreign policy under Stalin.

The breakup of the wartime alliance and the onset of the cold war marked a seminal event that defined the core structure of international relations until the collapse of the Soviet Union. As with the eventual defeat of the Golden Horde in the fifteenth century and the defeat of Napoleon in the nineteenth century, Russia during World War II had made huge sacrifices to "save the West" from a continental hegemon—this time, Hitler. Stalin believed the West should pay its debt by allowing the Soviet Union to expand its domination to extensive territories of Eastern and Central Europe, including a neutralized Germany. The Soviet victory over Germany was the event that cemented the legitimacy of the Soviet regime, and the regime did its utmost, through propaganda and education, to ensure that the citizens did not forget.

After that, the development of a Soviet identity was increasingly defined by the nation's position in a superpower confrontation with the United States. Moscow and Washington each maintained a series of alliance relationships in Europe and Asia and they held each other in a balance of nuclear terror. This balance of power remained critical even as Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev sought détente with the United States and Western Europe. Détente was defined as a relaxation in tension; it resulted in important arms control agreements, including the 1972 Anti-Ballistic

Missile Treaty and the SALT I and II treaties. The Brezhnev administration's achievement of nuclear parity with the United States helped consolidate the Soviet international identity as a superpower of equal standing with the United States.

Yet even at the peak of its powers, the Soviet Union, as Robert Legvold noted in 1977, was like a "deformed giant . . . mighty in its military resources and exhilarated by its strength, but backward in other respects." Paradoxically, the Soviet Union of the 1980s was simultaneously a global superpower and a third world country. In 1989, one Soviet official described his country as "Upper Volta with rockets."

The notion of the Soviet Union's relative decline in comparison with the West is essential to understanding the motivations for economic, social, and political reform during the perestroika years. It is rather difficult to imagine that the Soviet leaders would have embarked on reform if their economy had been growing rapidly while the West stagnated. Indeed, the catalyst for perestroika was Mikhail Gorbachev's perception that the Soviet Union in the 1980s was in a "pre-crisis situation." The Soviet president's motivations were somewhat similar to Peter the Great's at the end of the seventeenth century.

THE NEW THINKING

As the perestroika years proceeded into the late 1980s, it became increasingly clear that the new thinkers' attacks on the traditional Soviet approach to foreign policy were aimed primarily at reducing the impact of the military on Soviet security and foreign policy, and then by logical extension ending the military's lock on domestic economic resources. The Gorbachev team profitably used diplomatic success with the West to help support efforts to redefine Soviet security demands and so to justify reductions in defense spending.

However, Gorbachev's failure consistently to implement an effective set of economic reforms left him without the promised benefits of increased economic production and subsequent trade with and investment from the West. In fact, the very half-hearted measures toward economic reform effectively destroyed the previously inefficient but functioning system. They helped reduce Soviet markets to chaos and the state to near bankruptcy.

Russian history before the collapse of communism reveals, in short, core continuities that formed organizing principles of domestic and foreign

policy from Muscovite to czarist to Soviet Russia. These deep grooves include highly centralized and unaccountable political authority, weak and often virtually nonexistent institutions of private property and rule of law, and a great power mentality that is deeply militarized as well as colored by messianism and xenophobia. Russia's experience of either being in or preparing for war for most of its history, coupled with its unique geography, engendered a highly territorially based sense of security. This in turn drove Russia's impulse to dominate near neighbors and to expand "buffer zones" against presumed and potential enemies.

The revolution of 1991, led by Boris Yeltsin and his team of reformers, marked the most concentrated and successful effort in Russia's more than thousand-year history to break out of its traditional patrimonial and imperial paradigm. In retrospect, it seems remarkable that this effort has been as successful as it has been, given the disastrous conditions at the starting point. The new Russia was effectively bankrupt. With the demise of the institutional glue of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, state power and authority were gravely weakened.

And probably most devastating was the inheritance of an economic system and infrastructure that for 70 years had been based on nonmarket principles, resulting in perhaps the greatest misallocation of resources in history. The late economist Gregory Grossman captured the magnitude of this legacy in the 1980s when he described the Soviet economy as "negative value-added," and suggested that, from an economic point of view, Russia would make better use of its resources by simply shutting down its entire misdeveloped industrial structure.

Yeltsin and his team were exuberantly optimistic, too optimistic as it turned out, about the future of Russian foreign policy and Russia's place in the world order. Immediately after being elected president in June 1991, Yeltsin came to the United States and formulated his vision of Russian-American relations based on common interests—for example, creating a "common political and economic system in the Northeastern hemisphere in which the United States and Russia would play a leading role." These dreams of deep partnership evaporated all too quickly, as the reform-

ers' economic and foreign policy plans came under increasing political attacks. In the spring of 1992, the Yeltsin administration's "shock therapy" approach was already in rapid retreat, even before much shock had been administered.

PUTIN'S THERMIDOR

Since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, the more traditional themes that marked the continuity between Russian czarist and Soviet foreign policy have gradually come to predominate. First is the virtual obsession with Russia's status as a great power that both deserves respect and is entitled to "privileged relations" with its neighbors. Certainly the traditional sense of territorial security drives Moscow's approach to its neighbors, and control of or hegemony over vast swaths of territory remains a key factor in Russia's sense of what constitutes a great power. In addition, the recentralization of political and economic power has been cast as a security imperative. (The militarization of the Russian economy, a core link

between czarist and Soviet domestic orders and their highly security-driven foreign policies, has, so far, not taken place.)

Russia's extraordinary economic recovery since 1999 has fueled its transformation from a reluctant

follower in the 1990s to an obstructionist power with aspirations to revise the world order from unipolar to multipolar. The country's recent economic setbacks, a consequence of global recession and declining oil prices, have not altered this perspective as yet.

Indeed, recovery from the economic crisis of the 1990s is only part of Moscow's rather Darwinist outlook on the increasing tilt in the global economic balance of power toward large emerging-market economies and hydrocarbon producers—two categories in which Russia figures prominently. Thirty years ago when the Group of Seven was formed to manage the global economy, its member countries constituted more than 60 percent of the world economy; today those countries are no longer so dominant and account for only 40 percent.

During the 1990s, President Bill Clinton and President Yeltsin believed that they shared the same Western values, which could be described as "market democracy." Today, the Russian lead-

A security framework that would allow for Russia's special spheres of interest sounds straight out of the nineteenth century playbook of great powers.

ership no longer subscribes to those values. The country's capitalism persists but is increasingly becoming state capitalism, and political freedom in the Western sense has been curtailed.

Given these changes in its perspective, Moscow was bound to reevaluate its interests in the international system. Then-President Putin did so starkly in his famous February 10, 2007, speech at the *Wehrkunde* Security Conference in Munich. He made essentially two points: first, that the United States was behaving irresponsibly in managing global affairs, and second, that the international system of American hegemony was evaporating and being replaced by genuine multipolarity. Most commentary focused on the first point and missed the importance of the second, which Putin summarized:

The combined GDP measured in purchasing power parity of countries such as India and China is already greater than that of the United States. And a similar calculation with the GDP of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) surpasses the cumulative GDP of the EU. And according to experts this gap will only increase in the future. There is no reason to doubt that the economic potential of the new centers of global economic growth will inevitably be con-

verted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity.

Putin and his colleagues elaborated on this theme in a series of important speeches in 2007, and the call for a "new international architecture" of global governance became a campaign theme of the Russian parliamentary and presidential electoral cycle of 2007–08.

Russians are right to point out that institutions of global governance are anachronistic and often ineffective. However, Russians' own capacity to contribute to a solution is less obvious because of their emotionally charged view of the past 20 years. The Kremlin considers many changes to the international system since the late 1980s as illegitimate, because Russia was too weak to assert its positions. In its narrative the West—mainly the United States—took advantage of Russian weakness through NATO enlargement in 1997, the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, the abandonment of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001, the endorsement of regime change (the "color revolutions") on Russia's borders in 2003 and 2004, the promotion of missile defense, and the recognition of Kosovo in 2008. The Russian

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elite sees these Western moves as detrimental to Russia's national interests.

Russian leaders see themselves as "realists," and describe their foreign policy as pragmatic and driven by national interests. When they discuss international relations, they rarely talk of "public goods" or "norms," and they receive US and European references to them with cynicism or, more often, with defensive hostility about "double standards." They view US efforts to promote American "values" as hypocritical justifications for the promotion of US interests—and, ultimately, US influence and hegemony.

In place of norms and public goods, Russian leaders and political analysts frame their country's international cooperation in terms of *realpolitik* bargains and "tradeoffs" of interests. If the United States wants Russia to take a stronger position in isolating Iran, Washington is expected to compensate Moscow by ending NATO enlargement or, as was announced recently, halting missile defense plans for Central Europe.

One of Russia's oft-repeated grievances is the US betrayal of a supposed "gentleman's agreement" between George H.W. Bush and Gorbachev in 1990 to allow the unification of Germany as long as NATO would not deploy new bases on the territory of former Warsaw Pact countries. US officials contest the Russian interpretation, thus illustrating the problem with such unwritten exchanges.

THE MEDVEDEV DOCTRINE

The Russian government holds one norm dear, that of national sovereignty—but it applies it very selectively. Russian policy is itself rife with double standards when it comes to the sovereignty of countries like Georgia and Ukraine. President Dmitri Medvedev made this eminently clear in his September 2008 remarks on Russian television presenting the five principles that would guide his country's foreign policy:

First, Russia will comply in full with all of the provisions of international law regarding relations between civilized countries.

Second, Russia believes in the need for a multipolar world and considers that domination by one country is unacceptable, no matter which country this may be.

Third, we are naturally interested in developing full and friendly relations with all countries—with Europe, Asia, the United States, Africa, with

all countries in the world. These relations will be as close as our partners are ready for.

Fourth, I see protecting the lives and dignity of Russian citizens, wherever they may be, as an indisputable priority for our country, and this is one of our foreign policy priorities.

Fifth, I think that, like any other country, Russia pays special attention to particular regions, regions in which it has privileged interests. We will build special relations with the countries in these regions, friendly relations for the long-term period.

Western analysts interpreted Medvedev's speech as aiming at a diminished role for NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. But his formulation, which analysts have dubbed "the Medvedev Doctrine," is also a striking contrast with the idealistic universalism that marked Gorbachev's "new political thinking" of the late Soviet period. And it bears a strong resemblance to traditional "realist" balance-of-power thinking.

A European security framework that would allow for Russia's "privileged relations" with neighbors and special spheres of interest sounds straight out of the nineteenth century playbook of great powers, including the American Monroe Doctrine, which justified the United States' repeated violations of the sovereignty of its neighbors. Such anachronistic notions are nonstarters in twenty-first century Europe, where the trend is toward common and cooperative security institutions.

An even more fundamental contradiction exists between Russia's domestic goals for economic growth and its increasingly belligerent insistence on hyper-sovereignty. Russia is more integrated today in the global economy than it has ever been. However, as its ambitious strategic economic goals for 2020 make clear, the best-case growth scenarios for Russia require much deeper integration with the West—first and foremost Europe, but also the United States and Japan.

These partners are far more important to Russia for trade, investment, technology, and management transfer than are the Commonwealth of Independent States, China, Iran, Venezuela, and the rest of the world. Yet, despite Russia's deepening economic integration and the imperative for more such integration, Moscow's political ties with the West have been worsening in recent years. This is an unsustainable contradiction that runs counter to Russia's national interests. ■