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## Russia's Post-Imperial Condition

DMITRI TRENIN

Recent years have provoked a surge of interest in the fate of empires—their rise, decline, and fall. Much of the writing on this subject has been intended to serve as reassurance, or, alternatively, warning to the premier power of today, the United States. This is understandable. Substantially less attention is paid to what happens after the decline and fall are complete, and the empire is no more. “What remains of a doughnut when it’s eaten?” a character in Nikita Mikhalkov’s film, *The Barber of Siberia*, asks. And answers, laughingly, “A hole. A hole remains.” Well, not exactly.

Russia is no longer an empire, and it is not going to be one again. However, many features established in the imperial period are still felt to this day. Russia is not merely “lost in transition” but also in translation: The real name of the game is historical transformation, which takes much longer—generations rather than years or even decades—and has no immediately identifiable end station.

Unlike all the other members of the Soviet bloc or former republics of the Soviet Union, Russia has had to deal with its imperial legacy, and this fact has weighed heavily in the country’s failure to embrace integration into, or even with, the West. Focused mainly on itself, and trying to avoid being dominated by any other countries, Moscow is striving to reconstitute itself as a great power. It believes it has enough resources to play an important role as a makeweight on the geopoliticians’ scales—a swing state affecting the global balance.

Whether this hope has any foundation depends on how successfully the country reforms its institutions and economy. But whatever happens, whether Russia modernizes or not, there will be no new incarnation of its historical empire. Today’s Russia is post- rather than neo-imperial.

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DMITRI TRENIN is director of the Carnegie Moscow Center. His most recent book is *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), from which this essay is adapted.

### AFTER THE FALL

All empires rise and fall. When they fall, they sometimes join with mightier powers, whether ex-adversaries or allies. The German Third Reich and the Japanese Empire went down in flames, first defeated on the battlefield and occupied, then reformed by the victorious powers. Great Britain and France, though among the winners in World War II, lost most of their overseas possessions within a few decades as a result of postwar decolonization. The smaller European imperial powers, such as Portugal and the Netherlands, waged bitter colonial wars, saw they could not prevail, and finally had to sail back to the “old country.”

Whatever the case, all of these nations managed relatively soon to reconstitute themselves as successful nation-states. Once the physical separation with imperial possessions had occurred and trade flows had been diversified or diverted, imperial nostalgia gradually subsided. What remained was cultural influence. The British Empire spawned several societies, which now form the English-speaking segment of the Western world. Even non-Western countries as diverse as India and South Africa have borrowed from their former colonial power its language, legal system, and basic principles of government.

Contiguous empires were more difficult to break up, but separation when it did happen was more complete. Turkey for many decades after 1923 played a very limited international role, above all in its former imperial possessions. Likewise, West Germany after 1945 played a limited international role. Maritime power Spain, having lost its American colonies in the nineteenth century, had to continue in relative obscurity, virtually up to the moment it integrated with the rest of Europe via membership in NATO (1982) and the European Union (1986).

Decades after the downfall of their empires, some of these countries rose to become regional

powers (Turkey) or emerged as the leader of a united Europe (Germany); or established an informal “guiding role” for itself in the Balkans and along the Danube (Austria). The imperial mentality of the respective elites, once demolished, returned later in a sublimated form of leadership, responsibility, and arbitration. In all these cases, however, the gap between empire and post-empire was lengthy, and during that time nation-states arose and matured.

Russia, which by 1980 had built a huge formal and informal empire—and lost most of it a decade later—is a rare case of a former imperial polity having neither disappeared nor reinvented itself as a nation-state. However, in laying claims to a regional base and global interests, it is not engaging in the kind of revanchism that, in the 1920s and 1930s, doomed post-Versailles, post-Weimar Germany. No longer a pretender to world hegemony, and staying within its shrunken borders, Russia is trying to establish itself in the top league of the world’s major players and as the dominant power in its neighborhood.

At the same time, it is striving to keep itself in one piece. This is a dual adventure almost unparalleled in modern history. Whether the adventure succeeds is a big question, and an important one.

### ZONE WITHOUT PRIVILEGES

Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the “post-Soviet space” no longer exists. The USSR itself passed away abruptly in 1991. The 2000s saw the disappearance of the “former Soviet Union” as a useful notion. The milestones for this process included Georgia’s Rose Revolution (2003) and Ukraine’s Orange one (2004); the end of gas subsidies (2006); the Russo-Georgian war and its aftermath (2008); and a public row between Russia and Belarus (2010). Perhaps most importantly, thinking about the former imperial space *en bloc* is disappearing from the Russian mind, which now treats the new countries rather discretely.

Today across the region, new generations with no direct experience of the Soviet Union have entered productive age. Old links—economic, political, defense, human, cultural—have frayed, and new ones reflecting post-imperial realities have emerged. People born after 1985 find it hard to believe that countries as diverse as Estonia and Turkmenistan used to be part of the same state.

In lieu of the former Soviet Union, three new regions have formed. One is what can be termed New Eastern Europe, composed of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. Another region is the South Caucasus, with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and the breakaway territories of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. Finally, there is Central Asia, consisting of Kazakhstan and the four states of what used to be called, in Soviet times, Middle Asia.

Russia’s interests in this neighborhood are real, and its cultural influence remains substantial and potentially critical. But a privileged zone is a chimaera. Moscow’s current zone of direct influence extends only to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russo-Belarusian union, promulgated in 1999, has long looked stillborn and is now recognized as a fiction; a customs union among Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia is a practical measure that, over time, could be the nucleus of meaningful economic integration, but not some zone of influence.

Meanwhile, though Moscow is no longer shy about using its advantages when dealing with smaller countries on its periphery, seeking advantage is not the same as seeking annexation.

As for post-imperial Russia itself, it did not experience a rebirth as a nation-state, like postwar democratic Germany or the republican Kemalist Turkey. It did not shrink to a small fragment, a souvenir of past imperial glory, like post-1918 *Deutsch-Oesterreich*, which became the Republic of Austria. It did organize the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which has nothing in common with the Commonwealth except for the term itself; and it has promoted the idea of a community of Russian language speakers. But essentially its post-imperial agenda is to remain a great power.

Not *too* great a power, though. The multipolar world that Moscow started to call for in the late 1990s has finally arrived, but Russia’s position in it is that of a relatively minor pole. Moscow can no longer hope to play a major geopolitical role in Europe, which is unified, or in Asia, where the two heavyweights are China and India. It is certainly not eyeing any major role in the Greater Middle East.

True, today’s Russian Federation occupies all the space between the EU and China—something the Czardom of Muscovy achieved in the seventeenth century. However, its severe demographic

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challenges, including a calamitous mortality rate, hardly encourage sustained projection of power. And with just 2 percent of global GDP, Russia by its own standards does not feature at the top of the international hierarchy. Since World Bank statisticians abolished the category of transition economies, Russia has formally joined the ranks of developing countries.

## THE NEW EURASIA

The Soviet Union claimed to be the very antithesis of an empire. It branded its enemies “imperialists,” which, in the Leninist tradition, denoted the highest—and supposedly final—stage of capitalism. But “American imperialism,” to Soviet propagandists, was also a policy of territorially expanding power and influence. And of course the Soviet Union sought to match America’s international reach. It publicly rejected the title of superpower but enjoyed it in private—and in practice.

The Soviet Union itself was built as an empire, albeit a peculiar one. Formally a federation, it was ruled from an imperial center. A salient feature of all Russian empires was that they did not have a clearly identifiable metropolitan area, except for the capital. The regime at the center was as harsh as, or even harsher than, in the borderlands. Unlike, say, the British Empire, which in Britain itself maintained a parliamentary government, the Soviet empire did not have at its core a true nation-state.

Russia today has entered a post-imperial world. And yet vestigial elements of imperial attitudes are still visible—at home and abroad. Windfall revenues from energy exports in the 2000s helped Russian society acquire a new quality, particularly through the rise of consumerism and middle classes. But public space, including politics, suffered a setback compared to the 1990s. Domestically, today’s Russia is a neo-czarist, mildly authoritarian polity. Its operating formula can be termed authoritarianism with the consent of the governed.

As an international actor, Russia has undergone a remarkable evolution over the past two decades. From immature attempts at integration into and with the West, Russia went on to assert itself as an independent great power, only to discover its glaring deficiencies. Having then adopted a policy of promoting domestic modernization through close links with Europe and North America, it has been careful at the same time to maintain a balance between East and West.

A number of observers claim that Russia is an empire that has failed to dissolve completely. According to this view, the process of disintegration

was only temporarily stopped at the turn of the twenty-first century; it will have to continue, engulfing the North Caucasus and possibly other regions of the Russian Federation.

Unquestionably, the North Caucasus is an area of high turbulence and uncertainty. Yet many empires have failed to dissolve completely. Britain still holds on to Gibraltar, the Falklands, the Bermudas, Diego Garcia, and other small possessions; France has a sprawling community of French-speaking affiliates: Guyana, Guadeloupe, and Tahiti, to name but a few; even the Netherlands keeps a few islands off the coast of Venezuela.

The common feature of all these former European colonial outposts is that their populations want to stay associated with the former overlord, as does Puerto Rico with the United States. Sovereignty per se is less important than economic prosperity and the degree of social development. Will Russia be able to offer something similar?

What is at stake in this continuing post-imperial story is the geopolitical setup of Eurasia in the mid–twenty-first century. Eurasia is no longer another name for the Russian empire; it now covers the entire Old World. Besides the Russian Federation, it is now Central Asia, the Caspian, and the Caucasus that are linking Eurasia’s east and west. It is Kazakhstan and Turkey that are acting as quintessential Eurasian countries, reaching to both Asia and Europe. Russia as one of these players, given its domestic challenges, risks becoming a dual periphery in both Europe and Asia.

## HARD ADJUSTMENTS

Postwar Britain and Charles de Gaulle’s France offer interesting insights into the stages of post-imperialism and the psychological compensation for geopolitical losses. It took Britain a quarter-century to put its economic relations with continental Europe above those with its far-flung colonies and dominions; to drop its pretensions to a politico-military presence east of Suez; and to reconcile itself with much-diminished international influence. Its “special relationship” with the United States was a major factor, both political and psychological, in easing this transition.

France, by contrast, toned up talk of its *grandeur*—even as it toned down discussion of its failings—in order to compensate for the trauma of defeat and wartime collaboration with the Nazis. Whereas the British, in order to protect their distinct identity, sought to keep some distance from the continent, the French aspired to lead Europe and turn the continent into an instrument for re-

constituting France's soft dominance. While post-imperial Britain sought greater closeness with America, post-imperial France rebelled against Washington's hegemonic ambitions.

One can argue that, in a way, neither Britain nor France is completely out of its post-imperial phase. Both countries' elites espouse a global approach to world affairs; both possess small nuclear arsenals; their conventional militaries, while much reduced, remain highly capable. As late as 1982, the United Kingdom projected power over thousands of miles to defend its sovereignty over the Falkland Islands. France routinely sends paratroopers to intervene in Central Africa. Yet these are surviving vestiges of the past. The present, and likely future, of both the United Kingdom and France are closely tied to NATO and the EU. Neither of these clubs has much time for empires, or even great powers—except, of course, in NATO's case, the United States.

By comparison, Russia's post-imperial condition is complicated by a number of factors, including: lack of integration with the rest of Europe at the strategic and economic levels; continued cohabitation with the former borderlands-turned-independent states; and the mammoth task of combating backwardness. This condition will persist, making Russia wonder about its place and role in the world, its policy priorities, and the proper methods for securing them.

In fact, the new community that all former subjects of the Russian and Soviet empires have entered is global. In this new world, Russia will seek to project an image of a great power, but it will have to fit into a new structure, with an even greater power—the United States—at one extreme and really small neighbors at the other extreme. Adjusting to this world, as Britain, France, and the lesser post-imperial powers have done—essentially by accepting US leadership—continues to be anathema in Moscow. Russian leaders crave equality, but they know that it exists in one area only: nuclear arsenals and missiles, which frames the relationship in an outmoded cold war setup.

## NO MAN'S LAND

After 1991, Russian security circles continued to assume that the United States was thinking seriously about one day striking militarily against Russia. True to this view, they believed the territories vacated by Soviet power at the end of the cold war had to remain as a kind of strategic no-man's

land, a buffer between Russia and NATO, which Russian generals still eyed with suspicion.

Thus, it was the prospect of NATO membership for Georgia that played the key role in Russian considerations and actions leading up to the five-day Georgia war in 2008. By seeking to limit NATO enlargement, Moscow wanted to exclude any outside influence in the region that would threaten Russia's own. This stance called for neutrality of the new states (at minimum), security alliances with some, unencumbered access for Russian business interests, and strong Russian cultural influence across the board. But Moscow's assertion of "privileged interests" did not claim a reconstitution of the historical empire, or an intention to establish a Warsaw Pact-like system of tight control.

Much has been made in the Western media of then-President Vladimir Putin's remark, in his 2005 annual address to the Russian parliament, that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century. Putin's words were interpreted as evidence of an active Kremlin nostalgia for the recently lost empire, and even as a sign of his intention to bring back the USSR.

This was a misinterpretation. An empire's collapse is usually a political earthquake, claiming lives. Suffice it to recall the immediate aftermath

of the end of British rule in India or in Palestine. Parts of southeastern Europe are still feeling the distant tremors that can be traced to the end of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires.

Moreover, Putin had been on record as saying that "one who does not regret the passing of the Soviet Union has no heart; one who wants to bring it back has no brains." He also called the CIS a vehicle for civilized divorce. Most Russians agreed with these words of wisdom. (Most did not realize that in both instances Putin was quoting, without attribution, leading Ukrainian politicians.)

Contrary to most interpretations, Putin's catastrophe remark was not a precursor to a neo-imperialist, revanchist policy. Similarly, his much-noted remarks at a Munich security conference in February 2007, when he lashed out at US foreign policy, were not a declaration of a new cold war on Washington. In reality, Putin was essentially trying to make the West accept new rules of engagement with Russia. These could be summarized as: "Accept us as we are; treat us as equals; and let's do business where our interests meet."

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Two years later, the Barack Obama administration tacitly accepted these terms. The “reset” of US policy toward Russia has ushered in a period of constructive and productive relations between the two countries, symbolized by the entry into force in February 2011 of a new START treaty.

## CRUNCH TIME

In the two decades since the Soviet Union’s collapse, imperial restoration has never been seriously considered by the leaders, nor demanded by the public. Rather, Russia has gone in reverse—expansion has yielded to introspection, and grandiose public schemes have given way to myriad private agendas. Even so, the belief, shared by many in the West, that Russia is essentially finished as a serious country is still to be tested and might well be premature.

Here, it is useful to keep in mind that post-World War II Germany did not rise because it had great friends, who also doubled as its occupying powers, but largely because of its homemade economic miracle. It was Germany’s own integration into world markets that did the job. Until Russia itself rises to the occasion, its efforts to achieve modernization through alliances will have only limited impact.

For now, the outlook is clouded. Russia is no longer an empire, but it is no nation-state yet, either. Put differently, it has yet to become a republic. Russians need to unite in a joint enterprise, but they first have to agree on the rules and agree to stick to them. While the private is still king in Russia, virtually completely overshadowing the public, there are indications that this universal aloofness from fellow countrymen may be coming to an end. The idea of individual survival and success allowed the more energetic members of society to rise and prosper. However, it is beginning to dawn on some of them that their private agendas may not be fulfilled in the future due to the constraints imposed by an ossified system. The system is stronger than any individual, and so individuals need to unite and go public in order to achieve their private goals.

In an interesting parallel with its residents, Russia as a unit, an international actor, is also living for itself. There is no ideology, no clear set of values, but a very strong sense of pragmatism. The motto is simple: to survive, and to succeed, using

whatever means available. This pragmatism allows no room for empire building. Russian leaders have agreed among themselves: no more expensive ideological nonsense; no more material self-sacrifice; and no more subsidies for others. The Soviet Union acted abroad as a big spender. The Russian Federation is constantly on the lookout for opportunities to make money.

For the time being, Russia is both pre- and, in some ways, postmodern. What is missing is the modern element. The country’s current modernization drive—powered from above—is largely motivated by the Kremlin’s concerns over its world role. But modernization, which requires pervasive liberalization and eventually a genuine democracy, confronts the Russian state and Russian society alike with serious challenges. It is not clear that they will meet these challenges.

Russia’s failure to modernize would almost certainly lead to its marginalization, deterioration, and decay. The 2000s model of success built on ever-rising oil prices has revealed itself as unsustainable. In the end phase of the worst-case scenario, the country’s physical disintegration cannot be ruled out. Still, Russia’s leaders face a stark dilemma: To leave things as they are means steady decline and ultimate fall, even in the leaders’ own lifetime; to start changing things in earnest entails the risk of losing control, power, and property. They may want to be Peter the Great but are afraid to end up like Mikhail Gorbachev. So for now they act like Leonid Brezhnev.

Putin in 2010 told members of the Russian Academy of Sciences a story about his former colleagues in the KGB who had furnished the West’s best-kept industrial secrets to the Soviet economy, only for those Western innovations to be rejected by the very nature of the Soviet economic system. Now Putin is presiding over a system that is likely to reject all the technology transfers he is trying to organize because corruption, the lack of legal protection, and bureaucratic arbitrariness rule the day.

Crunch time will come sometime during the current decade when the essential failure of modernization as currently conceived and practiced will be clear to all. Russia will never again be an empire. But to be seen as a great power in the twenty-first century, it has to become a great country, above all for its own people. ■