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'Boffins' and 'Buffoons': Different Strains of Thought in Russia's Strategic Thinking

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Summary

- Economic growth fuelled by exceptionally high oil and gas export revenues has provided Russia's top echelons with a feeling that a period of retreat and weakness is over.
- Assurance of Russia's absolute sovereignty and restoration of its international status as a global great power are the principal aims of Russian foreign policy today.
- To these ends, Moscow maintains a substantial nuclear force, uses its unique position as a major energy exporting country, has established a strategic partnership with China, and is trying to restore its dominion over the new independent states.
- Attempts to establish a 'new empire' are fuelling anti-Russian feelings in the new independent states. There are no 'pro-Russian' forces in the new independent states that would turn their countries into protectorates of Moscow were they to come to power.
- Russia's emerging strategic relationship with China is highly asymmetrical and limited owing to the great disparity between the two countries' economies, and also because of differences in their strategic attitudes.
- Incorrect assessment of the situation and overestimation of the nation's resources are resulting in unattainable goals being put forward. Frustration over inevitable failures will fuel hostility towards the West which could lead to Russia's self-isolation or semi-isolation.

Introduction

Policy is a matter of perceptions. Therefore, analysis of various schools of strategic thinking that exist in Russia today may help to explain some important components of the way in which Russia's foreign policy is shaped, and to clarify the current evolution of Russia's international behaviour. Indeed, since Vladimir Putin's re-election as president in 2004, the Kremlin has demonstrated a new foreign policy style. It is more opinionated and aggressive, especially towards the new independent states of the former Soviet Union, and less cooperative, yet not totally hostile, towards the West. Like previous zigzags of Russian foreign policy, this one was coupled with or, quite probably, triggered by a shift in Russia's top circles from one pattern of strategic thinking to another. These patterns form 'prisms' through which policy-makers see developments in the international arena and the main elements of a nation's foreign policy. They differ in perceptions of Russia's national interests, its capacities and the threats to its security.

'Hard traditionalists'

The 'hard traditionalist' school that appeared just after the demise of the Soviet Union was the intellectual heir of Soviet conservatism, the ideological mindset typical of the hardline opposition to Gorbachev's reforms and the democratic changes in the former Soviet Union. It sees the rebirth of a 'quasi-Soviet Union' as Russia's major historical mission and responsibility, and reproduces some basic concepts of the Soviet era using a different theoretical basis. Whereas Soviet dogma was based on the premise of a struggle between two antagonistic socio-economic systems, the present version derives mainly from traditional nineteenth-century geopolitical theory. The causes of conflict after the Cold War are explained by states' striving for regional and global hegemony. Political and military expansionism with a view to gaining control over natural resources, international communications and other points of strategic importance are believed to be an immanent attribute and motivation of international behaviour.¹ These views are supplemented by several theses borrowed from Slavophile and Eurasian schools of Russian philosophy – mainly the presupposition of permanent antagonism between Russian and Western civilizations, and the latter's immanent intention to destroy Russian identity.

Translated into strategic doctrines, this philosophy presumes that the fundamental threat to Russia comes from the West, especially from the US and NATO. The

latter is seen as the tool of US dominion over Europe, and as encircling Russia with a chain of military bases. This school of thought presumes the possibility of war in Europe resulting from the implacable drive of the US and some European states to minimize Russia's international profile and military might, to destroy its political integrity and to establish a 'pro-Western' puppet regime so as to gain control of Russia's natural resources.

To avert these threats, adherents of this philosophy believe, Russia has to maintain a massive nuclear deterrent; restore its conventional forces so as to be able to wage a large war in Europe; and build up a highly integrated military and political alliance with the newly independent states of the former USSR. According to this view, military reform in Russia should be aimed at rebuilding a strong army and modern military industry. Russia's natural allies are countries such as North Korea, Iran or Cuba. In essence, the former Soviet military machine and strategy would need to be retained.

Within this general framework different points of view have appeared. For instance, China is seen mostly as a potential ally; yet it is also sometimes perceived as a prospective rival, encroaching on Russia's Far Eastern provinces. Muslim countries as a whole are seen often as partners in a conflict with the West but at the same time as sources of terrorism, drug-trafficking and organized crime threatening Russia's security.

Public presentations of these views often resemble a sinister 'buffoonery' or black farce performed by those who, like the restored Bourbon rulers in nineteenth-century France, have 'learned nothing and forgotten nothing'. Yet behind the scenes are several interest groups which support this philosophy – a kind of '*profiteurs de confrontation*'. Among them are elements of a military command who are unable to adapt themselves to a new strategic environment and are afraid that radical transformation of Russia's armed forces will undermine their departmental and personal influence and position. For so-called hard 'statists' (*gosudarstvenniki*) who have strong positions in the bureaucracy and security sector, a threat from the West is a pretext to stop liberal reforms.² For some captains of the Russian defence industry such a threat is a weighty argument in favour of a massive transfer of national resources from civil to military purposes. And for revanchist parties and groups this philosophy provided many arguments against the 'traitorous policy of the Yeltsin government' and sometimes against Putin's.

'Pragmatists'

The other strategic concept that appeared at the beginning of 1990s can be called 'realistic' or 'pragmatic'. It is based on the premise that amalgamating developed democracies are emerging as the economic and military core of the globalizing world and as the major source of technological and social innovations. According to this concept, Russia, regardless of all its peculiar qualities, has only two options: either to associate with the community of democracies or to be removed to the periphery of the world system. Actually, this is the essence of what is called the 'European choice for Russia'. It is based on a clear understanding that military – above all nuclear – might, which was the main if not the only factor of Soviet power and international influence, cannot play such a role any more; and that the principal source of national power, including the military, is the nation's ability to create and introduce high technology, develop human capital and promote social innovations.

This school of thought presumes that security challenges for Russia come from local instabilities and low-intensity conflicts in Russia's peripheral provinces, especially in the North Caucasus, and in neighbouring countries; from proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD); from growing terrorism; and from a set of 'soft threats' including massive drug-trafficking, illegal arms trade and so on. In this light, Russia is 'in the same boat' with the West whether it likes it or not. In the first place, Russia should develop effective institutions and a machinery of cooperation with the West to fight Islamic-based terrorism; and settle differences with Europe and the US regarding the newly independent states with a view to promoting political and economic stability there.

As the devotees of this approach believe there is no possibility of a 'large war' with NATO in Europe, or of military confrontation with the US in the peripheral areas, then in their view the military machine inherited from the Soviet Union should be radically restructured. Instead of a huge army and navy designed for continental-wide land operations and large naval battles, they say, Russia needs relatively small yet well-trained and well-equipped, highly mobile forces able to fight effectively in local wars and counter-guerrilla operations in the unstable areas along Russia's borders, and also to perform peace missions outside Russia. Of growing importance for Russia are a strong police force and law-enforcement organizations, able to fight terrorism, organized crime, drug-trafficking, illegal flows of arms and people and other 'new threats'. Nuclear weapons are seen almost exclusively as an instrument to deter Chinese expansionism.

There are a number of as yet unanswered questions within this strategic mindset. Is a new global conflict between the South and the North emerging and, if so, what are its driving forces? Do expanding networks of Islamic-based terrorist groups constitute a global menace or are they isolated hotbeds of terrorism, each of which needs to be settled by a specific combination of measures adjusted to each situation? What could be the role of military force in fighting terrorism and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction?

Many 'pragmatists' believe that pre-emptive military options are important and in many cases the only effective means of stopping WMD proliferation and preventing terrorism. Others support a softer approach, based on engagement of 'states of concern' and militant organizations into a web of constructive efforts. They believe that the creation of positive incentives is much more effective in preventing threats than sanctions and the use of force.

An important subject of debate is China's future. Some believe that China, especially after a successful peaceful settlement or military solution to the Taiwan issue, may turn into a source of threat to Russia's Far Eastern provinces and to Russia's interests in Central Asia. Yet others think that China's integration into the globalizing world economy will change its political regime and transform it from a source of uncertainty, as now, into a source of international stability.

This sort of strategic thinking is typical of the intellectuals, media and academia who are able to overcome the stereotypes and prejudices of the Soviet era and also of the expanding circle of business people, professionals and bureaucrats engaged in a 'new economy' that is arising as an integral part of globalizing economic, financial and technological networks and institutions.

'The multipolar concept'

Neither of these two schools of thought was able to attract a majority of the new emerging Russian elite. Most of the post-Soviet bureaucracy and business milieu are repelled by the obscurantism of the 'hard traditionalists' and their inability to take account of the deep changes in the world system. Most 'New Russians' were not inclined to sacrifice their own economic and personal interests for the sake of the army or defence industry. At the same time they were not – and are not – ready to accept the 'pragmatic' style of thinking.

In part this is because of their instinctive sense of Russia's 'greatness', a perception of Russia as a global great power inherited from the Soviet period. Also, they are not able to adopt Western social, political and economic values, norms and practices, which are

necessary for integration into the realm of developed democracies; they prefer to develop and introduce their own rules and norms of political and economic behaviour on the pretext of Russia's 'uniqueness' and 'greatness'. Besides, being unable to compete with the West economically, the majority of new Russian economic elites merged with mighty bureaucratic clans interested in establishing 'special zones' – especially in the former Soviet Union, where their economic interests are politically protected.

The first attempts to integrate the views, feelings and interests of 'New Russians' into foreign policy thinking were made in the first half of the 1990s. At that time, it was a mechanical mixture of ideas taken from both 'hard traditionalists' and 'pragmatists'. In the second half of the 1990s a group of academics and government technocrats close to the former head of the Russian intelligence service and later Foreign and Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov developed a more or less coherent philosophy – the so-called 'multipolar concept' – which purports to avoid the 'extremes' and 'simplifications' peculiar to the other two schools of thought.

Contrary to the views of the 'hard traditionalists' who see the West as a consolidated entity cemented by American economic and military might, Primakov and his entourage assert that the strategic unity of the West is breaking owing to the end of the Cold War, and that the West is turning into a combination of independent 'power centres' moving along different geopolitical vectors.³ In this view, global international relations are determined by the interaction of the main actors: Russia, integrated Europe, Japan, China and the United States.

The US is seen as Russia's main rival, attempting to undermine its international position and displace it from regions of its traditional interest and influence.⁴ To improve its global strategic posture and counteract 'malicious' American policy, Russia, they insist, should capitalize on differences between the US and Europe, and the US and China. In its extreme form a 'multipolar' concept presupposes the possibility of creating an informal coalition, including Russia, some leading European states and China, to minimize the American geopolitical role in an emerging world order. The other basic strategic idea is to erect a flexible geopolitical construction, a so-called 'Big Triangle', composed of Russia, China and India, to counterbalance NATO and the US.⁵ At last, the new independent states have been proclaimed a zone of Russia's exclusive influence and responsibility. The 'red line' concept advanced by Primakov in the late 1990s stated that any NATO expansion beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union, including the Baltic region, would result in far-reaching countermeasures by Russia.⁶

'Neo-imperialists'

The 'multipolar concept' has undergone appreciable change since 11 September 2001, Russia's support for the US-led war on terror, the 'rose', 'orange' and 'tulip' revolutions and the substantial improvement in Russia's economic profile since 2000. The new edition of the 'multipolar' concept is at the basis of Russia's current foreign and security policy, and outlines Russia's two principal missions: to assure its absolute sovereignty and to restore its international status as a global great power. To these ends Russia has to maintain a substantial nuclear force, use its unique position as a major energy-exporting country, establish a strategic partnership with China and form a 'Big Triangle', and – this is seen as the most important and necessary condition for global influence – restore its dominion over the new independent states except the three Baltic states.⁷ Yet unlike the 'hard traditionalists', adherents of these views see the new empire as a 'post-modern' one based on economic dominance and political influence rather than on direct military control.

Russia's approach to the West is ambivalent. By and large, Moscow does not want a new confrontation with the US or Europe; it desires neither a new Cold War nor a 'cold peace'; it is ready for cooperation with the Western countries in fighting terrorism and is looking for a 'special relationship' with the European Union. In particular, the Kremlin is especially interested in the success of the G8 Summit in St Petersburg in July 2006, seeing it as a matter of personal importance for President Putin.

At the same time, most Russian policy-makers see the relationship with the West through a zero-sum prism. They are firmly convinced that 'orange' revolutions are the result mainly of Western interference, not of the bankruptcy of the ruling regimes, and that the policy of promoting democracy is nothing but a tool to supplant Russia from its areas of vital interests and historical responsibility. In this light the Russian top echelon is concerned both by the 'new threats' such as terrorism and WMD proliferation and by Western policy in the new independent states. The US is seen both as a partner in fighting these 'new threats' and as a rival in a wider context; thus joint operations against 'new threats' should not strengthen the overall American strategic posture. As for the EU, Moscow is irritated by the European policy of bringing the issue of values into the relationship with Russia, as well as by support for democratization of the new independent states. It seems that Moscow does not totally reject the possibility of long-term, extensive cooperation and partnership with the West. Yet it must be on Russia's terms only. For this to happen, the West should recognize Russia's special

role in the post-Soviet space, withdraw from competition there and also refrain from attempts to influence Russian domestic development. This last is seen as especially important in the light of the coming parliamentary and presidential election campaigns in 2007 and 2008.

Many believe that the current zigzagging of Russia's foreign policy results from the country's economic success combined with the consolidation of an authoritarian regime. This is true, but only in the most general sense. In fact, authoritarianism *per se*, whether combined with economic success or not, does not determine the strategic orientation of foreign policy. During the twentieth century there were many military and civilian dictatorships pursuing a pro-Western line in international relations; a number of authoritarian regimes were cooperating with the former Soviet Union; while a few regimes were successfully manoeuvring between the two superpowers and capitalizing on the bipolar confrontation.

It seems that economic growth fuelled by exceptionally high oil and gas export revenues and the marginalization of political opposition on both left and right have provided Russia's top echelons with a feeling that a period of decay, retreat and discontent is over.⁸ In their view, recovery from weakness and once again becoming a great power mean that Russia should behave as a great power, especially as its oil and gas exports provide it with a new and powerful political tool.

Conclusions

The majority of the Russian media and political milieu welcome the new foreign policy as a long-awaited 'counteroffensive', as the manifestation of the country's rebirth as a great power, and as a final farewell to the 'formless' and even 'shameful' pro-Western legacy of Yeltsin's period. There are only a few sceptics concerned with the current developments. They claim that Moscow's rising ambitions are not commensurate with the real capacity of the country, and that the gap will lead to a crisis in Russian foreign policy, with unpredictable consequences.

Though it plays no role in Russia's foreign policy, this scepticism nevertheless poses the question of whether the 'neo-imperialist' concept provides a solid basis for Russia's foreign policy. Of course, Russia today is much stronger economically and much more stable politically than it was under Yeltsin, and will be so at least for the foreseeable future. Yet at the same time, Russia is turning – or in fact has already turned – into a 'petrostate'. As such, it is suffering from the weaknesses that are typical of such states: a critical dependence on world energy prices, exports of energy and imports of high technology and consumer goods; and lack of motivation for modernization and reform of the economy, or for the development of human capital. Seen in this light, the very idea of absolute sovereignty and the use of energy exports to exert political pressure are highly unpractical.

The policy of building a new empire is based on the incorrect premise that there are 'pro-Russian' forces in the new independent states which, if they came to power, would turn their countries into Moscow's protectorates. It ignores the basic fact that the post-Soviet elites, including those looking for good relations with Russia, wish to be full masters of their countries and not the Kremlin's deputies as they were during the Soviet days. Thus attempts to establish a new empire are fuelling anti-Russian feelings in the new independent states.

Russia's emerging strategic relationship with China is highly asymmetrical and limited owing to the great disparity between the two countries' economies, as well as differences in their strategic attitudes. In particular, Beijing does not like Russia to be on the American or Japanese side in case of Chinese confrontation with these countries, yet it never risks its own relations with Washington for Moscow's sake. Thus the prerequisites for a foreign policy crisis are emerging. Incorrect assessment of the situation and overestimation of the nation's resources will result in unattainable goals being put forward. Frustration over inevitable failures will fuel hostility towards the West. This hostility could result in Russia's self-isolation or semi-isolation. Unless this is stopped a deep domestic crisis may ensue.

Endnotes

¹ A typical example of these views was presented quite recently by a top Russian Army officer: 'We [Russia and the USA] are divided by antagonistic contradictions produced by an unequal distribution of natural resources, a significant share of which has Russia has. These contradictions are now covered by diplomatic, economic, cultural and other veils. ...The Earth's natural resources can provide a comfortable life for only one billion people ... Therefore the new world order established by the USA and actively supported by NATO member states and Japan could provide a comfortable existence for this 'golden billion' at the expense of the poverty of all the others. ... It is possible that under these circumstances the Russian Federation will become subject to power pressure.' Lt-Gen. Vladimir Ostankov, Head of the Center for Military-Strategic Studies of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. 'Voennaya strategiya: vzglyad v budustchee' ('Military Strategy: A Perspective'), *Rossiiskoye voennoye obozreniye (Russian Military Review)*, No. 11, 2005. Available at <http://www.mil.ru/articles/article11823.shtml>.

² 'Statism' is the political ideology that emerged in Russia in the late 1980 and early 1990s, mainly within the officer core of the Army and the KGB. It attempted to adjust to new circumstances but was not able to adopt democratic values. Its basic ideas include the following: the state is seen as the main consolidating force of Russian society; the state's interests dominate over the interests of the individual or social groups; the core and principal pillar of the state is the security sector. In Soviet days, according to the adherents of these views, the armed forces and security organizations were instruments not of the Communist Party but of the Russian state.

³ 'After the end of the Cold War', Primakov wrote soon after his appointment as Foreign Minister, 'a trend towards a transition from a confrontational bipolar to a multipolar world began to develop. The centripetal forces that attracted most of the world's nations towards one or the other of the two superpowers weakened significantly ... The countries of Western Europe began to manifest more independence than before as they ceased to depend on the American 'nuclear umbrella'. Their gravitation to the 'Euro-centre' is gradually winning out over the transatlantic orientation. The bonds of Japan's military and political dependence on the United States are weakening against the background of Japan's rapidly expanding position in the world.' Ye. Primakov, 'Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya nakanune XXI veka: problemy i perspektivy' ('International Relations on the Eve of the 21st Century: Problems and Prospects'), *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn*, No. 10, 1996, p. 3.

⁴ 'All of us in the leadership of the Foreign Intelligence Service realized perfectly well that the concept of the enemy would not disappear with the end of the 'Cold War. ... The leaders of a number of Western states are acting in order not to allow Russia to fulfil its unique role in the stabilization of the situation in the former republics of the USSR and to disrupt the trend towards their increasing rapprochement with the Russian Federation'. Ye. Primakov, *Gody v bol'shoy politike* ('The Years in High Politics'), Moscow, 1999, pp. 133, 135.

⁵ There is some evidence that the idea of a 'Big Triangle' was initially developed by Andrey Kokoshin, a member of Primakov's inner circle who held high positions in the Russian government in the 1990s.

⁶ Igor Ivanov, a member of Primakov's team, and then Foreign Minister, wrote in 1998: 'There is a red line which should not be crossed in the process of Nato's expansion. This red line goes along the borders of the CIS and the Baltic states. ... If this line is crossed then a new situation will emerge. And Russia's decisions will be formulated and made in accordance with this situation.' Igor Ivanov, 'Mi zdelaem vse vozmozhnoe chto bi ne razochirovat' nashu stranu' ('We will do our best not to let the country down'), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 30 August 1998.

⁷ For instance, Vitaly Tretiyakov, a Russian journalist and analyst close to the top echelons of Moscow's political and bureaucratic elites today, characterizes one of the basic dimensions of Russia's foreign policy during Putin's second term in the Kremlin as being 'to maintain maximal non-military control over the traditionally established and recognized territory of its historical responsibility, i.e. over the so-called post-Soviet space'. Vitaly Tretiyakov, 'Gipoteza o bol'shom treugolnike' ('The Hypothesis about the Big Triangle'), *Politichesky klass (Political Class)*, No. 10, October 2005, p. 64.

⁸ President Putin has expressed this feeling quite clearly, having stated that without Russia's participation the G8 will turn into a meeting of 'fat cats': 'No one [of the G8 leaders] is against Russia being included and actively participating in this club [the G8] because nobody wants the G8 to become a meeting between fat cats.' Transcript of Vladimir Putin's Press Conference for the Russian and Foreign Media, 31 January 2006, Moscow, http://www.president.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2006/01/31/0953_type82915type82917_100901.shtml.

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