

# Russia Reasserts Itself as a Great Power

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“To me, I confess that [countries] are pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a great game for the domination of the world.” -Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, 1898

Geopolitics is a science whose strategic depth allows us to identify several constant patterns of human history. One of these regularities has been the conflict between sea power and land power. This rivalry has existed for millennia: Athens vs. Sparta (the Peloponnesian War); Rome vs. Persia (the Roman-Persian Wars); England vs. France (the Napoleonic Wars); Britain vs. Russia (i.e. the so called ‘Great Game’) and the US vs. the USSR (better known to all as the Cold War).

As Halford Mackinder stated, Eurasia is by far the world’s most strategic piece of land. Russia is and has been one of the most important players in Eurasian geopolitics. Thanks to its geographic position, Russia has been able to project its power deep into both Europe and Asia. Indeed, during wartime Russian troops have gone as far as Paris, Berlin, Central Asia and Persia. Nevertheless, that does not mean that Russia is invulnerable to foreign invaders for it has been attacked by the Mongols, the Turks, the French and the Germans.

Mackinder is regarded as the intellectual founder of the concept of NATO because he concluded that the potential of Eurasia’s heartland was so overwhelming that it could only be contained by a transatlantic alliance formed by Western Europe and North America.

During the early phases of the Cold War American geostrategists sought to encircle the Soviet Union by establishing a meaningful presence as well as by courting allies in Eurasia’s rimland, i.e. Mackinder’s “inner crescent” which encompasses Western Europe, Anatolia, the Middle East and the Far East.

The US triggered the collapse of the USSR by overtly and covertly supporting anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan (e.g. the Mujahideen) and Eastern Europe (e.g. Solidarity). Moreover, the Soviet economy could not possibly match the ever-increasing American military expenditures without going bankrupt.

The end of the Cold War was a huge window of opportunity for the US to forge a ‘*Pax Americana*’ now that the Soviet Union had collapsed. A vacuum power provided a chance to prolong this ‘unipolar moment’ long enough to become a ‘unipolar era’. This is the geopolitical context in which the Project for a New American Century was born, echoing Henry Luce’s appeal to become the world’s only and unchallenged superpower.

To fulfill such strategic agenda, American policymakers had to take care of some matters first. Even though the Soviet Union had been split into fifteen Republics, Russia was/is a major cause for concern. During the 90's Russia was economically devastated and its political leadership was too corrupt or too incompetent to heal the country's ailing health. Nonetheless, that did not necessarily mean that someday Moscow could not regain its place as a world-class major power.

Russia inherited a stockpile of nuclear weapons capable of obliterating the United States; it has a competitive military-industrial complex that designs and manufactures state-of-the-art products (long-range strategic bombers, fighter aircraft, satellites, tanks, submarines, ICBMs); its huge territory contains large sums of key natural resources (oil, gas, precious metals, iron ore, bauxite, diamonds, fresh water, coal, timber); it possesses the third largest foreign currency reserves; its manpower must not be underestimated because Russia has more college graduates than any other European country. Last but certainly not least, Russian national morale and resilience have always been formidable because both its State and its people have successfully managed to recover from tremendous catastrophes such as the Mongol, Napoleonic and Nazi invasions, which inflicted a great deal of pain on Russia.

Therefore, the West was not willing to share any power with Russia even though Russia's ruling elite, at the time, thought it was possible to build a Northern community from Los Angeles to Vladivostok. The West had different plans; the idea was to gradually disintegrate Russia as a functioning Nation-State one and for all so that it would never reemerge as a strategic challenger. Russia, as suggested by Zbigniew Brzezinski, would be Balkanized into several States (following the Yugoslavian model) to gain access to its abundant natural resources (particularly in the Caspian, the Urals and Siberia), its economy had to be permanently crippled and the country's remaining pieces could serve as cannon fodder to be used in a potential war against China should the need arise.

After the Cold War, the Russian government believed that the West was willing to facilitate the integration of Russia's economy into international markets due to its comparative advantages. However, the West allocated more resources and investment in Eastern Europe (Russia's former satellites) in an apparent attempt to seduce them away from Russia and towards the European Union. Economically, such decision made no sense because it would have been far more profitable to invest in Russia. That policy can only be understood as political tool meant to isolate Russia and to prevent its economy from fully recovering.

Moreover, NATO kept moving closer and closer to Russian borders. The Western alliance absorbed almost all former members of the now-defunct Warsaw Pact and, even more provoking for the Kremlin, it had also engulfed the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), countries formerly belonging to the Soviet Union itself. NATO also attacked Serbia, which has been one of Moscow's staunchest allies in the Balkans. Of course Moscow expressed its disagreement but the West could afford to ignore Russia's objections because of the latter's weaknesses. The US intentions to bring Ukraine and Georgia into NATO were the straw that broke the Russian bear's back.

This encirclement has not yet stopped because outgoing President Bush promoted the idea to establish radar facilities as well as missile interceptors in Poland and the Czech Republic whose covert purpose would be none other than the achievement of operational capability to eliminate the Russian nuclear deterrent. It is not yet clear if the Obama administration will go along with these plans.

Both Washington and Brussels thought they could continue belittling Russia even after Vladimir Putin came to power. Putin belongs to a political clan called the *Siloviki*; they are mostly former members of Soviet and Russian security and intelligence services, so one of their main goals is to re-establish the Russian Federation as one of the world's top powers. They are highly pragmatic and they also know that the West is not eager to passively behold Russia's resurgence. The Boris Yeltsin presidency was a major disaster because it privileged accommodation with the West at any cost, even at the expense of Russian basic national interests. The *Siloviki* are not necessarily anti-Western. Both Putin and Medvedev have been willing to negotiate with the West so that the latter recognizes the Kremlin's legitimate geopolitical concerns but they have demonstrated their determination to protect Moscow's interests whether the West likes or not.

Therefore, the Kremlin has befriended some countries openly hostile to American power (Cuba, Venezuela, Iran and so on) not because of ideological motives but because Moscow can use them to apply pressure on both the Europeans and the Americans and to be able to extract substantial concessions from them.

Even if Russia would prefer to negotiate with the West, it has also been preparing for the worst in case it is targeted by any Western attack. Russian military design bureaus have developed the "Topol-M" ICBM which is immune from almost any interception system known, including EMPs, nuclear blasts and laser hits. Russia is expected to witness the Sukhoi PAK FA's maiden flight sometime during 2009, which will be the first operational Russian stealth fifth-generation fighter, created to modernize its Air Force. Moscow has also contemplated the possibility to station Iskander missiles in both Kaliningrad and Belarus.

US senior geostrategist George Kennan (the very creator of the Containment strategy) warned about alienating Russian interests in the 'Near Abroad' (the post-Soviet space) because such impudence could trigger a harsh backlash from Moscow. Such response is clearly reflected in Russia's resolve to counter 'Color Revolutions' in Belarus and Uzbekistan and to unseat pro-Western regimes in Georgia and Ukraine.

The Kremlin has been cultivating a close relation with Beijing in order to increase bilateral collaboration in energy, defense, trade and foreign policy matters. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has become an institutional framework that embodies both countries' joint efforts to advance mutually shared interests. The SCO has not become a full-fledged alliance but it certainly has the potential to become the 'NATO of the East'.

The sole prospect of Russia and China (by far the largest powers in the Eurasian landmass) united in a military alliance is a scenario which turns out to be outright frightening to the US because it would represent a formidable challenge to its hegemonic ambitions. Thus, one can venture to assert that the US instigated Georgian ruler Mikheil Saakashvili to launch an offensive in order to retake South Ossetia. American military advisors in Georgian soil were well aware that Russia would be forced to intervene and eventually place troops in South Ossetian territory. They also probably expected that Moscow would back Ossetian (and Abkhazian) independence from Georgia either by recognizing them as sovereign States or by incorporating them into the Russian Federation itself. If the Kremlin decided not to defend its allies, it would have been ridiculed for failing to protect Russian nationals anyway.

One can reasonably argue that American planners harangued Georgia into attacking South Ossetia as part of a greater strategy specifically masterminded to distance China from Russia. How so? Well, for starters Moscow offered full diplomatic support for Beijing during

the 2008 unrest in Tibet. Nevertheless, the People's Republic of China was in no position to reciprocate in kind and could not openly support Moscow's efforts to dismember Georgia's territorial integrity because China itself has been dealing with aggressive separatist groups in both Tibet and Xinjiang-Uyghur. Thus, we can understand why the Chinese government only expressed its understanding for Russian involvement. Therefore, it is not implausible that Washington staged a war in the Caucasus carefully crafted to disunite China and Russia.

However, that does not mean that Russia was geopolitically defeated. Old Europe refused to join the anti-Russian hardline coming from Washington, London and Warsaw. Instead, the French and the Germans have refused to incorporate Georgia or Ukraine into NATO and both refused to implement any meaningful punishment on Russia. President Medvedev publicly explained that 'Russia can impose sanctions as well', just in case some Western capitals needed to be reminded. Moreover, the Kremlin militarily crushed a US client State, sending a powerful message: It is no longer possible to systematically ignore Russian interests and if someone is reckless enough to do so, he will not go unpunished. Furthermore, Moscow demonstrated that it will not hesitate to deploy and display its military power if deemed necessary. Last but not least, Russia made it clear that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline is well within its firing range.

The next geopolitical battle between Russia and the US will be Ukraine. Russia has decided that, one way or another, the pro-Western regime in Kiev has to go. The outcome is still to be seen and, at the moment it seems the Kremlin has many tools at its disposal to make its interest prevail. Central Asia, attractive for both its strategic geographic position and its abundant natural resources, is another contentious issue. We must scrutinize how these world powers move their pieces in this game of geopolitical chess, which is being played for the highest stakes. Whether their discrepancies will be dealt with through an accommodating compromise or through a somewhat hotter confrontation is still unknown at this point. What we do know, however, is that Moscow is much more empowered than during the 90's and that, if the West does not intend to reach an understanding, then Russia will be a formidable adversary.

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