

Analysis

Russia's Position in a Changing World

Hans-Henning Schröder, Bremen

Summary

In recent years, Russian foreign policy has exhibited a new assertiveness that is causing concern in the West, invoking memories of the “other superpower”, the USSR. Unfortunately for Russia's leaders, however, the country's claim to global power is not matched by adequate economic, military, and political resources for the successful pursuit of such a policy. But the Kremlin hopes to take advantage of a shift in the international balance of power caused by a weakening of the US. It has benefited from changes in the global energy market that have strengthened the hand of supplier countries. In this light, the Putin administration sees the new situation as an opportunity to reposition Russia on the international stage.

Images of Global Power

In the German media, Russia has recently been cast as the superpower redux, a kind of reincarnation of the Soviet Union. In July, the weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* trumpeted “The Return of Russia”, while the “Internationale Politik” issue covering the St Petersburg G8 summit headlined “Russia's Renaissance”. These media perceptions to some extent surely reflect the staged pomp with which Putin's administration celebrated Russia's G8 presidency.

As Russia seeks to present itself as a great power, the Russian leadership has astonished some by taking a harsh tone in its dealings with its neighbors. Ukraine was summarily cut off from gas supplies, while Georgia and Moldova can no longer export wine to Russia for “hygienic reasons”. The suspension of natural gas deliveries also irritated the general public in Europe, which became painfully aware of its own high dependency on Russian imports for domestic consumption. These Western concerns are matched by increasing self-confidence in Russia, which is laying claim to a greater international role. It appears that quite a few politicians are nostalgic for the good old days of the “Soviet superpower” and are having a hard time facing current realities.

Risks and Resources

Russia is not an economic giant today. In terms of economic performance, it ranks with states such as Mexico, Brazil, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The gross domestic product of Russia is about one-fifth of Germany's. In terms of per-capita economic performance, it is in the vicinity of South Africa, Romania, Argentina, Brazil, and Jamaica. Russians typically are only about 11 percent as productive as Germans. These figures do not describe the economic basis of a great power.

On the other hand, Russia has vast energy reserves that meet its own requirements, and generate substantial export profits during a time of soaring energy prices.

This resource wealth has given the Russian state enough economic freedom to pay off its foreign debt ahead of time. During this phase of growing demand on global energy markets, in which major national economies such as China and India will increasingly have to arrange long-term energy supplies, resources such as oil and gas can be leveraged for political benefit. In addition to Russia's UN Security Council (UNSC) seat and its arsenal of nuclear weapons, its control of energy supplies is one of the factors supporting Russia's claim to influence the shape of international politics.

Nevertheless, Russia's position on the international stage is not strong. Economically and technologically, the country cannot compete at present. In military terms, Russia only has a strategically relevant potential in the area of nuclear capability. Its conventional forces, poorly paid and badly equipped, are only partially combat-ready. The military leadership desires the capability to conduct successful operations in local conflicts across several regions simultaneously. This goal requires modern weapons and communications systems as well as qualified and motivated staff. However, all of these components are missing so far, and long-overdue reform measures are slow to get underway. Its nuclear strategic potential gives Russia a special political status, but this capability cannot be deployed in local conflicts and “asymmetric” warfare.

Political resources are also limited. To a certain extent, Russia carries clout internationally due to its UNSC seat. However, the cases of Kosovo and Iraq have shown the limitations of exerting influence via the UN. Another factor limiting Russia's standing is its failure to join any of the major economic and military alliances since the end of the Soviet Union. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has not developed into an important economic or political unit.

Due to the huge size of the country and its location between Europe and Asia, Russian politicians

face substantial challenges. Bordering on the EU and NATO in the west and on Japan, South Korea, and China in the east, Russia finds itself between two regions that have superior economic, technological, and demographic potentials. In the south, Russia must deal with the Central Asian states and the Caucasus region as well as with Iran and Turkey. Crises in the Middle East immediately spill over to Russia's borders.

The basic dilemma of Russian foreign policy is a desire to shape global politics, but the lack of resources to do so successfully.

Setbacks in 2003–4

There are only limited options available to Russian foreign policy-makers at this point. They can team up with a politically relevant partner and hope that the latter will reward Russian support with political benefit. On the other hand, Russia can mobilize its substantial disruptive potential and attempt to counteract competitors—like the US—in international bodies such as the UNSC, in order to force them to the negotiating table. Both of these strategies were attempted in the 1990s, albeit without visible success. In the early 1990s, then-foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev attempted to establish Russia, then in the throes of reform, as a partner on an equal footing with the Western states. This policy was just as unsuccessful as the attempts by Kozyrev's successor, Yevgenii Primakov, to question the dominant status of the US by propagating the idea of a multipolar world.

After September 11, 2001, the Putin administration seized the opportunity for a new rapprochement with the West, especially with the US. Against the protests of his own security advisors, the Russian president opened the way for US and NATO troops to be stationed in Central Asia. But the westward realignment and advances towards the US were not rewarded. The US began to play an active role in Central Asia and in Georgia, and maintained close ties with the Baltic republics. This perceived lack of reciprocity for Russian concessions was increasingly unsettling to the Russian elites.

Putin's ability to deliver foreign-policy results to the US did not lead to a real alliance against terrorism with an adequate role for Russia. The Putin administration learned this lesson and developed alternative strategies, for example by expanding its cooperation with China and the Central Asian states within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) into a viable foreign-policy option. The US attack on Iraq, which was criticized by Germany and France, among others, gave Russian leaders the opportunity to deepen their relations with Berlin and Paris—a step that, while it did not generate immediate results, at least symbolically broke Russia's isolation.

Soon thereafter, however, Russia's position was significantly weakened by political upheaval within the CIS. The popular revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the overthrow of the Kyrgyz president, and unrest in Uzbekistan raised questions about Russia's role in a region that Moscow regarded as its "backyard". The more the EU consolidated its influence in Ukraine, the more Russian fears seemed to be directly vindicated. The atmosphere between Russia and the EU states deteriorated, and Putin's officials openly opposed the OSCE's election monitors and other European measures to foster democracy in Georgia and Ukraine. In Europe, conversely, domestic developments in Russia were viewed extremely critically. Putin's reliance on authoritarian measures prevented him from establishing close relations with the western powers. The Russian democracy deficit was becoming a foreign-policy handicap.

Overall, Russia sustained severe foreign-policy setbacks in the years 2003 and 2004. Parts of the neighboring regions that Russia viewed as its central sphere of interest slipped out of reach, while relations with the US and the European states visibly deteriorated thanks to Western discomfort over domestic developments in Russia.

A New Tone in a Changed World

After years of foreign-policy setbacks, another turn of events now seems to be in the offing. The Russian leadership is aggressively seeking a role in international politics. It was with great satisfaction that Putin announced, at a Foreign Ministry ambassadors' meeting in June 2006, that Russia had significantly improved its domestic potential as well as its international standing in recent times and now played a global role. He demanded that the country take responsibility for global developments to an extent commensurate with its potential and its geographic position. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that Russian diplomacy had to take the intellectual lead in resolving difficult international problems.

This new assertiveness is fed by several factors: First of all, the Russian elite believe that the domestic situation is now extremely stable and that the national economy is on a solid path to growth. At the same time, political events in the CIS developed more favorably for Russia. Control over energy resources gives Russia's leaders strong leverage that can also be exploited politically in neighboring countries. Meanwhile, due to the crisis of the "orange" government in Ukraine, the parliamentary elections there have strengthened the forces that are more amenable to the Russian leadership.

Domestic consolidation and the reclamation of Russia's hegemonial role within the CIS have created

the foundations for foreign-policy initiatives with global reach. At the 60th anniversary of victory in World War II and at the G8 summit in St Petersburg, Russia presented itself as a great power on par with the US, Japan, and the EU. These celebrations were symbolic expressions of the new role Russia is prepared to embrace. In a changed world where the US is no longer the uncontested hegemon, the Kremlin wants to have a say in shaping global politics. From the Russian perspective, the US-dominated unipolar world order—the nightmare of the 1990s—has given way to a new balance of power.

At the ambassadors' meeting in June 2006, Putin declared:

“We have reached a point where for all practical purposes—and I am sure you all concur—the modernization of the entire global security architecture is already underway. And if the lazy thinking of earlier approaches is allowed to prosper, the world will once again be doomed to pointless confrontation. We must disrupt this dangerous tendency. And that requires new ideas and new approaches.”

From the Russian point of view, the world has changed fundamentally since the botched US invasion of Iraq. From this perspective, the US is obviously not capable of handling major crises alone. On the contrary, the actions of the Bush administration have only further aggravated the conflicts in the Middle East. The EU, on the other hand, is not able to derive political clout from its economic weight, according to Russian view. At the same time, India and China are emerging as new powers and also demand to play a role in the international system.

In the context of this new, multipolar, crisis-rattled world order, Russia perceives an opportunity to shape the course of international politics—and the Putin administration is now actively demanding the right to do so. It is to the advantage of Russia that the rise of China and India has changed the rules of the global energy market for the long term. Supplier countries like Russia are now in a much stronger position. In

view of this structural change, Putin's administration is now designing a foreign-policy strategy that is to be independent of other states' influence. The Russian behavior in the conflict with Iran, the invitation to Hamas to visit Moscow, and Russia's assertive stance vis-à-vis other CIS states should be seen in the light of this new foreign-policy doctrine.

Weak, but Ambitious

Certainly, Russia continues to be weak economically, technologically, and militarily. However, the domestic stabilization—authoritarian though it may be—creates a more solid base for the country's international performance. The crucial factor that has made this assertive foreign-policy stance possible is the realization that the world has changed—and that the US is by no means capable of playing the role of a global hegemon. The shift in the international power structure, together with the political and economic resurgence of China and India, has brought forth structures that Russia wants to be a part of.

The main priority is the consolidation of Russia's position in the “near abroad”, i.e., its ability to influence developments in the CIS states—including the option of a confrontation with Georgia or Moldova. At the same time, when it comes to Europe and East Asia, Russia opts for a policy of close cooperation. Moscow aims for cooperation as a way of advancing its own political and economic interests, but avoids definitive commitments and seeks to secure maneuvering space in both directions. In its dealings with the US, Russia acts in a consciously independent manner and demands to be treated as an equal partner.

It is true that many of the Kremlin's current activities are still not rooted in economic, political, or military power. But the current Russian administration is doing much to overcome its basic dilemma—lacking resources, but soaring ambitions—and is adroitly exploiting the changes in the global system.

Translated from the German by Christopher Findlay

About the author:

Hans-Henning Schröder is a professor of Eastern European History at the University of Bremen, where he works at the Research Centre for East European Studies.

Further reading:

- MacFarlane, S.N. “The ‘R’ in BRICs: Is Russia an emerging power?,” *International Affairs* 82, No. 1 (2006): 41–57.
- Saivetz, Carol R. “Making the Best of a Bad Hand: An Assessment of Current Trends in Russian Foreign Policy,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 22, No. 2 (2006): 166–188.
- Trenin, Dmitri and Bobo Lo. *The Landscape of Russian Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Moscow: Carnegie 2005), http://www.carnegie.ru/ru/pubs/books/9211doklad_fin.pdf 21 June 2005.

Programmatic texts (in Russian):

- Putin, V., “Vystuplenie na soveshchanii s poslami i postoiannymi predstaviteliami Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Moskva, Ministerstvo inostrannykh del”, 27 June 2006. <http://president.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/06/27/1543?type63374type63377type63378type82634107802.shtml> 12.9.2006
- Stenogramma vystupleniia Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V.Lavrova v M MO(U) MID Rossii po sluchaiu nachala novogo uchebnogo goda, Moskva, 1 September 2006. <http://www.mid.ru/brp4.nsf/2fee282eb6df40e643256999005e6e8c/a25a36a2bd8f443cc32571dc0045e2b5?OpenDocument> 12 September 2006.