

Russia's Spheres of *Interest*, not *Influence*

In the aftermath of the 2008 Georgian war, President Dmitri Medvedev, setting out Russia's foreign policy principles, spoke about the country's spheres of "privileged interests" and the government's obligation to defend Russian citizens abroad.¹ Coming less than a month after Russia's armed response to Georgia's attack on its breakaway province of South Ossetia, where most residents had been provided with Russian passports, this statement produced a shock. It sounded as if Moscow was reclaiming the Soviet geopolitical legacy of Russia's spheres of influence and was prepared to intervene with force in countries with significant ethnic Russian minorities. The talk of Russian assertiveness, making rounds since the mid-2000s, was substantially enhanced by accusations of Russia's outright aggressive behavior.

The year that followed has seen an unprecedented global financial and economic crisis, a new administration in Washington, and a decrease in tensions between Russia and the United States. The issues that had produced a near confrontation between the two—such as the United States' single-minded support for President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia; Russia's actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; NATO's membership action plans (MAPs) to Georgia and Ukraine; and plans to install U.S. ballistic missile defenses in the Czech Republic and Poland—while not completely off the table, are now clearly on the backburner.

In July 2009, President Barack Obama visited Moscow to lay down the key parameters of a new strategic arms reductions treaty between the United States and Russia and to explore potential collaboration on missile defenses. Both Obama, in his Moscow speech, and Vice President Joseph R. Biden, speaking

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Medvedev speaks about the country's spheres of "privileged interests" which are nonexclusive.

five months before at the Munich Security Conference, specifically rejected Russian pretensions to a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space.² Following the U.S.–Russian summit in Moscow, a number of Central and East European politicians sent an open letter to the Obama administration asking it to stand up to Moscow's actions "defending a sphere of influence on its borders,"³ and Biden traveled to Kyiv and Tbilisi to reassure Russia's neighbors.

The Kremlin, for its part, has sought to soften the impact of its harsh 2008 wartime rhetoric. All countries have interests, Medvedev subsequently said, and it was as natural for Russia to regard the former Soviet republics as a key strategic zone of its interests. It would also be fully legitimate, he added, for those newly independent countries to see Russia in a similar way. He also stressed that Russia's interests in the world were in no way confined to the post-Soviet area as many important investment sources, vital markets, and critical technologies were to be found outside of Russia's borders. In such a context, the talk of spheres of "privileged interests" appeared perfectly natural and thoroughly nonexclusive.

Toward the end of 2008, however, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in a wide-ranging statement, made a very strong case for the "unique relations" that bound Russia and the countries of the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). He spoke about "civilizational unity" of the lands that used to be the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and before that, the Russian empire.⁴ Thus, a question arose: what is the difference, if any, between the sphere of *interests* proclaimed by the current Russian leadership, and the more traditional sphere of *influence* condemned by international public opinion? What, after all, are Moscow's motives and its aims?

Since its leadership abandoned the notion of integration first into the West (Boris Yeltsin following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991), and then with it (Vladimir Putin in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks), Russia has been defining itself as a self-standing great power with global reach. Its current ambition is to become a full-fledged world power, one of a handful of more or less equal key players in the twenty-first century global system. Seen from that perspective, the former imperial borderlands of Russia are deemed to be both elements of its power center and a cushion to protect Russia itself from undesirable encroachments by other great powers. This says a lot about Russia's view of the world (*Realpolitik/Realoekonomie*: power competition and collaboration, under conditions of globalization), its self-image (a great power in

a global oligarchy, holding primacy in its own neighborhood), and intentions (to advance to a high seat at the global governance table, where the Group of 8, Group of 20, United Nations Security Council, informal groupings such as BRIC [with Brazil, India, and China], and the proposed trilateral security structure for the Euro-Atlantic area are seated alongside the European Union and the United States). The aim is to bring about a less U.S./Western-centric system.

Russia's evolution in the next two decades and developments in the new states will decide whether this worldview bears relevance to contemporary international realities and trends, and whether the Kremlin's ambitions can be fulfilled. For the purposes of this article, it will be important to see how Russia's great power policies at the beginning of the twenty-first century differ from the traditional policies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More specifically, is the current usage of the spheres of "privileged interests" instead of "spheres of influence" significant or is it a mere window dressing? Seen from a reverse perspective, how are the former Soviet republics/Warsaw Pact allies taking Russia's new (old?) interests? Finally, what does it all portend for Russia's relations with other power centers, such as China, the EU, and the United States, and with regional actors such as Iran and Turkey?

The Spectacular Geopolitical Retreat

The starting point to understanding modern Russia is to view it not as a new state which won its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but rather as one that chose to dissolve its historical empire and has been looking for a new role ever since. In other words, "Soviet," "imperial," and "tsarist" denote three epochs of the historical Russian state, not different states. Contemporary Russian history should not be extended all the way to Kievan Rus, an empire similar to that of Charlemagne's, and the common source of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. After that empire dissolved, the three countries spent their formative periods, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, under very different conditions, which produced three distinct societies.

The foundation of modern Russia was laid during the reigns of Ivan III (1462–1505) who shook off the Mongol rule and created a centralized ethnic Russian state; his son Vassili (1505–1533) who completed the "gathering of Russian lands" by adding Pskov, Smolensk, and Ryzan principalities, and his grandson Ivan IV (1533–1584), who through conquests of Kazan and Astrakhan, turned the ethnic Russian state with its prevailing Orthodox Christianity into a multi-ethnic empire with a significant—and yet, increasingly Russified—Muslim element. After Ivan IV's death, Russians colonized Siberia and reached the Pacific coast within 70 years. Russia's present borders, rather than being artificial as many

imperial nationalists claim, are strikingly similar to those of the mid-seventeenth century (pre-Soviet and pre-imperial).

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Russia competed bitterly with other major powers over the control of territories that lay between them. Finland and the Baltic States; Poland and the Balkans; the Caucasus and Central Asia; Mongolia and Manchuria all were divided up, annexed, turned into revolutionary bases or *cordons sanitaires*. For Russia, therefore, the concept of spheres of influence was historically a very useful one. These spheres, which separated it from other imperialist rivals, were both protective wrappings and staging grounds for advancing further in a never ending quest for power, influence, and security.

The Soviet empire, representing the widest extension of Russia's global influence, featured many layers: some were frontier outposts, formally referred to as "countries of socialist orientation," led by often unstable Marxist-Leninist regimes in Asia and Africa; some were the outer empire, closely integrated within the East Europe-based Warsaw Pact and the economic community of Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), which also included Cuba, Mongolia, and Vietnam; and some were incorporated into Russia's own state body as constituent republics of the Soviet Union. The configuration of the first group ebbed and flowed, whereas the last one *was* Russia at that time. It was the second group which was Soviet Russia's true sphere of influence. As such, it featured territorial control. Moscow's political supremacy was underpinned by its ideological domination, and backed by military presence and bloc discipline, made credible by the periodic use of force. In economic terms, the Soviet sphere was a closed system built on the centralized allocation of resources.

Russia's exit from this empire was surprisingly swift and smooth. The most important reason was a split within the Russian elite. This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of what caused the collapse of the Soviet empire. One only needs to highlight that when faced with rapidly mounting domestic economic and social difficulties, the more active part of that elite decided to radically cut the losses and shake off the imperial burden. By the late 1980s, the "sphere" had become onerous, and it no longer served a useful purpose as Moscow was winding up its Cold War with the West and a parallel one with China. Similarly, within the Soviet Union itself, it was not so much the national liberation movements in the Baltic republics, Georgia, and Moldova (although they all mattered) that drove the Soviet Union into the ground. It was actually the groundswell in Russia proper which created opportunities and encouraged regional separatisms.

As the August 1991 attempted *putsch* in Moscow demonstrated, that groundswell was not entirely unopposed, but the failure of the last-ditch effort to save the empire was of monumental importance. In short order, Moscow unconditionally allowed the Baltic States to regain full sovereignty, and never

bothered later to include them into any integration schemes. It accepted the result of Ukraine's pro-independence referendum, and very importantly, Crimea's status within a now-independent Ukraine. It also looked on with equanimity as never-heretofore-independent Belarus struggled to redesign itself as a successor to the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania. And finally, Russia virtually abandoned the entire southern tier of the empire, from the Caucasus to Central Asia. In other words, the Russian leadership displayed ingenuity and legal acumen in finding an appropriate way to formally *dissolve* the Soviet Union.

The CIS, which eventually included all ex-Soviet republics (except for the Baltic three), turned out to be a psychologically comfortable transition mechanism from empire to separate statehoods. During the 1990s, Moscow never really tried to use the CIS as a vehicle for reintegration. Progressively, it had to give up the notion of a joint CIS armed force; the ruble zone and a common economic space; common external borders and joint border guards; and dual citizenship. What it did manage to preserve all dealt with Russia's own status: ownership of the Soviet strategic nuclear weapons; inheritance of the Soviet Union's permanent seat on the Security Council; and the Soviet property abroad, including embassies. The negative inheritance was the Soviet Union's foreign debt.

The Russian leadership, of course, was not engaged in a fit of self-destruction or even mindless altruism, as its domestic critics claimed at the time. While "shaking off the dust of the old world," they hoped for an "end of history" in Russia's relations with the West.⁵ Instead of contest and rivalry, they sought inclusion and integration. Instead of bickering over the spheres of influence, they aimed at joint global leadership alongside Europe and the United States. From their new partners in the West, they expected proper recognition for their unique feat of embracing democracy, ending the Cold War, and recognizing former Soviet satellites in East Europe as fully independent states. After all, communism, in their mind, was not defeated by the United States and its allies in the Cold War. It was the Russian people, led by its elites that had toppled the *ancien regime* and ended the confrontation that had been rendered meaningless.

Obviously, Moscow expected much more than "peace with honor" from its adversaries-turned-partners. Unfortunately, it got much less. What Russia viewed as its concessions, albeit made under duress of the circumstances, were seen in the West as simply restoring part of the damage caused by the Soviet regime, and thus requiring no special gratitude. Moscow's informal bid to join NATO and a

Russia seeks to be one of a handful of more or less equal key players in the global system.

more formal one to become allies with the United States were shrugged off as untimely at best. Poor, chaotic, and disorganized, but strangely and naively ambitious, Russia was not to be integrated into the core West, but managed by it: no NATO but the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC); no Marshall Plan, but International Monetary Fund (IMF) trenches; no opening of borders but tightening of them in anticipation of waves of desperate economic migrants from the east.

A partner more humored than honored by the West, Moscow had to conclude that the news of the end of history was premature. Throughout 1992–1993, it engaged in a heated internal debate on what constituted its national interest in the post-communist, post-Cold War era. The need to have close relations with the West still featured prominently. Some, however, went as far as to advance a Russian version of the Monroe Doctrine. The majority view was that the newly independent states—the “near abroad”—was to be a focus of Russia’s new foreign policy. In the spring of 1993, then-president Yeltsin and then-Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev formally asked the UN to recognize Russia’s special responsibility for keeping the peace in the multiple ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet Union, because it had stopped and then “frozen” these conflicts through interventions of the Russian army.

Moscow’s generally benign attitude toward the West and to the happily abandoned satellite countries in Eastern, now Central, Europe changed abruptly in the fall of 1993. Yeltsin’s initial willingness to see Poland join NATO produced an irresistible backlash from the military establishment and the bulk of the political class. Not only had NATO rejected Russia’s fast-track accession and not dissolved itself, but it was now proceeding to pick up the pieces from the former Soviet strategic *glacis* and turn it into a forward position vis-à-vis a post-communist Russia. It appeared too many in Moscow that the United States and its allies preferred security *against* an unstable, Weimar-looking Russia to security *with* Russia. The Russians with access to the late Soviet negotiating record accused the West of perfidy. Hadn’t the United States and European leaders, from George H.W. Bush and James Baker to Helmut Kohl and Margaret Thatcher, they asked, assured Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not advance “one inch forward”? That those assurances had been given when the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact still existed did not seem to carry much weight with the accusers.⁶ The spheres of influence as a concept, they argued, was alive and well in international politics. It was only the masters and hegemony that had changed.

The enlargement of NATO, which did away with what the Russians had hoped would be a neutral buffer between themselves and the core West, was interpreted by many that Russia was a loser in the Cold War, at least geopolitically. The replacement by then-president Bill Clinton of his early Russia-first policy with a

concept of geopolitical pluralism in the former Soviet Union drove the message even closer to home in Moscow. The penetration of the Caspian region by Western oil companies and official U.S. support for multiple pipelines from the area, so as to end Russia's monopoly on Caspian oil transit, expanded the traditional military focus on geopolitics to include "geoeconomics." The West's growing influence now extended all the way to Russia's new borders.

The starting point is to correctly understand when modern Russia was formed.

At the other end of the spectrum, U.S. actions in the Balkans, culminating in the 72-day NATO air bombardment of Yugoslavia over Kosovo in 1999, taught the Russian leadership that democracies can choose to go to war as a means of policy on a basis of, what looked to them as, political expediency wrapped in human rights rhetoric. Contrary to popular perceptions, Russia sulked during the Bosnia and Kosovo conflicts not because it felt any particular affinity toward Serbia, but because it saw itself being eased out by the West as a factor in European power relationships. By 1999, when NATO wrestled Kosovo from the hands of Belgrade, NATO had already enlarged with the additions of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. Russia, for the first time in 250 years, had ceased to be a power in Europe. It was now simply the former Soviet Union—nothing more, nothing less.

No Longer the Neighborhood Bully

Mired in a myriad of domestic problems, including the 1998 financial default and a ten-year war in Chechnya, Moscow found it hard to compete even in its immediate neighborhood. Russia had no resources to back up its ritual claims that the CIS constituted a prime interest of its foreign policy. Meanwhile, the new states managed to establish themselves and entered into all sorts of relations with both their neighbors and outside powers. The leadership change at the Kremlin in 2000 saw the end of the CIS as a posthumous version of the Soviet Union—a "politburo of equals"—with the leaders of the now independent republics seemingly enjoying equality with the Moscow boss. As an incumbent, Putin took a much more pragmatic attitude to the ex-Soviet neighbors than Yeltsin, who till his very last days felt his guilt for bringing down the Soviet Union. Putin was not trying to recreate the Soviet empire. Rather, he quoted a Ukrainian politician who had quipped that those who do not regret the passing of the Soviet Union have no heart; but those who want to bring it back, he added, have no brains. The CIS, Putin repeated after another prominent

Ukrainian, was not a form of remarriage, but rather a civilized form of divorce.⁷ A new era had begun.

In the early 2000s, a combination of factors enhanced Russia's position vis-à-vis its near neighbors. The country was recovering from the economic crisis; it acquired a new leader who defeated the Chechen insurgency, regional separatism, and the Moscow oligarchy; and it had much more money to spend, as a result of steadily rising energy prices. Just after September 11, Putin used his new closeness to then-President George W. Bush to promote the idea of a strategic partnership between Russia and the United States. While Yeltsin sought integration *into* the West, Putin aimed at integration *with* it.

Unlike Yeltsin, Putin put a price on his country's cooperation with the United States. Washington would have to recognize Moscow's primacy in the CIS. As its contribution to "ensuring order" in Europe, Russia would accept Central Europe's new pro-Western orientation, take note of similar leanings in the south eastern part of Europe, allow the Baltic States' future entry into NATO

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and the EU, withdraw itself from the Balkans (and thus ceding that region to the Western sphere of influence), and even tolerate, albeit on a temporary basis, U.S. military bases in Central Asia and a U.S. military program in Georgia which was aimed to train and equip its military. For its part, the United States would vow

not to undercut Russia's own interests and policies in Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and the rest of the CIS.

The deal, however, fell apart since the United States was only prepared to talk about the "rules of the road," and not about anything resembling "spheres of influence." The Bush administration saw itself at the pinnacle of power and did not see much need for any binding agreements with lesser partners such as Moscow. The United States was soon drawn to the Middle East. Russia, in a parallel move, began moving to a policy which no longer saw the West as its focus. By the early 2000s, then-Foreign Minister Evgeni Primakov's statement in 1996—"Russia has always been, is, and will be a great power"⁸—was suddenly back as a guiding thought.

In 2003, Anatoly Chubais, a former member of the Yeltsin administration who had become head of Russia's electricity company, reiterated Primakov's statement and dubbed Russia the "liberal empire," which indicated a new mode of thinking.⁹ Russia was, of course, to replace its feeble and ineffective attempts at economic integration with its neighbors with a robust economic expansionism. The CIS must be made safe for Russian business activism. There was, however, more to it than just economics. Moscow had to keep the CIS space

from expanding politico-military alliances such as NATO. It had to be able to mediate and manage conflicts among its near neighbors. It had to exercise political leadership within the commonwealth and, no less important, keep it within the Russian cultural sphere. The plan was to make Moscow a mecca for ex-Soviet elites, much as London has been one for the former British empire, and Paris for the *francophonie*.

In 2003, as the United States invaded Iraq, Russia evacuated its forces from both Bosnia and Kosovo. The Russians also suffered a setback in Moldova. In November 2003, the draft peace agreement they had negotiated was canceled virtually at the last minute by the Moldovan president, on advice from the West, as it allowed for continued Russian military presence in the country. At the same time, however, Moscow advanced the idea of a Single Economic Space that would combine the three largest post-Soviet republics of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine in an economic union with Russia. In the politico-military field, Russia had managed to transform a feckless CIS Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) into a smaller but more streamlined organization. It actively mediated between Chisinau and Tiraspol to create a common state in Moldova. It engaged in crisis management in Georgia at the time of the 2003 Rose Revolution and helped Saakashvili extend Tbilisi's writ to de facto separatist Adjara. In a small but symbolic step, it established an air base at Kant in Kyrgyzstan, close to the U.S.-operated facility at Manas.

These efforts at integration, alliance-building, and expansion of Russian presence were given a shattering blow by the color revolutions of 2003–2005. The Georgian one, which originally did not look so bad with Saakashvili privately very deferential to Putin, whom he probably regarded at the time as his role model, went overboard with Tbilisi's 2004 raid against Ossetian smugglers which reignited the broader Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Moscow was enraged because Saakashvili took up arms without its approval and against its Ossetian protégées' interests.

The 2004–2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine was much worse. Putin had personally campaigned there on behalf of President Leonid Kuchma and his appointed successor, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, in an effort to defeat former premier Viktor Yushchenko, deemed to be pro-U.S. and pro-NATO. Putin's efforts, however, were rendered useless as a popular revolt nixed the official voting result and led to an election rerun, which was eventually won by the pro-Western forces. Within a few months of the Orange Revolution, a similar popular unrest toppled a staunchly pro-Moscow president, Askar Akayev, in Kyrgyzstan.

A 2005 Tulip Revolution was proudly proclaimed in what had been, under Akayev, the least authoritarian government in Central Asia. Other autocrats, from Kazakhstan in the north to Azerbaijan in the west, were put on notice.

Moscow wants to prevent CIS states from joining NATO or hosting any new U.S. military bases.

Moscow, which had come to rely on the existing regimes and feared that their forced replacement would open the floodgates to Islamist militants and insurgents, suddenly felt insecure. Whereas the Kremlin fear about the Orange Revolution in Ukraine was that the United States would not only project its sphere of influence all the way to Russia's borders, but by helping establish a local democracy, would undermine the

Russian political system. The fear related to Central Asia was that the United States would seek to ease Russia out of the region but could fail and leave a mess behind.

The Kremlin's reading of the color revolutions was largely conspiratorial. Rather than regarding them as eruptions of popular anger against corrupt and uncaring authorities, and made successful by splits within the ruling elites including the local security services, it saw them as part of a U.S.-conceived and led conspiracy. At minimum, these activities in the Kremlin's mind aimed at drastically reducing Russia's influence in its neighborhood, and expanding the United States'. At worst, they constituted a dress rehearsal for exporting a revolution into Russia itself, culminating in installing a pro-U.S. liberal puppet regime in the Kremlin.

In September 2004, in the aftermath of the massacre of schoolchildren as a result of a terrorist attack on Beslan, in North Ossetia,¹⁰ Putin blamed the West for being behind the terrorists and using them to weaken and dismember Russia.¹¹ At the time, several Chechen separatist leaders whom Moscow had accused of terrorism were given political asylum in the United Kingdom and the United States, with publics in several NATO countries, from the Baltic States to Poland to Denmark, sympathizing with the "Chechen cause." To Moscow, this looked as Western support for Chechen separatism, which threatened to undermine the unity of Russia—a throwback to the days of the great game when Russia and the United Kingdom struggled over zones of influence in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Persia.

The Spheres of Privileged Interests

The current policy of Russia's spheres of *interest* dates back from the mindset of the mid-2000s. Compared to the Soviet Union's, the Russian Federation's sphere is not only much smaller, but also much "lighter"—"interests" after all are not as compelling as "influence." In Russia, and throughout the former Soviet Union, ideology has been replaced by pervasive pragmatism. There is no hint of political

control by Moscow either. Minsk, its closest political ally, is a case in point. Not only has Moscow no power to install or topple leaders in Belarus, but before the advent of color revolutions, it had vowed not to challenge the sitting rulers by maintaining contacts with their domestic opposition. At present, it has decided to boycott only one leader: Saakashvili. Moscow's attempts to mobilize ethnic Russians in support of its policies have been few and half-hearted at best. Much of the opposition to the government of Estonia's 2007 decision to replace the Soviet war memorial and the Soviet war graves in Tallinn came from the local Russian population, with the Kremlin piggybacking on it. In Crimea, it is local Russians' resistance to cultural "Ukrainization" and their alienation from the policies of Kyiv that drives the protests against U.S. naval port visits and NATO military exercises. The Kremlin can exploit the situation, but it neither invents nor initiates it.

Russia's military presence in the CIS has become reduced to the Black Sea Fleet's main base in Sevastopol, Crimea, two army bases in Armenia and Tajikistan, a peacekeeping-cum-storage guards unit in Transnistria, a small air base in Kyrgyzstan, and a sprinkling of military installations in Belarus and Kazakhstan. Not a single country is militarily "occupied" by Russia, or feels that way. The closest Moscow has come to the Soviet model of massive military presence is in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two tiny republics that broke away from Georgia in the early 1990s and were recognized by Moscow as sovereign states in the wake of the 2008 Georgia war.

Unlike "influence" which tends to be both all-inclusive *and* exclusive, "interests" are more specific and identifiable. Rather than whole countries, they include these various politico-military, economic and financial, and cultural areas within them.

Politico-Military Issues

Militarily, Russia still casts a formidable shadow over its immediate neighborhood. While its own conventional military is weaker today than it has been for a very long time, and the usable forces are very small (as far back as 1999, Putin complained that out of a million-strong military only 55,000 were available for the war effort in Chechnya), the neighbors' forces are many times smaller and less capable. Had the Russians encountered a different enemy in Georgia in 2008, the outcome of the war might have been different, but the Georgian forces, despite all their U.S. training and equipment, simply fled in front of the Russians.

Moscow is working to create a security system in the neighborhood to shield Russia from the various challenges coming from the west, south, and south east. The CSTO includes Armenia, Belarus, the Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), and in an on-and-off mode, Uzbekistan.

This is a very loose alliance providing political consultations, a degree of coordination, and very limited interoperability among the national defense and security establishments. Bilateral military collaboration, however, with Minsk gives Moscow a forward position in Belarus, sitting on the main strategic East–West axis in Europe. This also provides Russia a land link, however imperfect, to its Kaliningrad exclave. Absent any real worries with Turkey, Russia’s presence in Armenia is more symbolic, and serves a message to both Azerbaijan and Georgia. It is security cooperation with Central Asian countries which looks more like an alliance. Its mission is twofold: to bolster Russia’s strategic position in the region and to deter or respond to attacks by Islamist militants.

Russia uses the CSTO increasingly as a tool to procure diplomatic solidarity from its nominal allies. The Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) has been one platform for joint diplomatic statements of CSTO member states (e.g. on matters of European security). The UN General Assembly has been

another one. Moscow’s ideal view of European security architecture would probably be something like a NATO–CSTO committee flanked by permanently neutral states, such as Ukraine. Such an approach, however, has not always worked. Russia has been trying hard, although without any success, to get NATO to establish formal contacts with the CSTO, and thus recognize Russian politico-military dominance in the area. In the highly visible case of recognizing Abkhazia and South

Ossetia, Moscow stood alone: not a single ally sided with it. The reason was neither disapproval of the Russian action nor any sympathy for Georgia and its leadership. Rather, the message that CSTO countries were sending to Moscow, and indeed to the rest of the world, was: we are not Russia’s clients, but sovereign states.

Russia’s top military interest in the neighborhood is essentially negative: it is to prevent any of the CIS states from joining NATO or from hosting any new U.S. military bases. The root cause of the Georgia war was Tbilisi’s desire to join NATO. Georgia’s attempt to resolve at least one of the conflicts by force and to internationalize the other was linked to its wish to get NATO’s MAP. On the other hand, Russia’s massive response to the Georgian moves had everything to do with the resolve to crush a local U.S. ally. In the conflicts where Russia is directly involved, such as the Caucasus and Moldova, Moscow de facto forbids “unauthorized” use of force, as it did in Georgia in 2008. When Tbilisi decided

Attempts to use Russian diasporas for its foreign policy goals have been largely unsuccessful.

to regain the country's territorial integrity by force, this was met with Moscow's armed response.

It is often claimed that Russia is also trying to stop the spread of democracy in the CIS. Moscow is being called the center of an *Authoritarian Internationale*, a cross between the Comintern and the Holy Alliance, which supports autocrats in place and fights democratic revolutionaries in the neighborhood while opposing Western democracies worldwide.¹² The reality is more complex. Unlike its Soviet predecessor, the current Russian leadership does not so much fear democracy (for which it has a lot of contempt) but the U.S. policies to promote it. Moreover, they suspect that the real objective of democracy promotion is to extend the Western sphere of influence in the CIS and to put pressure on the Russian leadership at home. The Kremlin has never had much respect for either the Georgian or the Ukrainian democracy experiments, but by contrast, it has always been respectful of U.S. power and Washington's determination to use it against Russia and its rulers. The least alarming Kremlin interpretation of the Orange Revolution is that its objective was to win Ukraine for the West. A more sinister one was that this was a dress rehearsal for a U.S.-engineered color revolution in Russia.

Economic and Financial Elements

Whatever the problems the Russian economy is experiencing, Russia is an economic powerhouse compared to all other CIS states. Its economy is several times bigger than Kazakhstan's and Ukraine's. Plagued by a severe demographic crisis, Russia has been attracting millions of labor migrants from the neighborhood. Until the 2008 financial crisis, the Russian economy provided work to about 12 million people from CIS countries. The largest numbers probably came from Azerbaijan and the largest proportion from Tajikistan and Moldova. This gave Russia considerable soft power over its neighbors, but when Moscow tried to convert it to hard power against Georgia—by forbidding direct money transfers at the time of the 2006 crisis—the results were minimal. Russian economic sanctions (e.g., stopping wine imports from Georgia and Moldova; milk imports from Belarus; boycotting sprats and dairy products from the Baltic States, etc.) were only partially successful. The neighbors suffered but Russia did not gain much from their sufferings. Sanctions, although liberally used, did not help build any kind of sphere around Russia, and only exposed the Russian health authorities as instruments of coercive policies. To gain leverage, Russia needs bridges rather than barriers.

As a leading energy exporter, Russia's main economic interest in the CIS area is to ensure unimpeded transit for its gas and oil across the territories of the new states, and to gain access to their own energy and other important resources. With a great effort, Gazprom has been able to buy into the Belarusian gas

transportation system, *Beltransgaz*. It has been trying, unsuccessfully, to acquire the Ukrainian one. Even the idea of a trilateral gas consortium with Germany or the EU as the Western partner, however, fell on deaf ears in Kyiv.

Moscow considers that transit countries are essentially unreliable on financial and political grounds, and has been trying to go around them. As far back as the late 1990s, Russian oil was diverted from the terminals in the Baltic States to the newly-built ones outside St. Petersburg. A decade later, there is a project to divert more oil from the Druzhba pipeline, which crosses Belarus and Ukraine and reaches into Central Europe, again to the Russian Baltic coast. In 2005, Russia launched the North Stream project to deliver gas directly to Germany across the Baltic Sea. A companion project, called South Stream, has been discussed since 2007. If implemented, it would transport gas across the Black Sea to south-eastern Europe and Italy. South Stream finds it ever harder to compete with the EU-sponsored Nabucco, designed to transport the Caspian and Iraqi gas via Turkey to Europe. What is at stake in this intense rivalry is, for Gazprom, its share of the lucrative EU market, and for the EU (and the United States that supports the Nabucco project), the degree of its dependence on Russian-delivered gas.

Until gas pipelines are built, and transport Central Asian gas to the world market without crossing Russian territory, Gazprom will remain the monopoly buyer of the gas. Some Ukrainians, who are used to receiving Turkmen gas from Russia, have been calling the region Moscow's gas caliphate. It is only natural that the Caspian hydrocarbon producers—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—seek to reduce their dependence on Russia by means of seeking other outlets to the world market. From 2006, Caspian oil has been flowing west, along the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, and east to China. The year 2009 may even see the start of a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China. The Trans-Caspian pipeline, which might become part of Nabucco, is at a discussion stage. For its part, Russia has been consolidating its control of the pipelines that are pumping north.

Energy, of course, does not capture the whole story of Russian economic interests in the neighborhood. The failure of the Single Economic Space following the Orange Revolution did not stop Russia's drive for regional economic integration. The effort is now centered on the Euro-Asian Economic Community (EurAsEC), which also includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, with Uzbekistan being in and out. Moscow's immediate objective is creating a customs union, originally with Belarus and Kazakhstan. In June 2009, Moscow terminated its 16-year-long effort to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) in favor of moving faster toward a customs union with Minsk and Astana. The step clearly prioritized construction of an economic unit in the former Soviet space over Russia's further integration into

the global economy. Like the politico-military CSTO group, EurAsEC is a main platform of Russia's zone-building in the economic field.

From 2007, the Russian leadership started airing an idea of the ruble as a regional reserve currency. This idea was officially proclaimed as a political goal by Medvedev at the World Economic Forum in St. Petersburg in 2008.¹³ Even after the global economic crisis had hit Russia, the goal was not discarded.¹⁴ The ruble area, Russian officials indicate, would fill the space between the Eurozone and China. In practice, this means the prospect of a currency union, again originally with Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The going will be anything but smooth. At the time of the momentous decision, Moscow and Minsk were in the middle of a "milk war" (potentially worth 7 percent of the Belarusian foreign trade revenue) and a bitter spat over the terms of Russia's credit to Belarus. Clearly, Russia was using strong-arm methods to make Alexander Lukashenko, the Belarusian leader, open his country for industry privatization, accept the terms of financial assistance, and fall in line on geopolitical issues including relations with the West. Belarus, which much to its benefit had been playing the integration game with Moscow since the mid-1990s, even creating the fiction of a "union state" with it at the turn of the century, found itself under unprecedented pressure. Then-finance minister of Russia, Alexei Kudrin, stated Minsk was on the brink of default, and Belarus was suffering by comparison to the neighboring Russian regions,¹⁵ which was a transparent reference to make closer unification appear more attractive.

Russian interests remain present but its influence, although considerable, is nowhere dominant.

Moscow has obviously concluded that the present economic crisis is the right time for expanding its influence in post-Soviet regions. Next to Belarus, which was to receive \$2 billion, Russia extended \$500 million to Armenia, promised a \$2 billion package to Kyrgyzstan, and \$300 million to Mongolia. The biggest loan—\$5 billion—was set aside for Ukraine, which so far has declined to claim it. Within the EurAsEC, Russia set up a special assistance fund worth \$10 billion, 75 percent of which is Russia's share and 15 percent is Kazakhstan's.

Geocultural Sphere

Despite the rise in status of the national languages in the newly independent states, and the inroads made by English (and to a much smaller extent other languages), Russian is still very much in evidence across the former imperial space. Riga, Latvia's capital, is predominantly Russophone. So are Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odessa in Ukraine. Minsk is virtually all Russian speaking. Among the elites

Russian leaders are on record stating that they would not resist Ukraine's EU-only accession.

in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Russian is a second language. Russian has suffered heavy losses among the less educated people in all former borderlands, where its teaching in primary and secondary schools has been curtailed, and among the indigenous Baltic elites, who are no longer compelled to use it in public life.

Despite the official efforts in virtually all new states to curtail Russian-language

broadcasting, Russian television is widely available in cable TV packages. Russian TV productions are popular for their high entertainment content and that content's relative quality. Russian popular music dominates FM radio programs in many ex-Soviet countries, and Russian films on DVD are another hit. Russian productions, unlike their Western analogues, rest on the cultural habits of populations, which entered modernity in the Soviet (or imperial) era. In Moldova, for example, it is Russian-made versions of U.S. blockbusters that are in greater demand than the Romanian-made ones for one simple reason: the Russian versions are dubbed, rather than provided, with subtitles.

It certainly helps that Russian language and culture are not only "imported," but supported by the reduced, but still sizeable, Russian minorities in most of the CIS countries. Yet, Moscow's attempts to use those diasporas in pursuit of its foreign policy goals have been largely unsuccessful. In Latvia, the local Russians are more focused on integration into the local community and, since Latvia's 2004 EU accession, into wider Europe. To them, the Russian Federation is an old country, not the present or future one. Russians in Ukraine and Kazakhstan may feel culturally Russian, but they accept living in countries where they do not form a majority. In other words, there is no significant longing for "reunification" with Russia.

What Does the Future Hold for Russia?

Rather than a Russian sphere of influence, as many in the West see it, or a belt of friendly, loyal neighbors, as Russians would want to have it, what has emerged in the last two decades in place of the Soviet borderlands is an area where each new country seeks both a new identity and a new pattern of relationships with others. Russian interests remain present throughout the entire post-Soviet space, but Moscow's influence, although considerable, is nowhere dominant. Thus, a "Russian zone" is either a dream or a nightmare, squarely divorced from reality.

Russia's integration effort is likely to have a limited result. With a lot of luck, EurAsEC could be a version of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), not an eastern companion of the EU. Despite a number of efforts to energize it, the CSTO looks a bit like Europe's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Its members' foreign and security policies are unlikely to merge, and the requisite resources are unlikely to be pooled. National interests will continue to run supreme, even though sometimes they will require close bilateral cooperation between Russia and some of the new players such as Armenia and Kazakhstan. Even as Russia is building its post-imperial great power identity, also with a view to its stature vis-à-vis the former provinces, all new states have built their statehood in opposition to Russia. This is only natural as their independence is, above all else, independence from Russia. Unlike in the EU neighborhood, Russia so clearly dominates its "new" neighborhood that too much rapprochement with it may lead to ceding a high degree of sovereignty not to an institution, as in the EU, but to a hegemon.

Of course, not one of the post-Soviet states wants to accede to Russia. Many in orthodox eastern Ukraine may have aversion to "Uniate" (i.e. Greek Catholic) but they have no wish to return to "fellow Orthodox" Russia. In Belarus, the dictatorial and culturally Soviet President Alexander Lukashenko became a true, even if highly unlikely, father of national independence. President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan's repeated "integrationist" initiatives seek to limit Russia's role in any new Eurasian compact. Even tiny Abkhazia, having broken away from Georgia, vows now to stay independent from Russia, despite the fact that the circumstances are not exactly propitious for that. As far back as 2004, a candidate openly supported by Moscow was defeated in the Abkhaz presidential election. Only South Ossetia, with under 50,000 permanent residents, may be the one that is not sustainable as a sovereign state. Its small size is in itself a problem. A Russia recognizing breakaway parts of the neighboring states is fearsome; a Russia moving its own borders forward evokes the most terrifying memories.

Having parted ways with Russia, the new states are grappling with the issue of their geopolitical orientation. Georgia's elites are perhaps clearest in pledging their allegiance to the West, but the country at large, of course, has a very long way to go to become "Western." In Ukraine, the largely pro-Western elites preside over a cleft society, which supports the idea of joining Europe while being apprehensive of joining NATO. In Belarus and Uzbekistan, authoritarian rulers balance between Russia and the West, even as those societies are gradually reconstituting themselves in broader East European and Islamic contexts, respectively.

Interaction between the new countries and the non-Russian poles will be crucial. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, all former Soviet satellites in Central and East Europe, plus three Baltic and several Balkans states, have acceded to NATO, the EU, or both of these organizations. From Belarus to Moldova to Georgia, post-Soviet countries now live virtually next door to the West. Still, as the Georgia war has demonstrated, NATO enlargement has already reached its safe limits. Before there is clarity about the borders of Georgia, its hypothetical accession can only mean importing two running conflicts with Russia as the West's own. And until and unless the people of Ukraine, including in Crimea, support NATO accession in overwhelming numbers, the issue can be so divisive as to provoke a violent crisis on a European scale.

Yet, there is no stopping Ukraine from progressively integrating with the EU, provided there is a strong will for reform in Kyiv and a modicum of strategic vision in Brussels. Russian leaders are on record stating that they would not resist Ukraine's EU-only accession, which in their eyes counts for a neutral Ukraine.¹⁶

The growing EU regional presence will ironically benefit Russia.

Even if they changed their opinion, there is not much they could realistically do to block Ukraine's EU membership. A lot will depend on how the EU weighs its challenges vis-à-vis its opportunities. The Eastern Partnership launched by the EU in May 2009 is a useful step in the right direction, but only a very small one. Much more will be needed to help consolidate Europe's zone of attraction.

Within the first third of the twenty-first century, Europe's borders in the east will probably coincide with Russia's western frontier. The only issue that looks unclear today is Belarus. One can guess, however, that in the end its elites and people will tilt toward the EU. Kazakhstan is most likely to engage in economic integration with Russia, even as it will seek to preserve its strategic freedom to maneuver through links with China, Europe, the United States, and others. The other Central Asian countries are likely to go their individual ways, balancing among the neighbors and global powers.

The south Caucasus represents a more difficult issue due to a number of reasons, as do the unresolved conflicts to Turkey's status for EU membership. Yet, the EU's presence in the region is likely to grow. Russia, ironically, will largely benefit from this development. It will be saved from the temptation to push westward and make another claim to being a great power in Europe. It will save precious resources which could otherwise be wasted on geopolitically-motivated assistance to countries that have no intention of becoming a pedestal for a Russian-based power center. With no more gray areas between Russia and

Europe, their interface will receive less interference. A common economic space between Russia or Russia/Kazakhstan and Europe will become a matter of necessity.

Finally, relieved of the post-imperial burden, Russia will be able to focus on itself, its needs and priorities. It will recognize its position and role as a Euro-Pacific power with a global reach. It will devote more time to Siberia, which is what made Muscovy Russia in the seventeenth century, and which is the real crown jewel of its historical empire. The changing climate will require more attention to the Arctic and the Russian High North, which has already emerged as the country's prime energy resource base. The rise of China in the east will challenge Russia to look for effective ways to develop its far eastern provinces and integrate them into both the Russian market and into the Pacific region.

The emphasis on the Pacific, rather than Asia, will provide a useful complement to the direct neighborhood with China. From the United States to Japan to Australia to South East Asia, Russia will strengthen its ties with the Pacific Rim nations and use these ties to keep its own presence in that rim permanent. A country that used to regard itself as European, but non-Western, has a chance to emerge in this century as Western, though non-European. The challenge for Russia will be to move around as a relatively small, but strategically independent, unit among the much bigger ones: China, Europe, and the United States. If it succeeds, it will triumph over its own history; if it fails, it may turn *itself* into a vast zone of competing interests.

Notes

1. President Dmitry Medvedev, interview by Russian TV channels (Channel One, Rossia, and NTV), August 31, 2008, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/08/31/1850_type82912type82916_206003.shtml.
2. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by the President at the New Economic School Graduation," Moscow, Russia, July 7, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-The-President-At-The-New-Economic-School-Graduation/; Joseph R. Biden, speech, 45th Munich Security Conference, February 7, 2009, http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2009=&sprache=en&id=238&.
3. "An Open letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe," Radio Free Europe, July 16, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/An_Open_Letter_To_The_Obama_Administration_From_Central_And_Eastern_Europe/1778449.html.
4. Sergei Lavrov, "Russian Foreign Policy and the New Quality of the Geopolitical Situation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, December 29, 2008, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/bc2150e49dad6a04c325752e0036e93f?OpenDocument.
5. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

6. For an historical analysis of these promises from NATO to the Soviet Union, see Mark Kramer, "The Myth of the No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (April 2009): 39–61, http://www.twq.com/09april/docs/09apr_Kramer.pdf.
7. "Kak ne Stalo Sovetskogo Soyuz," *Kommersant*, December 8, 2001 (in Russian).
8. Evgeny Primakov, "International Relations on the Eve of XXI Century: Problems and Prospects," *International Affairs*, no. 10 (1996): 3–13.
9. Anatoly Chubais, "Liberal Empire" (lecture, St. Petersburg University, St. Petersburg, Russia, September 25, 2003).
10. This was a culmination of a series of attacks, which included bombings in Moscow, mid-air bombings of two passenger planes, and a terrorist attack on Nalchik, the capital of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, also in the North Caucasus.
11. Vladimir Putin, September 4, 2004, Moscow, Russia, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/09/04/1958_type82912_76332.shtml; Vladimir Putin, "Interview with Newspaper Journalists from G8 Member Countries," June 4, 2007, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/06/04/2149_type82916_132716.shtml.
12. Comintern or "Communist International" was an international communist organization founded in Moscow in 1919 and dissolved in 1943. The Holy Alliance was a coalition of Austria, Prussia, Russia, and the United Kingdom, which was signed into force in 1815, with the aim to serve as bastion against revolution.
13. See Dmitry Medvedev's remarks, St. Petersburg. Economic Forum, St. Petersburg, Russia, June 5, 2008, http://www.robertamsterdam.com/2008/06/video_medvedev_speech_at_world.htm.
14. Dmitry Medvedev, interview with *Kommersant*, St. Petersburg, Russia, June 5, 2009, p. 1–2; Lyubov Pronina, "Medvedev Questions Dollar as World Currency, Open to Yuan Swaps," Bloomberg.com, June 5, 2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=anvHhN4CqQOE>.
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16. "Press Conference Following the Four-Country Meeting Between Russia, France, Germany and Spain," Elysee Palace, Paris, March 18, 2005, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/03/18/2334_type82914type82915_85457.shtml.