

# Current Geopolitical Thought and Estonia: A critical Approach

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This article will focus on the interpretation of geopolitical codes, the way the political leaders name places as more or less important, rank the world regions and particular states in terms of "threats" to their military and economic security or challenge to their national interests. It is divided into three parts with the emphasis on theoretical frameworks and current geopolitical thought. When the first part defines the nature of geopolitical reasoning then the second and third part attempt to demonstrate it on the international arena.

## Geopolitical Codes

According to conventional definition, geopolitical codes are the set of strategic assumptions that a government makes about other states in forming its foreign policy. They are closely related to what Henrikson (1980) calls 'image plans' and common to all the states in the world. Such operational codes involve evaluation of places in terms of their strategic importance and as potential threats. They tell about national interests and help to justify states' foreign policy through geopolitical reasoning. Geopolitical codes are not just state-centric, they involve a particular single state's world view. They may be ideological operations of exclusion and demarcations, which define "them" and "their place" as "other" in distinction to "us" and "our place". In fact there has always been a hierarchy of influence within the inter-state system whereby the most powerful impose ideas and assumptions on the less powerful.

In global politics the USA and Russia are in different ideological positions: ranging from neo-Cominternism to neo-Wilsonianism on the other extreme. When USA judges

that effective collective security is built on a solid foundation of American military capability and leadership (Wolfowitz, 1994) then Russia is worrying about the changing global equilibrium as well as the Russian state, and the emerging security vacuums around it (Lukin, 1994). Russian geopolitical thought is based on the notion of cold-blooded national interest rather than on any global idealism, accompanied by the interests that were the basis of "new political thinking" in the late Gorbachev and early Yeltsin time. Russia has not entirely given up an idea of restoring itself as a great European power with major Asian interests in a strategic alliance with the other countries of the Northern hemisphere. So far Russia has not given up the notion that the disintegration of the USSR and the formation on its territory of new states had little if any historical legitimacy (Karaganov 1991). There is even an opinion that Russia should use geopolitical suggestions in practice, so to say in

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foreign policy design (Sorokin 1996). If this school of thought starts to resemble the notorious inter-war German *Geopolitic* is open for discussion in the future. However all the presumptions for the flourishing of *Realpolitik* in Russia are noticeable. The USA and Russian geopolitical thinking is not simply conflicting or the opposite to each other, but rather represent different standpoints within the framework of international relation theories. Thus, there is no wonder why both sides do not easily find a common language in the international arena. Recent negotiations on NATO enlargement and Russia's involvement in the decision-making process showed less promising signs for those who believe in universalism and a "new wave" in Russian foreign policy.

Geopolitical codes are

best seen in foreign political doctrines with global and regional scope. U.S. global geopolitical code was defined in the White House paper issued in 1995, while Russian regional code is easily followed in strategic writings of 1991-96.

### **U.S. Global Geopolitical Code: Leadership Through Engagement and Enlargement**

National exceptionalism is the belief that one's own country has a unique "mission" or "destiny" in the world (Agnew 1983). In the case of American exceptionalism, geopolitical codes cluster around two basic claims: one, that America is a chosen place, a distinct and exceptional "homeland" within the world and that this place and those who live there have a sacred mission and unique destiny within the world. Second, it is argued that the United States spreads only freedom and democracy abroad, in contrast to other states, whose external policies promote their self-interests. Both these geopolitical claims are part of the ideology of American foreign policy that serves globalist perspectives. This global code stresses the importance and responsibility of the United States in world affairs and is considered to be involved in most if not all anti-American movements around the globe. Thus all the places in the world are equally important in the US foreign policy design but still some places acquire more attention.

At the moment the USA is making attempts to build a new world order. After the collapse of Soviet Union its military might and truly global economy has been unparalleled, making American leadership more essential. There is a widely recognised opinion that American assets like military strength, dynamic economy, powerful ideals and people are unique. The last national security strategy is focusing on new threats and new opportunities and is premised on the belief that the line between domestic and foreign policies is disappearing (A National Security... 1995). Opened foreign markets enable to create jobs for American people, increase foreign trade and benefit American nation. Democratic states are less likely to threaten American interests and to enhance global security the USA should initiate NATO's expansion process. Thus the United States feels a responsibility that goes along with being a super power, missionary of democratic ideals and economic prosperity. Those states opposing to democratic ideals and American leadership are threats to the US national interests as well as global security. Therefore, all Americans at home or abroad have to work to deter would-be aggressors, open foreign markets, promote the spread of democracy and pursue new opportunities for peace. US overseas presence is facing geopolitical reasoning like defending US interests in critical regions and preventing the development of power vacuums and threats to regional security. US global code seeks the possibilities to make announcements in every time and

place that in the post-Cold War era the USA is the only exceptional nation to exercise world leadership whose responsibility is to ensure its influence over and participation in collective decision-making in a wide and growing range of circumstances. The new geopolitical code stresses the need to enlarge the US leadership particularly in countries of geo-strategic importance. US strategy of enlargement and engagement is central to its policy towards post-Cold War Europe. Here the goal is an integrated democratic Europe co-operating with the United States under the framework of NATO. The NATO will remain the anchor of American engagement in Europe and while expanding the alliance to the East, it will leave no space for great power competition.

Estonia and the whole Baltic region serves a minor importance to the US national interests. We can only shape under the third pillar of the US global security concerns which means merely a development of democratic institutions and free market economy. We can even notice a considerable strategic shift if we take a brief look in "Strategic Assessment" '95 and '97, published at the Institute for National Strategic Studies. When the 1995 edition treated all the Baltic states under the heading "Europe" then the 1997 edition prefers to group the Baltics together with Russia and CIS. It depicts the Baltics as a conflict potential region because of its ethnic composition (large Russian minority) and because Russia recognises the independence of the Baltic states with certain reservations. Russia may want to invade the Baltics to protect Russian minority and secure the accessibility to the important sea ports. USA recognises a "Baltic problem" because of the threat to European stability and calls for risk reduction through improvement of mutual relationships between the Baltics and Russia. It is quite unlikely that all these details favour the Baltics and enforce a fast integration process with NATO structures.

### **Russian Regional Geopolitical Code: "Leadership Through Revival and Reorientation"**

No idea is more central in Russian history than the one that Russia has a special mission in the world which is linked to Russian Orthodoxy and the ideas of Third Rome. It was then transformed into the Marxist vision that Russia could represent a special way to the future. More recently it has been suggested that Russia has a special role to play in bringing democracy and free-market capitalism to the non-Russian successor states. Russia and Russians have talked much about loss and called for mission after the collapse of Soviet Union. Many foreign political analysts have pointed to the shift from global to regional geopolitical thinking and the importance of security interests in the first place. For example, there is a growing fear that the successor states will either collapse into violence that could spread to Russia or become

footholds of states hostile to Russia (Globe, 1994).

The tendency towards neo-isolation is strengthened by geopolitical factors and emphasised by the economic interests. In the dissolution of the USSR, Russia lost most of the ports. Only about 20% of the customs entry points are now on the territory of Russia. Eventually it will have to pay additional money for the transfer of its goods abroad. Therefore the Baltic ports serve an important role for Russian economy without doubt.

There is a "Versailles syndrome", which is visibly growing among Russians. Most people were able to adapt easily to the loss of the "external" empire, withdrawal of the troops from East-Central Europe and its diminishing role in world affairs. It is much harder to adapt to the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself which was inherited from the Russian Tzars and renamed in 1721 as the Russian Empire. People are fearing further disintegration and danger to the personal safety.

Russia's regional geopolitical code depicts the emergence of security vacuums or geo-strategic gaps where arms, political instability and the existence of little regulatory machinery will draw in outside powers. NATO is rapidly penetrating into East-Central Europe and trying to fill the security vacuum without Russia. Russia is economically and geo-strategically doomed to be a European power. Sergei Karaganov (1991) has written that if it is locked out, sooner or latter it will have to get in, or break in.

Historically, Russia's national interests and foreign relations have formed concentric circles (Travkin, 1994). Nowadays the first and innermost circle is reserved for CIS and Baltic states, so called "Near abroad" and the second or outer circle serves the rest of the world, so called "Far abroad". There is a widespread opinion that the whole Baltic area (also Estonia) falls within Russian security area in the same way as the Caribbean falls within the US security area. To meet these concerns, Russia must have some basic rights in the Baltic states and insists on that (Kremenyuk, 1994). The Russian historical expansion has created an image of the "Russian threat", which has survived until recently and feeds anti-Russian feelings in all neighbouring states. On the other hand, it created a superpower feeling among the common Russian people. Russian political culture is based on the veneration of power, on the belief that might decides everything. "Near abroad" has crucial meaning in regional geopolitical coding. Above-mentioned countries (sic! imagined region) have acquired top priority in Russian foreign policy design, since their sovereignty and independence could be perceived by some Russians as a threat, especially for compatriots, living in those areas. In this regard, Russia is often regarded as solely responsible for the state of affairs in these independent states - it has to play the role of guarantor of the public order, economic survival, de-

mocracy and defend the rights of Russian citizens abroad. Russia has even declared willingness to use all possible means, also military might if necessary for securing its national interests in the "Near abroad". Russia's primary mission is to provide leadership in restoring regional integration and thus pave a way to revival. Its regional geopolitical code expresses security concerns, political and economic interests that are diminishing with the distance from Moscow.

Neither the United States nor Russia has been truly European power and both have talked far more about mission than about interests. Many in both countries are undergoing acute withdrawal pains from the weakening of their missionary role and are engaging in both massive denial and search for enemies that will justify remnants of the centuries old conceptions. The same way as states like Libya and Iran behave asymmetrically in the world of commonly accepted rules and oppose the US global geopolitical code, Estonia is not willing to recognise Russian regional geopolitical code and domination in the Baltic area. In this way Estonia has become an enemy to much more powerful and one hundred times bigger Russia.

It's not fashionable to talk about "spheres of influences" but instead of those "security areas" of great powers. What we have heard about U.S. national interests in the world arena sounds clearly different compared to Russia's vital interests in the Baltics - who else would defend those undeservedly insulted and unjustly persecuted if not Russia itself? The statement that German interests in the inter-war Mitteleuropa and Russian interests in the post-Cold War "Near abroad" are diametrically opposite, does not hold up. Only geopolitical reasoning, the way how territorial expansion, threats and opportunities, friends and enemies are explained, really matters. The intervention on behalf of 25 million ethnic Russians can be used any time as a pretext for territorial expansion towards "hostile" non-Russian successor states. Unfortunately, Estonia is one of these "hostile states".

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