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### **The Return of Imperial Russia: Russia and Its Neighbors**

*Roger E. Kanet*

Professor

Department of International Studies

University of Miami

Research of the Program in Arms Control,  
Disarmament, and International Security

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Roger Kanet, Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1973-1997), is Professor of International Studies at the University of Miami. He was a member of ACDIS from its founding until 1997, and is presently an ACDIS Faculty Affiliate. While at Illinois he served as Head of the Department of Political Science (1984-87) and as Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Director of International Programs (1989-97). Previously he was on the faculty at The University of Kansas (1966-73) and more recently has served as Dean of the School of International Studies at the University of Miami (1997-2000).

Professor Kanet has edited or coedited twenty-four books on Soviet and Russian foreign and security policy, American foreign policy, and global politics; contributed almost 200 articles and chapters to scholarly journals and books; and lectured widely in the United States, Europe, and Asia. He has received various grants and awards, including from American Council of Learned Societies; Center for Advanced Study (University of Illinois), International Research and Exchanges Board; NATO; Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, Cologne; U.S. Institute of Peace; National Security Education Program; and Ford Foundation.



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**PART ONE**  
**Introduction**

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The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of fifteen new states in its place seemingly brought to an end the imperial tradition of Russian domination over various peoples conquered and absorbed into the Russian/Soviet empire over the period of more than half a millennium.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as we will demonstrate in the following pages—if such a demonstration is required after the August 2008 Russian military intervention in Georgia—since the very creation of the new Russian state political leaders in Moscow have been committed to returning Russia to the status of a great power, including the reestablishment of much of the imperial political order that seemingly collapsed in 1991. Before continuing with an examination of the emergence of Russia's more assertive approach to dealing with the world, it is important to note the international environment in which Russian policy developed.<sup>2</sup> To a substantial degree Western, especially U.S., policy since the collapse of the former USSR was based on the assumption that Russia's demise as a great power would be a permanent characteristic of the international system. Throughout the 1990s and even since the turn of the century Russia's interests and concerns were largely ignored, as both the United States and the Western community more broadly moved to fulfill their own political and security objectives in postcommunist Europe—objectives that included the incorporation of most of East European post-Soviet space in Western security, political and economic institutions.

Initially, as the Russian state found itself in virtual political and economic freefall under President Boris Yeltsin, the objective of reestablishing Russia's great power status seemed to be little more than rhetoric and an unrealistic and unrealizable dream. Even though Russia did employ its greatly reduced military capabilities in the attempt to play a role in those Soviet successor states challenged by internal conflict—conflict often facilitated, if not initiated, by clandestine Russian military interference (Kozhemiakin and Kanet, 1998)—the prospect of the Russian Federation's rejoining the ranks of major global actors seemed remote. More recently under Presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev, however, as the Russian economy and Russian self-confidence and assertiveness have been buoyed by the rising price of oil and gas, the revitalization of other sectors of the economy, and the reassertion of Moscow's control over the vast territory of the Russian Federation itself, more sophisticated diplomatic and economic instruments, including what amounts to economic blackmail, have become a central component of Russia's reassertion of influence within what Moscow views as its traditional, and legitimate, sphere of influence—although, as recent events in Georgia have made clear, brute military power remains an important element in the Soviet arsenal.<sup>3</sup>

The general argument to be developed in this essay proceeds as follows. The Russian political leadership's initial commitment to integration into the “community of civilized states,” to use Yeltsin's phrase (Yeltsin, 1992), and its willingness to follow the Western lead on major international political issues were short-lived. Even before 1995 President Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, the primary architect of this pro-Western emphasis in Russian policy, had been forced to redefine Russian foreign and security policy in a much more realistic and nationalist direction than they had done initially. With Kozyrev's replacement as foreign minister by Georgii Primakov in 1996, Russia proclaimed a formal Eurasian thrust in its policy, one that included active Russian involvement in and primacy over the so-called “near abroad” of former Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously this statement does not apply to the twenty percent of the population of the Russian Federation not composed of ethnic Russians.

<sup>2</sup> For the author's earlier discussion of these issues see Kanet (2001), Kanet and Ibryamova (2001), Kanet and Homarac (2007).

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of this shift in Russian policy toward the countries of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and the increased use of economic and financial instruments of power, see the recent work of Bertil Nygren (2007a; 2007c).

territory.<sup>4</sup> Closely associated with this approach, however, was direct and indirect Russian military involvement in regional, mainly ethnically-based, conflicts in a number of other post-Soviet states—in particular, in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan. Russian support for secessionist activities, which actually began already during the period of Kozyrev's tenure as foreign minister, provided Moscow with opportunities to influence regional political developments—as in Georgia, where in return for Russia's role as a "peacekeeper" in the secessionist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (conflicts that could not have developed as they did without Russian support of the insurgents), the Georgian government finally agreed to join the Russian-sponsored Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and to grant Russia basing rights in Georgia (Dale, 1996; Kanet, 1996). By the end of the 1990s, with Russia playing the role of "peacekeeper," most of these conflicts no longer involved active military operations, although they were still far from resolution. Most important, Moscow had successfully reasserted its influence over political developments in several other post-Soviet states.

Yeltsin's selection of Vladimir Putin as his successor and the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in September 2001 led to a short-lived rapprochement of Russia with the United States and Europe.<sup>5</sup> However, Putin's commitment to reestablishing Moscow's control over domestic politics and rebuilding the foundations of Russia's great power status, the financial boon resulting from the explosion of oil and gas prices, as well as the shortsighted and counterproductive policies of Washington, strengthened and expanded the range of policy instruments available to Russia, including economic and political leverage, in its ongoing attempts to reestablish its dominant role across post-Soviet space—the creation of a "Greater Russia"—as an integral part of reasserting its role as a great power whose interests can no longer be ignored as they were throughout the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

The argument of the paper will be developed in three major steps. We will first summarize briefly Russian policy toward the "near abroad" in the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet state and track those factors that almost immediately resulted in a reassessment of the importance of these regions to Russia's future, as well as the use of military involvement to reestablish a Russian role. We will then outline the overall security objectives, both domestic and foreign, set by President Vladimir Putin at the outset of his administration in 2000 and his pursuit of those objectives over the next eight years. Finally, we will track the shift from Russia's emphasis on coercion in its relations with its new neighbors to a broader set of instruments, including especially economic levers—what Bertil Nygren (2007a) has termed "the power of the purse." This does not mean that Russia has abandoned military intervention and threats as a tool, as developments in Georgia in spring and more forcefully in August 2008 have demonstrated (Chivers, 2008). But, the reintegration of former Soviet economic space, with Russia playing the dominant role through its control of energy production and distribution, has become the central focus of Moscow's efforts to reestablish a "Greater Russia" and to reclaim Russia's place in the world as a great power. Throughout this discussion we will also attempt to demonstrate the degree to which policies pursued by the United States and some European states contributed to the sense of isolation that underlay the efforts of Russian leaders to rebuild their great power status.

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<sup>4</sup> General discussions of Russian foreign and security policy during the Yeltsin period, including the shift away from a Western-oriented policy can be found in Arbatov (1993, 1997); Bugajski (2004); Dawisha and Parrott (1994); Jonson and Archer (1996); Kanet (2001); Kanet and Kozhemiakin (1997); Lo (2002); Truscott (1997); Tsygankov (2006); and many other studies.

<sup>5</sup> The rapprochement, however, occurred only after continuing deterioration in relations with the United States that had culminated in early 2001 in the mutual expulsion of diplomats in Washington and Moscow and an enhanced level of verbal hostility between the governments of the two recently-installed presidents Putin and Bush (Kanet and Ibryamova, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> For an important collection of perceptive articles that examine the domestic and foreign policy dimensions of Russia's reemergence as a great power see Hedenskog *et al.* (2005); see also Kanet (2007), especially the chapter by Rukavishnikov (2007).

## PART TWO

### The Russian Federation and the “Near Abroad” under Yeltsin

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In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the former Soviet Union Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev focused Russia’s foreign policy efforts almost exclusively on acceptance into the various institutions that comprised the industrialized “West.” The success of the economic and political reconstruction of Russia was, they argued, tied to Russia’s joining the various “clubs” that constituted the capitalist world and dependent upon Western economic and technological support for that reconstruction. Almost immediately, however, voices in Russia, even among democratic political forces, challenged the rationality and feasibility of such an approach to Russia’s foreign and security policy and called for a new policy approach that focused on rebuilding Russia’s links with and influence in what was then usually termed the “near abroad,” the other successor states of the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> One aspect of this emphasis called for strengthening the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which had initially served mainly as a tool in managing the former Soviet military forces immediately following the break-up of the Soviet Union (Roeder, 1997, p. 223) and in facilitating a program of economic cooperation (*Agreements on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States*, 1992). But, despite signing a number of general agreements on security, the members of the CIS were unwilling to commit themselves to effective integration of their security forces (Papp, 1994, p. 211). Moscow soon viewed the CIS as an instrument to help reestablish its hegemonic position over the other former Soviet territories. Already in February 1993 President Yeltsin, who had in fact maintained that Russia had no intention of resurrecting its imperial past, responded to domestic complaints about Russia’s having abandoned the approximately twenty-five million ethnic Russians “stranded” outside Russian borders and to the growing disorder in a number of post-Soviet states, by noting that “the time has come for authoritative international organizations, including the United Nations, to grant Russia special powers as guarantor of peace and stability in this region,” that is, the former Soviet Union (Yeltsin, 1993, p. 28).

By then Russia was already fully involved in a whole series of regional conflicts—from Moldova in the west to Tajikistan in Central Asia—in which Russian military forces played an important role.<sup>8</sup> Russian military involvement in these regional conflicts exhibited a number of objectives. First, there was the Russian desire to fill the power vacuum that resulted after the collapse of the USSR and to ensure the dominant position of the Russian Federation throughout this region. Second, at a time when the Russian military was in rapid decline, the military leadership sought a way to impose some degree of unity on the remnants of the collapsed union. Third, Russia needed the CIS as a way to preserve the existing links of former inter-republic cooperation mainly in the economic sphere. Finally, Russian military involvement in those conflicts was justified by Russia’s desire to protect the interests of the ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking population in the CIS (Kozhemiakin and Kanet, 1998). By the middle of the 1990s this final objective had become an important rhetorical issue in Russian politics and was employed to justify the extension of Russian involvement throughout former Soviet space.<sup>9</sup>

Despite numerous Russian efforts throughout the second half of the 1990s to turn the CIS into a meaningful integrating organization, in particular in the security area, virtually no progress was made prior to the transfer of

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<sup>7</sup> Alexei Arbatov (1993, 1997) provides two excellent reviews of the growing criticism of Russian policy and of the gradual shift that occurred during 1992-1996.

<sup>8</sup> Russian involvement in these local and regional conflicts is examined in a number of important booklength studies including Arbatov *et al.* (1997); Chayes and Chayes (1996); Jonson and Archer (1996); Kremenyuk (1994); Lynch (2000); Webber (1996).

<sup>9</sup> Among the best of the many studies of the importance of the Russian diaspora for Russian politics see Laitin (1998) and Kolstoe (1995).

political authority from President Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin (Blank, 2002, p. 150; Lynch, 2000, p. 89).<sup>10</sup> By the year 2000, almost a decade after its creation, the CIS had failed in any meaningful sense to integrate the Soviet successor states into an effective union. On paper the Commonwealth was a forum for ambitious projects of cooperation; in reality it witnessed a diminishing base of collaborative activities (Sakwa and Webber, 1999, *passim*).<sup>11</sup>

As part of the effort to diversify their foreign relations and reduce their focus on the West in the second half of the 1990s, the Russians also pursued policies aimed at strengthening ties with a number of countries throughout Asia—several of which had been important clients of the former USSR. This occurred despite strong and repeated opposition from the United States. Central to this effort was the announced “strategic partnership” with China, whose leaders shared Russia’s growing concerns about global U.S. dominance. A number of high-level meetings between the two countries during 1997 and 1998 emphasized the threat of U.S. global hegemony and condemned NATO expansion, as well as the growing pressure that NATO was bringing against Yugoslavia. By early 2001 the commitment of George W. Bush to move ahead with the development of a national missile defense system catalyzed Russian-Chinese policy collaboration. Moreover, an important part of the improving relationship between the two countries was the growth of Russian exports, especially of a wide range of military equipment.

Simultaneously, in the late 1990s, Moscow expanded relations with Iran and rebuilt its ties with India, both of which represented important markets for Russian military equipment and nuclear technology.<sup>12</sup> These initiatives, which had the dual objective of generating additional exports and strengthening Russia’s position as an independent global actor, brought Russia almost immediately into direct conflict with Washington’s policy objectives.

The gap between important U.S. policy goals and those of Russia actually grew significantly during the latter half of the 1990s. For example, the Russians increasingly opposed the use of largely U.S.-initiated United Nations economic sanctions against a number of countries—most of which were viewed in Moscow as important potential international partners. Russia wanted the UN to bring to an end the economic sanctions against both Iraq and Yugoslavia. In the former case Russia was concerned both about a former long-term ally and about Iraq’s inability to repay the substantial debts that had accrued in the Soviet period. At the time of U.S. and British military strikes in retaliation for repeated Iraqi refusals to cooperate with UN weapons inspectors in late 1998, President Yeltsin referred to “gross violations of the UN Charter” by the two Western states. When the West began to bring pressure on Yugoslavia once again in 1998 over the issue of Kosovo, the Russians supported the Yugoslav right to do virtually anything to protect its territorial integrity and threatened various forms of retaliation if the West bombed Yugoslavia.

The issue that raised the most serious response in Moscow in this period remained the question of NATO’s expansion eastward.<sup>13</sup> Prior to the Madrid meetings of NATO in July 1997 at which a final decision was to be made about possible expansion, Moscow orchestrated a multifaceted campaign that included pressure on the applicant countries and threats that the expansion would in effect initiate a new cold war in relations between Russia and the West. In fact, however, when NATO decided to invite the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to join the alliance, Russia reluctantly accepted the decision without any of the retaliatory responses that had

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<sup>10</sup> Dov Lynch is generally quite critical of Russia’s role in so-called peacekeeping operations throughout the former USSR and points to the central importance of Russian intervention in fomenting or expanding regional conflicts. Others, including Russian analysts, take a similar position. See, for example, Jonson and Archer (1996) and Kremenyuk (1994).

<sup>11</sup> Although some analysts have described the CIS as a “defunct” organization, Stephen Blank has noted the place that a revitalized CIS played in President Putin’s intensified efforts to achieve one of the central Russian foreign policy objectives established by the mid-1990s: that is, preserving Russia’s integrity and restoring Russian primacy in an exclusive sphere of influence across the CIS (Blank, 2002, p. 148). The Russian “security concept” approved in 2000 stated that Russian security interests mandate the permanent stationing of forces abroad (Blank, 2002, p. 146; “Doktrina informatsionnoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” 2000; “Kontseptsiiia natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” 2000).

<sup>12</sup> On Russian policy in Asia see Rozman, Nosov, and Watanabe (1999); Truscott (1997), pp. 54-58; and Conley (2001).

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of NATO expansion and other security-related issues in East-Central Europe see Kanet and Ibryamova (2002).

been threatened. But, it was clear in the approach that Washington and its allies took to Russian objections that Russia was not viewed in the restructured European security environment as a serious player whose interests had to be given serious consideration.

Once it became obvious that their efforts to forestall the expansion of NATO eastward were doomed to failure, the Russians seem to have accepted reality and attempted to gain whatever benefits they could out of that acceptance. They shifted the focus of their opposition to NATO expansion from East Central Europe to the Baltics. Moreover, on May 27, 1997 Moscow signed the Russia-NATO Founding Act that was supposed to provide clear parameters for the relationship between Russia and the Western Alliance. In return Russia was granted membership in an expanded “G-8.” During the rest of the year Russia participated in a U.S.-led military exercise in the Baltic Sea and continued to cooperate with Partnership for Peace activities.

In fact, however, neither of these relationships really fulfilled Russian goals. Moscow was excluded from full participation in those “G-8” meetings at which meaningful decisions concerning international financial matters were likely to occur. Moreover, given the disastrous state of the Russian economy, it could have little hope of exercising any real influence within the group. At the same time the Russia-NATO Founding Act also proved to be unsatisfactory as a means for Russia to pursue its foreign policy interests. While the Act did not provide Russia with anything approximating veto power over NATO decisions, it did call for effective consultation on important security issues. In fact, over the next two years NATO largely ignored Russia’s increasingly vehement complaints about NATO’s refusal to consult on its attempts to arrest Serbs as war criminals and implement various aspects of the Dayton Peace Accords.

Another issue of great importance arose to complicate U.S.-Russian relations by the end of the 1990s. Ever since President Ronald Reagan’s decision to initiate the development of an anti-missile defense system to protect U.S. territory from possible missile attacks, the Soviet and Russian governments have voiced their serious concerns that the development of such a system would have major destabilizing effects on the international security system. Although modest research continued on the project in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, it was not until the final years of the Clinton presidency that the matter became an issue of importance in U.S.-Russian relations. By then key members of Congress, in particular conservative Republicans who controlled the U.S. Senate, began to push for the actual development of a missile defense system. President Bill Clinton first seemed willing to go forward with the program; but, he finally reversed his decision—presumably in the face of strong domestic and international opposition, as well as cost projections and evidence of likely technical limitations. During the electoral campaign of 2000, George W. Bush and his spokespersons made clear that, if he were elected, the United States government would move ahead with development of an antiballistic missile system and would withdraw from the 1972 ABM treaty, which put limitations on testing and deployment of such a system. This is precisely what the new administration did, although the terrorist attacks of September 11 delayed the formal announcement of the final decision. Already during 2000 and 2001 President Putin stated Russia’s clear opposition to U.S. policy and sought support for the Russian position in Western Europe and in China—with very positive results in the latter country. He has also generated some interest in Europe for alternate proposals for a regional missile defense system. Russia’s concern, which was ignored by the advocates of a missile defense system in the United States, is that the development of a small U.S. system will merely be the first step in undermining the relevance of Russia’s nuclear arsenal, which serves as the sole remaining claim to Russia’s great power status (Solovev, 2001). As the United States has proceeded with the process of building a radar system and establishing missile sites in the Czech Republic and Poland, the level of Russia’s concern, anger and threats—U.S. protestations that the system was not targeted against Russia notwithstanding—has risen.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> After the Polish and U.S. governments signed an agreement on the emplacement of U.S. missiles on Polish territory, Russian President Medvedev noted that “This will create additional tension and we will have to respond to it in some way, naturally using military means” (RIA-Novosti, 2008). The deputy chief of the Russian General Staff, General Anatolii Nogovitsyn, noted that Poland was “exposing itself to a strike—100 percent” (Philip and Halpin, 2008).

Thus, by summer 2001, little more than half a year into the presidency of George W. Bush and one and a half years into Vladimir Putin's presidency, U.S.-Russian relations were apparently on a collision course.<sup>15</sup> The leaderships of the two countries had established objectives that they viewed as important to their national interests that were in direct conflict with one another. Russians were increasingly frustrated by Washington's obvious disregard for their role in world affairs and by the apparent U.S. lack of concern for Russian interests—as in the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and in U.S. efforts to restrict Russian involvement in the development of oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Basin (Ebel and Menon, 2000; Kanet and Homarac, 2007). The mutual diplomatic expulsions of early spring 2001 initiated by Washington were but the most visible indication of the seriousness of the tensions in bilateral relations.

Before we turn to a discussion of Russian policy in the Putin era, it is important to refer to the Chechen war because of its overall impact on many other aspects of Russian policy. The decision by President Yeltsin in the mid-1990s to suppress the demands for an independent state in Chechnya and the ensuing defeat of the Russian army initiated more than a decade of internal warfare that influenced Russian foreign policy and relations. At one level, the ferocity with which Russia attempted to suppress Chechen opposition, both prior to and after Putin's rise to political importance, has had an important negative impact on Russia's relations with the United States and the countries of the European Union. Russian abuses of human rights have become an important factor in the deteriorating relations between the Russian Federation and the West. Moreover, the ongoing Russian struggle to reassert control over Chechnya and to root out Chechen opposition has brought Moscow into regular conflict with Georgia, whose government the Russians have accused of harboring and supporting Chechen separatists. So, the war in Chechnya has been much more than simply an internal challenge to central authority within the Russian Federation; it has also had a visible impact on relations with both near neighbors and with the West.

Therefore, the issue of Russia's relations with the "near abroad"—its new neighbors in post-Soviet space—evolved in the first decade of independent Russian existence within an international political and security environment in which the Russian Federation's relations with the West, especially with the United States, were increasingly conflictual. Russia was no longer taken seriously as a major actor in world affairs, and its views and concerns were largely ignored based on the assumption that Russia was no longer an important or relevant actor.<sup>16</sup> Even in its immediate geopolitical environment, and despite its massive military superiority, Moscow could not control developments that it viewed of central importance to its security concerns. This was, in effect, the overall situation inherited by Vladimir Putin when he picked up the reins of Russian leadership at the turn of the millennium.

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<sup>15</sup> For a careful analysis of the state of Russian relations with the West at the time see the excellent article by Alla Kassianova (2001).

<sup>16</sup> Powerful conservative forces within the Republican Party and the U.S. Senate made clear their views of Russia's basic irrelevance to U.S. interests. For example, Senator Jesse Helms, then the powerful chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was especially outspoken. In introductory remarks before the Committee on Foreign Relations he dismissed Russian objections to US changes in the ABM Treaty by noting that the hearings would proceed from the presumption that the ABM Treaty had ceased to exist and that attempts to revise it would be defeated (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 1999; Helms, 1999).

### PART THREE

#### Putin and the Return of Russia as a Great Power

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As we have already noted, when President Boris Yeltsin plucked Vladimir Putin from political obscurity in August 1999 and began to groom him as his successor, the Russian Federation's relations with the United States had already deteriorated significantly. Several developments had occurred that were especially relevant for Russian policy. First, and probably most important, was the renewed challenge from Chechen separatists that in effect provided the new prime minister with the opportunity to present himself as the forceful political leader needed to destroy the terrorist challenge to Russia and to stabilize the chaotic political and economic situation in Russia. After a reported terrorist bombing of an apartment building in Moscow, Putin initiated a massive military campaign in fall 1999 that brought Moscow *de facto* control of most of the secessionist republic. This initiative generated support among the majority of the Russian population and played an important role in Putin's resounding electoral victory in spring 2000—even though the brutality of the policy raised serious criticism in the West, including censure by the Council of Europe.

Relations with the United States had also been seriously strained because of the U.S. and British bombing of Iraq and, even more, because of NATO's campaign against Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and his attempt to expel the majority of the ethnic Albanians from Kosovo. Although Russia strongly opposed NATO's military interventions—made evident by President Yeltsin's walking out of an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) meeting in November 1997—the United States and its NATO allies simply ignored that criticism. Thus, when Vladimir Putin took over as interim president on January 1, 2000, he inherited these and an entire series of additional policy disagreements with the United States, and the West more generally, that included the restructuring of the Russian debt, NATO and EU expansion, the U.S. commitment to move forward with a missile defense system, the longer term future of Yugoslavia and the Balkans, Russia's nuclear relations with Iran, and so on.

The general parameters of Russian policy, including policy toward the United States, were set early in Putin's presidency and derived directly from the policy lines established in Moscow in the mid-1990s. Putin made clear his commitment to reestablishing the place of Russia as the preeminent regional power and as an important international actor. Essential preconditions for the fulfillment of these objectives, as the "Foreign Policy Concept" that Putin approved indicated, were the internal political stability and economic viability of Russia (*Foreign Policy Concept*, 2000; "Kontseptsii natsional'noi bezopasnosti," 2000). According to this policy prescription Russia had to overcome all efforts toward and evidence of separatism, national and religious extremism, and terrorism. Putin moved forcefully, and in most cases effectively, in reasserting central governmental control in Russia. The economy, while still not flourishing, had shown strong signs of turning around with growth rates of 4.5, 10.0, and 5.0 percent in the years 1999-2001 (Central Bank, 2001). These political and economic gains, however, occurred with little or no regard for the civil liberties and democratic processes to which Putin's government was nominally committed. His anti-corruption campaign, for example, soon became a catch-all that targeted those who in any way challenged his position or were concerned about the authoritarian turn in Russian politics—such as those associated with the independent media.

In the foreign policy arena Putin continued to seek allies who shared Russia's commitment to preventing the global dominance of the United States that represents, in the words of the "Foreign Policy Concept," a threat to international security and to Russia's goal of serving as a major center of influence in a multipolar world. Most of the issues on which Russia and the United States disagreed already in the mid-1990s continued to plague that relationship. In other words, until the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001 there was little evidence that the seemingly enduring issues that divided the two countries throughout the 1990s would soon disappear—in particular since they derived from core elements of their respective foreign policy commitments. In fact, after a very brief hiatus immediately after 9/11, those issues resurfaced and continue to plague Russian-U.S. relations today. Russia's invasion of Georgia and formal recognition of the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have exacerbated that relationship.

However, Putin's success in dealing with the major problems challenging the Russian state at the beginning of the decade has meant that Russia now faces the United States and the West from a position of increased strength. Putin's reassertion of central control over the territory of the Russian Federation—by eliminating the election of provincial governors, by suppressing domestic opponents and critics (especially the independent media) and by playing on the fears of Russian citizens of domestic terrorism, crime, and general chaos—played an important role in strengthening the Russian state.<sup>17</sup> Besides rebuilding the foundations of the Russian state at any cost as a precondition of Russia's ability to reassert itself as a major power, Putin and his associates have benefited greatly from the exponential rise in global demand for gas and oil and the ensuing revitalization of the Russian economy. This, in turn, has contributed to Russia's ability to pursue a much more active and assertive foreign policy, as many analysts have noted.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Putin was quite successful—and fortunate—during the eight years of his presidency in establishing the economic and political foundations for a strong centralized state as the prerequisites for Russia's reasserting itself as a major player in international political and security affairs. While the voices calling for Russia to resume its role as a great, global power in the 1990s were strident, but not realistic, today they hold the dominant position in the Russian political debate—in so far as one can even refer to a debate—and are based upon realistic expectations of the successful implementation of Russian policy objectives. This policy position begins with former President Putin himself and his statement to the Russian Duma that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” (Putin, 2005)<sup>19</sup> These comments were followed early in 2006 with Putin's broad attack on virtually all aspects of U.S. policy delivered at a security conference in Munich (Trenin, 2008; Wagstyl, 2007) that made clear Russia's new assertive approach to foreign policy, beginning with its relations with the United States. As Mark Beissinger (2008) notes, Putin's comments imply that the “persistence of the Soviet empire would have been preferable to the East European democracies or to the current fifteen states that now cover former Soviet space.” Putin's—and Medvedev's—commitment to the reestablishment of “Greater Russia” is their reaction to the collapse of the old imperial relationships.

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<sup>17</sup> Several excellent discussions of domestic political developments during the Putin years can be found in Shevtsova (2007); Trenin (2007); Sakwa (2004); and Taylor (2007).

<sup>18</sup> However, as many analysts have argued, the revived role of Russia as a regional and global political actor is based extensively on the wealth generated by oil and gas production and exports. See, for example, Hancock (2007); McFaul and Stoner-Weiss (2008) and Menon and Motyl (2007).

<sup>19</sup> For recent discussions of the commitment of Russia's political elites to regaining great power status see Oldberg (2005, 2007) and Rukavishnikov (2007). Public opinion surveys in Russia indicate that a majority of Russians support the return of Russia to great power status. Fifty-one percent expect Putin's successor to return Russia to a preeminent global role, while only nine percent expect the next president to establish good relations with the West (*Angus Reid Global Monitor*, 2008). In August 2008, at the time of the Russian invasion of Georgia, opinion in Moscow strongly supported the reassertion of Russian influence (Barnard, 2008).

## PART FOUR

### From Military Intervention to Economic Coercion

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We turn now to a discussion of that aspect of Russian policy committed to reestablishing Russia's great power status by beginning with the reintegration of former Soviet space, which some have termed *Greater Russia*—precisely the policy implied by Putin's negative reference to the dissolution of the USSR. As we have already noted, despite the rhetorical commitment of Russian leaders to deal with the former republics of the Soviet Union as sovereign equals, from almost the very creation of the Russian Federation, Moscow has been directly and indirectly involved in the internal affairs of its new neighbors. Throughout the 1990s the major instruments used to reestablish Russia's influence were various types of *de facto* military intervention and attempts to turn the CIS into a meaningful organ of economic and political reintegration. As we noted earlier in this paper, since the year 2000 Russian policy toward its neighbors in the CIS, as well as to the Baltic states, has become much more sophisticated and complex—though by no means more cooperative and neighborly—and has relied increasingly on the use of Russia's dominant position in the energy field and its growing economic leverage vis-à-vis its generally much weaker and economically dependent neighbors. Most important has been the Russian government's regaining almost total control over Russian energy production and distribution and increasingly dominating the energy sector of neighboring countries—often through semi-coerced purchase of the energy distribution and processing infrastructure of those countries (Nygren, 2007b, 2007c, esp. pp. 238-45).

#### Oil, Gas, and the Revival of Russian Political Dominance

As noted above, and as other authors have documented in substantial detail, the exponential increase in global demand for energy has been the single most important factor contributing to the revival of the Russian economy and to growing Russian political influence vis-à-vis neighboring states (Nygren, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Ebel and Menon, 2000).<sup>20</sup> In fact, almost from the very inception of the new Russian Federation Moscow has used its control of energy as a means to “influence” other former Soviet republics to change political positions that they had taken or to follow Moscow's policy lead. This has been especially true in Russia's relations with the Baltic republics, with Ukraine, Georgia, and more recently even with Belarus, all post-Soviet states with which Russia has had serious policy differences over the course of the past fifteen years. Moscow has in all cases put the blame for the cut-off of energy flows on the other side, or explained them as the result of technical problems, and argued, as well, that the policies of its oil and gas companies were dictated solely by economic, not political, considerations.<sup>21</sup>

All of these countries are energy poor and almost totally dependent on supplies of petroleum, natural gas and, in some cases, electricity imported from the Russian Federation. Russia has pursued what Nygren (2007b) refers to as the “tap weapon”—by stopping the delivery of oil and/or gas to these countries—on various

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<sup>20</sup> The dominant narrative in analyses of Russia's economic revival that attributes that revival almost exclusively to Russian gas and oil exports and to the rise in global demand and, thus, prices, for those exports has been increasingly challenged by those who point to the vibrant growth of other sectors of the Russian economy. A recent World Bank report notes, for example, that growth in the Russian economy has been stimulated by sectors other than gas and oil. The report noted: “In 2003–04, oil and some industrial sectors drove economic growth, but the subsequent expansion was driven largely by nontradable goods and services for the domestic market, including manufacturing goods. In 2007, wholesale and retail trade alone accounted for almost a third of economic growth. Booming construction and manufacturing contributed another 30 percent. Manufacturing expanded by 7.4 percent in 2007, up from 2.9 percent in 2006. By contrast, growth in resource extraction virtually stopped, reflecting capacity constraints... The good news, so far, is that high rates of productivity growth underlie this robust growth.” (World Bank in Russia, p. 4)

<sup>21</sup> It is important to recognize that with the collapse of the former Soviet Union the Russian Federation decided to continue to supply gas and oil to other former republics—now, new sovereign states—at prices substantially below the world market price. Thus, as global prices for gas and oil skyrocketed after the turn of the century, Russia was exporting oil and gas to neighboring countries at subsidized prices one-third or less of the world market price.

occasions in the past decade as a means of strengthening its position in policy disputes and negotiating situations. The dispute with Ukraine in 2005-2006, which resulted in Russia's cutting off exports of gas in the middle of winter—resulted from Gazprom's decision to more than triple the price of gas. This decision, however, emerged only in the aftermath of the "Orange Revolution" which had reversed the "victory" of Russia's preferred candidate in the recent Ukrainian presidential election. Until that time Putin's policy toward Ukraine had been based on pragmatic long-term political and economic considerations. However, with the collapse of pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine, Russia initiated a new, more coercive approach, to demonstrate to the Ukrainians that assertions of independence from Moscow's influence would have real costs (Bugajski, 2004, pp. 80-89).

The "gas war" of 2005-2006 between Russia and Ukraine was "resolved" by a complicated settlement in which a majority Russian-owned Swiss company sold gas originating supposedly from Central Asia to Ukraine at subsidized prices, with prices increasing gradually over several years to world market levels.<sup>22</sup> Ukraine was in a position to bargain with Gazprom and Moscow because Russia depended upon the secure flow of gas through pipelines across Ukraine in order to fulfill its export obligations to customers in Central and Western Europe. In other words, Ukraine was not totally helpless in responding to Russian pressures, as was evident from the fact that the Ukrainians had, in fact, "illegally" tapped supplies of gas destined for Europe during the height of the confrontation. To a substantial degree the reaction of the Europeans to the reduction of gas supplies in January 2006 was an important factor in Russia's willingness to reach a settlement with Ukraine.

Ukraine is by no means the only post-Soviet state to have experienced Moscow's political displeasure and, thus, the effects of the "tap weapon." Belarus, which for most of the post-Soviet period pursued a slavishly pro-Russian policy, angered Putin's government in 2002, thereby leading to four years of confrontation between the two countries, with Gazprom taking the lead role in the dispute. Once again, because pipelines to the West crossed Belarusian territory, Belarus had some bargaining power. Eventually, however, the government of President Alexander Lukashenko was forced to capitulate or face the cut-off of Russian gas supplies. Prices were to be increased over a five year period, while Gazprom gained direct control over the pipelines across Belarus (Nygren, 2007c, pp. 76-79).

Until the August 2008 Russian invasion, the gas weapon, as well as that of electricity, had been the most important instrument in Russian pressures brought against Georgia, in order to coerce the latter into policies more in line with Moscow's interests. Here, these pressures have been employed, along with traditional threats of military intervention in support of Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists—threats that were realized in August 2008 (*The Economist*, 2008b). In the Georgian case over the past several years Russia has acquired substantial ownership of energy production and distribution facilities in Georgia to cover the costs of outstanding debts and as a precondition for continued discounted prices on Russian gas (Giragosian, 2007; Pamir, 2003).<sup>23</sup> This control, however, did not cow the Georgian government into accepting Russian dominance in the region—or accepting the *de facto* autonomy of the Russian-backed secessions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, resulting in military hostilities in August 2008 that in effect wiped out Georgian military capabilities developed in recent years with U.S. military assistance and training.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nygren (2007c, pp. 61-62) provides a detailed discussion of the specifics of the agreements, as well as providing the relevant sources.

<sup>23</sup> In 2003 the Russian firm UES obtained 75 percent ownership in a Georgian electricity distribution company and management control over several power plants, as well as 50 percent ownership of a nuclear power plant. Gazprom acquired control of Georgia's main gas pipeline in 2005 in return for a restructuring of the latter's debt. In other words, Russia now directly controls much of Georgia's energy production and distribution and still serves as the primary source of gas, even after the opening of the new pipeline from Azerbaijan in late 2006 (Khachatryan 2003; Torbakov 2003a; 2003b).

<sup>24</sup> In early August 2008—after weeks of mutual verbal attacks between Moscow and Tbilisi and apparently with encouragement from political elements in the United States—President Saakashvili of Georgia, reportedly responding to rocket attacks from locations inside the breakaway region of South Ossetia, sent forces into the region to reincorporate the breakaway republic. The Russians, who had apparently massed troops on the Russian-South Ossetian border in advance, almost immediately overwhelmed Georgian forces in the republic, as well as in a second breakaway region of Abkhazia, and advanced far into Georgia territory proper. The message to all—the Georgian government, Washington, and other former Soviet republics with grievances against Moscow—was quite clear. Russia is back, and Russia is willing to use its economic

Russia's *de facto* control over the energy supplies of other post-Soviet states—Armenia, Moldova, and the Baltic states—has also been used in similar ways to influence the policy positions of these countries, as Nygren (2007c) has described in some detail. Yet, there is another part of Russia's use of its domination over energy production and distribution that is significant for the drive to reestablishing Greater Russia and reestablishing the Russian Federation as a major world power; namely, attempting to gain control over the distribution of oil and gas from Central Asia in Western markets.

### **Pipeline Politics, from Central Asia to the Baltic Sea**

Since the mid-1990s the United States has been actively involved in efforts to ensure alternative distribution routes to Europe and the West for Azerbaijani and Central Asian gas and oil, in order to prevent Russia from strengthening its semi-monopoly position in the distribution of Eurasian energy resources. Washington has pushed for the development of oil and gas pipelines that would skirt Russian territory and, therefore, reduce the potential of Russia's gaining further leverage over either Central Asian exporters or the Western purchasers of energy.<sup>25</sup> Yet, Russia has effectively outmaneuvered the United States in its relations with the oil and gas producing countries of Central Asia. Although several pipelines have been completed that avoid Russian territory, Moscow has been successful in recent years in reestablishing solid political and economic relations with the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia. They have signed new agreements with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and other major energy producers that will result in expanded supplies of gas and oil destined for European consumers through the existing and planned pipeline network that crosses Russian territory (Hahn, 2007; Kramer, 2007).<sup>26</sup> At the time of the Russian intervention in Georgia, Moscow signed new agreements with Central Asian producers for the expansion of their gas exports through Russia, rather than via southern pipelines favored by the United States (Bhadrakumar, 2008; *People's Daily Online*, 2008). This is all part of a Russian effort to increase Russian control over the flow of oil and gas to Europe as a prelude to being in a position to influence, indirectly at least, the political orientation of key European governments on issues such as the status of secessionist regions of Moldova and Georgia, Russian policy in Chechnya, etc.<sup>27</sup>

Russia and important Western partners have also put into place plans for the future distribution of oil and gas to Europe that will eliminate the possible interference of current transit states such as Ukraine and Belarus, as well as Poland, by avoiding those transit states altogether. The planned Nord Stream pipeline under the Baltic Sea directly from Russia to the coast of Germany (*Intelligence Brief*, 2006; *RFE/RL Newline*, 2008), as well as the more recently announced South Stream pipeline that will run under the Black Sea from Russia directly to

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and military power to accomplish objectives that it views as important to its interests (Giragosian, 2008; Dobbs, 2008; Galloway, 2008). Among the most salient analyses of the Russian intervention is that of George Friedman (2008), who points to the importance in Russia's calculations of what Moscow perceived—not without reason—as a U.S. policy of containment in which Georgia and Ukraine were important elements.

<sup>25</sup> The first of these, the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline, was opened in May 2005. It begins in Azerbaijan and brings oil from the Caspian area via Georgia to the Mediterranean coast of Turkey. At the same time, however, a gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey under the Black Sea has also begun operating (Sultanova, 2005; Arvedlund, 2005; *The Economist*, 2005; Lantier, 2008; Ziegler, 2005; Marin Thornton and Kanet, 2005; Kanet and Homerac, 2007). The Russian intervention in Georgia brings into question the longer-term viability of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, and the likelihood that investors will go ahead with another planned pipeline from Central Asia to Europe via Georgia, the Nabucco Pipeline, is significantly diminished.

<sup>26</sup> China has become a much more important competitor with Russia for Central Asian gas and oil and for political influence, more broadly, than is the United States. China represents an exploding market for Central Asian energy exports and affords local governments with an alternative to complete dependence on the Russian Federation. Moreover, like Russia, it does not make the type of political demands on political elites that have characterized U.S. policy (de Haas, 2007; Pannier, 2008; Radio Free Europe, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> This statement and others that emphasize the political aspects of Russian energy exports and policy should not be interpreted to mean that economic benefits are not also an important factor that influences policy decisions. Although until recently Russia had pursued a policy, in place for more than a decade after the collapse of the USSR, of selling gas and oil to other post-Soviet states at discounted prices, in recent years it has been shifting away from that policy. In fact, Russian demands for higher prices for oil and gas exports to neighboring states have been one of the sources of increased political friction with those countries.

Bulgaria (Isachenkov, 2008), will expand Russia's domination over the gas markets of Europe, while reducing the possibility of countries such as Ukraine, Belarus or Poland disrupting those flows (*The Economist*, 2008a; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2008). Overall, Russia has positioned itself very effectively to control the production and distribution of energy across almost the entirety of former Soviet space and, thus, to Europe as well, as part of former President Putin's commitment to establish Greater Russia as a major global actor. The dependence on external sources for virtually all gas and oil needs of some countries in the European Union and their willingness to cut bilateral deals with Russia outside the context of a common EU policy (notably Germany), has greatly aided Russia in its attempt to employ energy as a foreign policy tool.

**PART FIVE**  
**Toward the Future**

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The broader project to which this essay contributes focuses on new and old armed conflicts in post-Soviet space.<sup>28</sup> The “frozen conflicts” in Moldova, Georgia (until the recent Russian intervention), Nagorno Karabagh and, even, Chechnya are clear examples of those armed conflicts. Here, however, we have emphasized the non-military, but still largely coercive, aspects of Russia’s policy, as Moscow has expanded its efforts at establishing a *Greater Russia* as an integral element of former President Putin’s commitment to rebuilding Russia as a global power. By no means does this indicate that Russia has abandoned its use of its military capabilities in relations with its neighbors. Russia’s ongoing military pressure and threats against Georgia that culminated in August 2008 in direct invasion and partial occupation of the latter, its official recognition of the two breakaway enclaves in Georgia and its continuing support for secessionist forces in Moldova and Nagorno Karabagh, and the continued suppression of all potentially autonomous power centers in Chechnya make clear that military coercion remains an important tool in Moscow’s efforts to reestablish hegemony across former Soviet space.

As Nygren demonstrates in summarizing the argument that he developed in *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia* (2007c, pp. 232ff.),<sup>29</sup> economic levers have become the most reliable instruments for Russia in its campaign to reassert control over its neighbors—at least until the military operations in Georgia. Efforts within the CIS to expand security cooperation, as well as formal economic integration, have been largely ineffective in accomplishing Russia’s goals. Meaningful agreements have been difficult to reach and almost impossible to implement. As Nygren puts it, the SES (Single Economic Space) “has encountered basically the same fate as the CIS as a whole, i.e., it has started as an agreement on general principles which has been followed by negotiations on details which have failed and stalled the process” (Nygren, 2007c, p. 238). It has been primarily through the manipulation of oil and gas prices, the coerced purchase of neighboring states’ energy infrastructure, and agreements reached with key West European customers such as Germany that Russia under President Putin was able to reassert its dominant role in Eurasia.<sup>30</sup> This does not mean that Moscow does not face competition, for China represents for the states of Central Asia an alternative to total dependence on Russia (Ziegler, 2008; Chun, 2008) and the West continues to compete for influence in Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus (Berryman, 2008). However, during the past decade, in particular during the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia has expanded its ability to influence, even dominate, the policy-making of most of its neighbors who depend on Russian sources of energy for their very existence.

Given the extensive support in Russia among political elites, as well as among the general population, for the reassertion of Russia’s role as a great power, and given the limited likelihood of alternative energy sources for most of Russia’s neighbors, one can assume that energy supply and infrastructure will remain a central tool in Russian policy, even though recent events demonstrate that Moscow is able and willing to use its military power in situations where the West is unable to counter that use.

In the longer term—but here we are speaking of decades, not years—Russia’s position, both in relations with neighboring states and as a refurbished great power, is likely to decline, as significant population decline sets in and Russian oil and gas reserves are depleted and dependent states shift to alternative energy sources.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, there is the important issue seldom discussed seriously of the impact of Russia’s impending

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<sup>28</sup> Revised versions of the papers presented at the workshop at which an earlier version of this paper was a part are currently under review for possible publication at Oxford University Press as *Conflicts in the Former Soviet Territories*, edited by Peter Shearman and Matthew Sussex.

<sup>29</sup> In 2005 Herman Prichner (2005) also emphasized the place of economic instruments in Russia’s revival of Greater Russia.

<sup>30</sup> Recent developments in Georgia indicate that Moscow is not loath to use its formidable military capabilities to reinforce its position.

<sup>31</sup> On the issue of the weakness of the overall Russian economy see the perceptive article by Kathleen Hancock (2007), among many others.

demographic disaster on its ability to maintain its economy or pursue its foreign policy objectives.<sup>32</sup> Yet, for the foreseeable future the Russian Federation will likely continue to exert major influence over *Greater Russia* based heavily on its domination of the energy lifeline essential for most of its neighbors, but also on its willingness to exert other pressures, up to and including military intervention, if this is deemed necessary.

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<sup>32</sup> Among the clearest discussions of the issue of demographic decline and its implications for Russia's future see Walter Laqueur's perceptive analysis (2007, pp. 149-166). As Laqueur points out, however, most of Europe is likely to suffer the same decline as does Russia.

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