

Contents lists available at [SciVerse ScienceDirect](http://SciVerse.Sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Eurasian Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/euras

The heartland no more: Russia's weakness and Eurasia's meltdown[☆]

Andrei P. Tsygankov

San Francisco State University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 May 2011

Accepted 7 August 2011

ABSTRACT

The Eurasian region continues to disintegrate, and neither Russia nor the West has been able to arrest the destabilizing dynamics. Evidence of rising instability throughout the region include the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, terrorist attacks in the Northern Caucasus, the persistent failure of Western forces to stabilize Afghanistan, the inability of Central Asian rulers to reign in local clans and drug lords, and the paralysis of legitimately elected bodies of power in Ukraine and Moldova. The West's attempts to secure and stabilize Eurasia after the end of the Cold War have not led to success. Russia too has greatly contributed to the Eurasian meltdown. The Soviet collapse and the subsequent retreat of Russia from the region have greatly destabilized the area. The relative recovery of the Russian economy during the post-Yeltsin decade began to revive Russia's standing in Eurasia, yet Moscow could ill afford serious efforts to stabilize and pacify the region. Russia's resurgence is a response to its lacking recognition as a vital power and partner of the West. If Russia chooses to dedicate itself to obstructing Western policies in Eurasia, we will see more of the collapsing dynamics in the region. Preventing this requires recognizing Russia's role in stabilizing the region and working with Russia in developing a joint assessment of threat and establishing a collective security arrangement in Eurasia.

Copyright © 2011, Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University. Produced and distributed by Elsevier Limited. All rights reserved.

"Russia's external geopolitical interests are to the maximum degree tied, to the Great Limitrof [a buffer zone separating Russia from Europe and, Asia - AT], whereas problems of other civilizational entities are to us of, the global, rather than the geopolitical, importance."

Vadim Tsyburski, 1995¹

[☆] The article is written in memory of Russian geopolitical thinker Vadim Tsyburski who passed away in December 2009.

E-mail address: andrei@sfsu.edu.



Produced and distributed by Elsevier Ltd.

¹ Vadim Tsyburski, "Zemliya za velikim limitrofom: ot "Rossiyi-Yevraziyi" k "Rossiyi v Yevraziyi," *Russki Arkhipelag* <http://www.archipelag.ru/geopolitics/osnovi/russia/earth/>.

1. Introduction

In the mid-1990s – in response to rising instability in the former Soviet region and the decision by NATO to expand eastward – Russian analysts begun to seriously reflect about a security vacuum and disintegration trends in Eurasia. While some of them insisted that Russia remained the only stabilizing force, others understood that the formerly central power was in no position to play its traditional role and must be prepared – for a long time – to decrease its international responsibilities in the region. Those in the latter group argued that stabilization by taking on a new burden of empire was out of the question.² Among them, Vladimir Tsyburski proposed that Russia concentrate on internal development and restrict its external tasks to

² This debate has been well documented in a number of publications. See, for example, Aron (1998) and Tsygankov (2003).

neutralizing potential threats from peripheral areas. He argued that, while the danger of the region's destabilization was serious and could translate into a great war, Russia was sufficiently secure if it managed to guarantee a minimal peace within a buffer zone separating it from Europe and Asia by engaging in defensive balancing politics. Indeed, Tsyburski maintained that, while transitioning from the imperial status to that of the geopolitical "island", Russia remained an indispensable power.³

As a modest tribute to Tsyburski's contribution to Russia's geopolitical thinking, this paper continues with the theme of Eurasia's instability. I argue that since the mid-1990s, the region has not become more stable.⁴ Evidence of rising instability throughout the region include the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, terrorist attacks in the Northern Caucasus, the persistent failure of Western forces to stabilize Afghanistan, the inability of Central Asian rulers to reign in local clans and drug lords, and the paralysis of legitimately elected bodies of power in Ukraine and Moldova. Neither Russia nor other great powers have been able to arrest the destabilizing dynamics in the region after the end of the Cold War. Russia has greatly contributed to the Eurasian meltdown by losing its internal strength and focus on what Tsyburski called the Great Limitrof or a buffer zone separating Russia from European and Asian civilizations. The interests of China and the Muslim world have been too peripheral to successfully fill the emerged security vacuum and compensate for the weakness of Russia in Eurasia. As to the West, its attempts to become the sole referee and security provider in the region have been ill-conceived encouraging Russia's anti-Western thinking and the zero-sum competition for spheres of influence. Engaging Russia as an equal and, indeed, indispensable participant in a larger collective security-based arrangement in the region remains a better strategy than attempts to confine Russia's activities within its national boundaries.

The paper's organization is as follows. It first discusses the historic and contemporary context of Eurasia's stability and meltdown. It then reviews contributions to the region's continuous disintegration made by Russia, the neighboring non-Western powers (China and the Muslim world), and the West. The next section explains why Russia, despite its weakness, remains irreplaceable for delivering and consolidating security gains in Eurasia. In the concluding part, I discuss specific policies that must be advanced to prevent further violence and breakdown in the region.

2. Eurasia in world history

As a landmass, the Eurasian region has traditionally prevented the Western world from a direct confrontation with non-Western civilizations. Occupying the vast space between central and northern Europe, the Middle East

and eastern Asia, Eurasia connects and helps to stabilize some most volatile territories – the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Afghanistan – from which instability tends to spread outward. Historically, each of these territories has been located between major cultural entities while not developing a sufficiently strong identification with any of them in particular, producing instead a dense mixture of ethnic, religious, and linguistic affiliations. Under conditions of external tensions these territories tend to be destabilized, leading the way to violence of a much greater scope.⁵ Under more stable international conditions, they serve as cultural, political and transportation bridges connecting large cultures and continents across the world.

As a unified region, Eurasia has been held together by political, economic and cultural layers. Politically, the region has consisted of principalities or empires but rarely with recognized fixed territorial boundaries, remaining relatively open to inside and outside influences. Since the 18th century, Eurasia has established itself as a Russia-centered empire that ultimately has stretched from the Baltics to Afghanistan. In 1943, the British geographer Halford Mackinder famously referred to Russia as the "Heartland" of Eurasia and "the greatest natural fortress on earth."⁶ Economically, the region has been a wealth of resources which it extracted and transported from one continent to another, mostly from East to West. The Baltic Sea and the Black Sea have been especially important for economic connections across continents. In addition, Eurasia has brought together diverse ethnicities and religions, teaching them how to communicate and preserve a measure of cultural openness. Politically, economically and culturally, the region has functioned as a unity in diversity, serving as a hub of various influences and providing stability for European nations to the north and for the nations of Asia and the Middle East to the south.

Perhaps most significantly, Eurasia has historically solidified the great cultural peace between the Christian West and the Islamic world. After the decline of the Mongols, Europe emerged as the most powerful civilization. Still fearful of Muslims, it relied mainly on military and economic expansion to secure its position in the world. It was ultimately left to the Russians to learn how to absorb influences from both East and West, thereby preserving the fragile cross-cultural equilibrium. While identifying with Eastern Christianity, the Russian empire developed tolerance toward other cultures. Tensions between the Russians and other nationalities were a part of the empire's existence, yet these tensions were not as pronounced as in overseas empires, partly because of the absence of an official distinction made between the metropolitan center and the colonial

³ For more on his views, see his *Tsyburski (2007)*. Many of his articles are assembled by the site *Russki Arkhipelag* at <http://www.archipelag.ru>.

⁴ For the reversed argument that expectations of conflict within the former Soviet Union have been wrong, see, for example, *Robinson (2010)*.

⁵ Arnold Toynbee's notion of "external proletariat" captures the violent potential of these borderland territories. In Russian geopolitics, Tsyburski theorized the areas as located in between "civilizations" introducing in their description the notion of Limitrof (See his "Narody mezhdru tsivilizatsiyami," and "Geopolitika dlya 'yevraziyskoi Atlantidy'" in Tsyburski, *Ostrov Rossiya*).

⁶ Mackinder (1943, p. 601).

periphery. As Geoffrey Hosking wrote, “annexed territories became full components of the empire as soon as practicable.”⁷ Since Catherine the Great, the Russian empire developed special ties with Islam by supporting those Muslim authorities who were willing to submit to the empire’s general directions and even by serving as arbitrator in disputes between Muslims from the Volga River to Central Asia.⁸ Russian intellectuals, both Westernizers and Slavophiles, had difficulties with accepting Islam but were ultimately challenged in their Eurocentric assumptions.⁹

More than anything else, this cultural experience made Russia the heartland of Eurasia.¹⁰ With its access to vast resources, its large landmass and highly centralized state, the culturally open empire was able to provide the region with economic, political and cultural cohesion. Although the system underwent a major mutation under Soviet rule, it preserved some important ties across the region. In line with the old Russia, the Soviet Union did not become an empire in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, it became what one historian called an “affirmative-action empire,”¹¹ in which all decision-making power was concentrated at the center, but nationalities were granted multiple privileges, including the territorial status of republics and various affirmative-action programs to reserve local cultures and languages. In addition, no matter the absolutist and centralist nature of the Soviet state, citizens were provided with important social and economic rights.¹² An emergency system, rather than a natural state of the Russian historic statehood,¹³ the Soviet Union has played its role in unifying Eurasia and preserving the global peace.

3. Contemporary Eurasia: conflict and meltdown

That contemporary Eurasia is in a state of decline is evident from the disintegrating structure of its economic, political and cultural strata. Economically, it is no longer a unified region, given the emergent rivalry among major powers over energy routes and the competing foreign policy orientations among smaller states. Politically, the formerly affirmative-action empire has been transformed into a collection of nationalist entities led by predatory and opportunistic elites. Culturally, the region that once prided

itself in cross-ethnic diversity is turning into one with growing cross-ethnic violence.

Evidence of rising instability are everywhere throughout the region. They are in the August 2008 war in the Caucasus and in the tense atmosphere in the region following the war. The war has revealed the failure of European security system to maintain peace and stability prompting Russia to call for the system’s reform. Although Russia prevailed in the crisis, it has little to be triumphant about and President Dmitri Medvedev was correct to emphasize the collective nature of the problem and to propose a collective solution involving European peacekeepers.¹⁴ No viable international institutions exist in the Caucasus, and the international law is silent in the Caucasus as it was silent when Yugoslavia and Iraq were attacked by the Western powers without the United Nations’ approval.

Evidence of instability are also in renewed terrorist attacks in the the Northern Caucasus. Terrorism is contained in Chechnya but continues to spread throughout other parts of the region – Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and North Ossetia. Even Moscow has been under attack. In October 2002 Chechen Jihadists seized a Moscow movie theater, threatening to blow up themselves and 700 hostages. Since then Jihadists were trying to stage violent actions in the Russia’s capital. They succeeded on March 29, 2010 when two female suicide bombers trained by the Caucasus-centered Doku Umarov detonated their explosives inside a Metro train killing 40 people and injuring many more. Just two days later, two explosions killed 12 people in Kizlyar, Dagestan. The Kremlin responded by outlining a new anti-terrorism strategy for the region,¹⁵ but the violence is far from curtailed. For example, on September 9, 2010, a car bomb near the entrance of a market in North Ossetia’s Vladikavkaz killed 15 people and injured 96.¹⁶ Another major attack took place in January 2011 at the Domodedovo Airport leaving 37 people dead and more than 100 injured.

The region’s instability also reveals itself in the persistent failure of Western forces to stabilize Afghanistan and the inability of Central Asian rulers to reign in local clans and drug lords. In Afghanistan, the Western coalition is not successful in securing control over areas around Kabul. Not having won support from local groups in the country, the United States looks for ways to negotiate with the Taliban and withdraw from the region – possibly before Afghan army and security forces are properly trained. In Central Asia, a hidden infa-elite struggle for power is waiting to erupt into a large-scale confrontation, as the sides employ resources such as mob violence and recruitment of Jihadist fighters. In June 2010, Kyrgystan went through ethnic riots and violent transfer of power, and the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border was destabilized. In the fall of the same year,

⁷ Hosking (1997, p. 40).

⁸ Crews (2006). The Ottoman empire developed similar relations with its Jewish and Christian minorities. See Lieven (2000, p. 149).

⁹ For some overviews of the debate between the so-called Eurasianists and those favoring Russia’s European development, see Neumann (1996), Laruelle (2008), Tsygankov (2008).

¹⁰ For a sample of studies of Russia in Eurasia, both critical and supportive of the heartland thesis, see Trenin (2001), Tsygankov (2003), Bassin and Aksenov (2006), Wohlforth (2006), Morozova (2009), Ismailov and Papava (2010).

¹¹ Martin (2001).

¹² The initial argument about continuity between the old and new Russia was formulated by Nicholai Berdyayev, *Istoki i smysl russkogo kommunizma* (Paris: IMCA Press, 1937).

¹³ McDaniel (1996).

¹⁴ “European Security Treaty,” November 29, 2009 <www.kremlin.ru>.

¹⁵ “Medvedev outlines anti-terrorism strategy for North Caucasus,” *RIA Novosti*, April 1, 2010.

¹⁶ Anastasia Ustinova, “Putin Calls on Muslims to Battle Terror After Blast Kills 15,” *Bloomberg*, September 9, 2010.

Tajikistan struggled to suppress resistance from militant members of the old political elite that participated in 1992–1997 civil war and the terrorist group Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.¹⁷ Should the neighboring Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Iran be destabilized further, the vacuum of instability may be quickly filled by Sunni or Shi'ite radicals. Then what has been prevented in Tajikistan in the 1990s, may still come to pass in the larger Central Asia.

The disturbing developments in Ukraine and Moldova include the paralysis of legitimately elected bodies of power. Deep cultural divisions and rivalry between Russia and the Western powers for influence over the Ukraine and Moldova's leaderships have made it impossible for them to choose and implement a policy program. In Ukraine, business elites have pulled the country in different directions blocking state ability to form a coherent course. On surface, after transfer of power in 2009, the political system is changing toward its greater centralization, as Constitutional Court revived presidential control over key powers, lost to parliament in 2004. In reality, however, neither foreign powers nor internal oligarchs found an agreement regarding the country's future. In Moldova, the government went through several crises trying to secure popular support. The Communist Party, which ruled during 2001–2009, worked to maintain good relations with both Russia and the European Union. By declaring its lack of interest in joining NATO, Kishinev then also encouraged Russia to mediate between Moldova and its breakaway region, Transnistria, to help bridge the gap between the two sides. By contrast, the new leadership severed ties with Russia and does not have the required support for ruling. The liberal Alliance's attempt to switch to direct presidential elections by organizing a referendum in Moldova failed.¹⁸ Molovan leadership, however, is determined to strengthen its ties with the European Union and the United States at the expense of those with Russia.¹⁹

State weakness notwithstanding, even the smallest and poorest countries in the region, such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Moldova, and Georgia, seek to establish their own identity at the expense of Russia, the former metropole, and are willing to play it against other great powers.²⁰ Such policies have been marked by similar disregard for their societies' domestic and international conditions, among which are ethnic heterogeneity, weak national identity, lack of internationally tradable resources and volatile geopolitical environment.²¹ The nationalist thinking invites violence that is gradually spreading throughout Eurasia, waiting for an opportunity to erupt into a large-scale conflict.

4. Russia's weakness

Russia has been a major contributing force to the Eurasian meltdown. The Soviet collapse and the subsequent senseless retreat of Russia from the region were not inevitable and have greatly destabilized the area by playing a role of what Vladimir Putin defined as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."²²

Trying to revolutionize foreign policy simultaneously with fundamental reforms in the economy, political system, and the area of center-periphery relations has been an admirable, but ultimately impossible task. By not dealing with the nationalities crisis in a timely manner, Gorbachev worsened his domestic standing, and the public had difficulties with trusting his course. Symptomatically, during 1988–1989 the percentage of those viewing nationalities' relations as worsening increased from 38 to 72%, and in 1989 30% of the respondents thought that a future civil war was likely.²³ To his credit, the father of New Thinking acknowledged the defeat and resigned as president of a country that was no more. The record of Gorbachev's successors is even worse. Unlike Gorbachev, who had at least offered his country an opportunity to reformulate its sense of national pride, the new Russia's leaders were astonishingly unimaginative in their vision of national identity and entrusted the West with defining the priorities of their country and the larger Eurasian region. At the time when the region was desperately searching for self-definition after the end of the Soviet system, the radically pro-Western leaders denied the very legitimacy of such a search by offering it the "solution" of becoming a part of the West. By the mid-1990s, Eurasia still existed in people's minds,²⁴ and Russia's new foreign minister, Yevgeni Primakov, attempted to re-integrate the region. However, the efforts to re-integrate the former Soviet states around Russia by generously using the tool of financial subsidies could no longer work – the Kremlin was nearly bankrupt, barely making its own ends meet.

By the time Putin had assumed power, Moscow's severely undermined position in the region was obvious to everyone, especially after new terrorist attacks had taken place in Chechnya and other parts of Russia. The relative recovery of the economy during the post-Yelstin decade began to revive Russia's popularity in Eurasia,²⁵ yet the nation could ill afford efforts to single-handedly stabilize and pacify the region. At best, the Kremlin could defend its core interests in regional and global settings and begin to escape the alternative of an unstable society, dwindling

¹⁷ Lola Olimova and Nargis Hamraeva, "Tajikistan struggles to quell militants," *Asia Times*, October 7, 2010.

¹⁸ Richard Balmforth, "Moldova poll fails, ruling Alliance on back foot," *Reuters*, September 6, 2010.

¹⁹ Svetlana Gamova, "Kishinev budet zhit' ne po Moskve, a po Vashingtonu," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, March 11, 2011.

²⁰ Suny (2010).

²¹ Tsygankov (2007).

²² Putin (2008, p. 272).

²³ Levada (2008, p. 280, 288).

²⁴ During the referendum on 17 March 1991, which has taken place in the context of Gorbachev's struggle for a renewed Union and was conducted in all of the Soviet republics except the three Baltics, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldavia, 147 million people voted and 76.4 percent approved the preservation of the union. The wording of the question was as follows, "Do you support the preservation of the union as a renewed federation of sovereign republics in which the rights of a person of any nationality are fully guaranteed?" The Yeltsin-led Democratic Russia has actively campaigned against the referendum (Kotz & Weir 1997, p. 147).

²⁵ Hill (2006), Tsygankov (2006).

population and truncated sovereignty. By capitalizing on high oil prices, it could also advocate multilateral arrangements in the region and strengthen its presence in neighboring economies and energy companies worldwide. Finally, it demonstrated its ability to overwhelmingly defeat the army of Georgia using several armored battalions, air power and marines.

None of this meant that Russia has gained enough power to become the engine of Eurasia it once was. The global economic crisis has further revealed the tenuous nature of Russia's recovery and the remaining weaknesses of its power base. During the recent crisis, Russia, which is heavily dependent on energy, including exports, was hit particularly hard and its GDP fell by around 8 percent in 2009, while China and India continued to grow, albeit at a slower pace. Russia has also had to spend a considerable portion of its reserves to bail out domestic enterprises, including non-competitive ones, and to scale down its activist foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus.²⁶ Although the nation has become stronger and more confident since 2000, it is not a *rising* power given the growing international competition and domestic constraints on its development. It is catching up with some European economies, but is unable to narrow a widening gap with China and India. Although largely successful relative to the fifteen years of decline, Russia is only modestly successful relative to the rising challenges ahead. This pattern is noticeable in multiple areas of its development. Russia can report successes in economic and military development, demographics,²⁷ strengthening ties with neighbors, and fighting crime and corruption, but none of these successes warrants calling Russia a rising great power. In addition, the legacy of an "incomplete" power continues to complicate Russia's development. The country has progressed in some areas, but continues to stagnate and fall behind in others. Russia has met some of its economic and security challenges, but it has also perpetuated an insufficiently diversified economic structure and has failed to address some serious gaps in its social infrastructure.²⁸

5. China and the Muslim world

China and the Muslim world are also not in a position to fully address the growing instability in Eurasia. They have limited tools for influencing the region and their visions and policies serve to satisfy their narrowly-defined interests.

To China, Eurasia is of importance as an area free of Western military presence and an additional source of resources, especially natural gas. China seeks to influence the region via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) established in July 2001 with Russia and four Central Asian states to address threats from terrorism and the

security vacuum in the area. China is also increasingly successful in gaining access to Central Asian energy reserves and winning new contracts with the wealthiest Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. As a result of Beijing's commercial expansion to the region, China's trade with Central Asia rose twenty five times – from \$1 billion in 2000 to \$25 billion in 2008 – matching Russia's trade with the region.²⁹ The global financial crisis made China's economic influence on the region even more pronounced. As Russia's economy contracted by 8% in 2009, China's economy kept growing by 8–9%. Since December 2009, Turkmenistan has opened a major gas pipeline with China through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. China National Petroleum Corporation now owns 50% stake in Kazakhstan's largest oil company, outbidding Russia's Gazprom, and China invested \$4 billion in Turkmenistan's largest gas producer, assisting the Central Asian state during its gas dispute with Moscow.³⁰

Still, China's Eurasia reach is limited given Beijing's relatively peripheral geographic location as well as lacking energy reserves and cultural capital. China has emerged as a center of the world's gravity in the Asia-Pacific region, but Beijing continues to be passive and disengaged from making explicit choices in Eurasia. Not being geographically central to the region, China continues to delegate solution of critical security issues in Eurasia to other powers. Its lack of initiative in stabilizing the neighboring Afghanistan or Kyrgyzstan is noteworthy. In addition, China is aware of resentment its expansion continues to generate in Russia and Central Asia. Although Central Asian elites are not happy with Moscow's lack of sensitivity toward their interests, they remain attracted to Russia – by virtue of memory of the Soviet past, multiple linguistic and cultural ties. In addition, Central Asian states continue to be suspicious regarding China's culture and political intentions in the region.³¹

Even more peripheral is the influence on Eurasia by the Muslim world. The two core Muslim states with interests in Eurasia – Iran and Turkey – are able to influence the areas around the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, respectively. However, their ambitions in Eurasia are limited by competition for influence in the larger Middle Eastern region. After the United States' invasion of Iraq, the two have emerged as leading powers that seek to intensify their diplomatic activities, military buildup, and establishment of energy ties. Iran has sought to expand its presence in Eurasia via joining the SCO, but – due to China's veto – Iran was only able to gain an associate membership in the organization. Its influence on Turkmenistan and the largely Shia Azerbaijan is notable, yet it is limited as far as other states in the region are concerned. Turkey has some important interests in the the Central Asia, the Caucasus and Crimea, and Istanbul has cooperated with Moscow in improving security in the Black Sea area. However, Turkey's main objective is to position itself as the post-Attaturk state

²⁶ Mankoff (2010).

²⁷ For example, in 2008, Russia's population decline slowed down by 50%, relative to 2007 ("Russia's population shrinks by 113,300 in 10 mths," *Interfax*, December 19, 2008).

²⁸ For development of this argument, see Tsygankov (2010).

²⁹ Laruelle and Peyrus (2010).

³⁰ Jeffrey Mankoff and Leland R. Miller, "China-Russia Competition Opens a Door for America," *Forbes*, April 22, 2010.

³¹ Laruelle (2009), Laruelle and Peyrus (2010).

by capitalizing on Sunni's cultural capital and status of a hub for energy pipelines connecting Eurasia, Middle East and Europe.³² For example, in July 2006 British Petroleum opened a new pipeline through Turkey bringing oil from the Caucasus to the Mediterranean and able to carry 5% of the world's oil.³³ In May 2010 Turkey signed an agreement with Russia to carry Russian oil from the Black Sea to the the Mediterranean.³⁴ There are also important gas projects that connect the two countries including a pipeline from Russia to Greece, Italy and Israel and from Russia to Southern Europe – both through Turkey or the Turkish sector of the Black Sea waters.³⁵

6. The West, Russia and Eurasia

After the Cold War, the West's thinking about Russia and Eurasia has followed two distinct trajectories. In the mid-1990s, American geopoliticians, like Zbigniew Brzezinski, recommended that the United States, in its capacity of the world's hegemonic power, pursue a policy of replacing Russia as the referee and protector of the newly established non-Russian states in the region.³⁶ Recycling centuries-old arguments about Russia's cultural "expansionism" and "imperialism," they insisted on its principal inability to play a constructive and stabilizing role and were ably assisted in it by Russia's own pro-Western thinkers.³⁷

Another prominent school in the West has been arguing since the 1990s that Russia is irrelevant as a serious power, insisting that the country is nothing but a weak state that "simply cannot 'make it,' with Western help or without it."³⁸ Members of Russia's "irrelevance" school are convinced that the country is fundamentally weakened by the competition of rival clans within the Kremlin and the overall political class.³⁹ They also advance the notion of the U.S.–China alliance for managing Eurasian security challenges.⁴⁰ Although the arrival of Barack Obama to power has given the United States a doze of realism about its international abilities, the Russia irrelevance school remains as influential as ever. For example, one of the school's prominent spokesmen, Vice-President Joseph Biden, has insisted that there was no need for the United States to seriously change its policy by taking Russia into consideration. "The

reality is, the Russians are where they are," Biden said in the midst of the global financial crisis. "They have a shrinking population base, they have a withering economy, they have a banking sector and structure that is not likely to be able to withstand the next 15 years, they're in a situation where the world is changing before them and they're clinging to something in the past that is not sustainable."⁴¹

After an initial hesitation, the United States and other Western nations have followed the advice to sideline Russia in the region. Yet the West's attempts to secure and stabilize Eurasia after the end of the Cold War should be recognized as a failure. Eurasia has not become stable or peaceful and continues to disintegrate. The arrogant bureaucrats in Washington and Brussels have failed to understand that they lack the resources, the will, and the experience to stabilize the complex region. Today – after the Iraq war and the global financial crisis – the United States is beginning to recognize its over-extension in the world, but it is not at all clear if Washington and Brussels are prepared to act differently in Eurasia. Rather than being guided by the Russia irrelevance approach, Western diplomacy will do well to recognize that, even while unable to prevent a further meltdown of Eurasia on its own, Russia remains a critically important and potentially indispensable power.

7. Why Russia still matters

Russia's importance in Eurasia can be described in four principal ways. First, Russia continues to possess dominant military and diplomatic resources which it has already used effectively to resolve several violent conflicts in the region, such as those in Tajikistan and Moldova in the 1990s and in Georgia in 2008.

Second, Russia remains a nation with an incomparable historical experience and cultural capital for pacifying the volatile territories from the Balkans to Central Asia. The nations of Eurasia go back centuries and have developed similar cultural experiences. During the Soviet era, they shared external borders, fought the same enemies, and were subject to similar linguistic and cultural policies. Although the Baltics were independent during the interwar years and preserved a sense of national identity even while a part of the Soviet empire, other republics' experience with statehood was too short and fragmented to develop a sufficiently strong sense of cultural distinctiveness. Russian was the common second language in non-Russian republics and the mother tongue of many professionals and politicians. Today it remains the common language uniting the former republics. People across the region watch the same Russian-language news broadcasts, movies, serials, and soap operas. They eat many of the same foods, especially on holidays, and support the Russian football team in international competitions. The bonds across republics are strongest among business and political

³² Sakwa (2009).

³³ Akerib, Michael, "The Eurasian Idea: Where the Eagle Looks," November 1, 2006 <www.shapingtomorrow.com>.

³⁴ Selcan Hacaoglu, "Turkey, Russia sign agreement on oil pipeline," *AP*, May 12, 2010.

³⁵ Anna Smolchenko, "Medvedev hails 'strategic' Turkey ties," *AFP*, May 12, 2010.

³⁶ Brzezinski (1994). See also Brzezinski (1998), Clover (1999).

³⁷ For example, see Trenin (2001). For analysis of American phobias of Russia after the Cold War, see Tsygankov (2009).

³⁸ Tayler (2001), Odom (2001).

³⁹ For example, Celeste Wallander (2007, p. 140) argues that Russia's grand strategy is "neither grand, nor strategic, nor sustainable," and "whether Russia will survive as a great power in the 21st century is an open question" because it practices the culture of patronage and corruption that continues to reveal the ineffectiveness of the state.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Brzezinski (1998); Henry A. Kissinger, "The chance for a new world order," *New York Times*, January 12, 2009.

⁴¹ Vice President Joe Biden's Interview to Peter Spiegel, *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2009. <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124846217750479721.html>>.

elites, many of whom were educated in the same universities, worked in the same institutions, and served together in the Soviet army.⁴²

Third, Russia is able to serve as a state-building example in the region. Although it is in no position to offer viable competition to the United States' liberal democratic ideas, Russia has been perceived by many in the region as generally successful in accomplishing other state-building tasks, such as providing citizens with order, basic social services and protection against external threats. This explains why ordinary people and many politicians from Central Asia to Ukraine often rate Russia's current leaders higher than their own.⁴³ Even outside the region, the influence of Russia's state-building experience is considerable and rising. For instance, the report by the European Council on Foreign Relations provides evidence of Russia and China's ability to attract votes at the United Nations. The report notes that since the late 1990s, support for Russian positions has risen from around 50%–76% today, while support for the EU and US fell from over 70% and 75% to around 50% and a mere 30%, respectively.⁴⁴

Finally, Russia possesses enormous energy reserves which it has been successfully exploiting to its advantage. Russia has approximately 13% of the world's known oil reserves and 34% of its gas reserves.⁴⁵ This power resource has gained in importance as global energy demand and prices have risen. As a result of competition with the Kremlin over resources in Russia and the Caspian region, American and European companies lost many opportunities. Meanwhile, Russia remained an important oil and gas producer, preserving its status as a major transit country through which to carry energy from the Caucasus and Central Asia to Europe. Part of Russia's negotiating success stems from the fact that the republics used to be linked together in what Soviet planners called a "single economic complex" that was anchored by Russia. International trade and investment networks from the Soviet era continue to facilitate commerce by keeping transaction costs low. After the breakup, several republics, including Central Asia's, Belarus and Armenia, initially opposed the idea of establishing their own currencies and severing commercial links with Russia. Russia has been slow to withdraw its energy subsidies for the former Soviet states, and all of them have taken advantage of this discount. Transit states, such as the Baltics, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, profited handsomely by reselling considerable portions of Russian supplies to European consumers at the world market price. Today, millions of labor migrants from the poorer republics—Moldova,

Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan, for example—earn a living in Russia because there are not enough jobs at home.

Of other large powers acting in this part of the world, only Russia remains irreplaceable because it possesses all the four listed attributes. By contrast, other leading powers, such as China, the United States and the European Union can only claim two out of four – military and diplomatic tools as well as various components of the state-building experience, but not the cultural capital and the energy reserves.

8. Preventing Eurasian collapse

Given the significance of Eurasia, preventing a collapse of the region should be a number one priority. Although Russia alone is not the solution, recognizing its critical role in stabilizing Eurasia is essential. Once this is done in practice, and not rhetorically, many pieces of the region's puzzle will start falling into their places. Energy supplies will become more reliable; governments in politically contested areas, like Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, will obtain a greater legitimacy; and the so-called frozen conflicts will have a better opportunity to be resolved. Russia's recent resurgence is a response to its lacking recognition as a vital power and partner of the West. Continuously denying Russia a genuine engagement in the region – under false pretenses of its "neo-imperialism" or "irrelevance" – is sure to bring additional counter-productive effects. If nothing changes on the West's part and if Russia chooses to dedicate itself to obstructing Western policies in Eurasia, we will soon see the collapsing dynamics in the region. Ukraine and Moldova may disintegrate, as did Georgia. Belarus may be reintegrated with Russia. Central Asia and Azerbaijan are likely to be subjected to a much greater degree of instability with unpredictable consequences. Russia too will suffer greatly as its modernization processes will be derailed. In short, the region may change beyond recognition – mostly through use of force.

Russia, of course, is only a part of the solution. Other major powers must become involved as participants in establishing a collective security arrangement in Eurasia. From a security perspective, it is important that the three most prominent actors in the region, NATO, SCO, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), develop a joint assessment of threat and coordinate their policies. Instead of expanding its reach further, NATO ought to learn its limitations and stop efforts to solve problems in Afghanistan or elsewhere unilaterally. Without a full-fledged involvement of SCO and CSTO, Afghanistan is likely to turn into another version of Iraq, with additional negative implications for the U.S. reputation in the world. What is referred to as "Obama's war" by pundits⁴⁶ has the potential of carrying lasting destructive consequences for the larger Eurasian region.

Kyrgyzstan may serve as an example of how great powers mismanage crises in the region. When the country went through its first violent change of power in March 2005, the event – accompanied by an even worse violence in Uzbekistan's Andijan in May 2005 – had the potential to

⁴² On Russia's cultural capital, see sources listed in fn. 25.

⁴³ The recent Gallup poll revealed that 61% of those living in the former Soviet region approve of Russia's leadership performance, whereas the worldwide median approval of adults across 104 countries that Gallup surveyed was only 27% (Julie Ray, "Russia's Leadership Not Popular Worldwide. Residents in former Soviet states are most likely to approve," August 5, 2011 <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/148862/Russia-Leadership-Not-Popular-Worldwide.aspx?version=print>>).

⁴⁴ Gowan and Brantner (2008, p. 26).

⁴⁵ Arbatov, Belova, and Feygin (2006).

⁴⁶ Woodward (2010).

spread a greater instability in the region. Yet the large powers were unable to agree on a unified response. The change of power was strongly supported by the United States and the European Union, while Russia and China viewed the event as directed against their power and security. When another, even more violent round of power struggle occurred in Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, it again elicited no serious response from key powers or international organizations in the region. In the meantime, the new interim government in Bishkek failed to gain control over the country, and the southern part – a stronghold of the ousted president Kurmanbek Bakiev – became a de facto independent.⁴⁷ The new elections that followed legitimized the situation by empowering Bakiev's party and delivering a blow to the ruling coalition.⁴⁸ The absence of an agreement among key powers⁴⁹ and a functional collective security system in the region are sure to continue to serve as catalysts for Kyrgyzstan's continued destabilization.

Another key issue is energy security. Although theoretically Russia and the Western nations in the region could build an energy consortium and even cooperate on the basis of the International Energy Agency (IAE), in practice they are engaged in a highly competitive zero sum interaction. A new, shared understanding of energy challenges must be reached which would encourage a mutual respect for each side's critical interests. Viewing Russia as a potentially reliable alternative to traditional Middle Eastern sources of energy may serve the West and members of the region better than the image of a "neo-imperialist" bully that only seeks to subvert its neighbors' policies. Here, too, one might take advantage of existing yet poorly exploited arrangements. For instance, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium's principles allow for a joint exploitation of existing reserves and transportation routes and may be extended to other projects. Trying to persuade European countries to invest additional billions into the Russia-alternative Nabucco pipeline may well turn out to be a waste of money and time. As the West and Russia continue their scramble for Caspian resources, both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are building pipelines to China and may at some point consider cooperation with the Asian giant more advantageous to their interests. A more important and potentially unifying idea for all the parties would be to engage in the construction of acceptable rules and principles of energy security among Eurasia's powers.

Finally, for restoring the region's capacity to function and perform basic services for its residents it is critical to curb the Russophobic nationalism. While rebuilding

a Russia-centered empire would be very dangerous, there is hardly an alternative to the emergence of an economically and culturally transparent community of nations with strong ties to the former metropole. For Russia not to raise the issue of ethnic "reunification" of some 20 million Russians living outside their "homeland", it is necessary to facilitate the establishment of conditions for cultural openness across the region. Russians and other ethnic minorities must be able freely to travel, practice their linguistic and religious needs, and celebrate their historically significant events. The overall objective of the outside world should be to strengthen Russia's confidence as a regional great power, while discouraging it from engaging in revisionist behavior.

References

- Arbatov, A., Belova, M., & Feygin, V. (2006). Russian hydrocarbons and world markets. *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 1.
- Aron, L. (1998). The foreign policy doctrine of postcommunist Russia and its domestic context. In M. Mandelbaum (Ed.), *Russia's new foreign policy*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations.
- Bassin, M., & Aksenov, K. E. (2006). Mackinder and the heartland theory in post-Soviet geopolitical discourse. *Geopolitics*, 11, 1.
- Brzezinski, Z. (1994). Premature partnership. *Foreign Affairs*, 73, 1.
- Brzezinski, Z. (1998). *The grand chessboard*. New York: Basic Books.
- Clover, C. (1999). Dreams of the Eurasian heartland. *Foreign Affairs*, 78, 2.
- Crews, R. D. (2006). *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and empire in Russia and Central Asia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gowan, R., & Brantner, F. (2008). *A global force for human rights? An audit of European power at the UN*. Brussels: European Council on Foreign Relations.
- Hill, F. (2006). Moscow discovers soft power. *Current History*, .
- Hosking, G. (1997). *Russia: People and empire, 1552–1917*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ismailov, E., & Papava, V. (2010). *Rethinking central Eurasia*. Washington, DC: The John Hopkins University, The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute.
- Kotz, D., & Weir, F. (1997). *Revolution from the above*. London: Routledge.
- Laruelle, M., & Peyrus, S. (2010). Vynuzhdennaya družba. *Rossiya V Global'noi Politike*, No. 2, March-April.
- Laruelle, M. (2008). *Russian Eurasianism: An ideology of empire*. Washington, DC: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Laruelle, M. (2009). *Russia in Central Asia: Old history, new challenges?* Brussels: The Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS). Working paper 03.
- Levada, Y. (Ed.). (2008). *Yes' mneniye*. Moscow: Progress, 1990.
- Lieven, D. C. B. (2000). *Empire: The Russian empire and its rivals*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Mackinder, H. (1943). The round world and the winning of the peace. *Foreign Affairs*, 21(4).
- Mankoff, J. (2010). Internal and external impact of Russia's economic crisis. *Proliferation Papers*, March(48).
- Martin, T. (2001). *The affirmative action empire: Nations and nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca, NY: University Press.
- McDaniel, T. (1996). *The agony of the Russian idea*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Morozova, N. (2009). Geopolitics, Eurasianism and Russian foreign policy under Putin. *Geopolitics*, 14(4).
- Neumann, I. B. (1996). *Russia and the idea of Europe. A study in identity and international relations*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Odom, W. E. (2001). Realism about Russia. *National Interest*, 65(Fall).
- Putin, V. (2008). Poslaniye Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiyskoi Federatsiyi, 25 April, 2005. In *Izbrannyye rechi i statyi*. Moscow: Knizhnyi mir.
- Robinson, N. (2010). *States and conflict in the Former USSR*. Ireland: University of Limerick. Limerick, Limerick papers in politics and public administration, No. 3.
- Sakwa, R. (2009). *Russia and Turkey: rethinking Europe to contest outsider status*. *Russie.Nei.Visions'*. No. 51.
- Suny, R. G. (2010). The pawn of great powers: the East–West competition for Caucasia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1, 1.
- Taylor, J. (2001). Russia is finished. *The Atlantic Monthly*, May.
- Trenin, D. (2001). *The end of Eurasia: Russia on the border between geopolitics and Globalization*. Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center.
- Tsygankov, A. P. (2003). Mastering space in Eurasia: Russian geopolitical thinking after the soviet break-up. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 35, 1.

⁴⁷ Andrew Higgins, "In Central Asia, a new headache for U.S. policy," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2010.

⁴⁸ Grigori Mikhailov, *Kirgizy podderzhali partiyi Bakiyeva*, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 12, 2010; "Kyrgyz election leads to disintegration," *Russia Today*, October 8, 2010 <www.russiatoday.com>.

⁴⁹ Although there were some reports of an improved US–Russia cooperation in the region (See, for example, U.S. Asked Russia to Send Troops to Kyrgyzstan At Height of Rioting," *Interfax*, September 6, 2010), elements of mistrust and competition prevail (M.K. Bhadrakumar, "US, Russia fail to grip Kyrgyz helm," *Asia Times*, June 26, 2010; Steve Guterman, "Russia, U.S. at odds on Kyrgyzstan's future," *Reuters*, October 6, 2010; Kabai Karabekov and Gennadi Sysoyev, "Kirgiziya razbazarivayet rossiyskiye interesy," *Kommersant*, February 18, 2011).

- Tsygankov, A. P. (2006). If not by tanks, then by banks? The role of soft power in Putin's foreign policy. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 58, 7.
- Tsygankov, A. P. (2007). Variety of modern at last? Variety of weak states in the post-Soviet world. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 40, 4.
- Tsygankov, A. P. (2008). Self and other in international relations theory: learning from Russian civilizational debates. *International Studies Review*, 10, 4.
- Tsygankov, A. P. (2009). *Russophobia: Anti-Russian lobby and American foreign policy*. New York: Palgrave.
- Tsygankov, A. P. (2010). Russia's power and alliances in the 21st century. *Politics*, 30, 4.
- Tsyburski, V. L. (2007). *Ostrov Rossiya: Geopoliticheskiye i khronopoliticheskiye raboty*. Moscow: Rosspen.
- Wallander, C. A. (2007). Russia: the domestic sources of a less-than-a-grand strategy. In A. J. Tellis, & M. Wills (Eds.), *Strategic Asia 2007–2008: Domestic political change and grand strategy*. Washington, DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research.
- Wohlforth, W. (2006). Heartland dreams: Russian geopolitics and foreign policy. In W. Danspeckgruber (Ed.), *Perspectives on the Russian State in transition*. The Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University.
- Woodward, B. (2010). *Obama's war*. New York: Simon & Schuster.