Russian Imperial Policy: Tsars -- Bolsheviks -- Primakov

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If anyone still harbored illusions about the nature of the post-Cold War world, the alarming international crises of recent months -- the conflict in and around Kosovo, the arrest of Abdullah Ocalan and the resulting Kurdish protest movement, the bombings of Iraq, and repeated instances of Russian and American provocative behavior -- must have dispelled them. Over the last 10 years the actors on the world stage have not only failed to find solutions to the pre-existing foreign policy controversies, but they have added several new and very challenging problems.

This unexpected circumstance provokes some questions. Is it logical to suppose that in our current difficulties we are grappling with the intricate global consequences of Eastern Europe's transformation? Or, maybe, is it more reasonable to say that today's instability has a different source, one that is unrelated to the changes that swept through Europe? Perhaps the world changes too rapidly and intensely, outstripping our ability to analyze and react, thus international actors continue to rely on ineffective, outmoded means which only produce new dilemmas.

Great power chauvinism, imperialism, and militarism deserve obsolescence, yet they remain operative. Despite repeated declarations of adherence to the principle of equality among states, imperialist tendencies remain in the structure of international organizations and confer incomparable power to a few states. The institution of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council represents one obvious example. The escalating tendency to favor aggressive means -- the threat of force or the use of military might to resolve controversial questions -- represents another. The
formula of "peace enforcement," as in Bosnia, demonstrates this approach, which creates the illusion of pacification but fails to arrive at a resilient or lasting solution.

Traditional, realist approaches to foreign policy formation remain defined by formulas like "national interests," "patriotism," and "sphere of influence." Minority rights, and even more so, the rights of the individual, still reside at the bottom of foreign policy priorities.

Ironically, at the very same time, Western democracies maintain a certain "super-naïveté" in their relations with Russia. The Western powers presume that they can significantly accelerate the acceptance of true democratic values and the market economy or even "coerce" governments and people whose cultures either lacked these values or distorted them through decades of totalitarian rule and ideology. Compare the German and the Russian attitudes: Even after decades of reform in Germany, atonement continues; in Russia, atonement has barely begun. For instance, several German companies apologized publicly for their use of prisoner-of-war labor during World War II and offered to compensate the victims. The Russian Communists, who continually and unabashedly compete for power and even find support in the power structures, failed to utter a word of apology for the occupational regime they imposed on other nations, for the deformed economy they forced onto their own country, for the mangled fates of entire generations of Soviet citizens, and for the frightful web of prison camps that covered the territory of the USSR. No, the Communist Party wishes to restore its old principles in all of their original purity.

Concepts like "integration," "partnership," and "common home" invite skepticism when applied to Russia's relations with the West. This terminology appears in the names of new initiatives like the "Partnership for Peace" or the "RF-EU Partnership Agreement" and echoes in official declarations of European, American, and Asian leaders. Such phrases crop up in the projects developed by Russian statesmen, like "Eurasian Union," or "Reintegration of the post-Soviet space." Supposedly, this terminology indicates the birth of new cooperative concepts and relations to replace those of the Cold War.
There is nothing innately wrong with these concepts except that they do not merge with the facts of the contemporary scene. The events of the last few years show that Russia's foreign policy has a well-defined and growing tendency to diverge from the policy of Western states, certainly with regard to the most profound problems facing the international community, such as the situations in Kosovo and Iraq, as well as the question of NATO's place in Europe. This can be easily explained using earlier formulas like "securing national interests" in reference to the covert and overt support for the Saddam Hussein regime. Concepts like "state-sponsored patriotism" illustrate Russia's efforts to impede the accession of new members to NATO or the formation of other special relations not subject to Russian control. "Partnership" or "common home" cannot explain such behavior on Russia's part.

Although subject to certain shifts and adjustments, the fundamental directions of Russian foreign policy remain consistent with the Soviet past. The events of the last few years have shown that, under highly strained internal conditions, statements and actions on the international stage can consolidate public opinion behind the government. The leadership cannot claim active and effective management of the economy, the social sphere or other aspects of the domestic scene, but it can forge solidarity by pointing at an external threat, real or imagined. It is not by chance that the extremely rare instances of unanimity among persons from the most incompatible political parties arise in connection with the concept of NATO expansion and the Iraq crisis. (1) The commonplace appeal to derzhavnost -- vast state power in the domestic and international realm -- falls just short of a central component of official government policy.

Finally, even as Russia's economy declines radically, the government prefers to retain a bloated military and armed security apparatus. Not coincidentally, last year's main technological achievements were the production of new types of military helicopter and airplane. The military spending continues despite the drama of the "August Crisis," despite general industrial stagnation, despite the lack of progress from the Soviet level of development in light industry and mining. Yet again Russia seeks a means of
overcoming the economic crisis not in the sphere of consumer goods, as would most developed nations, not in high-technology industry as Japan and Singapore, but through the development of the military-industrial complex. Hence the very understandable urge to express these and similar values in foreign policy.

Russia's greatest and most apparent problems are in its relations with the "near abroad" states; that is, in Russia's relations with the former Soviet republics. The external elements of the relationships develop differently in each case, but at the heart of the issue there is always something definite and, as a rule, hidden: Russia's interest in retaining the Black Sea coast of Georgia, the major uranium ore deposits in Tajikistan, or the dispersed enterprises of the military-industrial complex (e.g., the aviation factory in Tbilisi or defense enterprises of Transdniestra).

Such tangible aims do not constitute the whole story, however: The goal of subjugating most of the former Soviet republics is becoming increasingly more evident. Russia still strives to spread the ideology and principles of its military doctrine to all areas of the former Soviet Union, and that is why the recent declarations from Uzbek and Georgian leaders concerning their withdrawal from the CIS Collective Security Treaty were met with such hostility. The idea is to force the states of the "near abroad" into the role formerly played by the "socialist camp"; that is, a buffer zone between Russia and the "far abroad" states. Political efforts of this sort emerged from a growing nostalgia for the time when union republics were not even formally looked upon as independent government entities. Hence the evident inability of the Russian public to understand and accept the new states' drive to establish and elaborate their sovereignty. The general public finds in the legitimate efforts of the newly independent states an infringement of the "legal" rights of Russia or the Russian people, and hence has great difficulty accepting the former republics as equal and sovereign entities. This perception has been exacerbated by the fact that problems of adjustment to the demise of empire have not been easy to resolve: In each of the new states there were mistakes and excessive measures. The crowds of refugees overwhelming Russia often serve as the best justification for adopting an increasingly aggressive foreign policy strategy.
A civilized divorce was not in the cards: Bitterness over the Black Sea Fleet, nuclear weapons and space stations was subdued temporarily, only to flare up with renewed vigor. The acrimonious proceedings in the Russian Duma regarding the Friendship Treaty with Ukraine represent one such instance. With the aid of the mass media, a significant proportion of the population retains the sentiment that the agreement has not improved relations with Ukraine, but, on the contrary, represents another deception of the Russian people and an infraction against Russia's true interests.

Where overt military force has not proven sufficient, there emerges an alternate strategy of using economic incentives or sanctions to convince the former republics to remain within the CIS. Such means are applied without regard to their disproportionate costs. Yet, unlike the USSR, Russia does not wish to accept responsibility for regional problems, such as the carnage in Tajikistan, the periodic energy crises in Georgia, and starvation in Abkhazia. Moscow's quest for military-political and economic control over the former republics of the union does not extend to accepting responsibility for sustaining reasonable living conditions in Uzbekistan or lowering the infant mortality rate in Azerbaijan. Why would the newly independent states agree to such a one-sided arrangement?

When the states of the near abroad attempt to exercise their independence, Russia begins to support "national liberation movements" or increases pressure on the governments under the guise of protecting the Russian-speaking minority population. Sometimes the blatant use of Russian armed forces is camouflaged and presented to the world as a mission to mitigate ethnic conflicts. Russia's participation in the civil war in Tajikistan represented an attempt to strengthen Russia's own border while incurring minimal costs (excluding human casualties, which the political leaders of modern Russia don't take into account). It seems that the current government learned nothing from the 10-year war in Afghanistan: For them, the ambition to retain or restore the empire still exceeds the value of human life. It is one thing to see a demand for restoration of the USSR at communist rallies, but quite another when it emerges in the
official position of the Duma or inheres in the actions and policies of the executive branch.

Playing to the strong imperial sentiments of post-Soviet society, the Russian government presents proofs of its achievements like a pledge of loyalty to the maintenance of great power ambitions. Such tributes include the expansion of military control over the territories of the former USSR, manipulation of ethnic-territorial conflicts, attempts to exercise a veto on the entry of Central and Eastern European countries into NATO, near-elimination of the question of returning the South Kurile Islands from the agenda in negotiations with Japan, retention of troops and military bases in Transcaucasia, sustenance of a nuclear monopoly within the boundaries of the former USSR... Is all of that not enough?

No! -- So speaks the inflamed consciousness of a traumatized society and a strange transformation occurs: The romantic westernizing tendency which accompanied Russia's initial emergence on the international scene has faded, and the once democratically inclined society now adopts an aggressive demeanor. The distinctiveness of Russian culture and history, the country's geopolitical location, centuries of autocracy, and finally seven decades of Soviet totalitarianism all led to Russia's departure from the contemporary world, with its technological and political realities. Yet Russia remains a militarized power. Thus, when the option of military intervention to resolve conflicts presents itself in the international arena, we knock eagerly and insistently at the door to the modern world carrying what the Lord himself has seen fit to give us -- our "Asiatic ways."

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