



SIGUR CENTER FOR ASIAN STUDIES

Policy Brief – December 2010

Russia's Foreign Policy Debates: Perspectives on Rising Powers

At the heart of Russian foreign policy debate today is the question of Russian identity. Who or what is Russia? What does it mean to be Russian? Is Russia a part of European civilization, a part of Asian civilization or a separate civilization? The answers to these fundamental questions define the spectrum of the foreign policy discourse in Russia and shape the direction of its foreign policy.

This Policy Brief uses Russian identity as a reference point for examining foreign policy schools of thought in Russia. It draws on a series of seminars held in Moscow, Russia, in November 2010. The seminars are part of an international research project called the "Worldviews of Aspiring Powers," sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation and directed by the Sigur Center for Asian Studies at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University. The Brief examines different foreign policy schools in Russia, compares their assessments of the challenge of rising powers in the Eurasia region, and discusses some of the possible scenarios of future relations between Russia and the other rising powers.

Foreign Policy Schools of Thought in Russia

The defining feature of Russian foreign policy debate is that it is much more about Russia itself than about the international system. Compared to the United States, Russian foreign policy thinking is less rooted in conceptual approaches, such as realism or liberalism. Nevertheless, Russia's identity, its interests, and its role in the world are open questions.

The three main foreign policy schools in Russia are liberal westernizers, great power realists and a very diverse group of nationalists.

Great power realists represent the dominant foreign policy approach in Russia today while the other two groups are marginal. But the liberal westernizers were strong in the 1990s and nationalists may be getting stronger today. The schools persist, a reason to take them seriously.

Great power realists defend the status of Russia as a great power. The views of former Prime Minister of Russia Yevgeny Primakov are at the heart of this approach. Great power realists put more emphasis on sovereignty and military power while liberal westernizers focus more on economic issues. Liberal westernizers also seek to use foreign policy as a tool to promote domestic reforms. Nationalists support the thesis that the value of the nation is the highest form of social unity but differ in their understanding of this term. Ethnic nationalists identify with Russian ethnicity while neo-imperialist nationalists see it in a broader context of an empire.

Liberal westernizers were influential during the late Gorbachev – early Yeltsin era. However, by the mid-1990s liberal westernizers were disappointed in the relations between Russia and the West and began moving to the position of great power realists. An important factor in the massive exodus of Russian intellectuals and policy-makers from the liberal camp was the West's decision to expand NATO. In this sense, an external event helped galvanize a new consensus on the country's foreign policy. The central element of this consensus is that Russia is a great power that has to be actively involved in addressing global issues. It should focus on pragmatic but primarily

The Sigur Center's "Worldviews of Aspiring Powers" project examines foreign policy debates within rising powers in Asia and Eurasia. The project is supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information on the Rising Powers Initiative, visit: <http://www.gwu.edu/risingpowers>

A Worldviews of Aspiring Powers conference was held in Moscow, on November 11-12, 2010. The events were held at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and at the Carnegie Endowment – Moscow. The participants included:

- **Dr. Dmitry V. Polikanov**, Central Executive Committee of the United Russia party
- **Prof. Alexey Bogaturov**, MGIMO First Vice-Rector
- **Dr. Sergey Lunev**, Institute of World Economy and International Relations
- **Dr. Felix Yurlov**, The Russian Academy of Sciences
- **Dr. Nina Mamedova**, The Russian Academy of Sciences
- **Dr. Konstantin Sarkisov**, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- **Dr. Mikhail Troitskiy**, MacArthur Foundation's Moscow Office
- **Dr. Andrey Kortunov**, New Eurasia Foundation
- **Prof. Dr. Alexei Voskressenski** MGIMO
- **Mr. Fyodor Lukyanov**, *Russia in Global Affairs* journal
- **Dr. Dmitri Kosyrev**, RIA Novosti News.

hard power means, and, it should aim for some ideological leadership in the regional and global context. The increased assertiveness of Russia's foreign policy, including its greater emphasis on the military component, can be explained by a combination of economic and psychological factors. Rising energy prices created the conditions for economic growth, which in turn stimulated psychological revanchism. Russia benefitted from the continued expansion of the Western economic system even as it opposed the expansion of NATO. Economic growth and diplomatic defensiveness provided a psychological way to overcome the humiliation of the 1990s when Russians felt an extreme and painful dependence on the West. This new consensus is shared today not only by nationalists and conservatives but also by many liberals.

Different Assessments of the Challenge of Rising Powers

The three foreign policy schools differ in their assessments of the challenge of rising powers. These differences are especially evident in the views of the foreign policy schools on China. Liberal westernizers see China as a danger and a bad model for Russia. They advocate a strategic alliance with the West to balance against China's rising power. By contrast, great power realists view China as a strategic partner. However, there is a latent fear among this group of China's growing potential and intentions in the long term. Nationalists exhibit a wide range of opinions. On the one end of the spectrum are neo-imperialists who support an alliance with China against the West. On the other end of the spectrum are ethnic nationalists who virulently oppose any ties with China. The recent shift in China's foreign policy toward more nationalism is seen as a long-term danger, shared by the wide spectrum of the Russian foreign policy community.

India is largely absent from Russia's foreign policy debate. It is discussed only at the expert level. As with China, a potential shift toward more nationalism in India is not a favorable scenario for Russia. A shift toward more pragmatism would be a positive change from the perspective of Russia's interests. Nevertheless, the extent of the danger is relatively small compared to China, and it is understood mainly in the context of the destabilization of South Asia.

Iran is viewed through the prism of Russia's relations with western countries. The liberal approach advocates that Russia join all sanctions against Iran in order to maintain its alliance with the West. Great power realists propose a more balanced view. They argue that Russia should find the golden mean. It should ally with the West on some issues but on other issues pursue an independent policy toward Iran. Nationalists diverge in their views on Iran from the supporters of Iran as an anti-Western force to those who have a negative attitude toward Iran as an Islamic country.

There is some similarity between recent foreign policy shifts in Russia and Japan. There has been a movement in both countries toward a more realist hard-power approach. Both Russia and Japan initially sought closer relations with China and tried to balance their interests between China and the West. Both countries face a similar dual challenge of overcoming the dependence on the West while at the same

time containing China. They respond to this challenge differently, however. Japan is highly dependent on the US for its security while Russia's dependence on the West is evident primarily in the political and cultural context. Nevertheless, the two countries are more or less aligned at present, although recent Chinese assertiveness threatens Japan more than Russia.

It should be noted that, with the exception of China, the other rising powers are not widely discussed outside the expert community. They appear in the public debate more in connection with domestic issues than Russia's role in international relations. Asian countries exist in the Russian public conscience to provide an alternative to the western model of democracy, modernization, nationalism, and other western constructs. They offer a counterweight to the cultural and political dependence which formed between Russia and western countries during the 1990s.

The Future of Russian Foreign Policy

In a broader context, the Chinese factor will play an increasing role in Russian politics as a prism through which Russia looks at the world. At present Russia is going through a paradigm shift in its foreign policy. The period of post-Soviet politics, which began with the collapse of the USSR and lasted until the mid-1990s, is now over. Its two main goals – the recovery of Russia's role as an important global power and the restoration of Russia's position as a significant power in the post-Soviet region – are now mostly accomplished (although important concerns remain due to Russian economy's dependence on energy exports).

Additionally, Russia will need to rethink the regional priorities of its foreign policy. Russia has always related mostly to Europe in the context of modernization and cultural attachment. However, now Russia has to relate to Asia as well. The problem is that Russia while an important player in Europe is not a significant factor in Asia.

The changing international environment also challenges the new consensus on great power realism. Multipolar great power balancing might not work for Russia in the future. There is a growing realization among the Russian elite that a multipolar world may be very dangerous for Russia. Russia may not be able to remain an independent center of power in such a world. It may have to choose at some point between China and the West. At that point the liberal westernizers and nationalists may become more important.