



SIGUR CENTER FOR ASIAN STUDIES
Policy Brief– November 2010

“Back to the Future? A Revival of Realpolitik in Asia and Eurasia”

In each of three key Asian and Eurasian powers, China, India, and Russia, a realpolitik approach plays a larger role in the foreign policy outlook today than it did in the period following the end of the Cold War. This Policy Brief describes this trend and addresses its implications for the future of the region.

China, India, and Russia all possess the key traditional attribute of great powers: size. All three countries are among the largest in the world in both territory and population. While size is a necessary prerequisite of great power status, it is not a sufficient one. Size creates potential which political capacity and economic efficiency can activate. Over the past decade (and longer in the case of China), all three countries have tended to benefit from a remarkable economic dynamism. This dynamism was due in large part to economic liberalization in the case of China and India, and to high global energy prices in the case of energy-rich Russia. Assuming these trends continue, all three of these states are likely to play an important role in shaping the future of Eurasia. It is of great importance to understand their foreign policy outlook, and the nature of the balance between realist and idealist thinking within that outlook.

Is the foreign policy of these countries marked more by realist features of geography, military power, alliances and security, by liberal internationalist features of economic modernization, globalization and regional/

global multilateralism, or by idealist features of cultural, ideological or religious assertiveness that meshes with or challenges the existing Western, liberal model of transparent military relations, open markets and open societies? How is the relative importance of these schools of thought changing over time? The next section of the Policy Brief addresses those questions in the context of China, India and Russia.

China, India and Russia

Realpolitik and an emphasis on grand strategy has long been an important element of Chinese foreign policy thinking. However, China has during the past several decades sought to emphasize the peaceful nature of its rise and its commitment to harmonious relations with its neighbors. Beijing's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence emphasize non-aggression, equality and mutual respect. More recently, analysts have perceived a shift to a more aggressive approach. This new approach is illustrated by the inclusion of disputed island territories in the East and South China Seas as “core” interests of Beijing on a par with Tibet and Taiwan, and the hard line China took in the recent fishing boat dispute with Japan. The shift in the direction of realpolitik in China is relatively recent and its causes are disputed by analysts, who suggest that leadership transition and internal power struggles within China might help explain it.

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>

This Policy Brief is based on a briefing on “Worldviews of China, India and Russia: Power Shifts and Domestic Debates,” held at the Elliott School of International Affairs on Sept. 22, 2010. The event was moderated by Henry R. Nau, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University, and featured the following experts:

- **Andrew Kuchins** (Center for Strategic and International Studies)
- **Deepa Ollapally** (Sigur Center for Asian Studies)
- **David Shambaugh** (The Elliott School of International Affairs)

After independence, the foreign policy thinking in India was dominated by an idealist foreign policy consensus. Central to that consensus were the ideas of non-alignment, non-violence, and of third-world solidarity. India identified with other developing countries. Great power politics and reliance on hard power as a tool in the international arena were often regarded with skepticism. Two key events undermined these views. The end of the Cold War and India's decision to liberalize economically undercut India's previous commitments to non-alignment and to the socialist development model. Meanwhile, India carried out nuclear tests in 1998 that heralded its advent into the club of nuclear powers. Debates within India about the optimal scale of its nuclear arsenal continue but the debate over whether India should have nuclear weapons has largely been resolved in the affirmative. In contemporary India, realist thinkers are emerging as one of the important new schools of thought. India's ambivalence toward power politics has not disappeared, but the idealist consensus no longer exists.

Foreign policymaking in Russia has been historically influenced by both realpolitik and ideological assertiveness. Czarist Russia followed the realpolitik model with occasional ideological (religious) flourishes (e.g., by Alexander I in the early 19th century). Communist ideology played a significant role during the Cold War. During the late 1980s and the early 1990s a liberal western orientation briefly emerged. Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin sought to bring Russia closer to the open markets and open societies model of the West. They embraced collective security and shared international economic interests as important concepts in their foreign policy strategies. What helped undermine this approach, in the Russian view, was the perceived lack of support or outright opposition by Western countries to Russian goals and interests (e.g., not expanding NATO). By contrast, under Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev, Moscow adopted a more realpolitik view of whether Russia shares interests and values with the West. Moscow's contemporary foreign policy thinking emphasizes the need to have Russia recognized as a great power.

Implications for the Region

The shift toward realist thinking is either an indicator or a cause of an increased likelihood of conflict, and a decreased likelihood of cooperation, in the region. If we assume that foreign policy thinking reflects realities on the ground, then the shift indicates that the policymakers in the region believe that those conditions increasingly favor a more assertive ap-

proach. By contrast, if we assume that it is the ideas themselves that drive behavior, then the shift toward realpolitik is a cause of a more conflict prone environment.

The trend towards realpolitik points to the importance of solutions that take the interests of all the key actors into account. Cooperation between self-interested and assertive actors may be difficult but it is not impossible. The solutions that take those interests into account and reflect shifts in underlying capabilities are particularly likely to persist and to be effective.

While the trend toward realpolitik is a constant across the countries discussed in this *Policy Brief*, China,

India and Russia are also characterized by variation in the extent to which realpolitik is the dominant perspective today. That is the case in China and Russia, but not in India, which is the only stable democracy among these countries. While conceding that the small sample size makes it difficult to generalize, this variation is consistent with the claim that domestic political institutions matter and that democracies may be more open to cooperating with other countries, or with other democracies, than authoritarian states.

This argument identifies a potential long run source of optimism for Asia and Eurasia. In the contemporary world, there is a strong correlation between democracy and economic development (with energy rich

authoritarian states being the main set of exceptions to this pattern). If China succeeds in maintaining its high rate of economic growth, it is likely to democratize. If its economic growth stalls, China is unlikely to become a full-fledged great power. In either case, the world may be less conflict prone than if China is both rich and authoritarian.

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By Nikola Mirilovic (Ph.D.), Professorial Lecturer and Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies.

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts, and policymakers.