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# The Russian Mind Today: A Geopolitical Guide

*by Herman Pirchner*

During my 60-plus trips to Russia over the last 20 years, I've noticed how Russian attitudes toward the U.S.—once relatively friendly—have evolved. Today, dislike—even hatred—of America leads some Russian national security officials to believe that if you are an enemy of the U.S. (e.g., Venezuela, Iran), you must be a friend of Russia. Most are not so dogmatic, but they also are not America's friends. Their philosophical embrace of something akin to Mussolini's corporate state, plus their ambitions for increased influence in, or annexation of, former Soviet territory, practically ensures they will hold negative feelings about the American government. After all, we believe in an open society and the independence and sanctity of borders of the former Soviet states.

Russia's antipathy toward the U.S. is mitigated only by its opportunism. When it suits Russian strategic interests, Moscow will cooperate with the U.S.—over Afghanistan, say, or securing loose nuclear materials. Conversely, Moscow certainly will not hesitate to cause problems for the U.S., whether through sleeper agents or in its dealings with Iran or Venezuela. Russia's dominant geopolitical idea, then, is neither friends nor enemies—only interests. Yet despite this openly opportunistic approach, Russia has been getting what it wants from the Obama regime.

For instance, Barack Obama canceled George Bush's planned missile defense deployment in Poland and the Czech Republic, thus devaluating American promises worldwide (regardless of the military merits of the move). The Obama administration's current plans to deploy a less robust missile defense system have not lessened the fear of American unreliability. Furthermore, Obama made the START agreement, which has formal language favorable to the Russians, even more attractive by pledging to restrict the development of American missile defense programs. And under the Obama regime, America has disheartened its friends in Ukraine, Georgia, and other parts of the former USSR with increasingly passive behavior in Russia's "Near Abroad." For instance, Obama reversed the Bush administration's suspension of nuclear cooperation with Moscow in protest against Russian actions during and after the 2008 Georgian/Russian war. This reversal is viewed by many as "letting Russia off the hook" and a harbinger of things to come.

All of these concessions occurred without a substantial change in Russian behavior. Of course, that may come, in which case the Obama team's defenders will have a case to make. If not, however, the Obama administration will increasingly be judged as incompetent. In any case, Obama's policies have made him very popular among Russia's ruling class. This lovefest is likely to continue, with the only question being who will be the main Russian interlocutor for this popular American president.

Relations between the camps of Russian president Dmitri Medvedev and his mentor, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, are increasingly contentious. Medvedev has been irked by Putin's activity in national security areas that are the province of the president. Further, in addition to the usual competition for power, there are significant domestic policy differences between the Putin and Medvedev camps, which now consider themselves rivals.

The Medvedev camp lacks the raw political power of the Putin camp, whose loyal KGB colleagues control Russia's most important positions and have already registered websites for Putin 2012. What then is the basis for serious Russians saying that Medvedev has any chance to fully grasp the reins of power?

The answer is "kompromat," the Russian word used to describe secret evidence proving misconduct. If the Putin/Medvedev battle becomes serious, look for shocking public revelations of Putin misdeeds—evidence that would make the continuation of his public role a problem for those whose collective support is necessary for anyone who wishes to lead Rus-

sia. This battle, however, may not happen as the personal relationship between Putin and Medvedev is not beyond repair. Additionally, key players in both camps have an interest in preserving some version of the status quo—namely, not igniting a risky power struggle that could jeopardize ownership of private property questionably accumulated by many top supporters of both Putin and Medvedev.

Russia's domestic policy would likely move in a more "free market" direction should Medvedev consolidate his power, with Putin fading from the stage. What difference would a Medvedev-directed national security policy make? It is impossible to know, but perhaps not very much. Whether it's Medvedev or Putin in charge, Russia will grapple with serious problems that will test the Kremlin's relationship with the U.S. Here is a guide to some of the key trouble zones.

### **The Muslim Population**

Russia's problems with its Muslim population are not new. It suffered enormous casualties (estimates range as high as 500,000) bringing the Caucasus under control during the 1834–1859 Murid Wars—wars in which no quarter was given. Russia's last two Chechen wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2000) and subsequent guerrilla and terrorist activities have also been gruesome. On numerous occasions, Chechens tortured Russian prisoners and sent videotapes of the torture sessions to Moscow, in addition to launching separate terror attacks on Russian theater patrons and schoolchildren. And the Russians' leveling of Chechen cities and treatment of their prisoners was conducted in the same vein. This brutality, designed in part to dissuade other Caucasus clans from a similar rebellion, has not stopped increasingly Islamicized and foreign-funded elements in the Caucasus from seeking a broader insurrection. In fact, anti-Russian terrorism increased in 2009, with more than 100 bombings killing 263 people in Dagestan (population 2.4 million) and 319 in Ingushetia (population 460,000).

The increased foreign funding and training of terrorists in Russia motivates Moscow's support for sharing intelligence on terrorist and Islamist activity with the U.S. Because Russian officials fear that homegrown Muslim extremism will be a long-term and growing problem for them, their appetite for a common approach with the West will not fade soon.

### **The Near Abroad**

Of course, Russia's problems extend beyond its borders, and no countries

are more important than those of Russia's "Near Abroad"—the now independent countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union. Russia wishes to be the dominant foreign power in these areas. That means reducing the West's influence. Apart from negotiating a reduction in Western activity and influence in these countries, Russia's national security establishment believes that if they can exacerbate U.S. problems in other parts of the world, Washington will have less desire and capability to interfere in Russia's Near Abroad. They are constrained, however, by the need for American cooperation in areas where U.S. and Russian interests overlap (e.g., our sharing of intelligence on terrorist activity). These conflicting policy goals play out in different parts of Russia's Near Abroad.

**Belarus:** The Putin inner circle would like to unite Belarus and Russia. In spite of early signs to the contrary, Belarussian dictator Lukashenko has blocked all serious attempts to do so, as he prefers being head of a sovereign state to being an expendable governor of the expanded state. This opposition and the bad personal chemistry between Lukashenko and Putin have aggravated relations between Belarus and Russia. These relations were further damaged when Belarus recently granted asylum to ousted Kyrgyz leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

When I asked why Putin did not simply use covert means to push Lukashenko aside and annex Belarus, senior Russian figures told me that Belarus's KGB are of a Soviet-era mentality and more effective than the current crop of intelligence officials running Russia. This led me to believe that Russia is making efforts to topple Lukashenko. In spite of a growing Belarussian nationalism, time is on Russia's side as its Nord Stream pipeline, due to begin operation in 2012, will permit Russia to meet its contracts in Western Europe without using the pipelines that currently go through Belarus. In this case Russia could end the heavily subsidized delivery of gas to Belarus, forcing it to buy at market prices—or even higher. This would be disastrous for the already weak Belarus economy. As a result, those in Minsk who favor accommodation with Russia may gain sway.

**Central Asia:** Although they are geopolitical and economic competitors in Central Asia, Russia and the U.S. share an interest in combating the rise of Islamist extremism in that area. The region is ruled by secular autocrats, and the form of Islam practiced widely in Central Asia is largely resistant to extremism. However, jihadist groups with goals inimical to those of Washington and Moscow have now taken root in all five countries of Central Asia. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is perhaps the most

prominent jihadist group, emerging in 1998 with the stated goal of overthrowing the Uzbek regime and installing an Islamic state. The IMU is allied with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and maintains a presence in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. More generally, the U.S. and Russia have an interest in promoting state-sponsored forms of moderate Islam and combating efforts by established jihadist organizations to recruit from and gain a foothold in the Central Asian Republics.

Moscow and Washington also share an interest in seeing the Republic of Kyrgyzstan protect and maintain its sovereignty—a sovereignty challenged by Uzbekistan. Relations between Kyrgyzstan and its large, dominating neighbor have long been acrimonious, and the two have clashed over energy, border claims, and military basing. Ethnic Uzbeks (many of whom are recent arrivals who squatted on unused Uzbek farmland) make up some 15 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population and are concentrated heavily in the south. Quiet cooperation between Moscow and Washington during the recent coup and subsequent fighting in Kyrgyzstan underscores our common interests.

Since Uzbekistan's eviction of U.S. forces from their Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base in 2005, Kyrgyzstan has hosted the only U.S. air base (Manas) in the region—a facility vital to the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan. Roughly 15,000 personnel and 500 tons of cargo transit through Manas every month, and the base serves as the principal aerial refueling hub for the coalition war effort. While Moscow previously pressured the Kyrgyz government to close the U.S. base, the Kremlin now seems comfortable with our temporary war-related presence there as well as America's use of Russian airspace to supply our troops in Afghanistan. However, this position, now under attack by Moscow hard-liners, will likely remain a bargaining chip in American/Russian negotiations.

One important component of China's rise on the world stage has been its growing influence in Central Asia. To date, China's primary interest in the region has been energy. Chinese state-owned enterprises, investment groups, and sovereign wealth funds have been snapping up Central Asian companies and the rights to Central Asian resources as well as laying the infrastructure to import oil and gas from the region. China has been very active in closing significant energy-related deals in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

Columbia University's Alexander Cooley noted that in 2009, for the first time, Chinese trade with Central Asia exceeded that of Russia. At least in

the near future, Russia's economic importance in Central Asia will continue to decline relative to China's. For Russia, the question will be: Are Moscow's interests best protected with or without American (and Western) involvement in the region? Or, alternatively: Should Russia and China try to keep everyone else out of Central Asia? And what of American interest in supplying our troops, keeping fundamentalists out of power, and giving our companies an even playing field? Is America best served by any one country (i.e., China or Russia ) being dominant in Central Asia?

**Georgia:** Conversations in official circles are replete with references to the need to "settle Russia's score" with Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili. He will be "repaid" for starting the war that disturbed the 15-year (see below) status quo with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Additionally, the Russian leadership has not forgiven him for turning his back on Russia after seeking and receiving Russian help in his successful effort to remove then Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze from office. This grudge may not, however, extend to the Georgian state. With a new Georgian leadership, Russia's relationship with Georgia could normalize. However, as long as Saakashvili rules, Georgian/Russian relations are destined to remain very tense.

Another potential headache for Saakashvili lies with Georgia's Armenian communities (about 7 percent of the Georgian population), who are increasingly dissatisfied with their lack of prerogatives.

*Georgia's Lost Territories:* Many times during both the Czarist and Soviet eras, the Ossetians and Abkhaz made serious efforts to end Georgian administrative control over their territories. They preferred administrative control by Moscow because they disliked the Georgians far more than they disliked the Russians. It was, therefore, no surprise that, shortly before the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, both areas launched insurrections (supported by Moscow) that, by 1993, gave them de facto independence from Georgia. That status quo remained until Saakashvili triggered the 2008 war that led to the little-recognized independence of both South Ossetia (pop. 70,000) and Abkhazia (pop. 180,000). Today, as in Russia, almost all Abkhaz and South Ossetian officials have a KGB background and feel very comfortable working with their former colleagues of the Russian intelligence services.

In assessing Abkhazia's future, it should be remembered that Abkhazia existed for 54 years as a nominally independent principality under the protection of Czarist Russia before being formally annexed in 1864.

Almost no one in Russia contemplates returning Abkhazia to a sovereign Georgia. But is annexation to Russia in the cards? Probably, but Russia can well afford to bide its time, as it did in the 19th century.

The fate of South Ossetia will likely be the same. Its memory of the 5,000 Ossetians killed before the end of its war with Georgia in 1922 as well as deaths in other Ossetian/Georgian struggles leading up to the 2008 fighting remains too vivid for it to peacefully become part of Georgia. Further, Russian military support of South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) means certain defeat for Georgia should it attempt to use force to regain lost territory.

**Ukraine:** Contrary to U.S. interests, Russia would like, at a minimum, to treat Ukraine almost as it treated Eastern Europe during the Cold War. At a maximum, however improbable today, it would like to see Ukraine once again as part of Russia. The steps toward either goal are the same, and the first steps have already been taken.

The election of the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich as the new Ukrainian president has already resulted in a 25-year (to 2042) extension of Russia's lease of the Sevastopol Naval Base located in the Russian-speaking Ukrainian province of Crimea. If Russia has its way, the Yanukovich presidency will: 1) facilitate continued Russian economic penetration of Ukraine; 2) slowly move Ukrainian democratic and human rights standards closer to the Russian model; and 3) discourage Western political involvement in Ukraine.

Independent of this effort, Moscow plans to build a bridge from Russian territory to Crimea. Further, as the Crimean population is now dependent on water from Ukraine, there are discussions in Moscow on the possibility of supplying Crimea's water from Russian territory.

Finally, Russia is building a gas pipeline system that will permit it to deliver gas to Europe without going through the territory of Ukraine. This South Stream pipeline is projected to be completed in 2016. Then Russia will have the capability to squeeze Ukraine by raising gas prices while depriving it of transit fee revenue, both unsettling thoughts for Kiev given Ukraine's weak economy.

The combined pressure from all of the above will create opportunities for Russia that cannot be clearly foreseen at this time. On the other hand, the future of Ukraine's economic development, nationalism, military capability, and pro-Moscow leadership is not predictable either. In short, Ukraine remains in play.

## **Russia's Far Abroad**

**Afghanistan:** Russia has no interest in seeing the Taliban return to power in Afghanistan, having sponsored the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance prior to America's invasion. Its reasons for supporting a non-fundamentalist Afghan government remain the same now as in 2000.

*Drug Trade:* An estimated 30,000 Russians die each year as a result of overdosing on heroin imported from Afghanistan. Countless more lead non-productive or criminal lives because of Afghani heroin. Current and past Russian/U.S. cooperation on the Afghan war has always been accompanied by Russian pressure to stop the drug trade.

*Export of Extremism:* If the Taliban return to power in Afghanistan, Russians believe (correctly) that this will lead to greater fundamentalist efforts to subvert the governments of Central Asia and Russia proper. Very little is more important to Russia than stopping such a scenario.

**China:** On one level, the relationship between China and Russia is strong. The border issue that once brought the USSR and China to the brink of war is settled—at least for the foreseeable future. Diplomatic cooperation—often against the U.S.—has become the order of the day. But every year, as China gets militarily, politically, and economically stronger, a proud Russia will increasingly be forced to play the unwanted role of junior partner. This trend is not likely to change, and Russia's importance to China is increasingly as a source of raw materials, not as a supplier of sophisticated military equipment or other types of manufactured goods. Still, Russian strategic weapons would dominate in any possible confrontation with China in the near term and, as long as that is the case, Moscow's opinion will count at the table with China. In the long run, Moscow understands things may change and Putin himself has told citizens in Russia's rapidly depopulating Far East that if they don't get their act together, one day they will be speaking an Asian language. He did not mention China by name, but everyone in Russia's Far East knows that this territory was part of China until 1858–1860, when Russia made a land grab from a then-weak China.

**Iran:** Perhaps no other Russian national security issue generates more internal division than Moscow's policy toward Iran. On the plus side, after years of postponing their contracted sale of S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran, Putin last June announced that the missiles would not be delivered. This is important because Israel has reportedly served notice that it will attack Iran rather than permit any S-300 systems to become operational. Al-



so on the plus side, after years of strong opposition to sanctions against Iran, Moscow supported the successful June 9, 2010, UN vote to sanction Iran—albeit after using their influence to weaken the sanctions.

On the negative side, after many delays, Iran's Russian-built nuclear power station in Bushehr should be in operation very soon, if it isn't already by the time you read this.

What are the main ideas influencing Moscow's Iranian policy? Russians make at least four arguments in favor of cooperation with Iran:

1. An accommodation with Iran postpones the day the Islamic Republic will use its resources to stir up the Muslim populations of Central Asia or—even worse—Russia proper.

2. If a serious crisis occurs with the West, oil prices will go up dramatically—an event that will help Russia.

3. The West's continuing problems with Iran reduce America's appetite and capability for playing a role in Ukraine, Georgia, and other parts of the former USSR.

4. Russia profits from reactor and arms sales. Apart from the pending sales, Moscow worries about its credibility with other buyers if the Iran contracts are not met.

The counter-arguments, which are ascendant, include:

1. If Iran gets the nuclear bomb, other unstable and unfriendly Muslim states will also get the bomb. This is dangerous for Russia.

2. A nuclear Iran will not need cooperation with Russia, and Tehran's most extreme elements will help Russian jihadists. Thus, Russia should help the West stop this problem before it grows.

3. Hoping for a confrontation between the West and Iran is stupid because the consequences cannot be predicted—including the effect on the world economy and midterm oil prices.

4. Can Moscow be sure that Iran would not give the nuclear material necessary for a dirty bomb (or worse) to Russia's Muslim extremists?

As mentioned above, Russia decided to stop delivery of S-300 systems to Iran. It is telling that this decision was made public following Vladimir Putin's Paris meeting with French president Sarkozy, not in a forum that would let the Obama administration take maximum credit for Russia's policy reversal.

**Western Europe:** Using the leverage of Europe's dependence upon Russian gas, Moscow hopes to affect the policies of Western European countries in areas of the world that matter to Moscow—starting with its

Near Abroad. Apart for a growing lack of military capability, Western Europeans have little appetite for the serious use of military force. Hence, getting many NATO countries to oppose membership for Ukraine (whose population does not want it) and Georgia (whose population does) was not a hard task when the alternative would have been severely strained relations with Moscow. Moscow's energy lever will also be apparent as other questions (e.g., trade) are decided in Russian-European negotiations.

### **Russia and America, for Now**

The 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union gave rise to hopes of a democratic, open, free market, pro-Western Russia that would respect the boundaries of the newly independent states of the former USSR. Today, an increasingly closed Russia is driven by thoughts of greater influence in, or absorption of, the Christian parts of its former empire. This puts Moscow at odds with Washington in spite of common interests that include the fight against radical Islam, anti-proliferation initiatives, space cooperation, and nuclear cooperation. The Obama administration's efforts to improve relations have thus far consisted primarily of disproportionate concessions affecting America's missile defense program as well as American interests in Eastern Europe and parts of the former USSR. Left unchanged, this policy will likely whet the appetite of the usually shrewd Russian geostrategists to ask for, or take, more.

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