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# 1. Introduction

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The unravelling of the Soviet Union unquestionably caused Russia, its principal heir, serious loss to its status as a global political, economic or even military power. Not only did Russia cease to be a superpower; it also lost many of the characteristics of a country with genuine global interests and the capabilities to pursue them. Political and economic crisis continued to plague Russia throughout the post-Soviet period, severely limiting its options in international affairs, including security issues. Many attributes of Russia as a great power were either waning rapidly (such as its nuclear weapon capability) or becoming increasingly symbolic (such as its permanent membership in the UN Security Council) or frankly illusory (such as its attempts to transform the Group of Seven industrialized nations, the G7, into the G8 by joining it). Instead both the immediate national interests of post-Soviet Russia and the major challenges and threats to its security came in fact to be concentrated mostly in the areas bordering Russia. The geopolitical changes which accompanied this process or were its immediate result could not but have a fundamental impact on Russian foreign policy goals and priorities.

## I. Asia in the post-Soviet foreign policy of Russia

Remaining a major Eurasian nation, at least in geographical terms, Russia retains strong national interests in Asia. Those interests have even tended to become more assertive than in Soviet times because of the new Russian geopolitical and geo-economic realities. Indeed, giving the Asian dimension a more prominent role in its foreign policy (and in its domestic policy as well) came quite naturally to the new Russia, for several principal reasons: (a) the fundamental political, social, economic and demographic changes under way in Russia itself; (b) the rapidly growing role of Asia in contemporary international relations, both political and economic; and (c) the many threats and challenges to Russia's national security which Asia contained—a situation that called for a well thought-out strategy of current and long-term political, economic and security responses.

After the end of the cold war the international political and security situation improved insofar as the threat of global nuclear confrontation has been reduced to an unlikely possibility. The military expenditures of most major international actors were reduced, as were the sizes of their armed forces, including their nuclear component. International and national security was no longer understood in terms of military balances alone but was extended to include economic,

environmental and other non-military factors. These positive changes in international relations helped to substantially reduce Russia's concerns about its military security and justified a radical reduction of its armed forces in the Asian part of the country, along the border with China in particular.

The end of the cold war did not, however, signify the advent of an era of no conflict either in relations between the major powers or in interstate relations in general. The end of bipolarity in international relations and its substitution by quasi-unipolarity—the dominance of the USA—did not exclude the possibility of major challenges to international peace and security emerging. International stability became increasingly undermined by the sharpening of territorial, religious and ethnic conflicts at the intra-state, local and regional levels which had previously been contained by the rigidities of the global confrontation.

These negative developments in international security in the post-cold war period were particularly obvious in areas close to Russia's eastern and southern national borders, such as South and East Asia, where, contrary to global trends, military expenditures increased in absolute terms by 25 and 27 per cent, respectively (at constant 1995 prices) over the 10-year period 1989–98.<sup>1</sup> After the outbreak of a major financial crisis in the second half of 1997 most of the East Asian countries revised their procurement programmes but did not cut their military expenditure.

It was also in Asia that the problem of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction continued to be very acute after India and Pakistan conducted their nuclear tests in May 1998. The situation on the Korean Peninsula, where open conflict over the North Korean nuclear weapon programme threatened at the beginning of the 1990s, continued to cause grave concern, this time with North Korea's missile programme, especially after it launched a rocket over Japanese territory in August 1998. Also in Asia another major threat to regional and global security, connected with the spread of radical Islam in Afghanistan and a possible spillover to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, achieved alarming proportions by the end of the 1990s.

Among the serious security challenges and risks emanating from the east and south of Russia were the completely or partially unresolved territorial problems with some of Russia's neighbours, the expansion of drug trafficking and the illegal transfer of arms across its territory, the massive smuggling of goods from a number of neighbouring countries, and the growth in illegal immigration to Siberia and the Russian far east. These left no doubt that safeguarding its security in Asia and actively promoting political relations with Asian countries had to be among Russia's highest national priorities.

In Soviet times the USSR's national interests in Asia were perceived to be influenced mainly if not exclusively by ideological, political and military considerations. In the post-Soviet period they came to be increasingly influenced by economic motivations. An increase in the impact of economic factors on

<sup>1</sup> Sköns, E. *et al.*, 'Military expenditure', *SIPRI Yearbook 1999: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999), pp. 270, 283–88.

Russia's foreign policy in Asia and on its objectives and priorities there was largely seen as an obvious response to the deterioration of Russia's geo-economic position after the collapse of the Soviet Union, including the loss of the most convenient communication routes to the West and the need to compensate for this by expanding access to potential markets in Asia. The collapse of the Soviet central planning system resulted among other things in a partial, and sometimes quite substantial, reorientation of the business and trading ties of a number of economic regions away from the domestic market to the markets of neighbouring countries. This is particularly relevant to developments in Siberia and the Russian far east, where the increase in border trade, investment activities and long-term production agreements has been accounted for mostly by the countries of East and South-East Asia. Russia's economic interests in Asia are enormous, if only because Siberia and the Russian far east have between 60 and 100 per cent of the country's natural resources, such as oil, natural gas, non-ferrous metals and timber. These resources also provide the dominant part of Russian export earnings and budget revenues. Their exploration and use depend to a great extent on the ability of Russia to establish and promote business relations with its counterparts in Asia and Asia-Pacific and to obtain there much-needed investment and technical expertise as well as access to their markets. These processes have begun to develop fairly actively in the post-Soviet period but their scope and intensity are not yet substantial.

The influence of cultural and civilizational factors on Russia's national interests and foreign policy goals in Asia may be less obvious, but these factors are no less important for the future of Russia as a major power than political, security or economic ones. As is known, Russia's history has been most closely bound up with its cross-continental expansion, mainly in the eastern and southern directions—an expansion that is sometimes interpreted outside Russia as imperialism and inside Russia as nation-building. It is logical, therefore, that in the present-day Russia an idea of Eurasianism—a unique vision of Russia as a civilization that combines elements from both its European and its Asiatic heritage—is gaining ground in the attempt to help formulate the national interests of Russia as a state located at the junction of Europe and Asia.

Admittedly in a pragmatic sense this idea is interpreted differently by its different proponents—by some as a political formula to be used in justifying Russia's important national interests both in the West and in the East, by others as a basis for an economic strategy of using Russia's unique geographical position between Asia and Europe and the opportunities that position may offer, with trade routes across its territory, to the country's best advantage. Others present Eurasianism as a quasi-national idea which embodies the continuity between Russia and its predecessors—the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union—and thus enhances its international status. In the absence of any other national idea or even of a surrogate for a national idea, Eurasianism attempts to serve as a unifying ideology at a time when Russia is facing a grave threat of further disintegration along ethnic and confessional lines.

In order to protect its national interests in Asia as well as to respond in timely fashion and decisively to a variety of security threats coming from this area, Russia has to use skilfully whatever means and opportunities it has at its disposal. On the one hand it is restricted in its efforts to do so because of its sharply reduced economic and military potential in the post-cold war period. Therefore, even if it wants, it can no longer conduct its foreign policy from a position of strength but has to search for compromises in relations with its counterparts in Asia. The same constraints also prevent it from pursuing a broad approach to regional affairs and force it to concentrate its efforts in a few carefully chosen areas and on relations with those states that are critical to its national interests.

On the other hand, since Russia is no longer seen as an ideological or military threat by its neighbours, it is now attracting their interest because of its still vast natural resources and the availability of sophisticated technologies, including military ones, left over from Soviet times. Moreover, Russia has come to be regarded by these countries as a useful if limited counterbalance in regional affairs. The role Russia is prepared to play in the political and security affairs of Asia and Asia–Pacific is not only its concern but also of particular interest to its numerous neighbours there. These include the former Soviet republics of Central Asia as well as the USA, China, Japan, Turkey, Iran, India and other states.

A realistic assessment of these factors, favourable and unfavourable alike, requires serious changes in foreign policy tactics and priorities. Only after major changes will Russia be able to set out on an active course of pursuing its national interests in Asia and Asia–Pacific and expect to achieve positive results. In order to make them it also has to ensure the maximum degree of complementarity of political, economic and other methods employed for these purposes.

## II. Research objectives

In 1992, in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) launched several research projects that examined Russian foreign and security policy in the post-Soviet period. In 1997 it published *Russia and Europe: The Emerging Security Agenda*,<sup>2</sup> a comprehensive analysis of Russia's policy in Europe. Over the following two years it published two more books, *Russia and the Arms Trade* and *Russian Arms Transfers to East Asia in the 1990s*,<sup>3</sup> containing the results of research on Russia's international arms and military technology transfers, which served as one of the important instruments in its security strategy. In

<sup>2</sup> Baranovsky, V., SIPRI, *Russia and Europe: The Emerging Security Agenda* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Anthony, I. (ed.), SIPRI, *Russia and the Arms Trade* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1998); and Sergounin, A. A. and Subbotin, S. V., *Russian Arms Transfers to East Asia in the 1990s*, SIPRI Research Report no. 15 (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999).

1998 SIPRI initiated another research project addressed now to more general issues of Russia's foreign and security policy in Asia. The main objectives of the research were defined as: (a) to trace the historical pattern of continuity and change in Russian thinking about and policy towards Asia in the post-cold war period after the collapse of the Soviet Union; (b) to analyse the views of the major political forces in Russia on the country's national interests in Asia and identify the principal domestic constraints that affect Russian strategy there; (c) to explore the main conflict issues in Russia's relations with the Asian countries, possible approaches to resolving them, the prospects for building a cooperative security system in Asia and the ways in which Russia can participate in this process; and (d) to explore the role of Russia in the evolving Asian security environment not only at present but also in the foreseeable future.

The project addresses these and related issues from two perspectives—that of Russia and that of its neighbours. It therefore explores not only Russian foreign policy activities and the motivations that set them in motion but also other countries' evaluations of the current Russian stand in Asia and their perceptions of its future role in this part of the world.

Analysing the events and processes that are already in place and trying to foresee future developments, the project also proposes alternative scenarios of political and security-related developments that may take place in Asia depending on possible internal changes in Russia itself and in the policies of its neighbours.

### III. The period covered

The research covers the period largely up to the end of March 1999. International events since then, especially the 78-day NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia started on 24 March 1999, without UN Security Council authorization, and the adoption of the new NATO Strategic Concept at the Washington summit meeting of 23–24 April 1999, which extended the alliance's activities beyond its borders, have undoubtedly influenced Russia's foreign and security policies in many substantial ways. On the domestic front, on the eve of national parliamentary and presidential elections, tensions have continued to grow, resulting in further political instability. In May 1999 Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, regarded as the principal architect of post-Soviet Russian policy in Asia, and then in August his successor, Sergey Stepashin, were dismissed from office by President Boris Yeltsin. Also in August, Russian troops became involved for the first time since the 1994–96 Chechnya war in heavy fighting in the northern Caucasus. Started as a counter-insurgency operation against Islamic separatists in Dagestan, attempting to establish an Islamic state there, and actively supported from neighbouring Chechnya, it developed later into a full-scale military action which spilled over into Chechnya itself and led to Russian troops being sent there.

None of these developments, international or domestic, altered Russia's main strategic course in Asia as worked out during the second half of the 1990s and analysed in detail in this volume. Some of them may even have added new arguments in its favour.

Thus if anything else the conflict in the North Caucasus called for a proactive Russian policy in relations with the Muslim world and for an upgrading of Russia's cooperation in the security field with those Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries—Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in particular—which also experienced the threat of Islamic extremism in the 1990s.

Moreover, the new posture of NATO in international affairs only strengthened Russia's existing resolve to promote closer relationships with Asian countries and to build strategic partnership with the major regional actors on the principles of multipolarity. The need for an active policy in Asia arose originally for a variety of reasons, NATO's eastward expansion being at best only one of them; but following the Yugoslavia crisis and the NATO Washington summit meeting the development of a sustainable, safe and cooperative security environment in Asia became for Russia as a Eurasian state far more than a mere balancing act; it was unequivocally recognized as a vital part of its comprehensive security policy, to be pursued in a consistent and creative manner in the long-term national interest.

#### IV. The structure of the volume

Part I of this volume, which is the result of the project, assesses the major domestic and external factors which have a fundamental impact on the formulation of Russia's security interests and concerns in Asia in the post-cold war and post-Soviet period. Along with an analysis of major trends in international security in the 1990s, this part also deals with the analysis of foreign policy making in post-Soviet Russia. Special attention in this context is paid to the process of devolution of power from a single centre, which had an unquestionable monopoly of all major decisions on foreign policy and national security in Soviet times, to a number of such centres representing different—sometimes fiercely competing—interests of various government agencies, business groups, regional elites, the army and the defence industry. One of the chapters in Part I is devoted to an in-depth analysis of Russian cultural and civilizational values, which influence the pragmatic policies of Russia in this part of the world.

Analysis of the diverse Russian national interests and security concerns in different parts of the vast Asian continent necessitated a subregional approach, and this is undertaken in Parts II–V of the volume. The security situation in each of major subregions of Asia—Central, South-West, South and East Asia<sup>4</sup>—is characterized by a unique combination of political, economic, ethnic and socio-cultural factors which have a fundamental impact on relationships

<sup>4</sup> The subregions of Asia are defined on p. xvi.

within each subregion, between the sovereign states constituting it, between separate ethnic, confessional and political groups, and between these diverse components of the subregions and the outside world, Russia in particular. Although the security situation in these subregions is highly complex it is dominated in each case by a few major issues, such as the 'Islamic factor' in Central Asia, the re-emergence of Iran and Turkey as major actors in South-West Asia, bitter rivalry between India and Pakistan in South Asia, the continuous tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and the uneasy relationship between China and its neighbours in East Asia. The volume analyses the security relationship between Russia and the Asian states in all major subregions of the continent, taking into account these 'core' issues, and proposes alternative scenarios for the possible future development of this relationship.

This part of the volume also includes several case studies of Russia's political and security relationship with a few major international actors in Asia and Asia-Pacific which are central to Russian national interests. In Central Asia these include Russian relations with Kazakhstan, the largest country in the subregion with the largest Russian population and the longest border with Russia, and Tajikistan, where militant radical Islamic forces have been most active and where Russia maintains a forward military deployment. In South Asia special case studies are included on Russian-Indian relations and in South-West Asia on relations with Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan. In Part V of the volume, which describes relations between Russia and major actors in East Asia/Asia-Pacific, 'matching' chapters by Russian and other (US, Chinese and South Korean) scholars deal with China, Japan, the USA and South Korea.

Finally, Part VI of the volume summarizes the major conclusions reached in the preceding parts and offers an overall picture of Russia's place in the security environment in Asia that has been emerging there after the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union.