

“Because It Is”: Russia, The Existential Great Power  
Nikolas Gvosdev, Editor, *The National Interest*

Few Russians would disagree with the assessment made by Dr. Thomas Ambrosio in the preface to his 2005 work *Challenging America's Global Preeminence: Russia's Quest for Multipolarity*: “Russia seeks to be respected as a great power because of deep-seated beliefs about its own identity and its place in the world.” Unlike in any of the other established or rising great powers, the question as to whether or not Russia is a great power is seen as an existential matter, that Russia cannot exist apart from being a great power, lest it cease to be Russia.<sup>1</sup> Upon becoming foreign minister in 1996, Yevgeny Primakov declared his motto to be “Russia was and remains a great power. Her foreign policy should correspond to that status.”<sup>2</sup> The country’s status as one of the great powers is intertwined with the very notion of what constitutes the national identity. Both among elite groups as well as the general public, there is an assumption that Russia by definition is one of the leading countries of the globe—although the reasons for her inclusion in this category will and do shift over time. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov emphasized this earlier this year when he wrote: “Russia is now in a favorable international position. But such a position is never guaranteed in an evolving international environment. We can preserve, as well as increase, our achievements only through our active involvement in international affairs.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, a 2000 Public Opinion Foundation poll where almost half defined their hope for Russia to return as a “great and powerful” state. Archived at [http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/rus\\_im/Great\\_Power/eof002704](http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/rus_im/Great_Power/eof002704).

<sup>2</sup> Primakov made this statement on a visit to the Middle East. *Ha'aretz*, October 31, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> “The Present and the Future of Global Politics,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, April - June 2007, at <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/19/1102.html>.

At present, there is broad agreement across the spectrum that Russia cannot afford the burdens of being a superpower and should not seek to regain this status that the Soviet Union was, in the long run, unable to afford. But at the same time political forces which either advocate that Russia should cease its efforts to retain its great power status—or are associated with the diminution of that status as a result of the policies pursued in the 1990s—are discredited. Not only supporters of the Putin Administration but even many in opposition agree with the proposition that Russia is not only a major power but should continue to play a leading role, certainly in regional affairs but also in global matters. Sergei Kortunov, an advisor for the upper house of the Russian Federal Assembly, concluded: “[T]he majority of the people and the political elite would like Russia to be respected in the world, which explains the noticeable growth of great power sentiments in society and growing interest for discussions of "sovereign democracy", "energy superpower" and other related issues conducted by political analysts and experts.”<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the greatest Russian fear is the emergence of a new global order where the world’s major economic powers—the European Union, China, Japan and the United States—would be able to bypass Russia altogether. Russia’s ability to remain in the first rank depends on its ability to be able to align with other powers in order to be able to contribute to the global agenda.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sergei Kortunov, “Should Russia Claim Great Power Status?” *RIA Novosti*, September 25, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> See, most recently, Russia’s ability to lead a group of non-European states (China, India, and Brazil, among others) to propose an alternative candidate to head the International Monetary Fund, even though Russia itself has less than 3 percent of the votes at the IMF. Discussion at the Russia Profile Weekly Experts Panel: Flexing Muscles at the IMF (September 7, 2007), at <http://www.russiaprofile.org/page.php?pageid=Experts'+Panel&articleid=a1189168015>. On Russia’s need to be able to find maneuvering room, see Yan Li, “Russia’s

But what does it mean when Russians say their country is and ought to be a great power?

Speaking at a forum at the 2006 St. Petersburg G-8 summit, Russian commentator Alexey Pushkov identified three factors that he felt justified Russia's inclusion as one of the great powers of the globe:

The first was Russia's ability to devastate large portions of the globe as a result of its nuclear and conventional weapons arsenal—a traditional definition of “great power” status as defined by military might and the ability to wreak destruction on a massive scale.

The second was Russia's vital importance to the continued growth and progress of the global economy, in this case, by its possession of significant reserves of various types of energy (endowments of natural gas, oil and a significant nuclear power industry), making Russia an “energy superpower”—and then with the attendant results (such as large acquisitions of currency reserves).

The third was Russia's “indispensability”, in part due to its geopolitical location, for solving critical world conflicts (in Asia and the Greater Middle East). And here, it is important to note that this did not imply that the burden was on Russia to provide leadership, but that there could be no effective solutions (e.g. to the Iranian and North Korean nuclear crises, to stabilizing Afghanistan, etc.) without both Russian acquiescence and participation.<sup>6</sup>

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Shadowboxing Wards off U.S. in ‘New Cold War’,” *Washington Observer*, May 10, 2006, at <http://washingtonobserver.org/en/document.cfm?documentid=48&charid=3>.

<sup>6</sup> “After the G-8: Putin, at least, got what we wanted,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 18, 2006, at <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/07/17/opinion/edgvosdev.php>.

And this is a critical point. Russia's view of itself as the "indispensable nation" differs greatly from the formulation put forward by Madeleine Albright for the United States. It is an indispensability defined in negative terms—namely, that the absence of Russian help, even if that assistance is small in quantity in comparison to what others are providing, will preclude success.

Many Russian foreign policy analysts have a two-tiered vision for Russia's position as a major power. This begins with a notion of Russia as the metropolitan power of the Eurasian space. This follows from the perception that a power is a great power first and foremost because it has the ability to create a regional bloc or to orient the economic and political lines of influence toward a central pole of attraction. Each great power, therefore, acts as the regional "node" for the global system. What is striking is how much this view is shared across the Russian political spectrum, including by those considered to be opposition figures.<sup>7</sup>

From this Eurasian platform, Russia is then seen as a natural candidate for inclusion in what commentators Sergei Karaganov and Vladislav Inozemtsev have

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<sup>7</sup> There is almost universal agreement with the proposition advanced by the former foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, in his 2002 book *The New Russian Diplomacy* that "it is natural to suppose a pivotal role for Russia in [Eurasia] by virtue of its size, its population, and its economic capability." On this point, the liberal democratic parties are in accord with the Kremlin, even if they differ over means. On September 25, 2003, speaking at a commencement ceremony in St. Petersburg, Anatoly Chubais, one of the leaders of the Union of Right Forces, proposed the creation of a Russian "liberal empire" through the wholesale expansion of Russian business interests throughout the Eurasian space. "Russia should provide assistance to other CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] countries as it has the highest standard of living and is the natural leader among CIS countries." In this view, Russia can remain a great power and a peer of the United States, China and the European Union only by reconstituting a Russian-led Eurasian zone. Washington's favorite Russian politician, Yabloko leader Gregory Yavlinsky, has been more circumspect—warning that the aggressive promotion of Russian interests in the CIS might lead to conflicts with other states—but even he acknowledges that a revived Russia would nonetheless "become the center of gravity" within Eurasia.

described as a “global concert”, perhaps consisting of the G-8 member-states, China, India and several other regional powers, which would be in a position to “counter the growing chaos on the international stage through direct actions and push their policies through” for “expanding the zone of stability” around the world.<sup>8</sup>

In the popular view, this translates into some version of the Monroe Doctrine for Russia vis-à-vis its immediate region, and to have a consultative role on major international matters, without, however, Russia having to make any large contribution of funds or personnel for “out of the Eurasian area” missions.<sup>9</sup> This is also why questions of EU and NATO expansion remain such sensitive issues, and why the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has assumed such an important role in reaffirming Russian predominance (as the “elder brother”) in territories where China might otherwise have increased influence. There has been a shift in understanding what constitutes power, away from military force toward economic factors, but for many Russians tangible commodities, especially energy, are more important than intangibles—so the power to obtain, sell, transport and withhold vital materials is seen as a new source of Russian power in the world.

A second marked change is that, in contrast with the Soviet period, contemporary Russians do not put much stock in Russia’s “soft power”—there is no post-Soviet Russian model of development or of political and economic organization that is held out as desirable for other states to emulate. The appeal of the Russian language or of Russian

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<sup>8</sup> “Imperialism of the Fittest,” *The National Interest*, Summer 2005.

<sup>9</sup> On the Russian perception of a need for a “Monroe Doctrine” for the Eurasian space, see Igor Torbakov, “Ivanov Restates Kremlin’s Monroe Doctrine,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 13, 2006, at [http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2370664](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2370664).

culture beyond Russia's borders is limited to a larger but essentially circumscribed Russian cultural space (the Russosphere) that is largely coterminous with the former Soviet Union (Eurasia) and is also maintained, in part, by continuing migrations from the former Soviet periphery to work in a booming Russian economy.

The Russian view among both elites and the public at large remains one where power is exercised by states and by blocs of states, and where Russian power is measured less by per capita indicators (surveys comparing Russia's standard of living with Portugal or its receipt of FDI with Thailand have had little impact on popular thinking)<sup>10</sup> and more by Russia's ability to maintain itself as the center of a distinct Eurasian zone which in turn is essential for the smooth functioning of the global order.<sup>11</sup> Kortunov sums up the Russian attitude: "Russia is a great power in terms of its political importance, intellectual might and influence on global affairs ... it should claim an equitable role in the group of the world's top five countries, and not because it wants it. This is an objective and logical process, which cannot be disregarded." In other words, it is a great power—because it is.

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<sup>10</sup> See Kortunov, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> A 2006 poll conducted by the *St. Petersburg Times* noted that 55 percent of Russians define the country as a "great power" based on its energy resources and strategic location. Cf. "After the G-8," *op. cit.*