RESURGENT RUSSIA: NATO'S ADVERSARY OR A FUTURE ALLY

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Russia appears to be warming up to NATO as its efforts to create buffers to the West always come to a naught. It cannot resurge due to its economic, demographic and other geopolitical imperatives. Hence, it is advantageous in its long term interests to play a second fiddle and protect its core territory from further disintegration and become a reluctant NATO ally.

Abstract

Russia appears to be warming up to NATO as its efforts to create buffers to the West always come to a naught. It cannot resurge due to its economic, demographic and other geopolitical imperatives. Hence, it is advantageous in its long term interests to play a second fiddle and protect its core territory from further disintegration and become a reluctant NATO ally.
Key Words: Russia – Resurgence – NATO – U.S. hegemony – Germany – China’s economic rise – Geopolitical

Introduction

Russia lacks the capacity to underpin its historical desire to become an ultimate global power or even regain its Cold War power against America due to its geopolitical imperatives. Moscow is rather trying to figure out how to avoid further decay and loss of power. Its excessive reliance on its energy resources and nuclear deterrence can affect strategic stability. Hence, a steady Russia with a ‘credible’ deterrence is in Western interest.

Kremlin has always tried to maximise its power and create buffers towards its west in order to address its perennial geographic vulnerability. It could not maintain the peak of its Cold War power and size for long. Now Moscow strives to regain its influence in the European Heartland through energy politics and by engaging the NATO. To this end, Russia has developed warm relations with Germany. Berlin in turn needs Moscow to meet its energy requirements and to gain European leadership.

The apparent thaw in Russia’s relations with NATO, particularly with the U.S., is due to common security concerns that emerged after the Cold War. Russia-NATO commonality of interests lies in the future of Afghanistan and its neighbouring region; countering proliferation of WMD (weapons of mass destruction) and missile technology; and the threats posed by terrorist networks, organised crime and non-state actors.
Unlike rest of the world, China’s remarkable economic rise and military growth do not affect Russia’s geopolitical interests. The Far Eastern countries tend to lean on America to contain China. Consequently, America is cementing an arc of strategic partnerships with Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia that stretches up to and includes India. This, in turn, has brought Russia and China closer and there are no prospects of an adversarial relationship between them. Notwithstanding the potential risks of arming Beijing, Moscow is its strategic partner since 1996 and has resolved its longstanding bilateral territorial issues in 2008.

World is drifting towards multi-polarity and it is unlikely that Russia regains the zenith of its Cold War period power against NATO. Though America’s power is also waning, no single state – particularly Russia – will be able to pose a serious challenge to it in the short term. Russia faces a power dilemma; it cannot avoid reasserting its power and similarly it knows that it will be difficult to achieve hegemony over Western Europe. Hence, the previously unthinkable idea of Russia becoming part of NATO seems just a matter of time. An emerging NATO-Russia strategic concept may be a precursor to such an alliance and the November 2010 NATO summit in Lisbon seized the opportunity that was created by the “reset” in U.S.-Russian relations and can be termed as a “fresh start”.
Russia & American Hegemony

Russia does not have the capacity to challenge American global hegemony. Alexis de Tocqueville and Friedrich Nietzsche predicted Soviet Union and America’s rise in 19th Century but could not foresee their decline. Soviet Union completely collapsed by 2000 and the American power is gradually diluting.

In post-Cold War period the former Soviet states became part of NATO, Moscow’s involvement in the alliance’s affairs has increased, and the previously improbable idea of Russian inclusion in the NATO is a distant option at least. Likewise, Germany and France have broken their post-Cold War shackles and vie for Europe’s leadership. Though America is still the biggest military and economic power it is learning to cope with a multi-polar world. There are numerous indicators in this direction. However, a comparison of the GDP and defence budgets of leading powers reveals that even an economically weak U.S. is still the largest economy and military power (See Table–I and II).
Russia has resurged during Putin’s hold on power as the President and the Prime Minister of Russia. Moscow now actively reasserts its power in parts of post-Soviet space and elsewhere. Its role as a major energy producer and indirect control of energy resources of the former Soviet states has given it a newfound confidence. For instance, Russia wants Ukraine to actively participate in post-Soviet integration organizations like the Eurasian Economic Community, the Customs Union and the emerging Single Economic Space. Russia is also exerting its influence on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to actively participate in integration mechanisms. Putin recently reiterated that the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan is the key project in the Eurasian Economic Community.
In order to play an assertive role in shaping the international system, Moscow uses Europe’s energy dependency as a lever and takes advantage of lack of commitment within the European members of NATO. However, this effort to reassert its power also raises a bleak prospect of a future desire by Europeans to grab its energy resources. Russian energy politics has also prompted the Europeans to diversify their energy resources and to seek alternative sources of energy. U.K. has recently shown interest in building nuclear reactors, some Europeans are negotiating with Qatar etc. for LNG and the new pipelines from Central Asia may by-pass Russia.

During Lisbon Summit, NATO did not change its stance towards Russia and called on Moscow to reverse its recognition of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia as independent states. NATO members also discussed ways to meet security challenges beyond Euro-Atlantic theatre.

Though Russia jostles for increasing influence in Europe and elsewhere, it lags behind U.S. politically, militarily and economically. Such a prediction may not withstand the test of time, but the existing evidence points in that direction. Russia’s inflation soars above 12% (Table–III) and it has the lowest economic growth rate at a dismal -7.5% (Table–IV).

Kremlin can assert military power with its largest nuclear arsenal of 13,000 weapons (Table–V), land forces (Table–VI), numerical superiority in tanks and artillery (Table–VII), a sizeable nuclear submarines force (Table–VIII) and a big air force (Table–
IX), yet it find it hard to resurge and effectively challenge American hegemony due to its geopolitical constraints.

Russia is geographically destined not to expand beyond its present day borders and its past attempts bore no fruit. The Federation is a strategically vulnerable state that despite its size, finds itself surrounded by enemies and other powers. Though Russian winter and tundra have always come to its rescue, its land and sea borders are difficult to defend effectively, leaving the country vulnerable to invasion. The country’s core region consists of only the Moscow-St. Petersburg strip and the surrounding European Russian areas bordered by Ural Mountains. Protecting this strip of land is Russia’s primary focus because it is disconnected from Russia’s wealth of resources that lie beyond the Urals. In order to fully protect itself from other powers, Russia tries to surround itself with a buffer zone. Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact bloc were a manifestation of this need, thus forcing Russia to either conquer or influence countries around European Russia, the
Caucasus and non-European Russia.\textsuperscript{23} Russia’s permanent geographic vulnerability is exacerbated by other dynamics – like demography – and thus it has expanded and contracted in the past along with fluctuation in these factors.

Russia’s demographic makeup works as a drag shoot to its progress and resurgence. Russia’s unreliable population census holds that about 80\% of 140 million are actually ethnic Russians.\textsuperscript{24} For territorial expansion, Russia forcibly absorbed deeply resentful non-Russian minorities.\textsuperscript{25} Hence, in trying to create buffers against its geographic vulnerability, Russia has ended up creating a chronic security problem in the form of new populations hostile to Moscow’s rule.\textsuperscript{26} A dismal population growth rate is another impediment in Russia’s rise. After Soviet Union’s collapse, the birth rate has sharply declined by almost 50\%—and Russia is projected to lose a substantial 40 million people in next fifty years.\textsuperscript{27} In a sharp contrast, the birth rate of non-ethnic Russians like Muslim Chechens and Dagestanis’ has steadily risen since 1990s.\textsuperscript{28} HIV, tuberculosis, alcoholism among males and heroin abuse among
ethnic Russians, especially of child bearing age, is also negatively affecting their population rate.\textsuperscript{29}

By taking advantage of Russia’s unfavourable situation, America has gradually tightened the noose around it by helping in NATO’s expansion. America infiltrated into Russia’s domain by placing its military bases in Central Asia to support its forces in Afghanistan in 2001.\textsuperscript{30} Thereafter, Washington successfully placed its military installations in Central and Eastern European states in 2002 and promised a BMD shield against Russia and then Iran.\textsuperscript{31} The most aggressive move came in 2004, once U.S. steered the former Soviet Baltic States into NATO.\textsuperscript{32} This pushed Russia’s buffer to the West within 100 miles from St. Petersburg.\textsuperscript{33} America also supports Georgia and Ukraine’s pro-Western revolutions and their NATO membership.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus, while U.S. continues to bolster its ties with Russia, it does not shy away from disputed issues.\textsuperscript{35}

NATO’s expansion threatens Russia’s fundamental interests.\textsuperscript{36} If Georgia or Ukraine joins NATO, Russia’s ability to defend its core region will be undermined. Moscow’s cooperation with NATO and U.S. will be on the condition that latter does not expand to Ukraine or Georgia. Moscow considers arms control of
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central importance because it cannot compete with Washington in another conventional and nuclear arms race (see Tables I to IV above). Kremlin relies on treaties like START to lock the Pentagon into a bilateral strategic balance. For Russia, START is about long term survival and nuclear balance has a central role in ensuring Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The West, on its part, wants Russia to have a credible conventional and nuclear deterrence in order to achieve strategic stability. That is why the Obama administration is proactively pursuing U.S. Senate for the ratification of START. The NATO leaders also back Obama Administration on the START treaty because it affects European security also. Another contentious issue about European security is the proposed BMD shield. Russia has also shown eagerness to join the planned missile defence. The BMD shield for Europe is more about political bargaining than
actual defence.\textsuperscript{40} The American installations in Europe would have little effect on Russian ICBMs directed at the U.S.\textsuperscript{41}

A resurgent Russia’s strategy is based on three prongs. First, recover influence and effective control in the former Soviet states; then try to create a second tier of buffers beyond its Cold War boundaries without seriously antagonising the U.S. and Western Europe; and finally, continue to prevent coalitions to build against its interests. As Russia can no longer assert its influence in Europe and elsewhere through military force, it will exploit the weaknesses of its former states in Caucasus, Central Asia and Europe to challenge U.S. dominance.\textsuperscript{42} Analysis of Russian geopolitical imperatives leads to the conclusion that its attempts to resurge are basically a defensive move.

\textbf{Sino-Russian Competition}

Sino-Russian relations are good and there is no likelihood of a competition because both have commonality in their geopolitical interests. However, a rising China has prompted America and far-eastern countries to form a strategic partnership against it. America is cementing an arc of strategic partnerships with Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia that stretches up to and includes India. These developments allowed both countries to shed the prospects of adversarial relationship and instead enter a strategic partnership in 1996 and resolve bilateral territorial disputes in 2008.\textsuperscript{43}

Beijing triangulates between Moscow and Washington in order to play each one off against the other\textsuperscript{44} and even attempts to gradually convert Latin America into “China’s backyard”.
Cooperation between China and Latin America has diversified and expanded in the last six years on the basis of an increasingly close economic and trade relationship that is developing into a strategic partnership. An alliance between China, Latin America, Russia and Iran will be alarming for America.  

Russia is a major arms exporter to China. Its exports totalled almost $16 billion between 1996 and 2000. China actively pursues licensing and technological transfer from Russia. Sino-Russian arms deals in the past were a product of Russia’s bid to increase its military influence but there are potential risks involved. China literally dictates the financial terms to Russia and the limited income is lost to the corrupt Russian bureaucracy. This is a luxury that the flagging Russian economy can ill-afford over a protracted period.

The prospect of a Chinese military threat to Russia is a Western idea that considers a potentially destabilising situation can occur if Russia continues to bilaterally reduce its strategic arms with the U.S.; indirectly letting China’s arsenal grows steadily. Though China has announced a self-imposed limit of almost 300 nuclear weapons for maintaining deterrence, few observers assume that Beijing’s stockpile will outnumber Moscow’s between 2010 and 2015.

Though China is the most populous country in the world, and second only to America’s economic power, it will take a long time and sustained economic growth rate to challenge the U.S. hegemony. To continue to rise, Beijing will also have to address its domestic social and political problems. China is less likely to pose a
serious challenge to the U.S. for three reasons: its physical isolation and barriers of impassable terrain prohibit expansion, unlike America it is not a major naval power and it is an unstable country with prosperous coastal regions and an impoverished interior.\textsuperscript{52}

**Russian Alliance with NATO**

Only someone with a crystal ball may be able to predict the strategic scenario in the 2030s within the context of Russian and NATO relationship. In geopolitics, the geographical imperatives of a state are permanent and dictate its political fortunes too. The primacy of American power is a derivative of its relative geographical advantage,\textsuperscript{53} Lithuania’s destiny as a state constantly striving to maintain its territorial integrity is geographically preordained\textsuperscript{54} and Russia’s chequered history of attempts to resurge are ephemeral likewise. Hence, from geopolitical perspective, Russia may never be able to regain its Cold War period influence.

Though America’s power is waning, no single state – particularly Russia – will be able to pose a serious challenge to U.S. hegemony in a short term. There is a growing realisation in the Kremlin that Russia risks further disintegration\textsuperscript{55} if it surges on the basis of energy resource politics and nuclear deterrent only. Hence, Russia may attempt to diversify its economy and address its demographic challenges. It will continue to engage NATO, play a second fiddle to the U.S. and show willingness to become a member stopping, short of entering the alliance.

Russia, China, Europe and the U.S. are economically interdependent, so while they appear to compete strategically their
own survival and destinies are intertwined and will largely depend on each other’s stability. For instance, there was is a speculation that China is considering buying European outstanding debt.\textsuperscript{56} Notwithstanding, the permanent competition, the WMD proliferation threat, countering terrorism and efforts to diminish the role of non-state actors are few reasons for increased cooperation between the three great powers.

War is a constant of history\textsuperscript{57} and while the powers will fight for maximising their gains, the nature of war itself will become more non-traditional and asymmetric. This trend has already set in last one decade. Hence, it can be reasonably argued that the strategic stability between Russia, U.S., Europe and China will continue to grow in next two decades. An emerging NATO-Russia strategic concept may be a precursor to such future cooperation. The November 20\textsuperscript{th} NATO summit in Lisbon seized the opportunity created by the “reset” in U.S.-Russian relations and now there appears to be a “fresh start”.\textsuperscript{58}

That said, Russia is likely to grow wealthier by manipulating its energy resources but it will remain geographically insecure. Therefore, Russia will use its wealth to create a military force appropriate to protect its interests and manipulate its neighbours through energy politics to deter them to unite against it.

**Conclusion**

Russia cannot underpin its desire to challenge the U.S. hegemony due to its economic, demographic and geopolitical capacity. Moscow will play a difficult balancing act to regain its
influence in Europe through energy politics and by engaging NATO. The apparent thaw in Russia’s relations with NATO, particularly with the U.S., is due to common security concerns that emerged after the Cold War. American attempts to contain China have thus brought Russia and China closer. Russia’s resurgence is ephemeral and may not even attain its Cold War period power. Thus it may ultimately compromise and think of becoming part of NATO in mid-term.

End Notes


9 Putin has maintained this stance since June 2009. See Blake Marshall, “Policy Matters: The New Tripartite Customs Union and the Implications for Trade and
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12. Russians appear to perceive that Spain, Denmark, or Greece could be forced by the U.S. to approve or take part in an alliance attack on Russian territory. See Keith C. Smith, “Russia and European energy security: divide and dominate,” CSIS, 2008, 2.


14. Ibid.


17. “NATO’s relations with Russia,” Available online at NATO’s http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm accessed on 24 November 2010

18. Ibid.


20. For instance, Russia is also showing its military muscles in Far East. Russian President Dmitri Medvedev was recently the first Russian president to visit the southern Kuril Islands, which are controlled by Russia but claimed by Japan. Its friction with Japan is increasing as a result of re-building its military, from nuclear submarines to missile systems.
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22 Ibid.
28 Russia’s demographic data extracted from The World Fact Book, Central Intelligence Agency.
31 NATO’s 2010 strategic concept is deliberately vague and no specific threat has been identified. Text available online at http://www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf accessed on 20 November 2010.
32 Clive Archer, “New security issues in Northern Europe: the Nordic and Baltic States and the ESDP,” University Association for Contemporary European Studies, Routledge, 2008, 12.
35 Hillary Clinton said in a statement during a joint news conference on 16 November 2010 with Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Azubalis. Washington continues to exert pressure on Russia about Georgia’s territorial
integrity and to work toward energy security. START is one area of U.S.-Russia progress.

36 “NATO’s expansion plans pose a threat to Russia”, said Russia’s Chief of General Staff Gen. Nikolai Makarov on 20 Oct. 2010, B92 reported. He issued this statement during a visit to Serbia while commenting on alliance’s expansion close to the Russian border.


38 NATO has an interest in early ratification of the START as a delay will be detrimental to security across Europe. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said Nov. 19 that a delay to the ratification of the START treaty on nuclear arms would be detrimental to security across Europe, DPA reported. Speaking during a break in the NATO summit in Lisbon, Rasmussen said he "would strongly regret if ratification is delayed" and urged all parties to secure an early ratification.


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56 Denholm Barnetson, “Top Chinese official promises to buy Spanish Debt,” AFP, 5 Jan. 2011.Chinese Deputy Premier Li was on a visit to Spain, Germany, and United Kingdom from 4 – 12 January 2011 once this paper was written. His visit was fuelling speculation that China is considering buying a considerable
portion of European outstanding debt in 2011. China continues to diversifying its purchases of U.S. Treasury bills to other sovereign debt as well.
