

Gould Academy

Staring Into the Eyes of the Bear

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Thirty years ago, Russia was a world superpower. Now, the term BRICS, which denotes five “emerging” economies — one of them Russia, seems almost like an insult to that former nation. Russia is nothing short of desperate to shed the BRICS title and regain its status as a major world player. The question for international theorists is exactly how will Russians engender their rise to the top? The answer is not so cryptic as one might think. In the past, a centralized government and Russian pride have served as a foundation for not only Russian hegemony, but global domination. Nuclear weaponry and communist dictatorships helped Russia to meet the expectations of its global counterparts — the Russian bear was a force to be reckoned with. In 2015, the rest of the world sees Russia more as a dissident cub than the adult bear that emerged during the Cold War. Russia has yet to see itself through the world’s eyes, though, and within the country the bear prevails. This attitude is characterized by a devotion to Russian identity. Refusal to conform with the global order is Russia’s greatest weapon. A nation-wide desire to preserve “Russian-ness” fuels decision-making and simultaneously wards off global organizations looking to interfere. Its seat on the UN Security Council provides Russia with an invaluable window into the global order which would otherwise threaten the potency of its presence. In 2015, Russia has a toe in the door that opens onto the scheme of world power. In a few years, it may have a foot over the threshold... maybe even a whole leg. What is certain is that Russia is moving up. Russians are asserting themselves further and further into the crack of a door that slammed shut when the Soviet Union collapsed. If the Russia of the past is any indication of the Russia of the future, the world should prepare itself for a force that is highly independent, highly authoritarian, and highly motivated to get back on top.

Russia’s history is the best indication of what the future may bring. Their centuries-long reliance on autocracy as a source of legitimacy is unlikely to change. An analysis by Stratfor Global Intelligence asserts that, “Instability is inherent to Russia given its massive, inhospitable territory, indefensible borders, hostile neighboring powers and diverse population. Only when it has had an

autocratic leader who set up a system where competing factions are balanced against each other has Russia enjoyed prosperity and stability.”¹ Such autocratic leaders have taken many titles over Russia’s turbulent history, including that of “tsar” or “general secretary,” and now even “president.” No matter the title, the general pattern is that these leaders rule Russia with an iron fist. Considering Russia’s tendency towards hegemony, this highly-centralized pattern of government does seem rather logical. They may inhabit the world’s largest country by land mass, but Russians have never been satisfied with their borders. After a foray into Siberia in the 16th and 17th centuries, Russia decided that a more appropriate tactic would be conquest in neighboring states. From the confines of the Kremlin, Russian leaders asserted (and continue to assert) their will in the near abroad. In the 18th century, Russia first dominated in the Baltic States. From there they went on to exercise control in what is now the post-Soviet space. Eastern Europe fell prey to Russia’s territorial greed during the Soviet Era, and thus fueled their rise to the top. Nation by nation, Russia developed into the world power that dominated the global scheme during the Cold War Period. Russia’s enormous land mass backed this ascent. Adding more value to this land, Russia’s natural resources include but are not limited to fresh water, crude oil and gas, timber, and coal. Russia encouraged European countries such as Germany to develop a dependence on Russian natural resources in such a way as to escalate their growth. In this way, Russia has become tied inextricably to the European Union, whether member states like it or not.

Unlike their relationship with the UN, Russia’s relationship with the European Union is largely out of the Kremlin’s control. Within the UN, Russia’s permanent seat on the security council is a source of major leverage. Their veto power serves the Russian purpose more than any of their other global presences. When it comes to undermining the global order, Russia would be powerless without this swing vote. For the United Nations, Russia’s permanent seat renders the body generally powerless in terms of asserting dominance over the nation. In contrast, Russia’s lack of direct influence in the EU

¹ “Russia After Putin: Inherent Leadership Struggles,” *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, June 24, 2013, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/russia-after-putin-inherent-leadership-struggles>.

is a weak link that could compromise the country's ascent to power in the 21st century. Other than the control that they maintain through natural resource exports, Russia has little political sway in the EU. Sanctions and other measures taken by EU member countries in either defensive or offensive stances against Russia have the potential to prevent progress. Putin's recent actions in Ukraine, Crimea, and Georgia were accompanied by a drastic fall in the value of the ruble. Inflation skyrocketed as a result of the falling price of oil and foreign sanctions negotiated by the West. Fortunately enough for Russia, China seems keen to rush to their rescue when things start to look unfavorable. There are some indications that Russian leaders (i.e. Putin) are looking to model the rebirth of Russia's economy after the Chinese plan. The two countries assert a similar dominance over their economies, and after a brief exercise in capitalism in the 1990s, it seems like Putin is intent on keeping tight control over the Russian market. Although it is unlikely that Russia would turn once again to communism, Putin's political party, United Russia, tends to dominate the political scheme. In this way, Putin demonstrates his support for the one-party system and ensuing economic terms.² For Russia, China is a paragon of success. Putin views China's economic model as attainable for his country, a perspective which could have positive repercussions that are twofold. First of all, Russia would have a "role model" in the sense that there already exists a clear means for them to rise quickly to the top. In addition, Russia would keep China in its back pocket in terms of economic and political support. However, unfortunate as it is for Russia, there are certain geopolitical barriers that would prevent the Chinese model from success in its current form. With some modification, the Chinese economic model could bring success to Russia, but improper implementation could render them further from their goal than ever before.

Historical signs and current events point to Russia as intent on dominating the global political scene. However, this prediction leans heavily towards the realist school of political thought. From a more liberal lens, Russia has taken steps towards democracy that could even be argued to support the

² Clifford J Levy, "Russia's Leaders See China as Template for Ruling," *New York Times*, October 17, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/world/europe/18russia.html?pagewanted=all>

democratic peace theory. Russian citizens enjoy significant social freedoms, and while they are certainly somewhat restricted in terms of political expression, they are free to travel and exercise the right to vote. This progress, which is quite significant in the face of what was the communist Soviet Union, could be telling of a Russian future that is cooperative and peaceful. A Russia that welcomed NGOs and followed the advice of the US and its allies would certainly be a nice break for President Obama. Unfortunately, it is more likely that the realist perspective is just that: more realistic. Russia has never demonstrated an inclination towards submission, and it is highly unlikely that under Putin's rule would Russia finally become a passive nation. Russia is proud of the Russian identity, and Putin's supporters greatly outnumber his critics. This internal support could be crucial to developing political strength externally. Putin holds his high approval ratings over the heads of political leaders like Obama, who do not enjoy such statistical support. All the same, on a global level, Putin is far less inclined to compromise than President Obama, and thus he enjoys less support out of country. Putin's relationship with NATO is an ideal illustration of his tendency towards dissidence. The NATO/Russia relationship has been tenuous since Russia's military intervention in Ukraine over Crimea. Deputy Secretary General of NATO, Alexander R. Vershbow, went so far as to state, "Clearly, the Russians have declared NATO as an adversary, so we have to begin to view Russia no longer as a partner but as more of an adversary."³ Attitudes such as these define the Russian global identity, and will continue to do so into the future. Russia's refusal to cooperate in affairs like the current state in Crimea portend its relationship with events that could include territorial disputes over Georgia's South Ossetia or the Moldovan region of Transnistria. Once Putin tires of trouble-causing in Ukraine, it's likely that he will move on to stir the dust in nations with whom Russia has recently settled unsatisfactorily. Predictably,

³ Michael R Gordon, "NATO Caps Size of Russia's Mission After Internal Reports of Espionage," *New York Times*, April 9, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/10/world/europe/nato-caps-size-of-russias-mission-after-internal-reports-of-espionage.html?ref=europe>

Putin will conduct these movements with the same indignance that characterizes his current international activities.

Russia's unique Eurasian status does entitle the country somewhat to obstinacy. As the world's largest nation, Russia spans something like eleven time zones and two continents. Beyond its size, Russia possesses the aforementioned natural resources, and around five percent of the world's fresh water is contained in Siberia's Lake Baikal. For Russia's global future, these assets mean persistent uncooperativeness. Already the largest exporter of oil and natural gas to the European Union, Russia's presence in the energy sector is palpable. When the world turns more heavily to sustainable energy, Russia will be ready with hydroelectric power and the potential to harness wind and solar. Because Russia has such a massive capacity for energy production, the US will be hard-pressed to match them on this front. Global energy could serve as the platform for Russia's resurgence. The constant demand for sustainable energy (emphasis on sustainable) is less volatile than the production market that supports China's economy, for instance. If Russia were to turn to the Chinese economic model instead of facilitating for the natural development of their economy, they would sacrifice the benefits that could come from a global reliance on their nation. Politically, Russia is well engineered to act as a skeleton for the Chinese economic model, but the world has yet to know whether or not China's growth will prove sustainable. Russia's choosing to follow in China's footsteps could potentially result in further economic downfall. For several reasons outside of its political framework, Russia would be unable to support the current Chinese model. Russia's population would not allow for the type of enormous cheap labor force that China uses to its economic advantage. It would also be difficult for Russia to create the sort of infrastructure necessary for the mass-production that has developed China's economy. Russia's most realistic prospect would be to adopt a hybrid economic model that was comprised of a Chinese, vise-like grip on the market with a large reliance on sustainable energy development. This sort of economic development would mean that Putin could keep control over Russian economic action and

simultaneously use Russia's global economy as a source of power. Energy resources are one of Russia's greatest points of global leverage, and integrating them further and more innovatively into the economy could have positive repercussions in terms of Russia's ascent to global power.

In the wake of Russia's resurgence, countries like the United States may begin to fall behind. The era of American dominance seems well over, and the time for Eurasian development has arrived. China and Russia will work as partners to overcome a global scheme that is built largely on western sovereignty. The West can expect to deal with a force that derives its potency from a fierce preservation of national identity. Russia's refusal to conform among countries who are quick to westernize will define the nation's political character well into the 21st century. Russia's development will be similarly characterized by authoritarianism. The Russian population finds comfort and strength in Putin's centralized government, and in order to ensure Russia's success into the next decade, it will be crucial that Putin preserve his high levels of support. Of course, if Putin gets so absorbed in his power that he goes so far as to severely limit social rights and freedoms, he could jeopardize his reputation and subsequently Russia's strength. A similar effect could take hold if Putin were to act too obstinate in the face of global challenges in the near abroad. Russia's geopolitical reputation is contingent on a fine balance between cooperative deception and obstinance. If the balance were to be interrupted by Putin's thirst for power, he would risk losing his toehold in the door that opens onto global politics. The last century has seen Russia experience a spectrum of trial and errors. Tsarism, communism, and capitalism all met their match in the Russian bear. Each of these endeavors proved somewhat detrimental to the Russian political structure, but not to such an extent that the country couldn't recover. It would seem that Russia has now seen the entire range of possibilities: they've had a taste of glory and also a spell of destitution. The task of Russian leaders now is to synthesize these experiences to create a stronger nation — to reclaim the title that emerged from their 20th century strength. The Russian bear is catching its second wind.

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