

# **The Lone Bear No Longer**

Russia Today and Its Future Role in  
International Relations

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Though Russia may be one of the easiest countries to locate on a map, defining it is a much more difficult task. A modern Western perspective may see Russia as the last, distinguishable mark of the shadow of communism and the Soviet Union. An Eastern perspective may range from contempt for Russia to unwavering support of its actions. However, it's the conflicted way that Russian citizens view their own country that's most fascinating and revealing of a great Russian paradox: Russia does not yet know its own identity. The past and current state of the Russian identity, in many ways, can be likened to the nature of the popular Russian nesting dolls, known as matryoshka dolls—only with a twist. Like the toy, Russia's identity is comprised of many layers of varying size and prominence; but upon disassembling the layers of Russia's identity one doesn't find consistency among the interior, but a matryoshka set full of miscellaneity. This leaves a fair degree of uncertainty as to Russia's future in global politics. As a powerful player in international relations of today, a lack of transparency in Russian international relations is enough to make other world powers anxious. Therefore, if the Russian identity crisis continues to perpetuate foreign uncertainty as to its ambitions, Russia may adopt a constructivist identity to fulfill its aspirations of becoming a revisionist global power.

Understanding the means by which Russia's disparate identity has developed is key to understanding Russia's current stance on international relations. Of all the components that have divided Russia's identity, Russia's geography is the most obvious. Spanning over 6.6 million square miles, Russia's massive size has left it straddling both "Western" and "Eastern" culture since its inception (CIA Factbook). Thus, Russia's geography lends itself to the question of whether it's an Asian or European country. Historically, Russia isolated itself from Asian and European contact, relying on its vast landmass and resources to upkeep the empire. Nevertheless, Russian indifference as to whether it was European or Asian changed during the reign of Peter the Great, whose modifications resulted in a conflict between traditional Slavic and Western culture. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, leadership in Russia became fixated on Westernization. Using

the western model, Peter invigorated Russia's infrastructure and built St. Petersburg, calling it a "Window on the West" (Wood, 194). Catherine the Great expanded upon Peter's efforts in the late 18th century, but their combined efforts were not enough to erase the rich Slavic culture that resided in Russia. The Slavophiles argued that Westernism was a sickness, and by "curing" Russia they could assume the evangelical role of delivering superior Russian culture to the deteriorating West (Riasanovsky, 363). Though the Slavophile–Westernizer dynamic took a backseat during the Russian revolutions of the 20th century, it had established a decidedly two-faced Russian identity.

Where Peter the Great failed by defining Russia as solely a Western civilization, Lenin's revolution produced a new order that combined aspects of Western and Slavic culture. The regime tried blending elements of westernization, like industrialization and technological innovation, with those of the Slavophile, namely nationalism and resistance to western culture (Wood, 194). Lenin's actions, while a bold move, shortened the divide between Westernism and Slavic culture and further jumbled the notion of a Russian identity. This approach was abandoned only a short time later, when Russian nationalism and Slavic culture was reinvigorated by Stalin's regime:

"Stalin especially used to return to the Russian theme during the first, most difficult period of the Great Patriotic War..the proclamation of the war as 'Patriotic', with repeated usage of the word 'Motherland'...was introduced above all to influence the national consciousness of the whole Russian people." (Bordyugov)

As Stalin's nationalist and socialist doctrine continued to spread throughout the Russian public, it would have appeared that Russia had finally united itself under a single identity. However, only an iron-fisted leader like Stalin could sustain such a brutal regime and the identity it had created. When Nikita Khrushchev assumed power, he began the "de-Stalinization" of Russia, leading to

economic problems and the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union as well as the identity of the Russian public.

The downfall of the Soviet Union furthered the sense of a contrasting identity in Russia. After eleven countries declared their independence from the union in 1991, Boris Yeltsin was forced to end the union (Wood, 206). He still remained the leader of Russia, and his radical economic policies like “shock therapy” made Russia a free market economy overnight. Suddenly, Russian businesses were able to buy and trade freely with other countries, giving them a sense of first-timer confidence. Of course, shock therapy also continued to undercut the Russian identity. The quick transition from communism to an economic system based on western model incited doubt into Russian citizens as to the direction of the government. Instability plagued the system, and the Russian public, recently separated from the communist ideal, longed for stability. Vladimir Putin then came to the rescue in 1999, acting as the strong leader Russians desired. While Putin has succeeded in bringing stability to Russia, the turmoil that ensued before his rise to power has left the Russian public floundering in terms of a collective identity.

Today, Russia’s approach to international relations is as enigmatic as their search for an identity. Part of Russia’s approach is reflected by two national values held in high regard by the Russian public, nationalism and statism. Russian citizens’ expectation that their government will take an active role in their lives was perhaps instilled during the rule of the tsars. Putin is the current embodiment of a strong leader, evidenced by his vast approval ratings from the Russian public. Putin’s nostalgia for the superpower Russia of the 1990s harkens back to the golden age of Russian stability and influence in global politics. This nostalgia has inspired the notion that Russia was at its best when it was the Russian Bear against the West, stimulating a degree of nationalistic spirit among the Russian public. This spirit has invariably rubbed off on Russian politics. Russian politicians are generally considered to be realists, or those who believe in a world order of individual states conflicting with each other (Lawson, 41). Russia’s individualist approach to world

politics is certainly derivative from the nostalgia of the glory days of the Soviet Union. Putin, however, has realized the current and potential economic and political benefits of reaching out to foreign markets, namely America and those in the European Union.

Keeping with Russia's ambiguous identity, realism is not the sole approach Russia takes to international politics. Russian has also started to adopt a mild form of constructivism in their approach to foreign relations. Putin has aggressively pursued economic opportunities with Western nations that often promote different domestic policies than his own. This is a stumbling block for many of the democratic countries that are dealing with Russia. Yet Russian policymakers do not view this as a major problem. Current Russian leaders appear to be proponents of a theory developed by Russian intellectualists in the 1990s that discussed a "multipolar alliance" of powerful countries that would battle the "unipolar" world the United States was building (Jurado, 6). It's true that this theory was developed at time when anti-American and anti-capitalist sentiment was still high in Russia. However, the enduring idea of a multipolar alliance—like-minded, but not necessarily identical countries working together—reflects Russia's stance on working with countries that are similar to themselves: they are willing to cooperate, but a country's individualism is held in higher regard than the group's. Russia values individuality in a world where political regionalization is becoming popular, for example, in Europe.

The European Union, of course, represents the sort of unipolarity that Russian politics resents. Russia understands, nonetheless, that its prospects as an isolated country in a globalized world are dismal. One could therefore assume that Russia cooperates with Europe out of necessity. But some would argue that there's reason to believe differently; according to one political scientist, "Russia's re-emergence on the global stage has coincided with a new emphasis on the part of the Kremlin to underline Russia's European credentials, and...(in some ways) to be part of the "western club" of states" (Jurado, 6). Although Russia is only beginning to accept itself as something of a

European state they are the quickest to acknowledge that there are differences between themselves and European countries.

Much like the past incarnations of the Russian identity, the Russian identity suggested by Vladimir Putin's political actions lack in how they define Russia. This may be because the remnants of a Russian identity that Putin was left with after the collapse of the Soviet Union do not provide enough of a foundation from which to build a legitimate national character. Discussing the collapse of the Soviet Union, novelist Zinovy Zinik notes that in the course of one decade, "The entire communist universe, like a Soviet Atlantis, disappeared from the map of the world...We are no longer sure what country under the name of Russia we are dealing with" (Zinik). While some of the countries that fall into Russia's "near abroad" category may be skeptical of a resurgent Russia with an ambiguous identity, there's a good chance that Russia will look to act together with other countries in the future than on its own.

By some indications, Russia is moving towards the creation of the multi-polar world order first described by Primakov and other Russian intellectualists of the 1990s. This hints at their further withdrawal of realist policies in exchange for constructivist ones. Rather than continuing to assume the "loner" identity in the eyes of foreign countries, Russia's next stab at an identity could come from their attempt to form a revisionist world order. Putin has declared that the breakup of the Soviet Union was, "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" (Winchester). This sentiment roughly explains the reason behind aggressive measures in places like Crimea and Ukraine, both of which demonstrate Putin's efforts to recreate a large, world order like the Soviet Union. This order, however, cannot have Russia as the centerpiece once again. Instead, Russia would be one of many other powerful, like-minded countries who reject the unipolar order he believes the United States is imposing on the rest of the world. One country that Russia has already taken sides with is China. A Sino-Russian relationship exemplifies the type of multi-polar relationship that will be crucial to Russia's idea of a new world order. China and Russia represent

a, “Dichotomy between a revisionist power intent on reversing the current world order, and a rising power focused on bending it to Beijing’s will.” (Kitfield). Clearly, their political ambitions are rather contrary to each other. However, by competing with each other for top dog in the relationship, they are invariably bringing themselves closer together. If a Sino-Russian team were to persist, they would ultimately be powerful enough to challenge the will of the United States and European Union in future political conflicts.

Russia’s potential transition towards constructivism and a multi-polar world order may also come as a result of the advance of pro-western forces in Russia’s “near abroad”. This term is used to describe the 14 post-Soviet successor states that surround Russia. The fact that the Baltic states—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—have joined the European Union since the breakup of the Soviet Union is a major blow to Russian conceptions of security and national identity. From a Russian perspective it appears that the unipolar European Union and NATO member nations are encroaching upon its borders. Though both NATO and the European Union profess that it is a nation’s individual choice to join their organizations, the fast advancement of democracy on Russian borders may be like poking a caged lion—or bear.

Regardless of their new relationships with other world powers, keeping a solid relationship with the United States will remain crucial for Russia’s geopolitical strategy. The United States is still the world’s greatest power. Though their domestic policies are dissimilar, negotiating with the United States is a significant for Russian leaders because it makes Russia appear bigger. Matthew Rojansky, an expert in U.S. relations with former Soviet countries, theorizes that Russia’s current tactics with the U.S. are part of Putin’s power politics approach to world relations. Lately, Putin has only been interested in dealing with countries that are as powerful, if not more powerful, than Russia. This tactic helps develop the sense that Russia is once again a world power with weight to throw around. This is partly true, but much of the power they have is derivative from their economic leverage (not necessarily political leverage) on the United States and European Union.

Russia's most successful scenario in a developing world, however, will not come as a result of pitting itself against some world powers while joining with others. Rather, the opportunity for Russia to achieve a degree of multilateralism in its relations with other world powers—even those who represent the unipolar world order Russia resents—is in Russia's best interests. The success of integrating Russia and the U.S. into a multi-polar relationship is contingent on two factors: First, Russia needs to establish an identity. Today, the matryoshka dolls that represent the Russia identity have no degree of homogeneity. This inner conflict continues to confuse world powers as to Russia's true intentions and therefore undermines Russia's effort to establish themselves on the world stage. Second, western powers must treat Russia as an equal in world politics. Although Russia has a permanent spot on the United Nations Security Council, the revisionist views of Russian politicians estrange the growing number of politicians from democratic countries. Thus, Russia's ideas are more prone to being ignored in favor of more agreeable democratic ideals. They're also more susceptible to democratic lectures on behalf of the democratic world orders; given how elusive Russia's identity is, Russians doesn't appreciate other leaders assuming their identity and laying down a blueprint to follow. The European Union and NATO must also overcome their interventionist tendencies when it comes to Russia's development, and allow Russia to follow its own developmental path. Only then can true pluralism be achieved, giving Russia the chance to see the value in multilateralism and the potential for compromise in forming a multi-polar world order that includes NATO and the European Union.

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