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Russia and Eurasia Programme Meeting Summary

Russian Foreign Policy Under Putin: The Making of an Independent Centre of Power

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In the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, there was talk of a possible strategic alliance between Russia and the West. However, it soon became clear that despite the end of the Cold War, national interests did not coincide. Russia's realist policies were partly a response to NATO expansion; prospects for cooperation reached a nadir in 1994-5. Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev was even dismissed for failing to prevent NATO expansion into Central and Eastern Europe.

For Russia, a possible strategic alliance could take the form of cooperation with NATO and/or the EU. However, cooperation with NATO is not feasible in the current situation. The US would not welcome Russia's entry into the alliance, as it would no longer be the only major power in this grouping. Also, Russia's entry would hardly be welcomed by the states that joined NATO to escape Russian influence. The impasse will continue as long as NATO continues to act against Russia's security interests.

The Russian public has a rather negative view of the alliance; the way UNSC resolution 1973 was implemented caused an uproar and led then President Medvedev to declare that Russia would not allow a similar course of action in Syria. Cooperation through the NATO-Russia Council has not brought Russia closer to the alliance; NATO does not take Russia's opinion into consideration on important matters. Also, the promise of a Membership Action Plan to Georgia or Hillary Clinton's reminders that Ukraine could yet join NATO do not help improve the relationship. Russia does not dictate Ukraine's policy options. Ukraine has a dual track policy – increasing integration with the EU while maintaining good relations with Russia. Former President Yushchenko's anti-Russian and pro-NATO stance was not popular.

NATO has taken the view that Russian opinion is not decisive. It is no longer a purely defensive alliance – it has been involved in conflicts in Afghanistan, Libya, and former Yugoslavia. It is now an alliance that projects its influence into the Euro-Atlantic area. Georgia is already an unofficial NATO member; it uses US equipment and probably shares intelligence with NATO. The Libya invasion, despite being a European initiative, would not have been feasible without US support, just as NATO would be a non-entity without the US military might. Any invasion of Syria would be executed by US forces.

The only areas where cooperation has been relatively successful are Afghanistan and piracy off the coast of Somalia. However, the system currently in place in Afghanistan can only work with the US military present. When US troops pull out of Afghanistan in 2014, there is a high chance of the Taliban returning to power. The Soviet and American experience with the

country shows we should try to reach an agreement whereby the country is governed by locals.

America's principal argument in favour of the European anti-missile shield is that it will protect Europe from Iranian nuclear missiles. Yet, the US has also declared that it will not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. Once the shield is operational, it would have the capacity to neutralize Russian missiles. Russia and the US should try and reach an agreement on ballistic missile defense (BMD) before it is scheduled to become operational (in 2018). Germany wants the BMD issue solved, but it is not an independent international player: it is, after all, an EU and NATO member. Italy, France and the UK are also important for Russia. However, the number of independent actors with whom Russia could develop an alliance is limited.

The US seeks to counter Russian influence in the post-Soviet space, e.g. in Ukraine in 2004 or by blocking Putin's proposal on Transnistria in 2003. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is one of the few international bodies that the US is not a part of, and its members are likely to want to keep it that way. Russians' opinion of the EU is more positive, but cooperation with the Union is also fraught with problems. The EU's credentials are down because of the euro crisis. Pro-European liberals are not popular among Russian voters and have little support outside Moscow.

If Russia had intervened in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, it would not have led to conflict with the West. However, there is apprehension towards the use of force in Russian government circles. For example, NATO has been pushing Russia to deploy military personnel in Afghanistan, but Russia has consistently refused to do so. In Georgia in 2008, Russia used military force because Russian citizens were at risk. The stability of the post-Soviet space is important for Russia and if a crisis occurs there, Russia may proceed to intervene through The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The treaty contains a provision for a 15,000-strong force to be deployed in times of crisis.

A G2 world is not likely to appear as China does not want to shoulder the responsibility for world order. EU-Russia cooperation might be a response to the rise of China; but EU is prevented by the US from forming closer links with Russia as it would be considered detrimental to US security interests. If US President Obama's trend of adapting to a changed world prevails, chances for EU-Russia cooperation are better than if presidential candidate Mitt Romney's thesis – that the US should lead or others will – comes to the fore.

The perception of Russia as isolated is inaccurate; relative isolation from the West does not mean isolation from the rest of the world as we now live in a post-Western world. The BRIC grouping is promising but it is not yet a priority for Russian policy. The rationale behind the BRICs is to move away from a unipolar world order dominated by the US. The BRIC countries are interested in one another because none is a member of a major alliance.

The decision to form the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) stemmed from Russia's unsuccessful attempts at cooperation with the West. Kazakhstan is an important gateway to the Far East – the new centre of economic power – and Belarus is an important market for Russian industry. There has been a 40% rise in the trade among the three states. If others join, the Union may slowly evolve into an important organization. Economy has its own logic and Ukraine may take a more favourable stance towards the ECU yet.

Unless there is a serious economic crisis in Russia, the protests will slowly die down. The election results have been recognised by all parties, so there is nothing to unite the opposition. Also, the majority of Russians lean towards the left, so new elections would not bring a desirable result for liberals.