

The Tyranny of American Exceptionalism: Russia at the Fore of World Politics

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The Ukrainian crisis has thrust Russia's role in world politics sharply to the fore. In this risky game Putin is proving he has a good conceptual grasp of how to create a new world order to replace the tyranny of American exceptionalism.

Let us first examine the military and strategic aspects of the Ukrainian crisis from the Russian standpoint. What did Eastern Europe look like at the beginning of 2014? Russia was surrounded by a sea of American military bases. NATO expands steadily eastward, and there is now the possibility that it could incorporate Finland and perhaps Ukraine as well. When Kosovo was carved out of Serbia, the Americans immediately built there one of the largest military bases in the world. And one can't ignore America's weapons or its state of combat readiness and military targets. That nation is consistently at a high level of combat readiness and its primary targets are located within Russia. US missile defense systems are steadily approaching Russia's borders, and Russia is still viewed as the enemy in NATO's operational planning.

Twenty-five years ago the USSR's (Russia's) front line of defense in the West passed through East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. This line was located 500-800 kilometers from the Soviet border. The weakening of the USSR led to a loss of influence in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact, the creeping spread of NATO, and consequently, to the serious loss of depth in the theater of military operations. Now Russia's line of defense – running from the Kaliningrad region to the western border of Belarus to Transnistria (where a Russian peacekeeping contingent is located) to Sevastopol (the base for Russia's Black Sea Fleet) – has been fractured. Ukraine's metamorphosis (with America's backing) will quite likely result in the eventual appearance of NATO troops in that country, and, of course, the elimination of the Russian military base in Sevastopol. At that point, Transnistria would be located deep within NATO's territory and almost inaccessible to Russia. On that subject Vladimir Putin has commented, "We ... could not allow our access to the waters of the Black Sea to be significantly limited, or for NATO troops to arrive ... in Crimea or Sevastopol ... radically changing the balance of power around the Black Sea." The loss of Sevastopol would lead to a new and dramatic reduction in the depth of the theater of military operations. The northern border of Ukraine is less than 500 kilometers from Moscow. It is also less than 500 kilometers from the eastern border of Ukraine to a large division of silo-based missiles in the Saratov region. At such a close distance, the flight time of a medium-range missile is only a few minutes. That means there would be no time to respond.

In this context, Crimea's reunification with Russia should be seen as an important strategic

victory. Regardless of how events unfold in Ukraine, how aggressively our Western partners behave, or even the outcome of the uprising in the Donbass, a key strategic decision has already been made: Crimea will remain an important link in the Russian defense system. And although it is still possible for Ukraine to fall utterly under American control (which would entail the deployment of military systems there), by retaining Sevastopol, and all of Crimea especially, it will still be possible to maintain a strategic balance.

Edward Luttwak, the well-known American expert on strategy and geopolitics, recently offered this synopsis of the Crimean operation, "That's how you have to look at Crimea, not as a simple land grab, but as part of a larger strategy ..." And another quote from the same interview with Luttwak is also applicable, "Only two cultures in the world possess genuine strategic talent: the British and the Russians. And that's why Russia is the biggest country on earth – the Russians have not always been strategically successful throughout their history, but they were able to hold onto their talent and replicate it with each new generation."

Contemporary analytical journalism usually falls short by paying scant attention to strategic perspectives. The events in Yugoslavia in the 1990s offer a telling example. In very few of the many articles analyzing the civil war in that country and its subsequent collapse did the authors think to mention that strategic planners saw Yugoslavia as a key country in the European theater of military operations. Naturally the collapse of Yugoslavia was a boon to the West, in the military sense. Where once was a strong, independent country with a respectable army, now sit six weak states. When Serbia was definitively polished off, the Balkans ceased to be a headache for the West and now offer a wide-open field. The American military base already mentioned in Kosovo is a recent symbol of this strategic success.

The geopolitical status quo

Recently, the media in the US, Europe, and in some cases in Russia, have increasingly begun to advance the theory that President Putin is turning his back on the West, rejecting European values, and is even prepared to reduce the scope of Russia's trade with Europe, disengaging his nation. Russia's pivoting trajectory is supposedly Europe's loss and China's gain. But such an interpretation of Russian foreign policy seems overly simplified.

By retaining an open mind, one can see that over the course of 15 years of governing the country Vladimir Putin has never done anything to warrant accusations of any anti-European sentiment. Putin's acclaimed speech delivered in German at the Bundestag in 2001 was a vivid symbol of Russia's openness to the idea of cooperation with Europe on all fronts. During the "Putin" years, annual trade with Europe has expanded from \$80 billion to \$417 billion as of last year.

Putin has worked tirelessly to accommodate the needs of Europe and the West. Most of that interaction has been concentrated within the realm of energy, an area in which Putin has suggested that Europe make large-scale investments. As a result, as much as 25% of Russia's energy assets are now foreign owned. Putin has proposed an exchange of assets, and some of those efforts have been successful. There is already some reason to believe that the creation of a future Russian-European joint energy industry could become a reality.

But when Russia suggested trading technology for access to Russian natural resources, tensions immediately arose. The West does not want to share its technology with us, even on what would clearly be very financially advantageous terms.

A similar discussion arose around the question of deploying elements of the American missile-defense system in Europe. All Russian admonitions and appeals to stop this process and to instead work together in this area, using the Russian radar station in Azerbaijan, for example, have fallen on deaf ears.

So it is not Russia that is turning to China, but the West whose actions are inadvertently pushing Russia to the East. Sanctions restricting the economic give-and-take between Russia and Europe are inadvertently forcing Russia to expand its partnership with China. Although trade with China is not quite \$100 billion a year – only a quarter of the level with Europe – the momentum is clearly in China’s favor. One might well recall the recent mammoth deal between Russia and China to build the Power of Siberia gas pipeline, the construction of which will require an estimated \$60-70 billion of investment. Today Russian-Chinese relations are proceeding more smoothly than ever before. And if that relationship will someday grow to include military cooperation, then a reorientation toward the East will be inexorable.

To be continued...

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