



## Russia as a Eurasian power: impact and limits of the relationship between Russia and the West

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"Russia has always considered itself to be a Eurasian country. We have never forgotten that a greater part of Russian territory lies in Asia".

Vladimir Putin

During the first ten years of the new millennium, the combined effects of a "super" growth cycle and panic on the energy markets fed the ambitions of the Russian leaders and their vision of a re-emerging power capable of developing a continental-scale geopolitical strategy in the post-Soviet and indeed international arena. The "Five-Day War" and the invasion of the Georgian territory put the geopolitical revisionism of the official line into practice. Since then, the economic crisis has lifted the veil on the real situation in provincial Russia and underlined the redeployment of power taking place in a world in which the balance is moving towards Asia and emerging economies. In an attempt to identify common interests between Russia and Western powers, the United States and their allies (NATO-EU) have started to implement a commitment policy (the Obama diplomacy's "reset"). According to some analyses, the assertion of Chinese power could

lead Russians and Westerners to form a virtual alliance. That may well be. However, the Russian/Western revival has its limits and comes up against logic that is specific to "Russia-Eurasia".

## The "*reset*" and its geopolitical context

### > **Neutralising Russia's nuisance potential**

Barack Obama's arrival in power and the administration he set up in January 2009 marked a clear change in American politics in relation to Russia (Vice-President Joe Biden had mentioned key aspects at the Munich Conference in February 2009). Western diplomacies then engaged in a communication exercise aiming less to describe the real situation in Russia ("an oligarchy led by the secret services" according to Robert Gates, U.S. Defence Secretary) than to allow and justify clearing windows for cooperation on a number of concrete issues (strategic nuclear negotiations, antimissile systems, Iran, Afghanistan). Despite Medvedev's attendance of the most recent NATO summit (Lisbon, 19-20 November 2010) and media short-cuts, Russia is indeed an "enemy-partner" that is making use of its blocking ability and nuisance potential to try and hoist itself above its current status as a "secondary power". Conversely, Westerners are seeking to neutralise this negative type of power and to free up areas of cooperation in order to concentrate on essential strategic tasks (the fight against nuclear proliferation, wars in Afghanistan and elsewhere).

### > **Strategic cooperation of limited impact**

In actual fact, the lines have moved somewhat with regard to strategic nuclear issues (START-3 treaty, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010) (1), Iran (new Security Council resolution voted on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2010) and even Afghanistan (agreement regarding the principle of increased Russian assistance to the Afghan national army and opening a "northern route" for NATO logistics). However, we should not overestimate the impact of such reciprocal action. It will be hard to establish overall cooperation in the Vancouver-Vladivostok area. As far as antimissiles and cooperation between NATO and Russia are concerned, nothing can be taken for granted. The Russian leaders intend to acquire a sphere of influence in Central Europe, giving them the right to examine the foreign and defence policies of the countries in question, a prospect which is excluded by Westerners (2). Whereas Moscow is attempting to bypass the Euro-Atlantic cohesion by developing a network of bilateral relationships, Westerners are endeavouring to renew the Atlantic Alliance, an essential area for manoeuvre and reassurance in order to prevent Europe from being turned into a "Eurasian peninsula". These divergences between Russians and Westerners were confirmed at the most recent OSCE summit (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) held in Astana on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2010. This is the very essence of the problem.

### > **Russia's return to its Western margins**

The August 2008 Russian-Georgian war altered the equilibrium and outlook in the Eurasian hinterland of Europe. It is true that the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) did not follow Moscow's example in recognising Georgian secessionist entities (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), which underlined the limits of Russia's diplomatic influence as far as "close foreign countries". However, the Russian military thrust in the South Caucasus and Russian game-playing involving incentives both positive (energy agreements, capital exports, vote-catching) and negative (threats, destabilisation attempts, embargos) were not without an effect in the Ukraine. Indeed, European diplomacies were surprised by the rapidity of the reconciliation between Kiev and Moscow (extension of the lease of the Sebastopol naval base until 2042) once the initial optimism on the arrival in power of Viktor Yanukovich had passed (3). Europe remains excessively prudent in the light of many worrying signs in terms of basic liberties (pressure on information, threats against the opposition and its leaders, return of Russian agents in the Crimea, etc.). As for Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko's personality and way in which his regime operates are naturally

leading to reorientation towards Russia, as the oscillatory behaviour of Brussels and Moscow is merely seeking to increase the scope of action of Belarusian power (4).

## A "Russia-Eurasia" separate from the West

### > The "Russian system": patrimonial authoritarianism

In the 1990s, the dislocation of "Soviet Russia" and the expansion of Euro-Atlantic ensemble to Central and Eastern Europe led to fears in Russia of a geopolitical swing towards the depths of Eurasia. In actual fact, the political involutions observed since the start of the new millennium do not confirm the emergence of a "New West" and, in many respects, the "Russian system" is closer to the existing regimes in most of the post-soviet area than to western constitutional-pluralist regimes. This is emphasised by the Khodorkovsky affair and the legal nihilism it demonstrates. This is a type of authoritarianism based on relationships of the manager-client variety, control over private incomes, a combination of selective opening up to the world economy (exportation of basic products, importation of consumer products) and a freezing of internal politics. When analysed according to political science categories, the "Russian system" comes under patrimonial authoritarianism, a concept developed in the wake of the work of Max Weber on patrimonialism (5). It would be a mistake to think that the type of political regime does not have an effect on the foreign policy exercised by a State. Recently, a group consisting of important French political figures reminded us: "Stable, reliable partnerships with Russia can only exist if our basic common values are shared and applied. When human rights are protected, property rights are guaranteed and justice prevails over corruption" (6).

### > The hypothetical great Russian-Chinese conflict

According to a classic scenario, the combined effects of Chinese resentment generated by memories of "unequal treaties", the huge demographic imbalances on both sides of the border, the Chinese economy's "thirst" for basic products and the reversal of the Sino-Russian geopolitical equation could result in future crises or even a major conflict between the Russians and the Chinese. This vision of the future is wielded both in Moscow and in Western capitals to justify reciprocal political reconciliation. Although we should not ignore the medium and long-term after-effects of China's rise to power, the relationship between Peking and Moscow is not heading towards a "major conflict". The two countries have been linked by a "strategic partnership" since 1996, strengthening their relationship not only bilaterally but also within the SCO. Their border disagreements have mostly been resolved (the 2004 treaty put an end to reciprocal claims), and cooperation in the energy field has resulted in projects for "tubes" from Eastern Siberia to Northern China (7). It would definitely be hasty to regard Russia as a "Euro-Pacific power", but geo-economic logic for cooperation based on shared interests could be developed on the Russian-Chinese boundaries, thus dissipating the spectre of a "yellow peril" (8).

### > A Eurasian conglomerate of patrimonial regimes

Sino-Russian rivalries are actually stronger in Central Asia than in the Far East. Moscow should be more worried about the expansion of China's energy and trade interests (9) than about free access to the Caspian basin for Westerners (see *Nabucco* gas pipeline project). Russian hesitation during the South Kirghizstan Pogroms in June 2010 should not conceal the fact that Russia has reinvested a significant amount in this "centre of the Empires" since the mid 2000s following the "colour revolutions". More generally, the key idea behind Russian politics is to unite all or some of the countries belonging to the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) in more coherent formats such as the CSTO in political and military terms, or even in the form of the Eurasian Economic Community. Many of these countries share the same Soviet past and its afterglows, their economies are frequently based on natural resources and patrimonial regimes and their leaders uphold reciprocal solidarity

when it comes to the need to open up to others and to modernise their countries. The Russian leaders intend to re-establish the foundations of their power by adopting more or less loose methods for controlling "Near abroad countries" and by placing themselves at the intersection of the OSCE and the SCO. Consequently, their manoeuvring goes beyond merely rebalancing the weight of the United States and their allies from the Old World, and is carried out in the hope of forming the optimal basis for associating Russia with the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical system.

## Concluding points and geopolitical prospects

The continuing literary and philosophical debates between Slavophiles and Westernisers, relaunched by the Eurasian ideological trend, have artificially reduced Russia's geopolitical future to a simple alternative between East and West. In actual fact, Russia is a huge Eurasian unit which consists not only of land below the Ural, but also in the Islamic East and distant Asia. The transfer of the balance of power towards the Asian Pacific and the development of new economic and diplomatic opportunities in the "Great East" should convince the Russian leaders to come to terms with the Eurasian nature of their continent state.

However, we need to fully grasp the importance of the challenges facing a country which still has to deal with the dilemma of being a "poor power" with a frozen political system, notwithstanding the conventional praise of the "power vertical" established at the start of the millennium and the "virtuism" (10) of its leaders. We are not only referring to the consequences of corruption, the "curse of raw materials" or even, in the medium and long term, to the Russian demographic debacle; the North Caucasus drifts and the declining Russian ethnic presence in the "foreign homeland" will no doubt have an impact on other territories within the Federation (Muslim entities south of the Ural and the Volga for instance).

Consequently, without being at all complacent, and taking into account the Eurasian nature of Russia, Western powers owe it to themselves to implement a policy of active commitment to well defined objectives, upholding the security interests of their allies and partners in Central and Eastern Europe. Such an active commitment must be counterbalanced by a resolute policy of openness towards countries which have initiated or carried out a turnaround in their general politics (of which Georgia is the best example), without prejudice to the final outcome in the Ukraine, or in Moldavia, where the processes are contradictory.

Lastly, although we should bear in mind the possibility of a geopolitical upheaval which would completely overturn Russia's relationship with the West, other scenarios need to be anticipated. Let us imagine the possibility of a political protest at the very "centre" of Russia (a sort of delayed "Orange revolution") which would show the limits of a power whose apparent strength lies in the indifference of a Russian population which gives priority to the personal sphere, an appearance relayed by the "choice of words" of Western diplomacies. Morality and praxis both require a language of truth.

### Jean-Sylvestre MONGRENIER

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(1) According to the START-3 treaty, both the Russian and American strategic nuclear arsenals are to be cut down to 1550 warheads (a 30% decrease) and 750 vectors respectively.

(2) During the NRC (NATO-Russia council) organised in Lisbon, Medvedev simply accepted the launch of a "joint analysis" which would "enable decisions to be reached". Moscow demands an "equal share" in the project and has apparently suggested dividing the Vancouver-Vladivostok space into areas of responsibility for intercepting enemy ballistic missiles, which would be the equivalent of ratifying the Russian desire for recognition of an exclusive sphere of Russian interests in Central and Eastern Europe. Cooperation between NATO and Russia would probably be limited to advanced warning, sharing information and a series of confidence and security measures.

(3) Viktor Yanukovich was elected Ukrainian President on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2010, against a backdrop of widespread Ukrainian disappointment following rifts between the *leaders* of the "Orange revolution" and European procrastination regarding Ukraine's possible membership of the EU and, to a lesser extent, granting the Ukraine NATO candidate status.

(4) On 19<sup>th</sup> December 2010, Lukashenko was elected President of Belarus for the fourth time with a Soviet style score denounced by the OSCE's competent authorities; five of his competitors were put in prison. Despite recurring disagreements with the Russian leaders, he had first signed an agreement regarding the creation of a common economic area between Moscow and Astana (9<sup>th</sup> December 2010), given that Russia had abandoned the idea of imposing oil rights for exports (Belarus imports Russian petrol at preferential tariffs and re-exports it at the market rate).

(5) "Neo-patrimonialism" as defined in the comparative analysis of political systems is regarded as characteristic of developing countries.

(6) Group made up of André Glucksmann, Bernard Kouchner, Noëlle Lenoir, Hervé Mariton, Hubert Védrine and Galia Ackerman, "Russia, pays de droit? Lettre à M. Medvedev", *Le Monde*, 15<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

(7) The Skovorodino-Daqing oil pipeline (1013 km) was inaugurated on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2010 - a derivation of the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline. This marks a turning point in Russian energy policy, offers hope for the construction of gas pipelines to China and helps open up the Far East of Russia.

(8) Amongst other things, we should point out that the Russian leaders shamelessly exploit Sino-Japanese rivalries around the Senkaku islands in the South China Sea in order to strengthen their geopolitical position in the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan regarding the Kuril Islands (Medvedev's visit on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2010).

(9) See Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier, *Du Turkménistan au Sin-Kiang: axes énergétiques et reconfigurations géopolitiques de l'ancien Turkestan*, Thomas More Institute, 5<sup>th</sup> January 2010.

(10) Neologism is borrowed from the Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto and his *Treatise on general sociology*, 1916.

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