

# G – Great Powerness

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DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2020-18-1-85-91

In the theory of international relations, great powerness is associated not only with independent foreign policy and national security, but also with the opportunities and influence that only a few states in the world have. At the same time, the concept of ‘great power’ has different interpretations. For some, it means material and power possibilities, for others, it is status and prestige, while still others understand it as an ideological and political dimension and the ability to lead by example. The most simplistic interpretation of great powerness has been given by representatives of American neorealism, for which all states are the same and differ only in their power potential.

Great-power thinking is characterized by at least three principles. First, the advocates of great powerness separate internal factors from external ones in how they influence the development of society. They are convinced that the international environment is a priority as it is least subject to control and potentially is the most destabilizing factor. Foreign policy, therefore, cannot merely reflect the needs of domestic development, but must respond to international challenges. Second, the advocates of great powerness believe in the permanence of the state’s geopolitical interests. The state has no permanent friends and enemies, but only permanent

interests—Russian statisticians often cite this maxim, following Lord Palmerston. Statisticians can advocate national ideology if it does not constrain the state, but helps formulate and protect its interests. The third principle is related to the second one and refers to the flexibility of foreign policy alliances. If the state has no mission but has permanent national interests, its leaders must be prepared to cooperate with anyone, but only so much as may be necessary for ensuring the interests of the state.

Lying behind the general components and principles of great powerness are various historical conditions of its emergence and development. Each power is unique, nationally and historically, solves its tasks in its own way and justifies the significance of the chosen solutions as it sees fit. For Russia, great powerness has historically been determined by the importance of maintaining the internal unity of a geographically large and socially diverse state. Its core postulate is a strong state capable of governing a complex country. Without such a state, it would have been impossible to gather the lands and strengthen the borders during the Moscow period, defeat Sweden, the strongest power in the early 18th century, participate in maintaining the European balance of power in the 19th century, and build the Soviet system in the 20th century.

What makes Russia's external conditions quite specific is that it has long land borders, neighbors on several powerful states, lies between Western and non-Western civilizations, and some other factors. It should also be stressed that, due to relative geopolitical remoteness, size and Orthodoxy, Russia is not an organic part of Europe. And yet, it sought to merge with the Western world, while asserting itself as an independent and culturally unique power.

Russian great powerness implies (1) a sphere of cultural and value influence in Eurasia and Europe, (2) political and economic self-sufficiency, and (3) military capabilities sufficient to defeat any other power. The great powerness understood this way ensures the achievement of the strategic goals of drawing close to Europe, keeping special trust-based relations with the East, and maintaining decisive influence in Eurasia.

While sharing the formulated principles of thinking, Russian advocates of great powerness are nevertheless a heterogeneous group of people who offer different strategies for achieving the goals of the state. With a certain degree of simplification, three main groups can be distinguished.

The first group includes those who have historically advocated an alliance with the West against common threats. An example of such cooperation would be Russia's attempts to participate in the First Northern War against Sweden (1655-1660) in alliance with other European states. A little later, Russia joined the Holy League to confront the Ottoman Empire by signing a treaty of eternal peace with Poland, its long-standing rival, in 1686. Peter the Great began his reign with an ambassadorial trip with a view to rallying European states against the Swedish threat. The proclamation of Russia as a "European power" and Catherine the Great's participation in the Seven Years' War fit perfectly into this reading of great powerness. An even more important example is the Holy Alliance concluded by Alexander I with other European states in a bid to ward off a danger similar to the one that had earlier come from Napoleonic France. In the second half of the 19th and in the 20th centuries, examples of alliances with Western countries against a common threat included the Entente, an attempt to form an anti-Hitler coalition before World War II, and the opening of the Second Front against the Nazis. In the 21st century, Russia has tried to build an alliance with the West against international terrorism.

The second group of Russian statisticians advocates a flexible allied policy that is not focused entirely on Western countries as priority partners. When Russia was unable to achieve goals in alliance with Western countries or garner their support, Russian rulers often retreated into relative isolation to regroup forces or buy some "respite" (Vladimir Lenin). At the beginning of the 17th century, after several losses in the confrontation with Poland, Russia remained in isolation until 1654, when it launched a new offensive, taking over Ukraine. In the 18th century, Russia took a twenty-year pause by assuming neutrality in the war with Sweden in order to ensure its own financial and demographic recovery. Following its defeat in the Crimean War, Russia took time to "concentrate" by implementing a policy of flexible alliances until it could finally regain lost positions on the Black Sea. The Bolsheviks' "peaceful coexistence" and Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country" were also an attempt to subdue foreign policy activity in order to strengthen the country after the revolution and the civil war. Finally, this group also includes Yevgeny Primakov's attempts to maneuver between the West, China, and India after the end of the Cold War.

The third type of Russian great-power thinking is quite offensive, including in relations with the West, if the latter refuses to recognize Russia's vital foreign policy interests. Russia has repeatedly asserted its interests unilaterally, regardless of Western criticism. In the 17th century, the Russian state fought numerous wars with Poland and the Ottoman Empire, seeking to strengthen its borders and protect Balkan Slavs. In the 18th century, Peter the Great crushed Sweden without forging any alliance with European states. Russia was mostly successful in fighting Turkey until the Crimean War, which it lost because of the support given to its adversary by England and France. After internal recovery, Russia resumed active politics in the Balkans, inflicting a new defeat on the Turks in the 1870s. In the 20th century, the Bolsheviks' "world revolution" doctrine became a prime example of offensive thinking as it questioned the very system of Western nation states. In 1920, the Bolsheviks even tried to invade Poland to change the government there. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union pursued an offensive policy by seeking to increase its geopolitical influence in the world. It did so during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and in 1979 when it sent troops to Afghanistan. After the end of the Cold War, Russia's offensive policy manifested itself in armed interference in the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia, the reincorporation of Crimea, and participation in the war in Syria.

Depending on the coalitions built by statist and their political preferences inside the country, they were ideologically opposed by representatives of either pro-Western or distinctively civilizational thinking. Westernizers feared that great powerness would weaken the country internally by putting materially and politically backward Russia in opposition to the advanced West. By linking Russian identity to Europe, Westernizers call for reproducing European political institutions in Russia and building priority and strategic relations with European countries. Representatives of civilizational thinking often supported statist as they considered great powerness a condition for protecting national values from external encroachments. However the supporters of Russian identity may stand up against great powerness if they believe it weakens society. For example, Slavophiles considered national interests and boundaries secondary, giving priority to creating conditions for free community work and life in Orthodox faith.

Great power thinking has traditionally been supported by broad sections of society, especially if it did not require significant sacrifices from people and did not result in foreign policy defeats. At the same time, great powerness often proved to be a heavy burden for the Russian people if the state solved foreign policy tasks by putting too much strain on public resources. Exposed to numerous external dangers, the Russians consolidated around the state to preserve freedom from external attacks, but lost their internal freedom. Over time, they lost opportunities for free communal economic management (“peace”) and participation in state governance and the election of the prince (“*veche*”), consequently establishing a centralized patrimonial state. According to historian Georgy Vernadsky, “autocracy and serfdom became the price the Russians paid for national survival.” Military strength, imperial power, and the ability to resist external incursions gradually became a public policy end in itself. Poverty and serfdom had become means of accelerated army mobilization. The authorities often ignored the urgent need for reform, seeing it as a threat to the system of governance in Russia.

The weakening of the internal and external components of great powerness was the price that was paid for internal overstraining. The disintegration of the Soviet state is an example of such overstraining caused by long confrontation with the more developed West. The traditional pillars of power—the army and security agencies—whose task is to protect the security of the state, happened to be in a humiliating position, while the new “*boyardom*,” or oligarchs, had grown stronger. The army’s demoralization was exacerbated by a belated and poorly thought-out military campaign to stabilize the situation in Chechnya. People had lost their savings as a result of essentially oligarchic economic reforms and did not support the authorities. Crime had raised its head in the country, and the state was unable to promptly respond to massive violations of law against citizens. The conflict between the executive and legislative branches, which led to the use of force against the parliament in October 1993, completed the picture of an extraordinary weakening of the state. In foreign policy, the Russian leadership sought to pursue a pro-Western course, essentially renouncing the principles of great-power policy. However gradually, thanks largely to the efforts exerted by the newly

established Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and the activities of Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, the idea of great powerness returned to the political vocabulary as one of the central concepts. In the 2000s, a generally favorable external environment and the absence of a threat of war allowed the Russian leadership to focus on solving internal problems crucial for economic and political stabilization. The result was the end of hostilities in the North Caucasus, relative consolidation of the political class, and regained ability to pursue an independent foreign policy.

The future of Russian great powerness is connected with the need to build new international coalitions amidst global turbulence and with the ability of the country's leadership to make a transition to a new model of the state. There has been more progress with the former than with the latter. Great powerness in foreign policy enabled Russia to regain important positions lost in the 1990s. The decision to focus on the strengthening of the balance of power and the prestige of a great power has passed the test of time. A single-superpower world is coming to an end. Europe is changing and decentralizing. Russia is turning towards Asia by implementing a number of projects such as Greater Eurasia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and others. New opportunities are opening up for the country to develop international cooperation outside the Western world.

A transition to new statehood is more difficult as it requires a number of measures to overcome the political legacy of the 1990s, connected not so much with a strong great-power state as with its absence. Economic underperformance, corruption, focus on stability rather than development are the "birth marks" of Russian capitalism which emerged out of loans-for-shares auctions, raiding, energy exports as well as the inability of the government to enforce uniform principles and rules in politics and economy. In this respect, great powerness still remains a vain wish. There is a difficult period ahead that requires devising new strategies to build a strong and legitimate state.

There can be no true great powerness without such a state. It is an axiom for statist that the state should have considerable freedom from interference not only by external but also by internal interest groups. This is critical for implementing a political strategy for the benefit of society as a whole. For example, as prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov attempted

to fight Boris Berezovsky and other oligarchs from the Yeltsin “family.” Later, as head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, he insisted on developing and enforcing clear rules for the economy and property rights, and warned against “attacks” on business. He also understood the dangers associated with bureaucracy and corruption. A strong state should be based on the rule of law and institutions rather than abusive informal connections. A strong executive branch needs independent courts, partial regional decentralization, fair elections, and anti-corruption measures.

In an era of global instability and transition of power, those will survive who can adapt external and internal conditions to their needs. Markets, regional systems and military-political alliances are being redrawn worldwide. Modern great powerness should combine the protection of the world’s vital interests with active efforts to build a new world order and carry out necessary internal reforms. Firmness in defending sovereignty implies a flexible ability to create something new and desirable in the economic, information, military, and political spheres. This is going to be a bumpy road involving not only the risk of standing up to more developed powers, but also the ability to identify points of growth in internal development and invest in promising international projects.