

The Harvest of Globalism

How Russia Can Move from Confrontation to Construction

Andrei P. Tsygankov

Andrei P. Tsygankov, PhD in International Relations
San Francisco State University, USA
Professor, International Relations and Political Science

ORCID: 0000-0003-0011-2339
ResearcherID: K-1423-2013
Scopus AuthorID: 7102020604

E-mail: andrei@sfsu.edu
Tel.: 0117 415-338-7493
Address: Office HUM 282, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132 282

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The causes of the current crisis between Russia and the West, which has led to a military operation in Ukraine, are complex and diverse. Experts have yet to comprehend the role of Russian policy, the Western expansion of military infrastructure, and Kiev's attempts to build an inherently anti-Russian state. The purpose of this article is more modest: to find out how the global West's activities have affected Russia's foreign policy. For Russia, the historical roots of the crisis are partly related to its three hundred-year striving for the global power status, which has undermined the country's stamina and deepened the gap with the West. Today, this striving requires Russia to revise the very foundations of its internal development and foreign policy. It needs a strategy not only to withstand the unprecedented pressure, but also to develop further without excessive dependence on the West's markets and its global projects.

PETER THE GREAT COMPLEX IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

After the end of the Cold War, the Russian leadership sought to integrate the country into Western political, economic, and military organizations, but met no reciprocity. Soon it became clear that the West was ready to begin a dialogue with Russia on military-political issues and its gradual inclusion in global institutions like the World Trade Organization, but only on its own terms. Moscow was not intended to be an equal co-founder of the world order, but a useful participant respecting the fundamental interests of the West and sometimes having to act contrary to its own ones.

This role stopped suiting the Russian leadership in the second half of the 2000s. Once its negative attitude towards this policy was voiced by Vladimir Putin in his prominent speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, Russia moved to contain the West's global ambitions. The further development of events was largely predetermined by the logic of the Russian-Western confrontation and its understanding by persons who made foreign policy decisions.

Russia's drive for integration with the West and opposition to it are essentially two sides of the same coin, namely, striving for the global status. After Peter the Great's victory over Sweden in the 18th century, the most influential part of the world recognized Russia as a great power. Russia had thus become a full participant in Western diplomatic efforts to ensure the stability of the international system, being convinced of its own irreplaceability and showing a willingness to make considerable sacrifices for maintaining global status. Global elitism was increasingly perceived as an existential necessity and even a way to ensure the internal political stability of the state.

Since that time, Russia has either partnered with Western countries or resisted their efforts to subordinate its politics to their goals. Peter the Great, too, started with attempts to establish a partnership with the West by sending a diplomatic mission to Europe in 1697-1698, known as the Grand Embassy. Subsequently, Russia repeatedly participated in the coalition of Western countries both in pre-Soviet and Soviet times. The milestones of such a partnership include participation in the Northern War, the defeat of Napoleon,

the Vienna Concert of Powers, the Entente alliance, and attempts to build an anti-Hitler coalition in the 1930s. But there have been just as many attempts in Russian history to resist the West when it refused to take into account Russia's interests. The Crimean War and the Cold War are just two of the examples.

But there have been much fewer attempts in Russian politics to move away from Western centrism and focus on state-building and regional security problems. This approach was an important part of the Moscow period of "land gathering," associated with the refusal of Ivan the Great to submit to Rome, as well as the period of restoration after the Time of Troubles. In the post-Petrine period, Russia "concentrated" only as a result of foreign policy weakening, as was the case during Catherine the Great's withdrawal from the Seven Years' War, or after a defeat in a war, for example, the Crimean War. Having recovered, Russia always sought to restore full participation in the Western system of international relations.

The reasons for this striving are rooted in the Russian foreign policy consciousness plagued with the global great-power complex or a belief in the need to maintain this status at any cost. Both Peter the Great and most of his followers were and are still convinced that the high price is justified, because the alternative to it is Western pressure that weakens national sovereignty and statehood. It is this idea, historically reproduced in tsarist and Soviet times, that underlies the fundamental conflict with the West, unyielding and always seeking to expand at the cost of other countries.

THE BURDEN OF GLOBALISM

The global orientation of Russian foreign policy has always been accompanied by significant internal straining. The cost of Peter the Great's victory, which paved the way for this orientation, was exorbitant. The constantly fighting tsar initially ordered the local nobility to "protect and not overburden beyond measure" the peasants, but soon had to replace soft chimney money with chevage. In addition to the recruiting duty, taxes rose by 30 percent and were extended to all peasants. Serfdom remained until Alexander II's Great Reforms,

and many considered it part of the necessary price to be paid for sovereignty and independence.

The practice of serfdom and restrictions on internal freedom continued in Soviet times, contrary to the proclaimed ideals of the liberation of humankind. Stalin's collective farms essentially reproduced serfdom. Peasants not only gave most of what they produced to the state, but they also had no passports and could not move around the country. During the Cold War, this orientation towards globalism gained special importance. The Soviet leadership made the opposition to the "world of capitalism" the basis of its survival, which required broader involvement in various parts of the world from Cuba to Africa and Afghanistan. The collapse of the Soviet state was an example of overstrain from prolonged confrontation with the more developed West.

The described orientation towards the global West can partly be blamed for the incompleteness of the vast Russian state, its lagging behind the West in terms of living standards, the notorious militarization of the national budget, the inescapable belief in the importance of a mobilizing ideology and a powerful administrative and bureaucratic apparatus. Poverty and political consolidation became a means of accelerated mobilization of the army, and military strength and the ability to resist the West were often regarded as the goal of state policy.

The abovementioned alternative—abandoning Western centrism to focus on domestic and regional development—was discussed but no more than that. The influence of the Peter the Greats complex was (and still is) too strong. Every time, the ideas of building a flexible, defensive, and inexpensive strategy were put to test by the outside world and faced resistance from dominant sentiments in the political and expert community at home.

As a bit of a tangent, it must be said that Peter the Great's policy was consistently opposed by Slavophiles, who did not want to compromise the freedom of economic communalism and the spiritual autonomy of the church. One of the most prominent Slavophiles, Konstantin Aksakov, expressed the common opinion of this intellectual camp by advocating

a vital division: free management and faith for society and political rule for the state. In his opinion, any state is a dead external form that does not help find the moral idea and internal truth necessary for popular development. Slavophiles repeatedly criticized the Western path and Western politics. “The West is crumbling, its lies are being unmasked, it is clear what kind of disease its chosen road leads to,” Aksakov wrote on the eve of the Crimean military campaign of the mid-19th century. “... Separating ourselves from the West of Europe is all we need.”¹

But the problem was not only the elites and constant external challenges. It was impossible to build an alternative policy to Peter the Great’s one without relying on significant social groups in Russian society itself. However these groups, such as the peasantry, were deprived of the right to vote and depended on the state, or both. This is why the Slavophile idea of separating state labor from public labor had no chance of success.

CURRENT CONFLICT WITH THE WEST

The current conflict with the West has already reached the stage of a hybrid war in Ukraine and can even lead to a military clash between Russia and the United States and NATO. The concrete manifestation of this conflict in the form of a military operation undertaken by the Russian leadership in Ukraine was not inevitable, but became possible for the reasons described above. On the Western side, it was provoked by the desire to shape the world according to its own rules, and on the Russian side, by the historically established Peter the Great thinking complex.

The Western policy of expanding NATO and military infrastructure, Kiev’s anti-Russian course coupled with increasingly aggressive actions in Donbass necessitated Moscow’s response. The diplomacy of security guarantees dragged on without producing necessary results. Of all the possible “military-technical” responses, Russia chose a military operation in Ukraine. The West’s reaction turned out to be unprecedented and included its willingness to fight

¹ Tsimbaev N.I. *Slavyanofilstvo: iz ystorii russkoi obshchestvenno-politicheskoi mysli XIX veka* [Slavophilism: From the History of Russian Socio-Political Thought of the 19th Century]. Moscow: GPIB, p. 155.

with Russia by way of the Ukrainian army, supplying it with all the necessary types of weapons, freezing hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars in Russian assets, and attempting to “cancel” Russia and Russians economically, politically, and culturally on a global scale.

There were theorists who advocated avoiding a conflict with the West, but they failed to gain sufficient political influence. The Russian intellectual community often discussed the ideas of internal “preservation,” rearrangement and avoidance of external Western pressure. This line of thinking was most strongly opposed by Vadim Tsymbursky and his followers, who insisted that Russia should achieve independence by gaining the status of a geopolitical “island.” But there were neither political will nor social conditions for proper absorption of these ideas. Part of the problem was that the isolationist idea of the “island” was proposed at the time of growing politico-economic and informational globalization.

As a result, Russian thought did not produce anything self-sufficient. The main ideological battles revolved around adaptation to the Western world or confrontation with it. But there were few attempts to get away from Western centrism and formulate a national idea of development. Even the quite promising Greater Eurasia concept, which initially called for building an open political and economic regional space “from below,” was soon used by the authorities for geopolitical confrontation with the United States and the European Union. The idea of regional development was once again replaced with the craving for global rivalry with the West. The idea of the Eurasian Union, too, arose in the context of confrontation and intensifying struggle for Ukraine in 2011. The reaction of European bureaucrats turned out to be symmetrical and firmly linked to geopolitical attempts to pull Kiev to their side.

The decision to continue Petrine opposition to the West led to familiar restrictions on internal freedom. Instead of focusing on national development, emphasis was increasingly placed on traditional values and conservatism. The logic of confronting the West with its “liberal” values was gaining the upper hand. The sources of political and economic activity independent from the state became weaker. Administrative and bureaucratic control and the powers of law

enforcement agencies were strengthened. As had often happened in history, society was mobilized to survive in the fight against the Western world, not to implement its own national development project.

The military operation in Ukraine drew a line under the thirty-year period after the Cold War. Having followed the paradigm of globalism, Russia inevitably came to a deeper conflict with the West. The desire to preserve the foundations of military-political sovereignty turned out to be fraught with the loss of opportunities for cooperation with the Western world and with the need to fight it. The flows of Ukrainian refugees, casualties and destruction in Ukraine have jeopardized Russia's reputation. The image of a country seeking only a free and independent development has faded. Opportunities for such development will now have to be built mainly outside the Western world. And the terms of cooperation will not be the best due to the temporary weakening of the country and the loss of the traditionally important foreign policy opportunity to maneuver between the West and the East.

TOWARDS A NEW IMAGE OF RUSSIA

Whatever the outcome of the military operation in Ukraine, the question of foreign policy positioning and the national idea of Russia will remain relevant and is already gaining utmost importance.² Such an idea is necessary both if the conflict with the Western world drags on, and if it abates. As I have already said before, it cannot be based entirely on strength and confrontation with the West (or the non-West), but should include a set of positive goals and guidelines.³ Any confrontation in itself is not enough and is potentially flawed because it can lead one away from the main problems in a completely different direction.

A modern Russian idea should be formulated as an idea of national development for several generations ahead. To make sure it does not become hostage to geopolitical games, it is important to prioritize not “conservative values” or “national interests,” but social

² Trenin, D., 2022. "Pereizdanie" Rossiiskoi Federatsii ["Re-Edition" of the Russian Federation]. *Rossiia v globalnoi politike*, 20(2), pp. 27-33.

³ Tsygankov, A.P. and Tsygankov, P.A., 2022. Snova russky urok? [A Russian Lesson Again?]. *Rossiia v globalnoi politike*, 20(1), pp. 51-58.

justice, prosperity and freedom. Important as they are, traditional values and security interests are just an element and means of national development, but not its main goal.

Amid confrontation with the West and the military operation in Ukraine, some in Russia have started talking again about development as a fortress state, as neo-Soviet autarky or by borrowing the Chinese development model. In many ways, these ideas stem from Peter the Great's complex of confrontation with the global West. Now that Russia is again deeply immersed in such confrontation, there is a considerable risk that, for the reasons stated above, such approaches will serve to preserve the existing system amid growing social injustice and economic stagnation. In Russia, the role of reformers has been played by progressive rulers, who, in the words of Alexander Pushkin, could act as the "only European" in the country. Although the focus on the European path is not optimal for Russia, development and reforms remain fundamentally important.

Given the need for development, it is important to restate the traditional idea of a strong and just state in line with the times.⁴ After the end of the Cold War, Russia did not choose to build a developmental state. At first, it tried to join the Euro-Atlantic community. Then, in the 2000s, it created an economic and political model that relied mainly on energy resources. At the same time, economic and political-institutional mechanisms, which could have ensured the country's movement forward on a broader basis, faltered or were imitated. Instead, a system of conservative power was built, and the authority of the head of state strengthened. Partly for these reasons, years of economic growth, political stabilization, and moderate foreign policy gave way to stagnation, weakening institutions, and mounting confrontation with the West. The idea of development was replaced by lagging national projects that imitated it. As had often happened in Russian history before, the conservation of the system, coupled with an exaggerated assessment of one's own power, led the country into a dead-end.

A developmental state should be able to create incentives for economic growth and ensure a fair balance between freedom and

⁴ Tsyganov, A.P., 2015. Strong State: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century. *Valdai Club Papers*. Available at: valdaiclub.com/files/11390/

equality. Russian mentality is inseparable from the idea of a just state that can reconcile extremes, guarantee freedoms and reduce inequality. For all the differences, many Slavophiles, populists and socialists defended the Russian ideal of a “holistic personality” living in harmony with oneself and the surrounding world.

A developmental state should be rooted in the general idea of economic and demographic growth, the development of the country’s vast territories and resources in the Trans-Urals, Siberia, and the Far East, and efforts to raise the level of education, science and technology in the context of new international competition. It is important not only to seek external diversification of markets, but also diversify and deepen the domestic one. This is particularly true in a situation of global instability and Western isolation and is already happening as the need arises.

The domestic market cannot be improved without creating additional incentives for private initiative to flourish and attract investment. Instead of trying to control businesses, it is necessary to establish clear rules for their operation. In this sense, Pyotr Stolypin’s large-scale modernization program undertaken more than a hundred years ago is still relevant as it sought to connect the Russian economy to the world system more actively. Adopting clear rules for business, combating corruption and creating a legal competitive environment would not be enough. It is important to invest in education, health care and other social programs. The latter are not only a condition for social stability, but can also help solve specific tasks of retraining employees and adapting to new conditions of economic development.

A strong state and political elites need new sources of legitimation related to the ideology of patriotic unity, the fight against corruption, and competitive elections. The system of laws should clearly spell out the mechanisms of socio-political participation, recruitment and upbringing of the elite, transfer and succession of power. In this case the political energy of society will go not only downward but also upward, and the political system will get rid of “manual control.” A developmental state will be reinforced by the release of public initiative and energy, which many Russian thinkers dreamed of. Various groups of society will accept the idea of development if it is protected by law and formalized in clear rules.

A CHANCE FOR EURASIAN CONCENTRATION

Freedom from Western-led globalism is impossible not only without preserving sovereignty, but also without attracting resources from the outside world for Russian development. Globalism should sprout from below, not from above. It is important to assess relations with the surrounding world in a regional-geographical dimension as a strategic, ideological, political, geo-economic and transport-logistical project contributing to long-term development. Russian experts often talk in this regard about the need to build Greater Eurasia as a focal point for the application of national interests and a space for interaction with the peoples of the region.

The task of a developmental state is to identify promising geo-economic projects contributing to internal development and benefitting China, India and other countries of the Global South. A developmental state will not be able to do so without playing a strong planning role and supporting sectors of the economy that are vital for international integration. The goal should not be a fortress isolated from the world economy under the pretext of its growing instability, but integration into its most dynamically developing parts on conditions favorable for the country.

The development of regional Eurasian identity is traditionally important for the Russian idea. The concepts of “self-standing” and “spatial development” devised by the Eurasians are relevant in modern conditions. These ideas reveal an understanding of the importance of developing this complex continent. The Eurasian idea contains the Russian understanding of inter-civilizational dialogue with a focus on national originality and “universal responsiveness” (Fyodor Dostoevsky). Slavophiles and Christian philosophers were known for visualizing Russia as the “great Euro-East” (Nikolai Berdyaev) and the “unifier of Europe and Asia” (Alexander Panarin) on new principles of cooperation. Interaction with Europeans can also be possible on the same principles. The Eurasians cautioned that their worldview “does not mean that we must hostilely isolate ourselves from Europe and that we have no points of worldly contact with it” (Pyotr Savitsky). Coupled with the imperative of developing the state and strengthening Russia’s

security, these ideas must contribute to the future development of regionalism in Eurasia and its stabilization as one whole.

Let us recall that the early Eurasian system was built even before the baptism of Russia on the basis of Russian trade and economic ties with the Greeks and the north of Europe. In this tripartite system, the Russians acted as intermediaries and ensured the protection of waterways. The system that existed in the 9th-13th centuries determined the long-term interests of the Russians—to prevent any dominance in the region and to promote civilizational dialogue and open trade. In the subsequent centuries, the system fell apart as a result of both the dominance of the Golden Horde and the fragmentation of Eurasia due to the rise of the crusaders, the activity of the nomads, and the collapse of the Russian principalities. Then the time had come for another Eurasia, which resembled a fortress more than a bridge of civilizations. But after the geopolitical strengthening of the Grand Principality of Moscow, trade routes reopened, and Russia headed for interaction with the West and the East.

Today, due to the relative decline of the Western world against the background of rising China and India, new conditions are gradually emerging for arranging the Eurasian system. However, the world is at a crossroads. The West is entering a period of internal change, and fatigue from confronting the non-West becomes increasingly pronounced in opinion polls. We may see radical changes in the United States and European countries in a few years. The aging Cold War-era generation will be replaced by leaders looking forward to a new dialogue with the world around them. One cannot rule out, though, that the choice will be made in favor of deeper confrontation, especially with China. This may happen because the West is not prepared for renovation and seeks to use the image of an external threat for temporary consolidation. But both outcomes will give Russia a chance to concentrate on Eurasia. Just like before, the interests of the Russians require the development of inter-civilizational dialogue, the promotion of economic openness, and the prevention of regional hegemony.