



PERSPECTIVES

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Russia vs. the West: The Beginning of the End

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 832, May 13, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Russia-West confrontation has, over the course of the past several years, reached its most tense point since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Differences between the two sides will only grow as neither side wants to make concessions on Syria, North Korea, Ukraine, Georgia, etc. However, there is also a strong possibility that the West is making significant headway in its competition with Russia over the former Soviet space.

Contrary to the much-touted opinion that Russia has been successful of late in projecting its influence across the former Soviet Union, Moscow's influence has in fact significantly receded on the Eurasian continent. US pressure is important here, as are internal economic problems in Russia. But a closer look can easily reveal that it is the EU that has undermined Russian political, economic, and even cultural influence in eastern Europe and the former Soviet space. Moscow has lost influence the Baltic states, Moldova (at least in part), Ukraine, and Georgia, and is losing credibility in Armenia. Europe, meanwhile, has never been so united and unanimous in its internal as well as foreign policy actions.

Why has Europe never been so successful against Russia in the past? A partial answer lies in Europe's unfortunate geography. The European continent represents a peninsula of Eurasia, with Russia right on Europe's edge. Peace between them has been a fleeting phenomenon as each has tried to dominate or influence the other.

Russia's rise to power was basically a product of constant European internal fighting. There were times when the Continent was unified and Russia was threatened, but the creation of a truly unified European empire that could economically challenge Moscow in the long term was a daunting task.

The building of a European empire had at least three phases. Military victories were essential, but these did not provide a lasting foundation. A ruler needed a centralized administration and cooption of the local elites of large invaded states, something that could have taken decades to achieve: a virtually impossible task. Europe also had the problem that the continent was full of ambitious, technologically and militarily advanced states very much unwilling to abandon their freedom.

Even when a conquest of Europe was achieved (as in the case of Napoleon and Hitler), the continent faced its two “big enemies on the periphery,” Britain and Russia. London was willing to keep the balance of power among the European states while Moscow controlled Eastern Europe. This simple geography explains why throughout the centuries, a united Europe was not a viable project and peace with Russia was an unachievable goal.

However, geopolitical developments in Eurasia since the breakup of the Soviet Union show that a united Europe is a plausible project when unified non-militarily. Modern Europe poses a serious challenge to Russia, as the battle between the two is – for the first time in history – in the economic sphere. Modern Europe is in fact a powerful economic and political machine based not on coercion, but on state and elite cooption.

Never before has Europe posed such a fundamental challenge to Moscow. Neither Napoleon nor Hitler worked towards the fundamental weakening of Russia, as a military conquest of Russia was impossible at the time. A fundamental weakening of Russia is only possible through the purposeful economic dominance of the territories around the Russian heartland (the modern western part of the Russian Federation).

That is what is now happening. Russia is losing to Europe in terms of competition and economic relevance. Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and the Baltic states show how far Russian influence has receded into Eurasia. What is even more interesting is the fact that this process will continue unabated, at least for the near future. Russia will remain isolated while its immediate neighborhood will deepen its cooperation with the West.

Is Eurasia in the midst of a fundamental transformation? Will Russia’s weakening allow small states on its periphery and elsewhere in the Middle East to improve their geopolitical situation? There are plenty of indications to support this scenario.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family