



## PERSPECTIVES

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### **Russia After the Ukraine Crisis: European, Asian, or Eurasian?**

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,061, January 11, 2019

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** As competition grows more intense between the US and China, Moscow must assess which side will do more to help it solve its problems across the former Soviet space. Moscow's choice will affect Russia's identification as European, Asian, or Eurasian.

The current crisis between Russia and the West is the product of many fundamental geopolitical differences both within and without the former Soviet space. All trends in bilateral relations suggest that the essential differences between the camps will remain stalled well into the future.

The West's successful expansion into what was always considered the "Russian backyard" halted Moscow's projection of power and diminished its reach into the north of Eurasia – between fast-developing China, Japan, and other Asian countries and the technologically modern European landmass. This geopolitical setback on the country's western border has caused the Moscow political elite to rethink Russia's position in Eurasia. Politicians and analysts are debating whether the country belongs to Western or Asian civilization or represents a Eurasian symbiosis.

Many trends in Russian history are cyclic, including the search for a position as either Asian or European. This search usually follows geopolitical shifts to Russia's disadvantage. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, following a disastrous defeat in the Crimean War (1853-56) against Britain and France, Russian intellectuals began to think over just how European Russia really was.

Something similar happened following the dissolution of the Russian Empire in 1917 as well as the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. While in each case, the Russians reacted to European military or economic onslaughts by looking with

interest towards the east, the reality was that such a turn was impossible. Most developed territories were in the European parts of the state. The Russians looked to the east mostly because of the empty lands in Siberia and the Asia-Pacific.

Today, Russia's pull towards the east has a different prompt: the presence of powerful China bordering on Siberia. This difference is fundamental when evaluating the Russians' modern quest for a position in Eurasia.

Today, Europe remains a source of technological progress, but so are Japan and China. Never in Russian history has there been so much opportunity to develop Siberia and transform it into a power base of the world economy.

Russia's geographical position is unique and will remain so for another several decades, as the ice cap in the Arctic Ocean is set to diminish significantly. That ocean will be transformed into a network of commercial highways, giving Russia a historic opportunity to become a sea power.

Chinese and Japanese human and technological resources in the Russian Far East, and European resources in the Russian west, can transform it into a land of opportunity.

Russia's geographical position should be kept in mind when analyzing Moscow's position vis-à-vis the China-US competition. Apart from the purely economic and geographical pull that the developed Asia-Pacific has on Russia's eastern provinces, the Russian political elite sees the nascent US-China confrontation as offering a chance to enhance its weakening geopolitical position throughout the former Soviet space. Russians are right to think that both Washington and Beijing will dearly need Russian support, and this logic is driving Moscow's noncommittal approach towards Beijing and Washington. As a matter of cold-blooded international affairs, Russia wishes to position itself such that the US and China are strongly competing with one another to win its favor.

In allying itself with China, Russia would expect to increase its influence in Central Asia, where Chinese power has grown exponentially since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although Moscow has never voiced official concerns about this matter, that is not to deny the existence of such concerns within the Russian political elite.

However, if Moscow chooses to side with the US, the American concessions could be more significant than the Chinese. Ukraine and the South Caucasus would be the biggest prizes, while NATO expansion into the Russian "backyard" would be stalled. The Middle East might be another area where Moscow gets fundamental concessions – for example in Syria, should that conflict continue.

Beyond grand strategic thinking, this decision will also be a civilizational choice for the Russians molded around the perennial debate about whether the country is European, Asiatic, or Eurasian. Geography inexorably pulls Russia towards the east, but culture pulls it towards the west. While decisions of this nature are usually based on geopolitical calculations, cultural affinity also plays a role.

Tied into the cultural aspect is the Russians' fear that they (like the rest of the world) do not know what the world would look like under Chinese leadership. The US might represent a threat to Russia, but it is still a "known" for the Russian political elite. A China-led Eurasia could be more challenging for Moscow considering the extent to which Russian frontiers and provinces are open to large segments of the Chinese population.

The Russian approach to the nascent US-China confrontation is likely to be opportunistic. Its choice will be based on which side offers more to help Moscow resolve its problems across the former Soviet space.

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