



PERSPECTIVES

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The Phenomenon of “Global Russia”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As Russia increases its geopolitical involvement across the globe, the concept of “Global Russia” has been gradually taking hold. Though Russia is inherently weak, it is likely that Moscow will continue its global initiatives throughout the 2020s. Only by the end of that decade and into the next is there likely to be a gradual decline in Russia's adventurism abroad.

Ever since the Ukraine crisis of 2014 there has been a significant uptick in Russian activity beyond its borders. This includes direct military moves in Syria, eastern Ukraine, and Georgia's breakaway territories as well as semi-military moves in Venezuela, African states, and other locations to which Moscow sends paramilitary units to support existing governments or uphold a failing security environment.

There is also significant internet activity emanating from Russia that targets not only westernized former Soviet states and European states but also the US and Latin American countries. Washington recently accused Moscow of fomenting instability in Chile, for example, which has been experiencing protests and general upheaval.

Intriguingly, these internet, military, and semi-military moves are backed by diplomatic moves. President Vladimir Putin just held the first Russia-Africa summit. Though criticized for the lack of any corresponding major Russian economic investment on the continent, the event can still be considered a good starting point for the Kremlin after the decades of Russian absence from Africa that followed the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Moreover, a grand strategic shift has been taking place in Eurasia since 2014 in which Russia is pivoting to China. Many perceive this pivot as a short-lived nuisance, but Russia's overall shift to Asia (including MENA) represents [much](#)

[more](#) than mere disenchantment with the West. It is rooted deep in the Russian historical tradition of searching for a means of de-Europeanizing the country's foreign policy.

Russians are calling this the period of "Global Russia," an era in which Moscow's policies are unrestricted and directed around the globe. The "Global Russia" concept hearkens closely to the Soviet approach to foreign policy.

How long might the "Global Russia" phenomenon last? Many believe that as Russia is inherently weak, the Kremlin will be precluded from continuing its active policies abroad into the 2020s. True, Russia's population is declining and its share of Slavs is set to diminish as the number of Muslims increases. Also, Russia lost Ukraine and Georgia, two lands that are strategically located for the projection of Russian power into the former Soviet space. The Russian economy is performing poorly and is unlikely to improve radically in the coming decade. Technologically, in terms of education, and even militarily, the country is increasingly less competitive than it was during the Soviet period.

Still, Russia is large and powerful enough to prompt neighboring countries to watch developments in Moscow's foreign policy carefully and with apprehension. It is worth bearing in mind that as long as the US-China confrontation grows, the West will be less likely to concern itself with containing Russia in the Middle East or anywhere else. In other words, Russia's inherent weaknesses are not the point, but rather the strategic shift (caused by China) in Eurasia that enables Russia to position itself as "global."

In short: the growing probability of a China-US confrontation in the coming decade may look to Russia like an opportunity to continue and possibly ramp up its high-level economic and military involvement around the world.

One element could be a problematic development for the "Global Russia" phenomenon: the evolution of the Russian elites. The late 2020s will be decisive in many ways for Russia's development. The country is now run by people born in the 1960s and raised during the Cold War and the traumatic 1990s. The late 2020s should see a shift to those born in the 1980s. The 2030s could be even more telling, as those born in the late 1980s and 1990s—people with no living memory of either Soviet or imperial culture, on other words—will be running Russia. It is very likely that their strategic vision will be more inward-looking, with more attention paid to internal development.

The Russian ruling elite will be more focused on the near-abroad than on risky geopolitical gambles in far-flung territories of Eurasia or elsewhere. This will be a natural development, as the country will contain more people born in Russia following the break-up of the Soviet Union and without any psychological

attachment to Soviet-era geopolitical ambitions. The Russians are now in a traumatic post-imperialist period: most remember the imperial traditions of the past but understand that rejuvenating those ideas would be suicidal.

In this light, “Global Russia” is a temporary (perhaps two-decade-long) concept that will be gradually reversed as incentives decline for the Russian elites to spend national resources abroad. Russia’s current adventures in Syria and Venezuela might seem strange and unnecessary and Putin’s Africa ambitions not of primary importance.

This is not to say that Russia will not actively pursue its geopolitical ambitions. The former Soviet Union will continue to attract Russian attention, but internal economic development will remain the focus of the Russian elites.

Thus “Global Russia” is not as futile as many in the West believe. The phenomenon is likely to continue as the US-China confrontation mounts over the coming years. However, as Russia experiences internal changes among the elites, particularly by the late 2020s, it is likely that we will see a gradual decline in Russia’s geopolitical adventurism in the 2030s. The Russians will be paying more attention to the internal development of the country.

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