

The State of Play in **Russia's Near Abroad**

By PETER B. HUMPHREY

Right now, Russia is engaged in a grand face-saving gesture: having lost the Cold War in so dramatic a fashion, it is swapping dreams of global domination for dreams of Eurasian suzerainty. Key to this aspiration is rigorous control over the activities, alliances, internal affairs, and attitudes of the (generally former Soviet) states on its periphery, and a new entrant: the Arctic Ocean. With World War II now woven into their being, Russians want to be able to defeat an invader on foreign (rather than Russian) territory, in buffer states such as Mongolia and the Muslim/Slavic “near abroad”—thus, their overwhelming desire to coopt these lands and create a sort of peripheral suzerainty where all others must fear to tread. Attempts to control the next ring of former Warsaw Pact allies have been abysmal, but that has not stopped Russia from trying; witness, for instance, the political capital expended to prevent Kosovo’s independence or to torpedo the proposed U.S. antiballistic missile

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What is driving Russia is a desire to exorcise past humiliation and dominate its “near abroad.”

—Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates,
January 2009



Russian honor guard in Moscow

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 2009		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The State of Play in Russia's Near Abroad				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 260 Fifth Ave SW (BG 64) Fort Lesley J McNair, Washington, DC, 20319				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. Highly reminiscent of America's own Monroe Doctrine, Moscow is asserting a privileged sphere of influence and expecting the world to concur without objection. It is increasingly laying down markers and drawing red lines in the sand so border states are constantly aware they can only go so far before displeasing their neighbor.

Russia's Periphery

Finland. The nation that gave birth to the term used to describe neighborly strong-arming (*Finlandizing*) lost a substantial slice of territory (Karelia) in the aftermath of World War II. It was expected to conduct its affairs without reference to this territorial excision and avoid any Western military entanglements that might necessitate further military intervention—a sort of forced neutrality that had the advantage of often bridging the interests of the Cold War duellists. Considerably freer in its post-Soviet space, the Scandinavian republic senses the new assertiveness of its neighbor and is pursuing its most substantial military budget increase in many years.

Baltic States: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia. Before the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) uncomfortable

accession of these three republics, Russia touched the Alliance only on the inhospitable Norwegian frontier. With these three new members now an ever-present thorn in its side, Russia has countered by making clear its willingness to militarize its anomalous, isolated enclave at Kaliningrad. It is there that Russia promised to place a new missile force in the event of an antimissile emplacement in nearby Poland. Finlandized almost to the point of absorption, the White Russians make common cause with the Red Russians in almost every endeavor.

Belarus. The possibility of a reintegration plebiscite has been raised more than once—delayed only by the reality that the autocratic Alexander Lukashenko seems unwilling to exchange his current position as president for anything less than a top post in a united republic—an offer that has never been forthcoming. His country's military integration with Russia probably exceeds all other post-Soviet states, and the two nations recently announced entry into a fully inte-

grated Commonwealth of Independent States air warning system. Only Belarus and Nicaragua are sympathetic to the Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence declarations.

The European Union (EU) is exploring membership for Minsk, largely at the urging of former Warsaw Pact members (Poland and the Czech Republic) who would like to coopt the Red and White Russian consolidation. Ever fearing that an accompanying measure (post-Lukashenko) could be NATO integration, Russia is standing firm against the EU feelers with enticements of its own: largely frozen natural gas prices and much needed loans (which Russia can ill afford) at a time of economic disaster. By agreement and as a provision of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a large Russian force will be stationed near the EU/NATO border.¹ Russia subsidizes arms exports to fellow CSTO members such as Belarus.² In his 2009 annual Intelligence Community threat assessment, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Dennis Blair affirmed Belarusian willingness

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USS *Annapolis* surfaces in the Arctic Ocean

U.S. Navy (Tiffini M. Jones)

to assist Russia in stifling U.S.–European missile defense plans, but noted that “Russia’s continuing efforts to control key Belarusian economic sectors could prompt Minsk to improve ties with the West to balance Moscow. Lukashenko maintains an authoritarian grip on power and could return to repressive measures if public discontent over the worsening economy turns to protest.”³

Moldova. Russian “peacekeeping” forces in Moldova continue to be a major source of friction.⁴ As one of NATO’s Partners for Peace, Moldova clearly views its own accession as inevitable. But Russian forces (2,800 strong) remain in the Russophile Transnistria region, over which the republic has little control. Were it not for the insulation of Ukraine, Transnistria would have gone the way of Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia long ago.

Ukraine. DNI Blair notes that Ukraine has moved toward democracy and Western integration despite numerous political tests since independence:

*Progress will be difficult because of weak political institutions, ongoing conflicts with Russia over gas pricing and contracts and the new exigencies of the global financial crisis, which has dramatically revealed the underlying weaknesses of the Ukrainian economy and potentially Ukraine’s stability.*⁵

Ukraine is of two minds with respect to Russia, and the divide is omnipresent in multiple spheres of civic life. Ukrainians can be effusive in their love for their Slavic brethren, but few forget the Russian-imposed famine that killed millions of Ukrainians in the 1920s, a psychic hard line that will take many more generations to overcome. The republic is populated by minority Uniate Catholics, who tend to look West, and the majority Orthodox, who often look East. This grand societal divide can even be found in the current government, where Viktor Yushchenko hopes to continue the flight from Soviet suzerainty and Yulia Timoshenko embraces a sort of cold pragmatism seeking to mollify Russia, stepping gingerly in any endeavor that might upset its cantankerous neighbor—even at the expense of evolutions that could ensure Ukraine’s security and global economic integration. The two will no doubt face off during the winter 2009–2010 presidential election.

The contentious presence of Russia’s Black Sea fleet is an artifact of the fall of the

Soviet Union. Upon independence in 1991, Ukraine and Russia negotiated a division of Black Sea naval assets, with the stipulation that both fleets could share the extensive base at Sevastopol at least until 2017. But Russia’s fleet may be seeing its last decade in the Crimea. Despite regular joint training exercises, relations have deteriorated since the collapse of the Soviet Union and partition of the navy. When the lease expires in 2017, Kiev wants the foreign navy out, but Russia wants to stay.

Russia’s full subornment of Ukraine would allow access to Transnistria, which cannot now be realistically liberated or reintegrated without crossing Ukrainian territory. Nonetheless, with the ever-present precedent of fully isolated Russian Kaliningrad, the concept is not stillborn and would, in fact, serve to surround the pugnacious Ukraine if it could be pulled off without Western military intervention.

The Caucasus: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Blair notes that the continued difficulty of bridging fundamental differences between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh will also keep tensions high in the Caucasus:

*Azerbaijan fears isolation in the wake of Kosovo’s independence, Russia’s recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and signs of improved Armenian-Turkish relations. Armenia is concerned about Baku’s military buildup and does not want to become dependent on Russia. Both countries face the dual challenges of overcoming inertia in democratic reforms and battling endemic corruption in the face of an economic downturn.*⁶

In the most festering sore and point of conflict with the West, Russia’s longstanding “peacekeepers” in Georgian Abkhazia and Georgian South Ossetia turned hostile and were strongly reinforced in response to a Georgian attempt to reestablish its hold over these constituent territories. August 2008 saw Russian forces crush the nationalist attempt and go on to destroy lives and infrastructure in Georgia itself. By year’s end, Russia pronounced the two territories independent and announced its intent to build more bases, particularly in Abkhazia: an airbase in Gadaut and a resuscitation of the Soviet naval facility at Ochamchira to accommodate the probable 2017 expulsion of the Russian Black Sea fleet from Crimea’s Sevastopol. There is better news in Chech-

nya: through the instrumentality of the brutal autocrat Ramzan Kadyrov, nationalist Chechens appear to have been coopted at the expense of their Islamist brethren.

Central Asian States: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Characterized by highly personalized politics, weak institutions, and growing inequalities, Central Asia is ill equipped to deal with the challenges posed by violent Islamic extremism, poor economic development, and energy, water, and food distribution. For instance:

■ Energy helped make Kazakhstan a regional economic force, but any sustained decline in oil prices would affect revenues, could lead to societal discontent, and would derail the momentum for domestic reforms.

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■ Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have heavily depended on migrant worker remittances from both Russia and Kazakhstan for a significant portion of their gross domestic product—up to 45 percent in the case of Tajikistan—and will be severely affected by the financial crisis. Tajikistan, in particular, faces increased threats to internal stability from the loss of these revenue streams.

■ Such challenges to regional stability could threaten the security of critical U.S. and NATO lines of communication to Afghanistan through Central Asia.

The Central Asian states are beholden to Russia for at least four reasons:

■ Allegiance to Russia-sponsored security organizations means discount arms and no pressure to reform any rampant autocratic tendencies.

■ Russia is assuaged sufficiently to temper any recent recidivist tendencies.

■ The army of migrant labor (now helping Russia overcome its stark population diminution) may face racist—even occasionally murderous—attacks, but the potential for mass expulsions seems off the table. Central Asian economies could literally collapse

under the weight of hundreds of thousands of sudden returnees who are no longer remanding earned income to their families back home.

■ Even with its strained economy, Russian financial largesse continues as a sort of soft power successor to Soviet military control. In exchange for certain (occasionally anti-Western) favors, Russia continues to provide regime-sustaining grants and loans. Indeed, the global financial crisis provides an opportunity to expand its influence in adjacent nations that are faring even worse than Russia itself. The Kremlin has shepherded a plan to buttress five cash-starved former Soviet republics by establishing a largely Russian-funded \$10 billion bailout fund. This year Moscow proposed a separate \$2 billion in Kyrgyz economic aid to offset the \$17.4 million that the United States pays to rent Afghan-critical Manas airbase (part of a far humbler \$150 million aid package). It is all the more astonishing that Kyrgyzstan accepted an annual \$60 million plus ancillary contribution of over half that amount. Analysts ponder why Russia signed off on this or whether defiant Kyrgyz are risking an independent streak. If Russia assisted in a Kyrgyz plot to extort the United States, the hand was perfectly played—and Russia subtly aids in the fight against Islamists on its periphery without spending a ruble.

Mongolia. Never a constituent Soviet republic, Mongolia (population 2.7 million) was nevertheless fully Finlandized and long served as a buffer zone between the ambitious Russian and Chinese entities, despite the large Mongolian population within China (4.5 million). (With the majority—over 60 percent—of Mongols living in China, this is indeed a curious geopolitical circumstance that could be exploited by either side.) Imposition of a Cyrillic writing system has endured, and even today's free Mongolia rarely strays far from the Russian party line. Centrifugal forces in a postcommunist China could double the size of this nation.

The Arctic. Arctic expansion in anticipation of ice melt from global warming is taking the forms of:

- producing and modernizing icebreakers
- resuming submarine probes and long-range trans-Arctic bomber patrols
- asserting bizarre and unsupportable territorial claims (uniformly rejected by the United Nations)
- stationing more researchers throughout that realm, with new stations at Alexandra Land and at Svalbard and Spitsbergen, the latter challenging a well-recognized Norwegian claim (some of these scientists report to Russian intelligence⁷).

Russia's claim is so extensive that no country would be willing to accept it, yet any reduction in the claim would entirely undermine its *raison d'être*. Russia's latest Arctic policy paper states that:

- the nation must complete geological studies to prove its claim to Arctic resources and win international recognition of its Arctic border
- the Arctic must become Russia's "top strategic resource base" by 2020
- northern border guard fences must be strengthened
- a new group of forces must be created to "ensure military security under various military-political circumstances."⁸

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The driver behind this new addition to the "near abroad" is resource lust for a disproportionate share of what is potentially a quarter of the world's oil and gas. Pelagic fisheries, seabed minerals, and methane clathrates may also prove interesting. Russia

Russian Peacekeeping Presence in Transnistria



U.S. Navy (Chad J. McNeelley)



Chairman meets General Nikolai Makarov, chief of the Russian armed forces, in Moscow

already envisions a time (before 2030⁹) when exploitation of its vast reserves will diminish due to tired infrastructure and the poor climate for foreign investment (which might otherwise have rejuvenated same). Selected offshore reservoirs may offer a fresh start, notwithstanding brutal development and transportation costs. Pumping directly to Europe or Japan-bound tankers in an ice-free Arctic could cut costs considerably. Even terrestrial reserves will fall prey to domestic consumption eventually, crippling lucrative exports. In grabbing the Arctic, Russia makes clear its intent to survive as a purveyor of raw materials rather than a technological powerhouse such as Japan or Germany. No nation has ever achieved superpower status via this route.

The Rest. Russia borders North Korea for a mere 24 kilometers (km), but that tiny portal may have significance soon. Reports noting the ill health of Kim Jong-il illuminate the possibility of chaos—even regime change—in the near term. China's demonstrated willingness to repatriate the steady stream of defectors who have made their way north does not bode well for an overnight wave numbering hundreds of thousands—and the Russia portal may be the only escape route available. China is completely unprepared for this human deluge and Russia even less so.

Its unrelenting bravado with respect to NATO notwithstanding, Russia's most probable long-term adversary is the overpopulated one-party state to the south, China. Russia touches China along a mountainous 36-km border running between Kazakhstan and Mongolia, but the remote frontier has not been a source of contention since the 1880s. That cannot be said for the Russian Far East, with its centuries of historical claims, counterclaims, unresolved border disputes, and actual shooting in the 1960s. The ongoing depopulation of northern and eastern Russian territories leaves a labor shortage that may intentionally or otherwise be filled by legal or illegal Chinese—a trend that does not bode well for long-term sovereignty over the area. Indeed, Beijing has quietly encouraged Chinese immigration across its border with Russia since the Soviet breakup.¹⁰

Russian Demographics

Russia is facing a demographic disaster that can help account for recent assertiveness with respect to its near abroad. With no incentives to help build socialism in the tundra, Siberia is depopulating. The end of communist residence permits means sane

folks are free to move elsewhere, and the market forces that drive labor requirements often mean that a legal or illegal Chinese immigrant will have to do. With an ethnic negative birthrate approaching a million per year, Russia is being overwhelmed by typically high Muslim birthrates around its periphery—a shadow looming ever larger and increasingly viewed as a Fifth Column.

Russia's national fertility rate is 1.28 children per woman, far below what is needed to maintain the country's population of nearly 143 million. With a death rate 50 percent greater than its birth rate, Russia's population is falling by 700,000 or more per year. It reached 145 million in 2002 and will dip to 100 million in 2050. Not so for Muslim populations—Russia's army (a young cohort) is already almost half Muslim, and by 2020 Muslims will comprise one-fifth of the nation's population. With ethnic Russians now over 80 percent of the population, Russia may be only two-thirds "Russian" in 20 years. At this rate, a Muslim majority is possible by 2050.¹¹

Vladimir Putin was blunt when he stated, "Russia needs a million new workers

every year. If we don't get them, we can forget about economic growth." Consequently, Russia has its own illegal immigration problem from former Soviet constituent republics (overwhelmingly Muslim states plus the Christian Caucasus). This is not the labor force Putin has in mind. The agenda here is more *Russians*, not more Russian nationals. Russia realizes that time is not on its side and is trying to stake its *Lebensraum* claim *now* before things get any worse. These are Shakespearian trends that really could finish

Shakespearian trends really could finish off Russia—and Russians know it

off Russia—and Russians know it. But their reversal requires exceedingly difficult social engineering. This is a stunningly complex problem to solve, and even a phenomenally successful intervention would take a decade—if not a whole generation. Here, then, is the source of a justifiable paranoia that seeks to secure the margins before it is too late.



Issues for the West

Economic Domination by a Failing State Assures Failure. Russia is no economic powerhouse, and the degree to which it is able to suborn the generally former Soviet states on its periphery is the degree to which these states may be kept off the path to economic success and integration into the global system, a system that has raised income, labor, environmental, and health standards elsewhere. Finland is an economic success story in spite of—not because of—Russian heavy-handedness, benefitting only modestly from its history as a preferred transit point.

Mini-Warsaw Pacts. Russia's current world view seeks to prevent sovereign states from joining international security and economic organizations, which could nurture those nations and the world as a whole. The countervailing military alliances (the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO] and Collective Security Treaty Organization) are primarily aimed at preventing Western entrenchment but coincidentally serve to protect autocracy.

A good measure of the success of CSTO (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) is its willingness not to ask a lot of questions in the midst of global pressures to democratize. The notion of alignment with NATO implies a certain respect for and implementation of democratic values that fly in the face of the autocracy now common in Central Asia. CSTO and SCO offer an opportunity to fight terrorism, separatism, and narcotics and provide a framework for dealing with Western intrusion without the pressure to reform. This also makes these organizations attractive to Iran.¹²

Impetus to Islamization? The fact that Russian dominion in Central Asia assures laxity with respect to the democratic evolution of these states may well serve as a font for Islamist fervor—citizens may rally round their faith and hopes of “just rule” as a counterpoint to bad government. Chechnya, once an overwhelmingly secular rebellion, turned harshly Islamist in response to unrelenting Russian assault. Slaughter of innocents in Beslan was the revenge result.

Afghan Resupply. The degree to which Russia is able to control near abroad security affairs is the degree to which Western material access to Afghanistan is impeded. Our dependence offers an ever-present crisis spigot that can be turned on or off whenever Russia feels under siege from the West. The nation

long ago mastered the art of creating crises that only it can alleviate (in exchange for concessions).

Arctic Gluttony. Russia's bizarre claim that the Arctic Ocean's Lomonosov Ridge—clearly an ancient tectonic boundary—is in fact the Russian continental shelf opens an as yet unchallenged and unprecedented land grab in which Russia purloins more than its fair share of submarine resources. According to Karl-Heinz Kamp:

*The consequences of global warming will lead to fundamental changes in the Arctic region affecting NATO and Russia likewise. Melting ice-caps will open new shipping routes, providing new strategic options but also increasing the dangers of ecological disasters. The competition for oil and gas as well as territorial claims might be another potential source of tensions and conflicts. Thus, crisis management and confidence building must have the utmost priority and must be put into practice as early as possible.*¹³

Otherwise, Arctic turmoil seems assured.

Energy Brinkmanship. Near abroad dominance assures an unending stream of energy disruptions. With its military in disarray and population in decline, energy is the one button Russia can push over and over again. This can take the form of repeated supply disruption or unending pipeline politics.

Potential Allies Genuinely at Risk. With NATO expansion viewed as the worst thing that has happened since the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine and Georgia could actually face preemptive military action. If Russia waits until they join, the provisions of the mutual defense treaty kick in. And that may even extend to prospective membership, which has never been tested.

Godfather of Ethnic Russians. The proposed Compatriot Law now working its way through the Duma aspires to extend Russian protection to Russians living in other lands and raises the specter of “liberation” of like-minded neighboring ethnic enclaves—all too reminiscent of Nazi Germany's “guardianship” of the Czech *Sudetenland*. Russian populations abound in Kazakhstan, Moldova, Ukraine, and the Baltic states. **JFQ**

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⁶ *Ibid.*

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¹² Fariborz Saremi, “Iran's Journey to Shanghai,” *Defense and Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, August 2007, 12–13.

¹³ Karl-Heinz Kamp, “Relaunching NATO-Russia Ties,” *The Washington Times*, March 15, 2009, B3.