

A Foreign Policy to Suit the Majority?

A New Dimension of Russia's Geopolitical Code

Igor Okunev

A geopolitical code is one of the key notions reflecting the position of a state in the international system and tendencies in the development of its foreign policy. Colin Flint defined it as the way a country positions itself in the international community. Vladimir Kolosov suggests that the code represents a set of a government's strategic suppositions regarding other countries in formulating a foreign policy. The geopolitical code of a country is formed through searching answers to the following five questions:

- Who are the current and potential allies?
- Who are the current and potential enemies?
- How can one keep one's current allies and attract new ones?
- How can a country counter its current enemies and prevent the emergence of potential ones?
- How can these four choices be explained to the nation and to the international community? (The latter question has key significance in today's world.)

This article attempts to analyze the essential evolution of Russia's geopolitical code in the past twenty years and the causes of the changes in the country's foreign-policy positioning.

GEOPOLITICAL CODE AND MORAL BONDS

Any geopolitical code has two crucial variable parameters – the scale and the orientation. Russia's history has evidenced the snowballing of its

Igor Okunev is Deputy Dean of the School of Political Science at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). He holds a PhD in Political Science. This article is based on a monograph prepared by the author for publication in the *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2013.

A Foreign Policy to Suit the Majority?

geopolitical aspirations from the feudal Muscovy of the 15th century to a land-locked nation state of the times of Ivan the Terrible; from a country of Peter the Great striving to get access to the seashores to a huge colonial empire of the early 20th century. By the end of World War II, the USSR and the U.S. had completed evolution from regional to global powers and had formed a bipolar world system. The Soviet Union's disintegration put the new Russia in the face of making a choice between a global strategy, for which it did not have either military or economic resources, and a regional one that fell short of the old ambitions. Thomas Volgy made a felicitous observation that Russia today enjoys an *overachieving major power* status, that is, this country's acknowledged global status is not backed by resources and its potential influence on the international agenda continues to be mostly insignificant.

The intellectual quarters in Russia have always had harsh debates over the orientation of the country's geopolitical code. By proclaiming once in the past that it was the successor to Byzantine (the "Third Rome"), or the heartland of Eastern Christianity, Russia put itself into an opposition to the Western European path of development and gave rise to the perennial question about the degree, to which it was affiliated with the European civilization, and, consequently, about whether it should develop towards the Western paradigm or choose a special pathway for itself. Although the majority of Russians have always had a rather anti-Western outlook, these debates continue to be part and parcel of the intellectual discourse, since the elite has always wanted the West to view Russia as part of Europe, and hence it has been leading the country largely along the European track. Even during the Soviet era the elite, which had absorbed the Western Communist ideology, would set this country in opposition to imperialism or capitalism rather than the West as such. In other words, it opted not for an *anti-Western* course of development but an *alternative* to Western society.

Today, we seem to be witnessing a cardinal reappraisal of the geopolitical code in the minds of the Russian elite, as the focus in foreign policy is shifting from the global to the regional level and its orientation is becoming increasingly non-Western-centric. In essence, the political elite is for the first time ever siding with the majority of the population and playing the anti-Western card as the trump card in its domestic policies.

Igor Okunev

At the beginning of each new term in office, a Russian president adopts a foreign-policy concept. An analysis of the four recent strategies reveals changes in the country's positioning. Vladimir Putin's first strategy of the early 2000s was completely West-oriented. In a notable speech in the German Bundestag he said Russia had made a historic choice, and this was the European choice. However, the search for a new, special way began in the country soon after that. The next strategy profiled Russia as an energy superpower, and the next one viewed foreign policy as a resource for internal modernization. Finally, Putin's latest foreign-policy doctrine, made public in February 2013, is directly aimed at the consolidation of national sovereignty, seen as systemic opposition to the West. Russia of the times of Putin's third term is embarking on a pragmatic and sharp policy in the spirit of *Realpolitik*.

The tough anti-Western rhetoric started out with a struggle against foreign NGOs that were accused of attempts to influence Russia's internal policy and to finance the opposition. It then transformed into a public campaign for nationalizing the elite, which envisioned, among other things, a ban on possessing bank accounts or properties in other countries for state employees. The Russian elite ripped the centuries-old mask of an enlightened pro-European government off its face and plunged into grassroots *pochvennichestvo* (a conservative version of Slavophilism – Ed.) and anti-Westernism. The Russian elite and public at large, which avidly warmed each other up, have closed their ranks in a revulsion against the West, which sometimes manifests itself in a base and obscurantist manner.

What is the cause of this pivot? The answer is multilayered, and to understand the reasons lying at the bottom one has to analyze those lying on the top and at lower layers.

Situational considerations make up the most obvious top layer. A rise of the opposition movement and mass street actions in Moscow in the winter of 2011-2012 forced Putin to seek an instrument for consolidating the elite. His appeal to the idea of national spirit, on the one hand, and intimidating people's minds with the specter of an "external enemy," on the other, helped him build a platform for uniting a broad range of anti-liberal forces in the country. The name of the new public movement – the All-Russia People's Front (recently renamed as People's Front for Rus-

A Foreign Policy to Suit the Majority?

sia — Ed.) — is quite illustrative of this policy, as it was designed to build a broad coalition of social groups supporting Putin. In essence, after losing support of liberal forces, Putin has stopped being a national leader standing above the bout of political opponents and balancing off the rightwing and the leftwing, Slavophiles and Westernizers. He is transforming into a right-off-center conservative who builds his policies to suit the majority while at the same time depending on this majority.

However, the current political situation is only a pretext covering up a desire to implement a U-turn in the country's foreign policy. The next layer is connected with the Russian political and diplomatic elite's frustration over the West's actions at the beginning of the 2000s. Unthinkable today, the idea of Russia's joining NATO was discussed in earnest after the 9/11 attacks in New York when Putin offered a strategic partnership to America in struggling with a new common enemy. A turn of events in that vein would have changed the world. A technical accession to the alliance would scarcely have been possible as it would have required NATO's radical reorganization and, above all, a revision of the range of potential threats and methods of eliminating them — an essential procedure that the North-Atlantic pact has not completed to date. A united Western front stretching from Seattle to Vladivostok would naturally have offered entirely different responses to the regional threats smoldering along the whole length of its perimeter from North Korea to Afghanistan to Iraq to Syria to Libya to Cuba to Venezuela.

Moscow thinks that the hand it stretched out then was not accepted or, rather, the West would agree to accept aid but not to establish equitable partnership. The foreign policy of an overachieving major power is based on a capital of symbols and Russia demanded a symbolic formalization of new brotherhood, but never received it. The mythical East-West division line persists in the Europeans' minds and impedes recognition of Russia as a friend. Instead of playing symbols and giveaway games, the West used Russia's weakness and broke its promise given to Mikhail Gorbachev during the unification of Germany that NATO would not advance a single step to the east of the German-Polish border. It is plainly obvious now that this choice, realistic as it was then, has proved to be shortsighted. In pursuit of tactical successes due to NATO's expansion to the East-European and Baltic countries, the Europeans

Igor Okunev

lost a historic chance of an amassed advance to the East through a full-fledged inclusion of Russia in the power-wielding field of the European civilization. For fairness' sake, Russia's inconsistent diplomacy (especially when it came to choosing friends) did not inspire much trust among its Western partners.

The West made a similar strategic error by not admitting Turkey to the EU. The Europeans got mired in debates about where the frontiers of their civilization lie and about other important but strategically narrow problems (like Northern Cyprus), and lost a unique chance to include Asia Minor and the Middle East in the orbit of the European identity or to try (with no guarantee of success, though) and win over to their side a crucial ally in the struggle with Islamic fundamentalism. Europe's hard-line pro-Palestinian policy pushed Israel, one more island of the European identity in the Middle East, out of the circle of the Old Continent's allies.

By refusing to admit Russia, Turkey and Israel as equitable actors of the West and its outposts in promulgating Western values, Europe has shrunk to the medieval mental size. This may mean that we are entering an era of decay of the European civilization in the sense of renunciation of its global ambitions but not in the sense of its vanishing as such. The centuries-old effort of promulgating the European ideals seems to have outlived itself at the very beginning of the 21st century. Europe has retreated into a cozy shelter on Eurasia's largest peninsula.

Yet this geopolitical layer is not the final one. Russia and Turkey, rejected by Europe, had to search for new – non-European – foundations for their identities and they found them soon enough. Turkey turned its eyes to Islam, and Russia, to Eurasianism. As an ideology, the latter was formulated in the 1920s-1930s by Russian émigré aristocrats who had fled to Eastern Europe from the Bolshevik purges. The geopolitical code of Eurasianism positions Russia as an insular state in North-east Eurasia surrounded by alien civilizations and bolstering its might through consolidating intra-continental ties across the former Russian Empire. The Eurasian ideas, simple and easily assimilable from the geographic angle of view, have so far encountered criticism due to the vagueness of their social and moral ideologemes. The European values of personal freedoms and the free market have been consistently demon-

A Foreign Policy to Suit the Majority?

strating progress in achieving economic and social prosperity, while the Russian notion of *sobornost* (unity as a universal value of a nation), used by the Eurasianists in opposition to the European values, has proved just an ephemeral utopia.

The Old Continent revels in enjoying its own successes in the promotion of liberal and social values without noticing how much they change the attitude towards itself. The societal state, which is turning into a hostage of underprivileged groups and undermining incentives for self-actualization, uncontrollable multiculturalism, the degeneration of the institution of the traditional family and gender roles in society, an aggressive emancipation of sexual minorities, bellicose atheism, and moral relativism are becoming norms of life in the West. While previously the European values would be regarded throughout the world as indisputable norms and the clues to prosperity, their current embodiments are seen from the outside as a crisis of the Western social-liberal ideology.

Although Russia would view itself as “not quite Europe,” until very recently it never called into question the dependence of its progress on compliance with the Western norms of life. The recent evolution of Western values, which Russian society finds hard to accept, has furnished the political elite in this country with grounds to build a new, conservative ideology emphasizing the banefulness of the Western path of development and the importance of keeping with Russia’s own moral and spiritual values. The need to mold spiritual values that would cement society was the focus of Putin’s latest address to parliament.

THE EURASIANIST MISSION

However, the nascent and artificially amplified ideological split between Russia and the West is not the final reason for the anti-Western turn-about of the Russian political elite. The leadership ambitions of the Russian president give the finishing touch to the picture. Vladimir Putin’s willingness to occupy an irremovable place in history obviously keynotes the current term of office. Consolidation of society on an anti-Western (and consequently anti-opponentist) platform, a cooling-off of relations with the U.S. and Europe, and the crisis of social-liberal values lay the groundwork for implementing his main messianic idea, which is to

Igor Okunev

revive a common Eurasian space, the former geopolitical niche of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. A Eurasian Union, the creation of which has been announced, is being built amid new conditions and following a new model. Now it is not a colonial formation but, rather, a flexible and mutually beneficial project of economic integration. In the conditions of the West's estrangement and crisis, the Eurasian Union also signals an attempt to offer an alternative model of social, economic and – most importantly – spiritual and civilizational development. The latter is a task of a historical dimension.

The Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, established in 2010, is not the first attempt to build a regional integration organization in the post-Soviet space. Numerous overlapping structures have been created over the past decades – the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), the Common Economic Space, the Union State of Russia and Belarus, etc. One may get an impression that the Customs Union is just one more entry in the list. But still there is a feeling that the Customs Union – and the Eurasian Economic Union, which is due to emerge on its basis after 2015 – marks a qualitative leap from the previous practices.

The Customs Union speaks the language of economic benefits, while previous integration attempts were accompanied by politically correct but empty statements about the brotherhood of peoples, cultural and linguistic unity and the parallels of historical paths, which inevitably created a phobia of a new Russian colonization. After Russia's accession to the WTO, one can feel confident that the regional practices in customs policies and trade will not contradict those accepted in the world. The first year of the Customs Union's operation brought about a 40 percent increase in trade between the participating nations, and the increase for the first two years was almost 100 percent. Ukraine, torn between a desire to join the Customs Union and a desire to join the European Union, is facing a pragmatic dilemma. With the Customs Union, it would earn U.S. \$9 billion in export revenues, whereas with the EU, it would lose U.S. \$1.5 billion due to asymmetric trade rules.

Another novel development in Russia's Eurasian integration efforts is that it has renounced attempts to involve all countries in the project.

A Foreign Policy to Suit the Majority?

Like in the EU, the Eurasian integration is becoming multi-level and multi-speed. If a country is ready to join only a free trade area, it can do this within a CIS framework, and if it sees economic benefits in closer ties, it is welcome to join the Customs Union.

WHY IS THE CODE CHANGING?

However, where is the borderline between shifts motivated by momentary considerations and a change of the geopolitical code? And why are we speaking of a major change rather than fluctuations caused by short-term factors? The change of the geopolitical code has a nonlinear dynamics (different speeds in different periods). For instance, the rigidity of the bipolar system presupposed a relative stability of the geopolitical code. It arose from the existence of two steady coalitions of a universal nature. The affiliated countries would heed the opinions of Moscow or Washington as coalition leaders in all spheres (from military and strategic to cultural/ideological to social/economic). This restricted attempts to change the geopolitical code, as potential allies and enemies of a nation would be predetermined by the very structure of the bipolar world.

Potential dynamism has increased notably after the disintegration of the USSR. First, a radical change has occurred in the nature of alliances, which have ceased to be steady or universal. In the context of today's increasingly complicated world, we are living in an era of ad hoc coalitions. Countries join different alliances depending on the occasion. For instance, Canada supported the U.S. in the war in Afghanistan but was opposed to military intervention in Iraq. Such flexible coalitions have stopped being universal. For example, Norway supports the European Union in the sphere of defense but prefers to remain outside the EU. Coalitions are formed to achieve a specific goal, therefore they are temporary. In these conditions, a country feels free to choose allies and enemies. Moreover, it can manipulate other countries to a certain extent, positioning itself as their ally in some cases and as an opponent, in others. These factors make the geopolitical code less stable and more vulnerable to bifurcations, and bring to the fore the symbolic aspects of this positioning.

Another reason for the current dynamism is a considerable increase in the number of actors of international relations. Formerly, policymak-

Igor Okunev

ing was an exclusive prerogative of states, whereas today we can see a brisk growth in the number of their competitors. States have to face and negotiate with multinational corporations, international NGOs, mafias, rebel groups, pirates, and terrorist groups in the international arena. Even a prominent public figure (for example, George Soros) can assume the role of an independent actor in world politics. All the aforesaid actors have their own sets of allies and enemies, which they choose using their own criteria. Consequently, they have unique geopolitical codes. But while a nation's geopolitical code gets stability from sovereignty and internal legitimacy, the codes of non-state actors are highly volatile.

One might speak about a fluctuation of Russia's foreign policy, were it not for two factors – an increasingly fast change in the geopolitical code in the world, and the deep-lying ideological reasons for a “divorce” between Russia and the West. There are short and long phases in shifts of the geopolitical code. The short phases depend on ad hoc coalitions involving a multitude of different-sized foreign-policy players. Longer phases depend on fundamental factors, above all, ideological or civilizational kinship/estrangement between some allies or enemies. In our case, it is the new Western values and their misunderstanding or non-acceptance in Russia that mark the beginning of a new longer phase.

The Russian geopolitical code is shifting from Western-centric to non-Western-centric, and from global to regional. The formation of a new center of power around Russia may not be smooth. It will inevitably face resistance from countries which Moscow considers to be part of its geopolitical space, and from other centers of power – Europe, China, the Islamic world, and the United States. The U.S. will retain its global domination, but the gap between it and others will narrow. Russia, which is moving away from its pro-European orientation but which does not belong to Asia by virtue of its cultural – not geopolitical – code, should be ready for existence in a competitive environment where it will be unable to rely on anyone but itself. This, again, raises the issue of resources required for such a policy.