

THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



FY24 SCSS#7, April 16, 2024

“Russia End State: Unravelling of an Empire?”

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Introduction

A defining characteristic of “Putinism” is its lack of clarity, its active “blurring – of past and present, war and peace, internal and external threats, military and non-military tools, the merging of Putin-regime-state, and perception and reality. Putin deliberately does not offer a policy map or blueprint for the future. Putin avoids ideological certainty in order to maintain room to maneuver and to have strategic autonomy as a leader.” (FY24SCSS#1) At the start of Putin’s third term in 2012, state-controlled institutions asserted that Putin embodied “historical-charismatic” legitimacy (“No Putin No Russia”) rather than “legal-rational.” He was in power because only he could defend Russia as a “civilizational state.” This mode of legitimization of Putin’s political authority lends itself to reinterpreting the past, but also forces elites to articulate more clearly what that civilizational space is – and in a post-Westphalia global order run by civilizational states, what norms apply and how these entities should interrelate.

In April 2024, on the eve of Putin’s fifth imperial term, this seminar addresses the prospects for ‘domestic decolonization’ in Russia itself in territorial and mindset terms, before looking to how historical perception determines Russia’s attitude and aggression towards Ukraine and shapes its influence in Central Asia. Ukraine and Central Asia generate competing geospatial constructs: Eurasia and Russian World. We then move to Russia in the Middle East, outside the borders of a four-hundred-year-old historical land-based empire, and note that current turmoil tests Russia’s strategic relevance. Finally, we adopt a global and maritime frame, examining Russia’s World Oceans strategy and what this tells us about future plans and Russian predictive thinking.

Domestic Decolonization

Calls for Russia’s ‘territorial’ decolonization as the ideal, or at least preferred, Russian end state, are dangerous. First, it confirms Putin’s narrative that the West seeks the disintegration of the Russian Federation and the end to Russian statehood. Second, it makes confrontation with the West existential and so risks escalation. However, decolonization of an imperial mindset, through a generational process, might be triggered by Russia’s defeat in its war of imperial

conquest in Ukraine. Such a defeat could have a catalyzing effect for Russia, akin to the impact of the French defeat in Algeria in 1962 or when Britain had to come to terms with the loss of its Empire in Suez in 1956.

Imperial tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and Russian Federation proved to be effective imperial managers. In the tsarist period, they were able to propagate unifying multi-ethnic and multi-faith ideologies and mobilize populations around a tsar with the divine right to rule. In the soviet period, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist ideologies promised “free peoples a post-imperial socialist future” and created a Soviet identity. In contemporary Russia, Putin has likewise sought to create an overarching notion of Russia state patriotism. Besides, brutal “forced resettlement” (for Tatars in Crimea, Chechens, Kalmyks) and the spread of ethnic Russian and Ukrainian colonists in the Soviet and tsarist periods has effectively broken the potential of titular nationalities to press for greater autonomy and even independence.

For Putin, poverty rather than ethnicity is seen as a marker for loyalty towards his regime and support for the “Special Military Operation” (SVO) in Ukraine. Correlations between high poverty rates and high levels of participation in the SVO, and so higher casualty rates among the poorer population highlight a potential problem for the future. While the populations of Moscow, St. Petersburg, the Leningrad regions, and Chechnya receive the greatest federal funding and have the lowest per capita casualty rates, the poorest provinces receive the least federal funding and have the highest level of casualties. Disparities in federal funding, which is a function of politics and coup-proofing (reducing socio-economic tension in the traditional capitals), creates a perverse incentive for poor but loyal peripheral regions to build narratives around the prospect of immediate social unrest. High casualty rates provide the ostensible trigger for potential social explosion and so lead to increased federal funding to mitigate the risk. The Soviet experience of Afghanistan illustrates how such narratives of suffering, now latent in the Russian Federation in the context of the SVO, can become narratives in the periphery to mobilize local support against what becomes a capricious center deliberately directing suffering.

Russia and Ukraine

Since its inception, the Russian Federation has consistently viewed former Soviet space or its “Near Abroad” (a term that received its first official usage in Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept in March 2023, even though it has been ubiquitous in public discourse since the 1990s) as a zone of influence if not control. The states of the former Soviet Union (FSU) were accepted as independent by Moscow, but seen as less fully independent than other states. Ukraine is the most important of former imperial territories for two reasons: geography bestows on it an unparalleled strategic significance and it has a central role in Russia’s national identity narrative.

Ukraine shares a 2000-kilometer border with Russia and lies 500 kilometers from Moscow. Furthermore, in its east and south the land is generally flat but its western border mountainous. Control of Ukraine thus gives Russia strategic depth and protects ground approaches to the Volga-Don region, Russia’s heartland. In addition to being a shield for Russia, Ukraine’s long Black Sea maritime border provides Russia a springboard to project power to the Mediterranean. In terms of national identity narratives and memory politics, “Kievan Rus” is posited as the origin of Russian statehood (even though the concept of “state” was alien to the 11th century), Crimea as the location of the first Slavic conversion to Christianity, and Ukraine presented as part of Russia’s imperial core. Ukrainians are presented as close to Russians but lesser. Their language is understood by Russian elites to be an unsophisticated country bumpkin-like dialect

of Russian. Ukrainians are referred to as “little brothers,” with Ukraine itself referred to as Malorossiya or “Little Russia.”

Loss of control of Ukraine is also understood in domino terms – lose Ukraine; lose influence in the rest of the “Near Abroad.” For these reasons, in Russian thinking, the use of military force to prevent Russia from losing influence, is justified. Russia’s preferred end state for Ukraine appears to be dismemberment and subjugation: to incorporate the east and south into Russia and render the rest a puppet state under Russian control.

Russia’s Role in Central Asia and Wider Eurasian Thinking

In 2022, analysts suggested that Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine would lead to a diminution of Russian imperial influence in Central Asia, but trade, investment, and labor migration figures do not support this “unravelling of empire” thesis, nor has the expected diminution of Russia’s military presence and footprint in the region materialized. Russia’s empire is not “unravelling” but mutating. In some important respects, Russian ties with Central Asia have become stronger and intensified, not despite, but because of, the war. Trade with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan has increased. As trade ties between Russia and the EU have been severed, Central Asian EU-trade has increased to allow the reexport of EU goods (including dual use) to Russia through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which has become an effective mechanism for sanctions avoidance. To give one (illustrative) example, German luxury car exports to Kyrgyzstan have increased by 31,000%. A major Russian gas deal with Uzbekistan and a \$6 billion coal deal with Kazakhstan, where almost 50% of foreign companies registered are now Russian, attest to an intensification of ties. In addition, the multi-modal Middle Corridor was expected to replace the sanctioned Northern Corridor running through Russia. But the Middle Corridor still faces infrastructure bottlenecks and the Northern Corridor now transits pre-war volumes again. Central Asian labor migrant remittances have increased, constituting 20% of Uzbek GDP, and higher percentages in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Lastly, the military balance in Central Asia has hardly changed, despite Russia’s often weak performance in Ukraine. Russia maintains its military presence in the region.

But some important changes can be noted. First, Central Asian states have greater opportunities to define and further diversify their cherished multi-vector foreign policies, as attested by a Central Asia-Gulf Cooperation Council foreign minister meeting in Tashkent this week and the ever-existing presence of China in the region. Second, two spatial ideas in Russian thinking – “Russian World” and “Eurasia” - are increasingly divergent and potentially incompatible, suggesting split views and strategic priorities within the Russian elite. Eurasia suggests a wider Slavic-Turkic space, an openness to labor migrants and imperial nationalism. The “Russian World,” by contrast, is a narrower concept, based on Russian Orthodoxy, the notion of triune people (Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians) and ethnic nationalism.

Russia and the Middle East

Escalating tensions and instability in the Middle East have, unexpectedly, highlighted Russia’s absence, lack of influence, and strategic irrelevance in the region. In the mid-Soviet period, the USSR first gained traction in the region, positioning itself as a leader in the anti-colonial struggle. They were avowedly anti-American, and the prime mover in the socialist camp, establishing ties with Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and South Yemen. Influence gains made in the 1960s and 1970s largely evaporated through the 1980s, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. President Putin was able to capitalize on the Arab Spring in 2011 to

promote Russia as a defender of the status quo, even if was maintained by a military coup (Egypt), suppression of society (Syria), and an enemy of “revolutions.” Russia’s anti-Americanism and its perceived counter-terrorism success in Russia and Syria, as well as its role as leader of Orthodox Christianity all promoted its “brand” and increased its influence. But this Russian brand, so strong between 2011-2022, has similarly evaporated.

The diminution of Russian influence in the Middle East is attested by numerous factors. SIPRI data highlights falling Russian arms exports to the region. A schism within the Orthodox Church, with Greece and Bulgaria supporting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, not Moscow, diminished Russia’s religious leadership status. In addition, Russia’s reflexive denial and deflection (“it was Ukraine and the Anglo-Saxons”) response to the reality of the ISIS-K Crocus City Hall terrorist attack in Moscow undermined its own discourse towards Islam and Muslim labor migrants. The ISIS-K brand is very familiar in the Middle East and Moscow’s ambivalence is seen as a sign of weakness, undermining Russian claims of spiritual-ideological leadership. Russia’s connection to the Middle East through Türkiye has been weakened despite Putin’s personal ties with Erdogan and extensive economic ties. In Syria, Russia has withdrawn air defense systems for use in Ukraine, leaving Syrian skies open to Israel. The “Syria Express,” a sea-bridge bringing supplies to Latakia and Tartus, is disrupted and supplies to these two Russian bases are diminishing. As for land troops, the Wagner PMC in Syria is in disarray, with the GRU unable to exert control over it.

Russia can maintain transactional ties to Iran and it can still veto UN Security Council Resolutions, but it lacks the ability to influence Iranian policy. Overall, Russia’s military operation in Syria looks static, with the potential for geopolitical debacle. At the same time, U.S. influence and leadership in the region appears indispensable, further eroding Russian narratives.

Russia’s World Ocean Strategy

World Oceans cover 70% of the earth’s surface and hold 80% of economic potential. For Russia, different oceans have different functions. For example, the Atlantic Ocean (including the Baltic, Black, and Mediterranean Seas) is critical for Russian logistics and communication flows; the Arctic for sovereignty, security, and as a resource base in need of development; the Pacific for connectivity and fisheries; the Indian Ocean for port calls and Myanmar; while the Southern Ocean is crucial for resources and dueling with China.

Russia adopts three different types of approaches to engaging in these oceans: unilateral, bilateral, and multi-lateral. Unilateral efforts are evidenced by the development of Russian national strategies, foreign policy concepts, and doctrines. Here, oceans are characterized by Russian vital national interest: Russia distinguishes between living and non-living resources and the importance of flying the flag, maintaining and promoting Russia’s presence, and great power status. Bilateral efforts in the Arctic involve the development of the Northern Sea route with China and in the Southern Ocean and Antarctica with India (not China), which helps Russia with resupplies. (India and Russia support each other’s resupply missions via the South Africa gateway. China used to use Australia but has since purchased most of Argentina’s gateway port). Russia signs bilateral agreements to facilitate port calls that promote Russian hydrocarbon investments. Multilateral efforts are evident in the Indian Ocean where Russia carries out joint naval exercises with Iran and China and in the development of North-South trade corridors from the Arctic Sea to the Indian Ocean. Multilateral treaties are another way to engage. Interestingly,

Russia blocks consensus amongst parties to the Antarctic Treaty for further maritime protection, that is to say, it opposes the expansion of further maritime protection.

Russia faces a number of challenges in realizing its goals and pursuing its interests in world oceans, mainly because the means to achieve its ends need to be updated and modernized. For example, weaknesses in shipbuilding and technology-related issues are exacerbated by sanctions. Both Russia and China are losing the sea-bed mining race, as India surges ahead; naval military and commercial port infrastructure need investments; and Russia faces personnel and workforce deficits. For Russia, partnership with China is the solution with China exporting LNG platforms to Russia, exploiting sanctions loopholes, and alongside India and the UAE providing needed investments and technology.

Conclusions

The notion of Russia as a “civilizational-state” and the invocation of “Russian” history to justify and legitimize justification of contemporary imperial Russian foreign and security policy is a notable feature of current Russian discourse. Russia’s identification with its supposed “1000-year history” and misappropriation of the history of others (e.g. ‘Kievan Rus’) highlights, in reality, its indistinct strategic identity. Imperial colonization and conquest began before Russia itself became a nation, and so outward expansion and overstretch became a defining characteristic and is ingrained in Russian identity, strategic and political cultures, and is integral to Putin’s operational code.

The findings of this seminar suggest that we are not witnessing the “unraveling of empire,” but rather its mutation and evolution. Russia is able to manage existing challenges, though we can identify potential incompatibilities emerging that point to future source of tension. Divergences can be discerned between what Russia says (narratives and discourse) and what Russia does. In effect, this is a split between the ‘intangible’ (mission, status, mindset) and the ‘tangible’ (money, resources, territory). This tension will be reflected in costs/benefits and how they are weighed in Putin’s risk calculus. The immaterial appears to currently outweigh the material and perception, for Putin, is reality.

GCMC, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, April 16, 2024.

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