



July 2001

Issues Paper 7-01

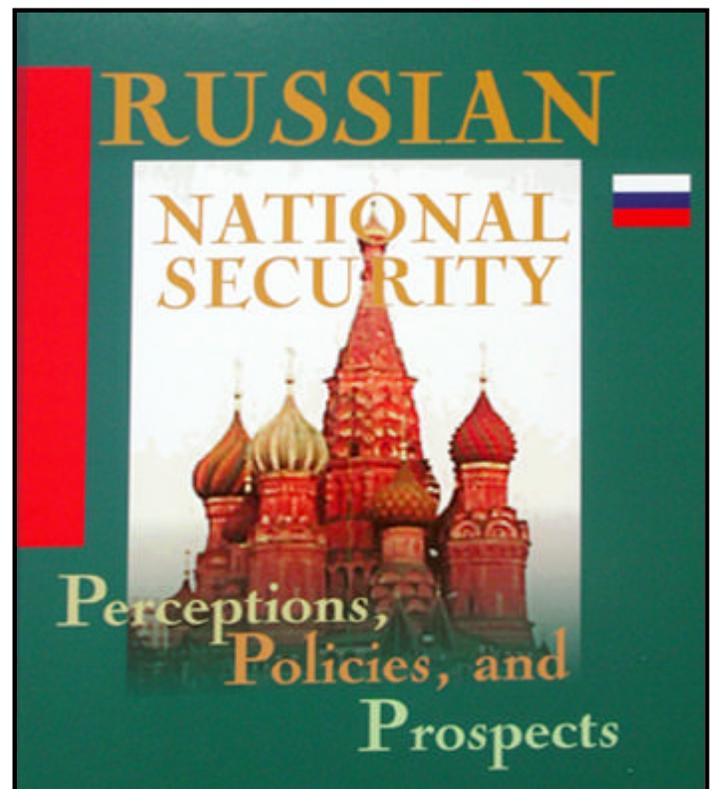
RUSSIAN NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY: PERCEPTIONS, POLICIES, AND PROSPECTS

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In early December 2000, the Collins Center brought together over 25 specialists to examine Russian national security policy. The workshop examined that policy in terms of factors influencing Russian national security policy formulation, Russia's perceptions of the world and itself, current Russian security and foreign policies in key regions of the world, and prospects for Russian interests and actions in the world and especially with regard to the United States.

Roots of Russian National Security

Looking first at the roots of Russia's security outlook, it was pointed out that there is a great deal of commonality between the Russian and Soviet outlooks, in spite of the significant differences in the positions and resources of the two countries; this is because the underlying motivations—the well-being of those in power—did not change significantly with the collapse of the USSR, only the more limited circumstances in which Russia found itself. This should not be surprising, in part because it is usually hard for a country and particularly any given generation of leaders to break with the past, perhaps especially so when national security policy is involved. In part, a country's national security outlook is determined by objective factors such as geography, resources, and traditions that are built over an extended period. Another factor is that national



interests are defined by a nation's elites, and in Russia's case, core Russian security beliefs, consisting of great power aspirations based primarily on military power generated to gain control over adjacent territories, date back to Peter the Great and have not been significantly altered by the elites during the intervening period.

Unfortunately for the Soviet Union and Russia, the country's elites and their views were ossified for an extended period, and while the security elites (the Communist Party *nomenklatura*, military, and security services during the Soviet era) benefited greatly themselves, society at large became much less flexible and less able to respond to change in the international arena. It could be argued that the ossification of the elite structures left the country unable to adapt to change in the world, making the society less competitive in virtually every arena of activity.

One author cited a recent paper by a Russian security analyst that referred to the re-creation of the policies of Tsar Alexander III, with a propensity for a great power mentality, conservatism, paternalism, independence from the West, and reliance on "the only two true friends of Russia—the Army and the Navy." This outlook results in "nostalgia for empire and great power status" and xenophobia remaining as significant factors in Russian national security policy formulation, even at a time that Russia can be regarded, in the words of one speaker, as "an emerging state—with nuclear weapons." These Russian attitudes are particularly dysfunctional in a world in which the focus on control of territory—and the large military forces required to control that territory—may become less important than the ability to generate technological innovation and other economic factors. As one author pointed out, however, change usually does come about when leaders finally realize the implications of continuing to apply policies that simply do not work.

Internal Challenges

Domestically, perhaps the greatest challenge for the Russian leadership is the economy, the recent improvements in which has been largely the result of the increasing prices for energy, particularly when compared to economic conditions in Russia in late 1998. The country still faces the challenge of establishing a rule of law in the economic realm, as in other areas of activity, before it can expect any significant and sustained economic recovery. This challenge, for which Russia has little historical experience, is required as the foundation of virtually all progress in the country. Absent major reforms, the current economic recovery will soon sputter, and the economy likely will reverse its recent favorable course. Additionally, conference participants recognized the immense economic challenges posed by the country's dire environmental situation and its obsolescent, if not obsolete, industrial base, issues addressed in greater depth in the Collins Center's February 2000 workshop, entitled *The Russian Armed Forces at the Dawn of the Millennium*, which resulted in an anthology of papers with the same title. Political challenges abound, as well, with significant concern about the authoritarian predisposition of the Putin administration. Such a predisposition puts at risk the growth of civil society and the eventual democratization of the country, a factor that undoubtedly will weigh heavily in the calculations of American and European leaders.

Conditions in the Russian military also are not good. Efforts to implement military reform over the past decade have been marked by false starts, a lack of will and the means to undertake real, substantive reform, and politicization of the armed forces. One participant aptly described the military as suffering from "malign neglect." Morale is low, scant resources are available for training, and procurement of new weapons is being maintained at an extremely low level. The result has been the near collapse of the armed forces, with only 7-10 of the divisional structures probably having any semblance of being combat ready. The war in Chechnya and the loss of the Kursk are merely the most visible indicators of the many, serious problems facing the Russian military. However, the exception to this may be the nuclear forces, upon which the Russians—in their own view—have to depend not only for status but also for deterrence, at a time when their conventional capabilities have declined precipitously. Additionally, foreign military sales, which Russia sees not only as a significant source of hard currency, are seen as the possible savior of Russia's military-industrial base. At the strategic level, the Russians see the U.S. drive towards a national missile defense (NMD) as a destabilizing factor in the strategic balance, voicing differing perceptions of the threat of nuclear and missile proliferation. Beyond the military-technical issues involved in the challenges of maintaining the force structure, there also has been little progress in establishing true civilian, democratic control over the armed forces.

International Challenges Abound

Abroad, Russia continues to try to identify its interests and define policies to meet those interests.

- US-Russian relations over the near future are likely to continue to be beset by friction and intense competition stemming from fundamentally different worldviews. Efforts by both nations to maintain an ongoing dialogue in all areas of interest and conflict are essential if the powers are going to avoid a total deterioration of relations. Differences of opinion on a wide variety of issues will stem from differing geographic, economic, and security interests. Indeed, even under the best of circumstances, relations between the two countries over the foreseeable future are likely to be characterized by intense efforts to resolve one difficulty only to have another arise almost immediately. In essence, the “strategic partnership” appears to be a thing of the past and is not likely to be revived over the next several years at least.
- With regard to Europe, Russia’s outreach to the region can be seen in its traditional light as an effort to sunder the Atlantic alliance, Russia attempting to divide the United States from Europe by emphasizing common interests with the other European states, but there also may be another element to this policy; that is, Russia—recognizing it is no longer the true equal of the United States in economic, political, or even strategic terms—seeking out “equal” partners with whom to conduct a dialog.
- Russia’s approach to the Caucasus and Central Asia under Putin is witness to the political elite’s continued pursuit of private interests, centered on self-aggrandizement, beginning to clash with concrete emerging Russian national interests and efforts to build a strong state. However, whether the issue is managing the Chechen conflict, seeking influence in the Caspian region, or positioning Central Asia within Moscow’s sphere of influence in the multi-polar international system that Russia is seeking to create, conference participants agreed that key Russian policymakers still lack a coherent strategy to guide them in meeting these challenges in a region of great importance to Russia and other major powers.
- In the Far East, Russia’s relationship with Japan will remain tied to Japanese hesitancy to invest where there is little prospect for real economic returns and to Japanese attitudes toward the territorial issue outstanding between the two countries. The Sino-Russian relationship likely will bring short-term gains for both, but from a security standpoint, China poses a significant longer-term threat to Russian interests in the Far East, including possibly a threat to Moscow’s control over its Far East territories.

Much as it faces a choice between democratization and authoritarianism at home, the current challenge for Russia’s leadership abroad is to recognize that it must choose between a course of seeking to play the role of a major regional power and attempting to impose its will on others or one of seeking real integration into the world community. Russia stands at a cross-



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Center for Strategic Leadership, December 2000*

roads that will determine its future—essentially what kind of Russia it will be. It must be recognized also that only Russia’s leaders can make the choice that the country faces. Unless the Russian leadership, prompted by a growing civil society, recognizes that this approach will not assure Russia a key role in the world of the 21st century, Russia will remain in crisis.

Observations.

Russia, roughly a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is still very much in the midst of redefining not only its interests but also itself. In this process, Russia faces several decisions and challenges, both foreign and domestic. Domestically, Russia must choose either the path of democracy or the path of authoritarianism. Although President Putin’s background and many of his actions reveal Russia’s traditional disposition towards a “strong hand” in governance, the path Russia will choose is still unclear. In foreign affairs, it must decide whether it will turn to the East and forge a closer security relationship with the People’s Republic of China or seek closer ties with the European community and North America. As regards U.S.-Russian relations, the U.S. ability or desire to influence events in Russia is not nearly so important as the choices Russia makes on these and other issues and how otherwise it conducts itself in the international arena. The choices Russia makes will largely determine the future opportunities and risks in the two countries’ relationship.

Also contributing to this article were Dr. Stephen Blank, Colonel James Holcomb, Dr. Marybeth Ulrich, and Professor Anthony Williams.

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