The masks of Proteus: Russia, geopolitical shift and the new Eurasianism

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Despite the growing interest within international relations theory and political geography in critical geopolitics, there has been little engagement – other than from Western perspectives – with the relationship between geopolitics and national identities in Russia. This article examines this relationship by focusing on the emergence of Eurasianism within geopolitical discourse, and the manner in which such representations of Russia as a distinctive Eurasian civilization and power inform geopolitical thinking, particularly in relation to the shift in Russia’s foreign policy since around early 1993. The article first explores the emergence of competing geopolitical discourses amongst political opinion-makers before turning to consider how particular sites – ‘the Near Abroad’, ‘Europe’ and ‘Asia’ – have been officially reinscribed as part of Russia’s understanding of itself as a Eurasian power. The article draws upon the geopolitical writings of prominent Russian theorists and statesmen and Russian government policy statements and documents from 1993 to early 1999.

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Introduction

Russia has undergone a significant shift in foreign policy since around 1993. Interpreted as a more assertive and nationalistic stance within global affairs, most commentators attribute this sea change to Russia’s disenchantment with its short-lived Western orientation in the early 1990s and to a growing perceived need within foreign-policy-making circles to be more assertive with regard to national security interests (Tsygankov 1997; Mezhuev 1997). This shift in security discourse has also been linked to the Yeltsin administration’s attempt politically to outbid both the nationally bellicose Far Right and the Communist Party following their successes in the 1993 and 1995 parliamentary elections (and a strong losing performance in the 1996 presidential election), to end the formation within the parliamentary lower house (Duma) of a ‘Coalition of Patriotic Forces’ made up of both blocks (Malcolm and Pravda 1996). While this is not always made explicit, there is also a general consensus amongst Western analysts that the reformulation of Russia’s foreign policy reflects a more systemic crisis of national identity, of what it means to be Russian following the demise of the Soviet homeland (Sovetskaya rodina) and of the difficulty that many Russians face in readjusting to the loss of global superpower status (Smith 1999a).

Editor’s note: Graham Smith finished this paper for Transactions just before his tragic death earlier this year. Given the circumstances, the paper could not be refereed in the normal way, but I am indebted to Mike Bradshaw (Birmingham), Mark Bassin (University College London), Gerry Kearns (Cambridge) and Andrew Wilson (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, London) for looking through it, and for their advice and comment. The paper was written before the recent events in Kosovo. It is published here as a tribute to Graham Smith’s outstanding contribution to the field of political geography in general, and to Soviet studies in particular. The paper is followed by an appreciation of Graham’s work by Gerry Kearns.
Within Moscow foreign-policy circles, the place ascribed to Russia within global affairs has become increasingly scripted as part of an explicitly geopolitical discourse based on competing representations of Russia as inextricably bound up, both geopolitically and culturally, with the idea of Eurasia. While the ‘Eurasian idea’ can be traced back to nineteenth-century Slavophilism, since the early 1990s it has emerged to occupy a prominent place within the geographical imagination of Russia’s intellectuals, politicians and foreign-policy-makers – especially in those governmental institutions concerned with international affairs, notably the Russian Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Defence, and the Duma’s Geopolitics Committee. Based on the notion that Russia should follow its distinctive societal and geopolitical path separately from Europe and the West, the ‘new geopolitics’ also accords to Russia, as the self-proclaimed leading Eurasian state, a special role within post-Soviet space. However, while stressing its distinctiveness as part of Eurasian civilization, Eurasianists differ in the extent to which they emphasize Russia’s place within Eurasian civilization as constituting either a potential cultural and geopolitical bridge between Europe and Asia or simply an alternative to both. In the process, Eurasianist thinkers have appropriated and reframed the writings of the self-styled inter-war Eurasianists, a school made up of young Russian diasporic intellectuals based largely in Prague who drew heavily upon both late nineteenth-century Slavophile thought and the ideas of Western geopoliticalists. Yet, despite their attempt to redefine Russia, as Laqueur notes,

they [the original Eurasianists] never made it clear whether they had a real, existing East or an abstraction in mind; whether they wanted a synthesis of Europe and Asia or rejected both, whether their devotion to the Orthodox church was deeper than their admiration for Islam and Buddhism. (Laqueur 1993, 175)

While the New Eurasianism embodies a similar ambiguity, its advocates across the political spectrum share an unease with Russia emulating the West, and with the form of foreign policy that Moscow pursued during its so-called ‘Western-liberal’ period of 1991–93. While the sudden and unplanned end of the Soviet Union might have been expected to have thrown Moscow’s practitioners of statecraft into confusion, in fact what swiftly emerged during this period was a clear global security discourse that welcomed a new beginning for Russia within world affairs. Based on abandoning ‘the imperial past’, it sought to safeguard Russia’s interests through cooperation with the West and with its post-Soviet neighbours by prioritizing its full and active participation in international political and economic organizations. The idea of Russia becoming an equal partner of the West, working with Atlanticism and sharing its security concerns, was rapidly inscribed in official government discourse. Russia, it was claimed, was not only rejoining the West but ‘returning to civilization’, again becoming ‘an apprentice of Europe’, and so connecting up with a Westernizing tradition begun in Russia in the late seventeenth century under Peter the Great (but which throughout most of the twentieth century had been interrupted by state socialism: see Kozyrev 1994; 1998). This new foreign-policy orientation was considered integral to the country’s transition to the market and to securing vital Western assistance for Moscow’s domestic reconstruction. As Andrei Kozyrev, Yeltsin’s first minister of foreign affairs, put it, this ‘return to civilization . . . is about a pragmatic politics, of helping meet the internal needs of Russia’ (Izvestiya 2 January 1992). In returning to the West, the new geopolitics also heralded a distancing from the past. Imperializing practices, interpreted as both Tsarist and Soviet, were, for Russia’s liberals, to become closed chapters in the country’s geopolitical history. In abandoning empire rebuilding ambitions, what was to be created was a Russian (Rossiiskii) national state in which even the idea of the reintegration of the surrounding CIS countries was not considered to be in Russia’s national interests (Yakovenko 1997).

Above all, the New Eurasianism has framed itself in relation to both Western liberalism and Atlanticism. But the revival of Eurasianist thinking has gone hand in hand with the emergence of differing normative geopolitical visions of Russia’s relationship with not only ‘Europe’ and ‘the West’, but also ‘the Near Abroad’ and ‘Asia’.1 Thus understanding Eurasia as a mask for legitimating particular stances on foreign policy also entails grasping its importance as a geopolitically constructed and contested exercise in moral justification. As O’Tuathail writes more generally,

To evoke a ‘civilization’ is to call up a foundational identity, a mystical and mythical transcendental presence that is vague yet absolutely fundamental. To
The masks of Proteus designate a conflict a civilizational one is to determine its character in a definitive and totalizing manner. It is to impose a closure upon events, situations, and peoples. (1996, 244)

This article seeks to unpack how such a civilizational credo is imbued with geopolitical meaning. It is divided into two parts. The first examines the emergence of the Eurasianist idea as propounded by the three most prominent and politically influential schools of geopolitical thought — those of the New Right, Eurasian Communists and Democratic Statists — each of which is scripted not only in relation to Western liberalism but also in relation to each other. The second part examines in more detail the dominant role that democratic statism plays in official post-1993 foreign-policy thinking and how this specific version of Eurasianism interprets Russia’s place in relation to ‘the West’, ‘the Near Abroad’ and ‘Asia’, thus helping us to understand how these sites have been produced geopolitically as part of official discourse.

Geopolitical discourse and the New Eurasianism

The Eurasianist New Right

Since the early 1990s, the so-called New Right has emerged as the most intellectually important and politically significant force in geopolitical thinking within Russian nationalism as a whole. It is particularly associated with two self-styled and influential geopoliticians: Aleksandr Prokhanov (who describes himself as a ‘geopolitical novelist’) and the political geographer Aleksandr Dugin. Combining popular and pseudo-scholarly writings, most notably giving a respectability to its ideas by publishing under the disciplinary umbrella of Political Geography, the New Right has expounded its views in such journals as Zavtra (Tomorrow) and Elementy: Evraziiskoe Obozrenie (Elements: Eurasian Review). Like inter-war Eurasianists such as the geographer Peter Savitsky and Nikolai Trubetskoi, who provide much of its inspiration, the New Right also draws heavily upon the geopolitical writings of Halford Mackinder and Karl Haushofer, as well as the 1940s Belgian geopolitician Jean Thiriart. Additionally, the New Right Eurasianists acknowledge both their shared political stance and intellectual indebtedness to contemporary Western European Far Right nationalist movements and thinkers, especially writers such as Alan de Benoist and the French Nouvelle Droite.

In emphasizing Russia’s special position as part of a distinctive Eurasian civilization, the New Right has produced a specific geopolitical theory that informs its vision of Russia’s place within the New World Order. Dugin argues that the era of the Cold War should not be interpreted simply as an ideological struggle between the capitalist West and the socialist East, with the end of communism and the adoption of Western liberalism in Russia signalling a resolution of these differences. Rather, he suggests, what distinguishes Russia from the West goes much deeper, and is bound up with what he calls ‘the geopolitical struggle between two civilizations’. Consequently, he argues, the neo-liberal regime in Russia has, since 1991, made ‘a fatal mistake’ in not recognizing this enduring difference:

[This national leadership [since 1991] seriously believed that the abandonment of Marxist philosophy would automatically lead to the creation of a balanced system in Russia itself with the active and friendly participation of the West . . . [Instead] when geopolitics came to the forefront, it was clear to everyone that the Cold War was not a manifestation of a philosophical duel of ideology but the expression of a historical constant independent of socio-political specifics. This was simply one stage of the ‘great war of the continents’. (Zavtra 26 May 1998, 7)]

In drawing upon the ideas of Mackinder, Dugin interprets history as a struggle for global supremacy between continentalism and maritimism. Throughout history, he argues, two types of states or empires have existed, each the antithesis of the other: the continental (tellurokatiya) and the maritime (talassokratiya) (Dugin 1997, 15–19). The former is associated with such great powers as the Roman empire and the nineteenth-century Russian and German empires. Based on a spiritual ideology of continentalism, their geopolitical formation, it is contended, is encapsulated in the idea of a people rooted to the land. Continental empires have tended to act as a positive and benevolent force throughout geopolitical history, uniting contiguous lands and peoples on a largely non-exploitative basis, so providing the means for promoting the positive virtues of social harmony, order and autonomy. As Prokhanov stresses, Russia’s nineteenth-century Eurasian Empire was above all a tolerant and benevolent
polity, which recognized that the Russian Imperial Mission was first and foremost concerned with creating a multi-ethnic rather than mono-ethnic empire. It was, he claimed, an empire that respected difference, and in which the spread and promotion of the Orthodox faith did not undermine cultural co-existence as claimed by Western historians and geopoliticians. Russia as Eurasian empire is thus represented as the geographical space in which Russians have for centuries lived in harmony not only with the land but also with other cultures, promoting neither creolization nor assimilation. This contrasts with the maritime empires, which stretch through time from Carthage to the British empire, and are presently represented by Atlanticism. Throughout history, such spatially non-congruent empires have been overly repressive, dominated by exploitative and self-interested metropoles whose inherent commercialism has been driven by rootless and materialistic cultures (Dugin 1997, 15-22). The United States, as the embodiment of Atlanticism and 'Russia's eternal enemy', is held to represent the present-day epitome of such an anti-organic, diasporic civilization, lacking any sacred tradition or ethnic roots, but with the aim of ensuring the universalization of its hybrid model.

Thus for Dugin, Russia’s geopolitical interests reflect its location at 'the geographical pivot of history' (Dugin 1997, 43-50). As a continental power, Russia has been continuously engaged in a struggle for *grosraum* in Eurasia. As its natural sphere of influence, it is therefore Russia’s manifest destiny to resecure control over Eurasia again – for it is only by doing so that it will fulfil its manifest destiny of becoming a global superpower. Moreover, by drawing upon Ratzel’s organic theory of the state, Dugin stresses the importance of spatial expansion for the renewal of Russian national identity, which he suggests will only be achieved by it reclaiming its rightful place at the pivot of Eurasian space. Spatial expansion is, therefore, deemed to be a legitimate strategy, not only because it is inseparable from Russia’s national renewal and dignity, but also because it serves as an essential defensive stratagem and bulwark against Atlanticism.

As part of this project, the post-Soviet South occupies a special place for the New Right. During the 1980s, Prokhanov, an outspoken advocate of Moscow’s continuing intervention in Afghanistan, considered the presence of Soviet troops in that country to be central to the Soviet Union’s geopolitical security, a position which earned him the title of the ‘nightingale of the general staff’ (Hauner 1990, 222). While both Prokhanov and Dugin continue to argue the importance of the post-Soviet South to Russia’s geopolitical security interests, not least because of the importance of its oil wealth in Transcaucasia and Central Asia, it is through the more idiosyncratic geopolitical writings of Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of the most electorally successful Far Right political party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), that the importance of Russia’s southward focus has received most public attention. Indeed, much of the inspiration for his ideas has come from the New Right geopoliticians. In his book *Last thrust to the south*, Zhirinovsky envisages Russia’s geopolitical influence stretching southwards to warm water outlets on the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, a goal he describes as a strategic priority in early imperial history. For him, this represents, the last thrust to the south. I dream of Russian soldiers washing their boots in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, and changing permanently into their summer uniforms. (Zhirinovsky 1993, 66)

Russia should therefore re-establish its hegemonic geopolitical role towards the South. Like the New Right, Zhirinovsky also borrows from Haushofer’s vision of a world divided into four north-south regions, based on what he claims are the ‘natural spheres of influence’ of the superpowers as a basis to legitimize ‘the natural outcome of the geopolitical interests of continentalism and maritimism’: a Russian sphere of influence, including Afghanistan, Iraq and Turkey; Western Europe (with its former African colonies); the United States (including the Americas); and Japan (dominating Eastern Asia and Australia). He writes:

Regional co-operation is better, division into spheres of influence is better, and by the principle of north-south . . . We must come to an agreement that we divide the whole planet, with spheres of economic influence, and operate on a north-south axis. (quoted in Solovyov and Klepikova 1995, 157)

The road to restoring Russian dignity and geopolitical security as in the past, therefore, leads south. In the process, Russia can provide stability and order amongst ‘southerners’, whose clan-based social structures are interpreted as the enduring cultural markers that distinguish Russians from the Eurasian South, and whose very
social condition has a tendency to encourage organized crime, social disorder and ethnic conflict (Andreev 1996).

While the New Right’s principle adversary is Atlanticism, the major geopolitical and cultural threat to Eurasianism is interpreted as far broader and more all-encompassing, an idea captured in the concept of ‘mondialism’ (Edinyi mir). Employed by New Right Eurasianists as shorthand for globalization, cosmopolitanism and both liberal and socialist internationalism, mondialism is held to emanate from Western-based practices of ‘chauvinistic cosmopolitanism’ (as was first argued by the 1920s Eurasianists: Neumann 1996, 112). As part of a carefully orchestrated and ongoing subversive strategy to undermine Eurasianism and further weaken Russia, it is claimed that mondialism also has its ‘fifth columnists’ within Russia itself. Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin, as purported agents of mondialism, are considered to have ensured the fragmentation of Russia as a Eurasian power and undermined its cultural distinctiveness, at last enabling the West to fulfil its twentieth-century mission of colonizing the material and cultural life of Russia. The long-term aim of Western-led cosmopolitanism is, therefore, envisaged as the creation of a homogenous one-world civilization that will be the mirror image of the West, and which threatens to lead to the wholly undesirable end-stage of a global federal government (Dugin 1997, 585).

Russia’s geopolitical mission should, therefore, be to unite anti-mondialist forces against Atlanticism, including mobilizing the support of the 25 million Russians living in the Near Abroad, as well as other forces both inside and outside the Soviet Union’s former territories, notably the countries of the Islamic Near and Middle East. Prokhanov in particular echoes the views of many New Rightists in arguing that Atlanticism has long attempted unsuccessfully to use the promotion of Islam as a buttress against Russia fulfilling its Eurasianist mission, especially its expansion to the South. It is therefore only by recognizing their common adversary that Russia and Islam will be able to check Atlanticism. However, the New Right also draws a firm geopolitical distinction between the United States and continental Europe. A revolution of the New Right in Western Europe, especially in Germany, is considered central to securing the necessary harmony and coexistence between the continental powers in order to usurp the global power of Atlanticism. It is therefore only through striking an alliance with Western Europe’s major powers against the maritime powers of the US and Britain that Russia will be able to weaken the geopolitical and economic hold that the United States currently possesses over global affairs (Tsymburski 1997, 74).

The New Right argues that Russia can only gradually realize its putative place as a Eurasian power within the ‘new millennium world order’. A political revolution of ‘patriotic forces’, made up of a so-called ‘brown-red alliance’ (the Far Right and Communist parties), Dugin argues, would have disastrous consequences for Russia. Not only would it result in an Atlanticist backlash in which financial support for Russia’s economic recovery and access to international trade would be severely affected, but also the rise to power of such patriotic forces by revolutionary means would lead to the country’s imminent geopolitical fragmentation, as the non-Russian ethnorepublics, such as Chechnya, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Sakha, would choose to abandon membership of the Russian Federation. Consequently, ‘Russia’s geopolitical position would not only not improve but would most likely deteriorate’ (Zavtra 26 May 1998, 7). The preferred course is Russia’s gradual movement towards ‘a Eurasianist position’, based on a dual strategy, one domestic, the other foreign:

It would not be accompanied by radical slogans or the declaration of a new course. Rather, the authorities would actively and extensively practice a double standard, outwardly continuing to declare their commitment to democratic values, but inwardly – economically, culturally and socially – to revive by degree the pre-requisites of global autarky, so following the post-war example of Germany and Japan. (Zavtra 26 May 1998, 7)

Thus the post-liberal era in Russia will ultimately lead to,

the process of a gradual Eurasian revival, a normalization of the historical course, and a recognition of the need of a unique cultural, geopolitical, and socio-economic path for Russia.

What would be established would be:

a kind of Eurasian capitalism . . . [that combines] moderate and limited socialism [with] clearly expressed patriotic underpinnings . . . based on an appeal to traditional values, to eternal Eurasian constants.
Eurasian communism

In contrast to the New Right, those who subscribe to a neo-Soviet or communist vision of Russia take as their reference point and golden age a Russia embodied within the Soviet homeland (Sovetskaya rodina). Juxtaposed in particular to Russia’s experiences since the fall of communism, the Soviet era is represented with nostalgia as a positive period in history that provided Russians with international respect and pride in their country’s achievements. Besides blaming its economic, moral and global decline on Western capitalism (and the United States in particular), the neo-Soviet version directs its animosity towards liberal intellectuals and the Russian nouveau riche. It is only by returning to communism and fulfilling its geopolitical destiny as a Eurasian power that Russia will be strong enough to stand up to the West (see in particular Zyuganov 1994; 1995a; 1995b). The main organizational force behind neo-Sovietism is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), which emerged out of the Russian Communist Party, a hard-line group founded by opponents of Gorbachev in 1990, banned after the August 1991 putsch and legalized again by a constitutional court ruling in late 1992. Combining unreconstructed class politics with nationalist rhetoric, ‘the real success of the CPRF’s rejuvenation has undoubtedly been grounded in its encapsulation and embodiment of the nationalist cause in Russia’ (Lester 1997, 36).

The Communist Party’s most important geopoliticalist is its leader, Gennadii Zyuganov, who has headed the CPRF since 1993, and has written extensively on what he labels ‘the new geopolitics’. Zyuganov has drawn on the ideas of Mackinder and others to envisage Russian history since its early medieval origins in Kievan Rus as a constant struggle to secure its natural hegemonic position as a Eurasian continental power. Russia’s key present-day geopolitical battle is therefore to resist capitalist globalization, which can only be achieved through returning to the communist path and so securing the economic and military strength to resist the West. So, while state-directed modernization through the renationalization of the economy and a return to socialist welfarism are important goals, any such programme of economic recovery should not come at the expense of Russia’s geopolitical security. Above all, its geopolitical mission is to connect up historically with the idea of Russia as a Great Power (Derzhava), a synonym for it again sharing the same political space with its Slavic brethren in Ukraine and Belarus, Russians in the Near Abroad and those other peoples and cultures who value communism. In short, neo-Sovietism envisages Russia returning to a socialist Eurasian homeland. Its pale present shadow, the Russian republic, is considered to be neither ‘historical’ nor ‘ethnic Russia’. Its boundaries are ‘unnatural’. The ‘weak’ and ‘subservient’ Russia of today is destined to ‘disappear’ (Zyuganov 1995b). In wanting ‘to provide conditions for the gradual restoration of a Union-state on a voluntary basis’, Zyuganov’s stance is consistent with the actions in 1996 of the Communists in the Duma who voted to renounce the Belavezha accords of 7–8 December 1991 (which recognized the formal dissolution of the Soviet homeland).

Three aspects are crucial to defining and legitimizing Eurasian communism. Firstly, there is its relationship to homeland-patriotism. Throughout the Soviet era, it is argued, there was a constant struggle within the Communist Party to decide who legitimately represented the Russian homeland. For Zyuganov, this is framed in terms of a binary struggle between patriotic forces supportive of nasha strana (our country) and those of ta strana (that country), whose homeland-patriotic credentials deviated from the path of reflecting the true interests and cultural values of the Russian nation. The former is symbolized by particular events and people: the 1917 October Revolution, the Great Patriotic War, and its patriots, Joseph Stalin, Marshal Zhukov (hero of the Second World War) and Yurii Gagarin. It is these symbolic representations of communism who, Zyuganov argues, stand for the true qualities and social values of the Russian people and who in their deeds and actions put the homeland first. This is also a vision that is associated with Russia fighting against the odds, overcoming economic backwardness through the rapid industrialization of the 1930s, urbanizing and taming the Siberian wilderness and defeating fascism. This patriotic heroism contrasts with ta strana, defined through its connections with cosmopolitanism, dogmatic Marxism and national minorities, particularly the Jews, who undermined the greatness of the homeland: those communists who put their individual careers before the Russian national interest, Soviet leaders after the death of Stalin who initiated nationality policies designed to curtail the celebration and greatness of the Russian people, and above all
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those individuals who in the last few years of Soviet rule turned their back on Russia by embracing the policies of Western cosmopolitanism. Indeed, as with the New Right, it is the forces of liberal-cosmopolitanism within present-day Russia that form a vital ingredient of Zyuganov’s conspiracy theory, in which much of the rage generated by the collapse of ‘the socialist fatherland’ is directed against what is interpreted as the grand American plan, supported by Russian liberals and ‘pseudo-communists’, to break up the Soviet Union and weaken Russia. ‘Our fatherland’, claims Zyuganov, ‘is being torn away from us . . . everything is being stolen and sent abroad by insatiable predators’ (Sovetskaya Rossiya 9 March 1996). The West’s aim, in conjunction with ‘compradors . . . native agents of foreign enterprise’, is to create conditions whereby Russia becomes merely a raw material colony of the West. Russia’s present-day liberal reformers, it is further contended, have been duped into believing that capitalism is in the best interests of the Russian homeland when in fact it will reduce it to the rank of a third-world state. This is also a world view that singles out elements within the Jewish diaspora as playing an instrumental role in influencing Western affairs, and, as an integral part of a Western capitalist Judeo-Christian civilization, as antithetical to Russian cultural values and interests.

Secondly, for Zyuganov, the Russian nation is constructed as primordially communist, an association that predates the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Indeed, it is claimed that, as a primordial quality of the Russian nation, communist values stretch back 2000 years and ‘are in tune with the age-old Russian traditions of community and collectivism, and in keeping with the fundamental interests of the Fatherland’ (Sovetskaya Rossiya 19 March 1996). The distinctiveness of the Russian nation therefore rests on it being quintessentially communist in orientation, on the innate belief in the importance of collectivism and ‘the communal spirit’ (sobornost’) as inextricably bound up with Russianness. For Zyuganov, Russia differs from European civilization in that capitalism remains alien to its culture. Bourgeois values and market individualism, it is contended, are both foreign and unsuited to the Russian mentalité, not least because until the 1990s Russians were innocent of ‘the sin of ownership’. Thus the homeland is held to be a space of and for communism because it is occupied by a people whose inherent cultural values have since time immemorial been based on collectivism and sobornost’.

Finally, for Zyuganov, the new geopolitics is about re-establishing a communist Eurasia through voluntary reincorporation. Yet this contains its own internal contradictions: although it extols the virtues of incorporation, embracing universalistic aspirations of an ‘international brotherhood’ based on the idea of equality between nations within a common Eurasian homeland, it also regards socialism as a singularly Russian idea and aim. As the motherland of socialism, Russia is deemed to be the socialist archetype and its nation ‘the agent for remaking history’. The 1917 revolution is interpreted as specifically Russian, reflecting the innate superior socialist values of the Russian people (Pravda 25 June 1994). Among the post-Soviet nations, Russia, it is argued, is destined to lead the way in re-establishing socialism – thus coexisting uneasily with the theme of international brotherhood is that of Russia’s national greatness. Although the core aim is to rebuild a socialist Eurasia, this project is dependent upon strengthening Russian statehood, for ‘the Russian people should bind together all nations and people by their common historical destiny’. The appeal of this largely unreconstructed form of Communism therefore relies on re-establishing Russian hegemony. Just as with the formation of the Soviet Union, the restorationist political order would be a specifically Russian achievement, with the reconstituted socialist Eurasian homeland constructed on the basis of the Russian nation as ‘first among equals’.

Democratic statism: official Eurasianism

Democratic statists (gosudarstvenniki), so called because of their advocacy of combining the idea of a strong state with a commitment to Western-style democracy, hold a vision of Russia that has come to reflect a hybrid or compromise drawing upon a combination of Western liberalism and nationalism to produce a syncretic geopolitical discourse. Democratic statists see Russia as a distinctive civilization, different from the West in its cultural values and geopolitical security concerns and interests. It is envisaged as a Eurasian power whose role is to organize and stabilize the Eurasian heartland, so operating as a bridge between Europe and Asia. Thus the goal of Russia should be to ensure:
the cultural self-preservation and further development of national traditions and co-operation among Slavic, Turkic, Caucasian, Finno-Ugric, Mongolian and other peoples of Russia within the framework of Eurasian national-cultural space. (Rossiiskaya gazeta 10 July 1996, 5)

The new world order does not, therefore, automatically imply that Russian interests would converge with those of the West, but nor should it simply adopt an anti-Western stance. Instead, it must play a more active, even interventionist, role within post-Soviet Eurasian space, in order to protect its own geopolitical interests, especially those of regional stability. Statists accept Russia’s new geopolitical borders, remain steadfast in their commitment to market reform and wish to see Russia playing a full and active part within the world economy. Although statism is uneasy about Atlanticism as a geopolitical project, it is pragmatic enough to recognize that Russia must work with the West, and that it is in its interests to cooperate with Western-dominated international organizations. Thus statists have recast a role for Russia within global affairs (Neumann 1997). Rather than retreating into geopolitical isolation or confrontation with the West head-on whenever differences are at stake, Russia has shown a willingness to recast itself as ‘political broker’ between the United States and its so called ‘rogue states’, as in the case of Iraq in December 1998 and Kosovo in April 1999 (Rossiiskaya gazeta 1 April 1999).

The manner in which statists perceive Russia’s redefined role as a Eurasian power – in particular how specific spaces and cultures (‘the Near Abroad’, ‘the West’ and ‘Asia’) have been geopolitically produced – and why such a discourse has come to occupy a central place within foreign-policy-making circles can now be examined.

The Near Abroad

Until late 1992, Russia had largely ignored what it dubbed the countries of the ‘Near Abroad’ (blizhnee zarubezhe). The subsequent shift in thinking in Russian foreign-policy circles reflected a growing unease over events in some of the borderland states. As Andranik Migranyan, one of Yeltsin’s advisors on foreign policy, put it,

As a result of miscalculations in assessing the role and place of Russia and the deep-seated nature of relations between Russia and the countries of the Near Abroad, officials of the Russian Foreign Ministry and other political leaders in the country drew the strategically erroneous conclusion that Russia should return inward . . . thereby openly and publicly renouncing any special rights and interests in the post-Soviet space outside the Russian Federation . . . However, the events that occurred in Russia and in the republics during 1992 made some serious adjustments in the understanding of Russia’s role and place in the post-Soviet space . . . A significant proportion of the political establishment . . . began to realize more and more clearly that a special role in the post-Soviet space belonged to Russia. (Nezavisimaya gazeta 12 January 1994, 4)

Moscow decision-makers began to represent the Near Abroad as crucial to Russian geopolitical interests. The Near Abroad, as a politically constructed spatial boundary-marker distinguishing it from ‘the Far Abroad’, has been rescripted in four distinctive ways. This space is bound up with Russia’s past greatness, its geopolitical security, its economic interests and the well-being of its diaspora.

Derzhava (Great Power status) Eurasian statists signal the way in which the Near Abroad is bound up with Russia retrieving its great poweress or national greatness. Any abrogation of Russia’s responsibilities towards the Near Abroad is judged as antithetical to Russia regaining its place as a global superpower. Russia can therefore emerge as a superpower only by abandoning the rudderless policy that it had pursued during the early 1990s, by reforging closer ties with its erstwhile Soviet neighbours. The fact that Russia had abandoned its moral and political responsibilities as Eurasia’s regional policeman was also deemed to be contrary to its long-standing benevolent relationship with the borderlands. With the retrieving of great power status inextricably bound up with reinstating Russia’s ‘natural sphere of influence’, what is deemed to be important is what the post-Soviet states share in common, rather than what divides them – a relationship which can only be based on cooperation and trust. While the Yeltsin administration has not fully explained how the Near Abroad is to play a role in ensuring Russia’s place as a Eurasian power, the gosudarstvenniki are clear that fulfilling Russia’s role as ‘a great power’ is different from behaving as ‘an imperial power’:

the former constituting the legitimate pursuit of state interests towards its neighbours within the norms and expectations of the state system, the latter constituting a policy of domination standing outside these norms. (Beissinger 1995, 167)
The masks of Proteus

Geopolitical security The Near Abroad has become viewed as bound up with the permeability of borders, both in terms of Russia’s ‘internal’ and ‘external’ security, in which certain political flashpoints within the borderlands may pose a potential threat to Russia’s internal security. Russia should therefore intervene to ensure the de-escalation of conflicts that could imperil its geopolitical interests or spill over into Russia proper. In the mid-1990s, in particular, at the height of the war in Chechnya, a geopolitically unstable Near Abroad – especially in Transcaucasia – fuelled fears of the Russian Federation itself succumbing to Balkanization. This included concern over the escalation of disputes in civil-war-torn Georgia, notably secessionist struggles in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In keeping with this line, Moscow began to talk about the need to deploy troops in the Near Abroad for the purposes of peacekeeping. In re-scripting security concerns, statist ideologues also began to borrow the language and metaphors of geopolitics of the neo-nationalists (Baev 1997). Moscow now talked about ‘a geopolitical vacuum’ and fears of ‘geopolitical isolation’ within ‘Eurasian political space’, and about the need to reassert Russia’s ‘natural sphere of influence’ over the Near Abroad. In redefining the Near Abroad as pivotal to Russia’s geopolitical security, Moscow was signalling the emergence of a new Russian Monroe Doctrine, or what has been dubbed the ‘Yeltsin Doctrine’. But defining the Near Abroad as a security concern is also bound up with delimiting those who do not belong, namely anxiety about the growing influence of some Far Abroad countries within the Near Abroad. Besides the security of its Western borders in relation to NATO expansion, Russia fears the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism on its southern rim. Moscow has therefore been prepared to intervene in the affairs of the Near Abroad (as in the civil war in Tajikistan) when militant Islam is judged to be a potential threat to Eurasian security, especially in relation to stability in the Muslim ethnorepublics of Chechnya, Dagestan and Tatarstan. Such fears prompted Russia, in May 1998, to sign an agreement with the Central Asian states of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. As presidential spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky, put it, the ‘troika’ is dedicated ‘above all to political co-operation . . . in the struggle with [Islamic] fundamentalism’ (Rossiskaya gazeta 7 May 1998).

Common economic space While in the early 1990s Moscow emphasized the pragmatic need for continuing economic ties between Russia and the Near Abroad, under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the idea of the re-integration of the surrounding CIS countries was not considered to be in Russia’s national interests (Yakovenko 1997). To have done so would have been tantamount to a ‘return to the burden of empire’ (Yakovenko 1997). From 1993 onwards, however, Moscow began to emphasize the importance of the CIS not only as a means of facilitating closer economic and political integration within post-Soviet space but also as a way of giving Russia a higher profile within global economic affairs. In taking the lead in 1995 in setting up a fast-track customs union with Kazakhstan and Belarus (extended to include Kyrgyzstan in 1997 and Tajikistan in 1999), Yeltsin was adamant that:

Russia’s main foreign policy priority is the consistent promotion of integration processes in the CIS framework. This is a vital economic, humanitarian and political interest of ours. (Rossiskie vesti 1 June 1996)

While liberal-Westernizers in Russia continue to balk at the economic costs of continuing to subsidize many CIS member states, and neo-nationalists see such an organization as an opportunity for Russia’s return as a Eurasian geopolitical power, democratic statist ideologues view the idea of ‘deeper integration’ and the eventual creation of ‘an economic confederation’ as having mutual economic and geopolitical benefits for Russia and the other member states. As Yevgenii Primakov, while Foreign Minister, put it:

Moscow must do everything it can to bring the ‘states on the territory of the former Soviet Union’ closer together through economic integration and the ‘creation of a single economic area’. (Goble 1998)

Diasporic space The Near Abroad is also represented as the space in which the Russian diaspora reside. Since 1992, the fate of Russians living in the borderland states has emerged as a major focus of concern. Having recognized the sovereignty of the borderland republics, Russia had initially ‘conceded de facto to rendering Russians living in these areas as foreigners’ (Dunlop 1997, 37). But Moscow subsequently began to express concern that ‘in the territory of the former USSR we are, in effect,
seeing a restoration of the principle of ethnocracy and the formation of ethnocratic states’, a tendency which ‘is asserting itself throughout post-Soviet space . . . from the Europeanized Baltic regions to the clan societies of Central Asia’ (Andreev 1996, 105). Within some of the borderland states, notably Moldova, Estonia, Latvia and Ukraine, statists were calling for Moscow to play a more active and interventionist role in supporting those ‘who have essentially been abandoned to the vagaries of fate’ (Andreev 1996, 112). While in the initial years of Russian statehood, the plight of Russians in the Near Abroad had been championed by neo-nationalists, Moscow foreign-policy-makers now also began to think about their ethnic brethren outside Russia and the way in which they were being castigated as ‘colonizers’ and ‘occupiers’. Indeed, concern for ethnic Russians in the Near Abroad is now at the forefront of Russia’s foreign policy. The introduction of exclusionary citizenship legislation in Estonia (1992) and Latvia (1994) prompted Moscow to level highly charged accusations of ‘social apartheid’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ against these countries. Russia also threatened to impose trade embargoes and other economic sanctions, and signalled its unwillingness to withdraw troops from the Baltic states until their governments respected what Russia termed ‘the end of human rights abuses’ (Smith 1996). The Yeltsin administration was now in no doubt that ‘the twenty-five million of our compatriots in these countries must not be forgotten’ (Nezavisimaya gazeta 1 January 1994).

In referring to Russians outside Russia as ‘compatriots abroad’, Russian statists signal an important change in Moscow’s thinking on citizenship. Although the state is still prepared to offer citizenship to any former Soviet citizen residing in the Near Abroad, what now clearly concerns Russia most is ethnic Russians. Such a policy shift highlights Russia’s envisaged role as the historic homeland of the Russians. For the vykhodtsy (‘those who have left’), Russia is deemed to be their ‘natural’ homeland (otechestvo). The upshot is that Russians in the Near Abroad have become a central concept in defining Russian national identity, with Russia being the ‘historic homeland’ of all Russians and Moscow making it clear that it has responsibilities and obligations to protect their well-being. Moscow has therefore made periodic calls for action against recalcitrant borderland regimes, most recently in 1998 against Latvia, to protest against what Moscow views as that country’s increasingly inflexible attitude towards its large Russian minority. Support for Near Abroad Russians is also reflected in Moscow’s policy of earmarking public funds for what it prefers to call ‘humanitarian aid’ (Rossiiskaya gazeta 10 July 1996, 5).

The idea of Russia as the homeland of the Russians has therefore been reinvented (Smith 1999b). By offering citizenship to all those who have a connection – ethnic or historical – with the homeland, Russia has sought to redefine the boundaries of the nation, while at the same time acknowledging the inviolability of the borderland states’ sovereign spaces. This differs from the stance adopted by the neo-nationalists, who do not accept that Russians in the borderlands should be politically separated from Russia, arguing instead that they should be reunited with their brethren within a common political homeland. Moscow’s renewed willingness to protect Russians in the Near Abroad does not, however, mean that it wishes to encourage ‘return migration’. In the current economic climate, it is recognized that a large-scale migration to Russia could have disastrous economic and social consequences for the country (Zevelev 1996). Rather, statists have attempted to protect members of the nation without either encouraging the grand gathering-in of Russians or calling for the establishment of a homeland-empire.

The retreat from Atlanticism
From the mid-1990s onwards, important changes in attitudes towards the West began to emerge. This sea change was largely a reaction to ‘the construction of a new wall in Europe along the wall between the CIS and those states bent on applying for EU and NATO membership’ (Neumann 1996). What concerned Moscow in particular were Western proposals to expand NATO’s frontiers eastwards, initially to include three new members – Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic – but with the further prospect of membership for the Baltic states as well. This meant not only that what once constituted Russia’s vital sphere of influence was now being usurped by its traditional military adversary, the United States, but that such a military alliance was expanding to the very borders of Russia, threatening its security. NATO’s proposals shattered what
Russia had envisaged as the prospects of building a common political and security system stretching from 'Vancouver to Vladivostok'. In a 1994 speech in Budapest, Yeltsin indicated his disquiet over NATO's proposed expansion by asserting that 'Europe has not yet freed itself from the heritage of the Cold War and is now in danger of lunging into a Cold War peace' (Rossiiskaya gazeta 7 December 1994). This growing mistrust of the West's geopolitical intentions not only showed Moscow that its geopolitical interests were no longer necessarily the same as those of the Atlantic Alliance, but that Russia now needed to play a more assertive role in its relations with the United States in particular.

Although statists recognize that Russia's geopolitical interests differ from the West's, Moscow continues to operate pragmatically. It acknowledges that Russia no longer possesses the superpower status of the Soviet Union. Nor has it the capacity to recreate the bipolar world of yesteryear: it must adjust to being part of a multipolar world made up of competing but coexisting global power blocs. Statists also see the need to take into account the stark reality of the country's economic fortunes being dependent on the goodwill of the West. In return for accepting US plans for NATO expansion, Moscow secured the establishment in 1997 of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council under the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which was intended to provide a new security framework for the whole of Europe, thus going at least some way towards reconciling Moscow's fears of the West as a threat to its national security. But cooperation does not preclude a firm, aggressive policy of defending Russia's own national interests (Matveyev 1995, 32). Indeed, one consequence of US-led NATO expansionism has been to raise once again the spectre of Russia adopting different stances towards the United States and Europe. Many statists have increasingly embraced the rhetoric of the neo-nationalists by representing the United States as 'the reborn Cold War Other'. Europe, in contrast, is redefined as 'the good West' because of its perceived sensitivity towards Russia's regional security concerns. Yet, for many statists, this is tantamount to a policy of divide and perish. As the deputy chairman of the lower house of the Russian parliament put it,

Objectively, most European countries share the American concept whereby the world is a single centre, a power house, uniting the Europeans in a major military bloc and other trans-Atlantic structures under America's aegis, a centre, which brings order and peace into this chaotic world. With perceptions like this, why should Europeans open their arms to Russia and stand up to the United States? For us, too, it would be an unforgivable mistake to seek rapprochement with Europe with a view to harming the United States. (Nezavisimaya gazeta 31 December 1997)

Rather, as Primakov put it,

Initially, Russia's policy was one of 'strategic partnership' with the United States ... a structure in which one country (the US) led the others was gradually created ... This is not what Russia wants. We want equitable co-operation even though we realize that we are now weaker than the United States. I think we have secured such an objective ... The world is becoming accustomed to the fact that we have our distinct identity. This is very important. (Izvestiya 23 December 1997, emphasis added)

While no longer viewing the West as an adversary, statists have lost neither Russia's anti-Western instincts nor its desire to find a new identity for itself distinct from the West.

Asia: guarded rapprochement

There is a general perception within Moscow foreign-policy circles that Russia's centre of balance has moved eastwards, towards Asia, in part as a result of the establishment of the six European post-Soviet borderland states (Kerr 1995). While Moscow has long seen its presence in Asia as synonymous with its status as a world power, a growing rapprochement with its immediate Pacific neighbours is now regarded as crucial to the country's material prosperity, especially to opening up Asiatic Russia (or Siberia). Probably more than in the late Tsarist period, Russia's vision of itself in Asia is more material than cultural or spiritual (Clover 1999). In short, Moscow recognizes that this region has the potential to give Russia the status of an economic superpower. Above all, Asia was a geopolitical project for imperial Russia rather than the basis of an imagined community grounded in Russians' identifying themselves as both European and Asian.

Statists have not been slow to realize that Russia must provide the necessary conditions for its Pacific neighbours to participate in opening up the region's economic opportunities. This has meant recognizing that Russia must strike a balance between its broader geopolitical concerns in
eastern Asia and the need to attract outside capital. In this regard, Japan is recognized as offering the greater potential. Since 1997 in particular, Russo-Japanese relations have shown signs of improvement. The major obstacle to closer ties has been the territorial dispute over the Kurile Islands, which the Soviet Union annexed from Japan after the Second World War. Yet while neo-nationalists in Russia view the islands as an inviolable part of Russia, the Yeltsin administration has adopted a more flexible stance, offering the prospect that some arrangement might be forthcoming over the ownership and administration of the islands. A similar rapprochement has occurred with China. Because of Russia’s initial orientation towards the capitalist West, Beijing treated the new Russia with suspicion, viewing it as ‘the gravedigger of communism’. Since the mid-1990s, however, Sino-Russian relations have improved considerably and are now better than at any time since the 1950s. In part, this is linked to a new confidence amongst China’s political elites. For the first time in the twentieth century, China has surpassed Russia in economic development. More importantly, its northern neighbour no longer represents the geopolitical threat that it did during Soviet times. Both countries have also come to recognize the mutual benefits that flow from cross-border trade and labour exchange. In an attempt to facilitate movement across the Sino-Russian border, major defence agreements were signed in 1997 in which the two countries agreed not only to respect their common border but also to ensure its demilitarization. Southern Siberia, in particular, has been a major economic beneficiary, as Chinese traders have seized upon the economic opportunities that this region offers. Such developments, however, have not been without their critics, as they have rekindled Russian fears of Siberia’s vast underpopulated expanses providing lebensraum for Chinese economic and geopolitical ambitions (Tsepkalo 1998). Yet the influx of Chinese settlers into Siberia’s southern rim has not been enough of an issue to hamper progress towards a new Sino-Russian détente. As much as anything else, it is increasing mistrust of the United States and resentment at what is seen as its high-handed behaviour in Asia that has helped to facilitate what many in Moscow and Beijing hope will become ‘a new strategic partnership’ forming an ‘alternative pole’ to Atlanticism in global geopolitics (Ferdinand 1997).

Conclusions

‘Eurasia’ may now be the key term in Russian geopolitical discourse, but, as Laqueur has argued, there are many possible Eurasias. One version imagines Russia as a cultural and geopolitical bridge between the continents of Europe and Asia (Neumann 1996). Like Slavophilism, Eurasianism was originally a product of the nineteenth century, of ‘a redirected Russian nationalism that had been rebuffed by Europe, and a growing consciousness of Russia’s presence and opportunity in Asia’ (Kristof 1968, 369). This was a vision of Russia forged by the country’s colonization of Asia, by its southern and eastward expansion during the nineteenth century into the Caucasus and Central Asia and the consolidation of its hold over Siberia. However, as Greenfeld notes, the Eurasian vision, the process of looking inward towards the unique local synthesis of cultural values, was also inextricably bound up with a view of the West as the anti-model:

It was ressentiment [of Europe], not social concerns, that fuelled Russian national consciousness, and it was ressentiment, not sympathy for the peasantry, that made the peasant a symbol of the Russian nation. (Greenfeld 1992, 258)

Moreover, while many nineteenth-century Russian imperialists embraced a vision of Russia’s frontiers extending to Constantinople and even India, Russia’s actual historical relationship with Asia has been an ambivalent one, with imperial hauteur just as important in shaping relations as cultural cross-fertilization. For example, Hauner notes ‘the almost unlimited capacity among Russians to identify themselves with Asia while showing their contempt for the Asian peoples and civilizations as utterly barbaric’ (Hauner 1990, 2).

More typical of today’s Eurasianism, therefore, are those thinkers who, by rejecting both European and Asian experiments with state-building, see Russia in exceptionalist terms and argue that a prosperous future can only be secured by promoting a ‘third way’. As Borodaj, a leading spokesperson for neo-Slavophile ideology, proclaims, we have to seek our direction between the East and the West as it corresponds to our spiritual and geopolitical position in the world. Not Western individualism with its imposed sociality ... In the end, the Asiatic cults with monolithic sociality, where the individual is nothing ... We have to create the
Orthodox confession and the corresponding life and economy. This is our third path. (Borodaj and Nikiforov 1995, 110)

Finally, and more ominously, this cultural and geopolitical uniqueness is also held to be characteristic of the post-Soviet space as a whole. Modern Eurasianism assumes that the global resurgence of the region as an imagined whole is in essence the same thing as the resurgence of its Russian/East Slavic core. The rescripting of Russia’s various abroad still positions Russia itself in the central pivotal space.

Note

The ‘Near Abroad’ is a term used in Russia to describe the other 14 republics of the former Soviet Union. The rest of the world, including Central Europe, is the ‘Far Abroad’. The ‘Near Abroad’ includes the Baltic States, which the CIS does not.

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