The Next Stage of Russia's Resurgence: Introduction

Analysis

Editor's Note: This is the first installment in a five-part series on Russia's resurgence. Click to read Part 2, Part 3, Part 4 and Part 5.

Stratfor has long followed and chronicled Russia's resurgence, which has included bolder foreign policy moves and resuming the role of regional power. In particular, Moscow has focused its energy in its former Soviet periphery: the Eastern European states of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova; the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; the Caucasus states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan; and the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

In recent years, Russia has increased its influence in many of these states politically, economically, militarily and in the area of security, with the most obvious sign of its return to power coming in the August 2008 war with Georgia. Now, Moscow is preparing for the next stage of its resurgence. This new phase will include the institutionalization of Russia's position as the regional hub, but it will also include the use of more subtle levers and influence in areas Moscow wants to bring into its fold — though not all of these efforts will go unchallenged.

The Geopolitics of the Russian Resurgence

In many ways, Russia's geopolitical strength is derived from its inherent geographic weaknesses. There are few natural barriers protecting Russia's core, and this requires Russia to expand into and
consolidate territories around its core to acquire buffers from external powers. With the Arctic Ocean serving as the only natural barrier for Russia to the north, this expansion historically has required Russia to push to the west toward Europe (consolidating Eastern Europe and the Baltics), to the south toward the Islamic world (consolidating the Caucasus), and to the east toward Asia (consolidating Central Asia and Siberia). As Russia absorbed peoples and resources, it grew from a small Eastern European principality in the 13th century to the Grand Duchy of Moscow, which became the Russian Empire and then grew to become the Soviet Union, one of the largest contiguous states in history.

However, this expansion created two fundamental problems for any Russian state: It brought Moscow into conflict with numerous external powers and gave it the difficult task of ruling over conquered peoples (who were not necessarily happy to be ruled by Russia). Russia's geography requires it to expand to stay strong, but paradoxically, the more Russia pushes outward the more difficult and costly it becomes to rule its immense territory. Meanwhile, Russia's lack of access to the wider oceans has cemented its position as a land power but doomed it economically and weakened its position compared to other powers that have ready access to the world's oceans. Such factors have created a cycle in which Russia's power rises and collapses. When Russia is on the rise, it becomes a major regional if not global player, and when it falls it is only a matter of time before it rises again.

So when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 at the end of the Cold War and Moscow lost control of its constituent republics and fell into internal chaos, those circumstances did not guarantee that Russia was permanently removed from the international scene and that a unipolar world dominated by the United States would last forever. Certainly by the end of the 1990s, Russia was severely weakened as a geopolitical power; its economy was in chaos and it faced a military defeat in Chechnya, which gained de facto independence and threatened to spur similar movements within Russia proper.

But things began to change with the beginning of the new millennium. Starting with Vladimir Putin's presidency in 2000, Russia was able to reverse its losses in another more successful war in Chechnya, and Russia's position in its former Soviet periphery began to rise steadily. Numerous factors play into this, including the internal consolidation led by Putin to overcome the chaos of the 1990s, high global energy prices and the U.S. involvement in the Islamic world. In the past few years, most of the pro-Western color revolutions that swept the former Soviet Union in the early 2000s have been reversed. Russia has increased its military footprint in many of these states and is in the process of creating economic institutions to match (most notably its customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan that is set to become the Eurasian Union). In short, Russia has returned to its traditional status of legitimate regional power, and its influence is increasing in its historical geographic buffer zones, which are currently made up of more than a dozen independent states.

**Gauging Russia's Resurgence and Looking Ahead**

In the context of its resurgence, Russia's broad imperative has been to prevent foreign influence while building and ingraining its own. Of course, Russia's plans for carrying out this imperative differ in each subregion of the former Soviet Union — Eastern Europe, the Baltics, the Caucasus and Central Asia — and in each state.
Russia's resurgence has not been seamless. Since gaining independence, each former Soviet state has developed its own imperatives: consolidating power internally and maintaining some sort of sovereignty. Also, different external powers are competing with Russia for influence in each former Soviet country. Therefore, the imperatives of Russia and the other former Soviet states often clash, which sometimes leads to dynamic and occasionally volatile relations, even with some of Moscow's most loyal allies.

But power is a relative concept, and right now most former Soviet states are too weak to independently stand up to Russia and most external powers cannot match the strength Russia wields in its periphery. And with Putin set to return to the presidency and begin a new chapter for the Russian state, it is important to gauge the progress Moscow has made in its resurgence in the former Soviet Union and what this projection of Russian power will mean in the future.