

Russia's Security Agenda in Asia Pacific

Victor A. Kremenyuk
Institute for USA and Canada Studies

Introduction: Russia's Security Concerns

The amount of writings on Russian security policy is outstanding. There has always been an active interest towards Russian, formerly-Soviet, thinking on security issues because the Soviet Union has emerged after the World War II as a military superpower ready not only to pursue its security policies with the help of weapons but also to exert direct pressure on other countries if that were considered useful for its interests. Both Soviet nuclear arsenal and its policy of using force in promoting what it considered its legitimate interests have impressed much of the writings and contributed to dissemination of certain ideas on security in the world at large.¹

Basically, Soviet thinking used two pillars as the essence of security policy: division of the world on ideological basis and possibilities of using nuclear weapons as a means of policy-making. That has helped to identify "friends" and "foes" internationally and to draw a dividing line between the two groups in order to create a certain vision of security structure, while possession of nuclear arsenals has theoretically outlined the limits of possible use of military means. In case of escalation of a conflict, the perspective of an all-out nuclear war has forced the Soviet thinkers and their counterparts in the West to adhere to some "rules of prudence" in order to avoid a holocaust.²

This tradition of the Cold War period in the Soviet security policy has left a deep imprint for the period which followed. There were mainly two thrusts in the Russian security policy: first, to reconsider and to change its alignment in the world, to re-identify its allies and partners and thus to lead to the changes in "friends-foes" structure; second, to attack the threat coming from overextended nuclear arsenal through negotiated cuts with the West, mainly USA. Both thrusts had to be accompanied with a wide international effort to reduce numbers in conventional weapons. While using arms control policy in a much wider way to support its security, Russia has also changed its view of international cooperation regimes thinking that they may help to enhance its

¹ J. Nye, G. Allison and A. Carnesale eds, *Fateful Visions: Avoiding Nuclear Catastrophe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1988).

² R. Smoke and A. Kortunov eds., *Mutual Security: A New Approach to Soviet-American Relations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

security.

This has also been applied to Russian security policy in the Asian-Pacific area. After the Cold War ended Russia had a serious problem to be solved in this area which could be described as follows: first, to reconsider its relations with former enemies and to try to bring relations with them to partnerial or, at least, to neutral status; second, to carry out agreements achieved by M. Gorbachev in the Soviet era and new agreements made by B. Yeltsin in the area of arms control concerning nuclear arsenals and conventional weapons (especially along the Russian-Chinese border); third, to try to solve territorial and border issues which could otherwise develop into serious security challenges; and, forth, to enter wide cooperation structure in the area, both economic and environmental, in order to extend its links with the nations of the region to the level of partnership.

Complexity of this policy agenda was accentuated by the fact that not all these issues were related strictly to the Cold War legacy. Generally, it was one of the most difficult problems for Russian political life to try to separate issues which have emerged because and in the process of the Cold War (and ideological confrontation) from the problems which existed irrespective of the ideology, because of geopolitical setting, history, traditions, national differences.

Thus, it was more or less easy to understand that much of the Russian-American differences in the Pacific were caused by ideological confrontation. But, at the same time, it was also clear that Russia and USA have come to conflict over the control of Northern Pacific somewhere in the late 19th century. Purchase of Alaska from Russia by USA in 1867 has only partly solved this conflict. It has reappeared in 1920s and, understandably, after 1945 when US administration has gone as far as to use atomic weapons against Japan in order to intimidate Russia and to substantiate its claims to control the area.³

Equally, it would be hard to attribute Russian-Japanese conflict to ideology only. Both sides have become enemies because of two factors: unstable border between them (which was changed 6 times during the last century) and domination in Northern China and Korea. While there is no chance they may continue to fight for influence in third countries because both China and Korea have long ago become active players on the world scene, the unstable Russian-Japanese border still remains a source of confrontation. What makes the situation in perspective even less predictable and more volatile, is an evident lack of mutual interest and cooperation between them. Besides, Russian-Japanese relations have almost no autonomous purpose and depend largely on the state of U.S.-Russian and U.S.-Japanese relations.

Problems in Russian-Chinese relations have lost their ideological flavour. Both sides do not regard each other as rivals in the world Communist movement. Their border

³ G. Alprovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1965).

has also lost its capacity of bringing in new conflicts. But it would be too pre-mature (as in the case of Russian-Japanese relations) to conclude that Russian-Chinese links are free from tensions. New elements were born, including Chinese growing appetites towards Russian parts of Southern Siberia and Far-eastern Maritime provinces where Chinese population and business find a possible area of activities.⁴ Russian-Chinese relations at the same time have a growing global dimension because of adherence of both sides to ideas of “multi-polarity” and increasing anti-Americanism.

And, finally, a new look is needed to evaluate the strength of integrity of the Russian Far-eastern parts with the rest of the country because reduced power of Moscow has already raised questions about the future of Russia as a united nation.

So, from any point of view, disregarding whether there is a Cold War-type confrontation at the global level or not, Russia’s security agenda in the Asian Pacific area continues to have an urgent nature and has not been limited significantly. The changes of the type of relationship between Russia and its former enemies, i.e. USA, Japan, and China, have only helped to single out the most immediate and important issues of its security. Besides, Russia feels that its growing interest towards increased links with the Pacific community may change significantly its security agenda for better.⁵

Risks and Threats

What makes sense in a report on security assessments is a possibility to identify, to analyse, and to prove existence of real genuine security risks. Otherwise, governments and political leaders may simply become submerged in a watershed of what will be presented to them as security risks with no possibility to work out relevant and reliable policy which could both provide a sound domestic support and attract foreign nations in a combined effort to create a safe security environment. What Russians find out for themselves is the growing gap between government’s policy of security and the popular view which may create domestic crisis of the type of 1992 when B. Yeltsin was ready to sign a peace treaty with Japan and to return back the “Northern territories” while the public revolted in the nationalistic protest.

From this point of view, Russia’s security policy needs a deep and substantial overhaul of its inventory: risk assessments and goals of policy, relations with other nations on security matters, its force structure and deployment which can give a sense of

⁴ Trenin D. *Kitayskaya, Problema Rossii (Russia’s China Problem)* (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1998).

⁵ Shi Ze, “Changes in Russia’s Strategic Position in the Asia-Pacific Region and Its Impact,” *International Studies*, (Beijing, China), (1995), pp. 4-5.

security and create new security risks if misunderstood or disapproved by other nations. There should be a sustained national effort in order to clear out the security problems which were born due to ideological view of the world, to select among them the security issues which come from inability of previous regime to find an appropriate solution and to work out a totally new policy which would be supported by public at large and by the local authorities. This is something which still was not done and expects its solution.

What are the major findings of the Russian government and independent experts in security area after USSR collapsed and a new sovereign Russian Federation has appeared as a new international actor?

First of all, it was recognized absolutely necessary to completely overhaul the whole concept and structure of the previous security policy not only because the new Russia has opted for liberal democracy and market economy but also because the policy of heavy reliance on military force has proved to be too disastrous for the economy. Hence, Russia could not continue to regard the West as its major enemy and it had to find ways to make it a friend. Second, it had to reassess all its force structure and deployment because they had become not only irrelevant but also counterproductive and too heavy for the national economy. Third, Russian government had to reassess its major security risks because the type and nature of threats have changed together with policy orientations and new goals in national development.⁶

The process of such overhaul took several years and has not yet been completed. While ideological factor has ceased to work as a means of primary security orientation it could not be abandoned completely. New realities had to be taken into consideration. Russia felt that widening gap in its development compared with that of Japan, ROK, and China has also become a security challenge. Instead of a threat of war with an external enemy which was regarded as a primary security goal in the Soviet time, the threat of separatist movements and secessionist policies has become dominant. Instead of foreign forces deployment in the neighboring areas, on the Japanese, Korean, or Chinese territories, threat from disintegrating former Soviet strategic forces has become much more urgent. The major threat to security of the Russian Far-eastern provinces has come from failed economic reform and inadequate financial supplies.

To give an overall picture of the Russian security environment toward late 1990s, both globally and in the Far-eastern area, one has to understand that the real threat to Russian security has come from a major failure by the Russian government to work out a sound economic reform and thus to mobilize support on the part of population. This has created a structure of a capsized pyramid in the society which forces the agencies

⁶ The Sejong Institute, *Russia in the Far-east and Pacific Region* (Seoul: The Sejong Institute, 1994).

responsible for security planning to split their views of security policies between external threats (a traditional approach) and newly emerged internal threats which have come as a result of incompetent rule and inadequate planning (an innovative approach).

As a result, a real Russian security agenda in the Far East, as well as in Europe or Middle East, is a highly mixed blend of old approaches which served for decades and were implanted into force structures and deployments, new approaches which have partly destroyed old schemes and solutions and partly have introduced some new elements for planning and procurement, and a rough fact of inadequacy of financial supply which turns the efforts to work out a new and consistent security policy into a tragic farce. The real issue is that disregarding the changes which Russia has achieved in its relations with its neighbors in the Far East, its security agenda has not become grossly changed; it has renewed composition of items and priorities but still it is too far from the state when it may claim its concerns set. It still has both to re-identify its security risks and to work out relevant solutions.

Possible Solutions

If to try to re-identify current Russian concerns about national security and, particularly, assessment of security risks and threats in the Asian-Pacific areas of the country, a certain picture may be drawn.

First, there are strong elements of the old security structure which consist of conventional and non-conventional, mainly nuclear, forces. These forces have, as a primary goal, to demonstrate Russian capability both to fight against a risk of an attack by foreign nuclear and conventional forces against Russian territory, cities, and armed forces in the area and, in time of crisis, to attack territories and forces of foreign nations in the area. While Russian capabilities to defend its forces and territories largely continue to be operable its attack capabilities have shrunk because of growing inadequacies in homing and targeting mechanisms.

At the same time forces which are earmarked to fight foreign threat have acquired a new security role, that of an additional guarantor of territorial integrity of Russia. While new political and economic structures cannot be regarded completely as champions of Russian territorial integrity because of overextended ambitions of local leaders or because of economic hardships, armed and security forces continue to be loyal to the federal government in the center and are regarded by Moscow as its last and strongest resort.

Second, there are new elements of security structure which come from a host of agreements which Moscow has concluded recently with Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul. These agreements are mainly directed towards creation of a certain confidence-building

structure, lowering of the level of military confrontation, avoidance of a risk of inadvertent war (nuclear and non-nuclear). But this policy which in Russia is conducted without adequate economic basis creates new security risks because of unsettled status of the military personnel, inadequate housing, inability of local economies to reprocess discarded military equipment (especially nuclear submarines), and many other elements which turn Far-eastern provinces into a large nuclear waste dump, a source of illegal arms trade and a focus of attention of international crime.

Third, due to several key factors the issue of economic and social development has become crucial. Economic changes in Russia have produced a largely negative effect on the economy of Far-eastern provinces. Local economy depends to a large extent on imports of vital resources, including food and staples, from other areas of Russia (or from neighboring countries). Because of unreasonably high prices and tariffs for transportation, it is much easier and cheaper to purchase these products in the Far East than in Central Russia. Gradually, Far-eastern provinces become more and more isolated from Russia proper economically and socially (an average Russian can hardly afford a travel from Vladivostok to Moscow and back). This creates a perspective of estrangement between central Russia and the Far East.

Besides, differences in prices and services between Russia proper and neighboring Japan, Korea and China push Russian business and local governments to rely more on their links with the neighbors than with Russian partners. For example, a kilowatt of electric power in Russia (provided by the Integrated Electric Systems of Russia) costs 11 to 12 U.S. cents, while in South Korea or Japan its cost is only 4 to 4.5 U.S. cents and in China, 2 U.S. cents. All these facts make perspective of economic development together with economies of neighboring countries much more attractive for Russian business and local governments than with Russia proper. Evidently, this means that political forces of secessionism will become much more powerful.⁷

In the terms of security policy the identification of these new realities leads to a conclusion that the real security agenda for Russia, while has not diminished has dramatically and profoundly changed. National security continues to be a general obsession, but the essence if it shifts in the direction where lack of economic development, low living standards, and technological backwardness (in civil areas) compared with the rates and vector of development of other nations, ranging along Russian Pacific border becomes the major source of instability. It puts heavy problems on the government's agenda and challenges directly its ability to rule and to preside over economic reform. It also puts heavy questions, similar to those experienced by Canadians with regard to the future of Quebec, before the Russian public which expects that the

⁷ Far-eastern Governor E. Nazdratenko speaking on Russian TV. Nov. 10, 1998.

forces of disintegration, strong enough in all parts of Russia, will prevail in the Far East.

Finally, it puts highly responsible questions before the ability of Russian state mechanism to invent and to develop adequate responses and solutions to the emerging crisis. On one hand, it is supposed to have adequate enforcement mechanism to fight not only social protest which is at a full swing in the Far East, but also to pleas for independence which to-day are not that popular but will be growing with each failure of the Russian government's economic policy. This side of the picture has a special significance because B. Yeltsin's attempt to fight Chechnya's plight for independence with armed force has completely failed.

This is evident that a direct way to improve security conditions in the Far East, as well as in other parts of Russia, will go via successful economic reform. Only when rates of economic development will change from negative to positive and will exceed 4-5% annually, it will be possible to expect that security situation in this part of Russia will become regular. Without that it will be hopeless to expect the situation to change for better.⁸

But the question in that case is: what to do in the meantime? What to do while economic conditions continue to deteriorate and there is no hope that they will change for better within a foreseeable span of time? The search for appropriate answers to these questions provokes a heated domestic debate with no evident consensus so far.

Domestic Debate

Russian domestic debate today is mainly centered on the problems of economic reform and is waged between the two leading groups: pro-governmental which usually claims to be "democratic" (while it has almost nothing close to democracy and largely represents a policy of oligarchy) and its leading opponents grouped around the Communist Party. What is at stake in this debate is the power in the center, ultimate goals of economic policy, some issues of foreign policy, and *prima facie*, security policy. Both groups pretend they are obsessed with security issues in narrow as well as wide sense (national security versus social security) and, first, accuse each other that their respective policies are directed against "national interest", as it is understood by each of them, and, second, that their opposition to each other is motivated primarily by security consideration.

In a general sense, this is true. Without even making an attempt to identify who's rule was worse for Russian security, it is understandable that both results of almost 70 years of the Communist dictatorship and the consequences of 8 years of the so-called "democratic reform" have proved to be disastrous for the nation. Very rapidly, it is

⁸ Prime-minister Ye. Primakov's Testimony in the Russian Duma, Oct. 21, 1998.

evolving into an economic dwarf with a sick system of relations both in the society and between the society and the government. The residues of the imperial might (of the pre-1917 legacy as well as of the Communist period) in the form of big standing military force, largest territory in the world, global ambitions and the like continue to dominate in the national psychology. Russia has become highly volatile, unstable and unreliable society with all possibilities for political violence, discontent, rebellion.

In this sense issues of national security may play a double role. On one hand, they serve as a powerful motive for national mobilization, for a concerted action to bring together warring parties and to build national consensus. And if issues of national security play a key role in this process that will mean that a mobilized Russia will have all the chances to become another edition of a large empire with some elements of modernization but essentially a strong centralized power. As a historical parallel, Japan after the Meiji revolution may be cited.

On the other hand, the central role of the security agenda may and will prompt dominant attitudes of Russia towards its neighbors. Majority of Russian analysts understand that without a serious foreign effort (investment, loans and credits, assistance, security guarantees) Russia will have to spend decades before it achieves a tolerable level of development. But, to get that foreign assistance will need a certain arrangement, first of all agreements containing guarantees on the Russian part of a certain mode of conduct (like participation in G-7 or in World Trade Organization) which will inevitably be raised as an issue in its domestic debate.

So, this debate plays a double role in working out new Russian security policy. It helps at least to sketch out contours of a possible national consensus on these touching problems and in this sense Russia at last follows patterns of Western development. But at the same time it delays and makes questionable possibilities of a consistent and coherent security policy without which Russia may very easily turn into a source of insecurity for other nations.

Conclusion: International Repercussions

There are two major models of an impact a nation may bear for security of other nations — a “poverty” model and an “affluence” model. In theory, they sometimes are mixed with “status-quo” and “anti-status-quo” powers. But in reality there is a difference⁹ It is one thing when a poor nation seeks to change status-quo because there is no other way it may acquire funds necessary to satisfy the needs of its population.

⁹ Victor A. Kremenjuk, “International Security: A New Old Paradigm,” *Arms Control*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (August 1992).

Another thing when the same role is played by an affluent nation which wants to strengthen its leverage over other nations.

In both cases security is or may be impaired. When a poor nation seeks to change the status-quo in the sphere of international relations this is very often a pure aggression of the type Iraq has committed against Kuwait in 1990. In the second case it is an affluent and strong power which seeks to change the status-quo which also may lead to an aggression. Something what USA does in the Persian Gulf or NATO in the Balkans. The impact for international security is the same: in both cases we have to do with a case of aggression.

This is exact security scenario which comes to replace the Cold War type alignment in the Asian Pacific area. There is a policy by USA which thinks its interests will be guarded much better if it acquires a position of strength, especially in relations with China. Judging by its actions in the Taiwan straits in the crisis of 1997, one may come to a conclusion that US policy in this part of the world may seek exactly the same goals as in the Persian Gulf or in the Balkans. On the other side of the spectrum there is North Korea, a sheer case of a poor "anti-status-quo" power ready to use aggression and intimidation for its purposes.

Russia is somewhere between the two roles. Politically it has claimed that it will move towards the liberal democracy, seeking an affiliation with the West. Economically, it moves in the direction of the Northern Korea. In this sense its policy may acquire a crucial role for the regional balance of power and perspectives of security structures in the area. A certain combination of internal and external policies is need in order to bring the Russian factor in line with the dominant security needs of this part of the world.¹⁰

¹⁰ The Major Powers of Northeast Asia. Seeking Peace and Security. Tae-Hwan Kwak and Edward Olsen, eds. Lynne Rienner Publ., Boulder & London, 1996.