Exploring Russia’s Search for Identity

Russian Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity
By Andrei P. Tsygankov
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Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

RELATIONS BETWEEN the West and Russia have been in a state of tension since Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine. One recent manifestation of such tensions was evidenced by the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July 2016, where Russia and NATO were proclaimed no longer strategic partners. Immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many had hoped Russia would quickly emerge as a market economy and democracy, with special relationships with Western nations. The reality proved different, however, with Moscow’s political regime neither democratic nor its foreign policy pro-Western. Many pundits now contend that a New Cold War has already started.

What went wrong? How can we explain the discrepancy between the early expectations and the reality of today’s Russia, in general, and its increasingly assertive foreign policy, in particular? Some essentialists see the inherent anti-Westernism that is deeply rooted in Russian history as the fundamental source of Russia’s foreign behavior. Hawkish realists complete theentric, advocating inevitable, or desirable, containment of Russia.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY
Andrei Tsygankov, a professor at San Francisco State University, finds the sources of Russia’s foreign policy in its search for national identity. Taking a constructivist view, he argues in this book that since identity is socially constructed in both international and domestic contexts, Russian foreign behavior is shaped in response and reaction to the West, on the one hand, and through the process of domestic identity contest and coalition, on the other. Defining national identity as “a system of meanings that expresses the Self’s emotional, cognitive, and evaluative orientations toward its significant Other,” the author contends that Russia, like other countries, develops affiliations, attachments, and, ultimately, its own identity by interacting with other members of international society. He further contends that at least since Peter the Great, the West has played a special role as the “significant Other” and much of the country’s international behavior has reflected efforts of the Russian Self to win recognition from the West.

Since Western actions are contested domestically, local conditions are no less important in shaping a dominant vision of national identity, and thus of Russian foreign policy. Tsygankov identifies three traditions in Russia’s foreign policy thinking, which historically have competed with each other in the process of domestic identity contestation: Westernism, with its emphasis on Russia’s similarity with the West; Statism, which viewed the West as the most viable and progressive civilization in the world, while Statism has accentuated the Russian state’s ability to govern and preserve the social and political order; Civilizationism, meanwhile, has always seen Russian values as different from those of the West and attempted to spread them abroad. In the contestation process, different identity coalitions have been formed behind these three traditions, advocating different visions of national interests and foreign policy.

In this way, the book presents clear causal chains running all the way from international influence and local conditions to the formation of Russia’s foreign policy. Within this causal mechanism, the author identifies seven distinct visions of national interest that have been developed and pursued during the last three decades since Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev’s New Thinking. Amid Russia’s post-Soviet identity crisis, President Boris Yeltsin and his first foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, defined national interest as that of integration with Western economic and security institutions. The second foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov, in the Statist tradition, saw the need to restore Russia’s great power status by balancing the unilateral aspirations of the United States. Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev have adopted their own distinct vision of national interest, which balances Russia’s great power status with the need to have special relationships with the West, in general, and the US, in particular. In the wake of the global economic crisis and the rise of non-Western powers, however, Russia is yet again reassessing its interests and relations with the West, which the author labels as Putin’s “civilizational turn.”

PUTIN’S CIVILIZATIONAL IDENTITY
Russia’s newly discovered civilizational identity assumes the need to protect the country from the West’s pressures by developing relations with the non-West. As new, non-Western powers have risen to prominence, and in response to the West’s hardened posture towards Russia, Tsygankov argues that Moscow is now seeking to position itself as an independent cultural and political center in a multipolar and multi-civilizational world by strengthening its relations with China, Iran and India, and exploiting non-Western institutional vehicles, such as BRICS and the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO). As Putin said during the meeting in December 2014 of the Valdai International Discussion Club, the Eurasian Union is “a project for maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space in a new century and in a new world.” Convergence in the vision and practice of the Russia-initiated Eurasian Union and China-initiated New Silk Road (or the so-called One Belt, One Road) initiative could be considered a manifestation of co-operation between the two nations anchored on a value alternative to the West.

As a logical corollary of this constructive reasoning of Russian identity and foreign policy formation, in which the West certainly bears a share of the responsibility for Putin’s growing assertiveness, Tsygankov suggests that the West should engage Russia on a reciprocal basis: A better appreciation of Russia’s cultural distinctness and foreign policy concerns may encourage Putin and his successors to move further toward long-term co-operation with the West, whereas punishment or isolation is likely to strengthen anti-Western nationalists, pushing Russia further away from the West.

Defying mainstream international relations theories, this book presents a balanced perspective on Russia’s foreign policy behavior. Throughout the volume, the author sends clear intellectual warnings to those who believe that Western civilization is in a position to teach the rest of the world about economic and political institutions as well as moral standards, and those who perceive Putin’s foreign policy behavior predominantly in terms of realist power politics.

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