Moscow has long professed that the global and Asian orders are, or should be, multipolar. Given Russia’s seat on the United Nations Security Council, its nuclear weapons, its size and economic weight, it would appear that Russia merits recognition as a pole of both orders — or at least that’s what Russia’s leadership would like to believe. But is Russia really on the path to becoming a great Asian power?

Though Russian officials and analysts cite a new vigor in Russia’s Asian policy, others are more skeptical. A US Army Colonel who leads tours of Asian think tanks told a US audience in 2010 that Chinese, Japanese, South Korean and Mongolian think tanks unanimously argue that Russia will soon play no role in East Asian security. Many Chinese researchers also contend that Russia is neither a major nor an Asian power. And Aleksander Dinkin, director of the Moscow-based Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), writes that without radical reform, Russia by 2030 will be only a middle power like Turkey.

The 2010-11 joint Russo-Chinese proposal for a multipolar Asian order aims to avert that nightmare and ensure Russia’s great power status in Asia. But that proposal, and Russia’s broader discussion of multipolarity, are problematic. In 2011, both governments jointly declared that world politics should steadily become multipolar, that they would work together to advance that goal — for example, by promoting multilateral mechanisms throughout Asia and comprehensively deepening their partnership that is a factor for peace in the Asia-Pacific region. Moscow’s diplomats have already started pushing these ideas to Asian audiences.

This joint proposal is based on “mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and cooperation.” All states would respect each other’s sovereignty and integrity — eschewing criticism of their domestic politics and supporting Russian and Chinese postures on the Kuril Islands, the Senkakus, Taiwan and possibly even China’s claims to the Spratly Islands — non-alliance principles, equal and transparent security frameworks, equal and indivisible security, and so on. Russia seeks India’s assent to this formulation, and even covertly solicits Japan’s endorsement even while publicly humiliating Japan over the Kuril Islands, signifying its endemic desire to play both sides against the middle in what is fundamentally an anti-American orientation. Since the vagueness of the proposal benefits only Russia and China, squarely denounces the US alliance system in Asia, and greatly resembles Moscow’s European Security Treaty proposal of 2009-10, it reveals just how shallow, misconceived and self-serving Russia’s concept of Asian, if not global, multipolarity truly is.

Moscow even applies the same rhetoric here that it employed for the European Security Treaty. At the 2011 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La conference in Singapore, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov said:

Russia’s call for a multipolar world, where power doesn’t reside with a single hegemon such as the US, is a veiled bid to exert Russian influence in Asia and the world at a time when Russia’s great power status is questionable, at best, writes Stephen Blank.

A (Multi) Polar Bear? Russia’s Bid for Influence in Asia
By Stephen Blank
Russia, despite its rhetoric and aspirations, is not a global power. Russia is a regional power masquerading as a global one, apparently a highly conscious strategy given its shrunken post-Soviet state.

Even omitted mention of Russia in East Asia. Analysts still see Russia’s interest in Asia as stemming from European rebuffs that obliged Russia to pursue “multivector” policies enhancing its ties to China and Asia more broadly. Russia’s current quest for “modernization partnerships” follows this logic. Russian leaders think they can pick friends on a purely tactical and instrumental basis and for a singularly global purpose, beyond whatever regional significance those friendships possess. Russia-Chinese ties remain based upon a shared desire to curb US power and values. China is and has been a force multiplier for Russia, but primarily globally rather than in East Asia.

Russia’s concept of multipolarity consists of three guiding elements: 1) global multipolarity; 2) preserving Russia’s integrity and primacy in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and 3) regional engagement that cultivates new partnerships or allies. Multipolarity means that no state, especially not the US, can act alone. Meanwhile, new ad hoc groupings will form to constrain American unilaterality. Russia can and should, according to this line of thinking, use this trend to play a leading role between or among those blocs while retaining a free hand, especially in the CIS. Russia exploits America’s decline as well as rising divisions within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Russian policy also negates co-operative solutions in the CIS or elsewhere in favor of spheres of influence and zero-sum games, all within a context of traditional Realpolitik. Russia prefers a great power condominium everywhere but in the

Russian-Chinese proposals are aimed at helping the countries of the region to realize that security is indivisible and at abandoning attempts to strengthen one’s security at the expense of others. New regional security architecture should be based on the universal principles of international law, non-aligned approaches, confidence and openness, with due regard to the diversity of the APR and an emerging polycentric balance of forces.

Ivanov’s suggestion that this proposal simply grew out of existing mechanisms formulated by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), while Russia and China would retain veto power over its ultimate manifestation, underscores the fact that this proposal lacks substance and should not be taken seriously. A truly serious proposal would spell out critical details of the structure and processes involved. Ivanov continued:

We do not suggest — I repeat, we do not suggest — creating a new regional organization. A flexible mechanism of multilateral interaction relying on the existing structures and forums, which could be incorporated into an extended partnership network, is likely to serve the needs of the region better. We call this approach a “network diplomacy.” Besides, we consider it reasonable to establish connections not only between organizations and forums, but also between specialized agencies, notably counter-terrorism, anti-drug centers, and disaster relief centers. We would like to see ASEAN — the primus motor of this process and consider the Association to be a core factor of regional policy and integration.

Thus multipolarity means striking at Washington and its interests for Moscow’s benefit without considering Asian realities and interests. Moscow’s discourse on multipolarity is frankly exclusionary and anti-democratic, seeing world politics essentially as an oligarchy accountable to nobody, not unlike Russia’s domestic political structure, and essentially projects Russia’s domestic politics into its foreign policies and thinking. Even as Russia demands that others observe international law, it has in the past rejected such constraints, as when it unilaterally violated Georgia’s territorial integrity in 2008. Its concept of multipolarity breaks no external commentary or action about its relapse into traditional autocracy. This concept also condemns Eurasia to a sphere of Russian influence, entails thwarting US designs, pursues “modernization alliances” with Asian partners to rebuild Russia’s Far East while obtaining their recognition of Russia as a great independent Asian power. It also entails global bandwagoning with China. Yet Russian discussions of multipolarity focus mostly on Europe, not East Asia.

Russia, despite its rhetoric and aspirations, is not a global power. As Andrei Tsyganov observes, Russia is a regional power masquerading as a global one, apparently a highly conscious strategy given its shrunken post-Soviet state. Consequently, Moscow focuses on Europe, not East Asia, and can play only a limited global role. Many commentators acknowledge that despite recent proclamations hailing Russia’s successful Asian policy, Russia’s renewed interest in Asia actually builds on a very weak foundation. Neither US nor Chinese experts think Russia is an Asian power, and America’s “2010 National Security Strategy”
CIS, even though the CIS itself comprises areas of multipolar rivalry. Accordingly, Russian scholars and officials repeatedly propose binary structures where NATO and the CIS, led by Washington and Moscow, would constitute two equal pillars of Eurasian security, suggesting that bipolarity is Moscow’s real goal. Consequently, Russian thinking fixates on archaic concepts such as blocs, alliances and concert of powers.

In the CIS, Russia demands hegemony because that will supposedly preclude its own dissolution by extruding foreign influence in the CIS and enhancing Russian security. Russia aims to convert it into an integral regional security organization like NATO or a unique structure capable of playing, under Moscow’s guidance, an autarchic role in world affairs to preserve Russia’s political system. This is because its elites cannot conceive of a Russia other than a neo-imperial one.

The third element of multipolarity is regional engagement such as partnerships or alliances with key states in Europe and Asia to balance American and NATO ambitions, reassert Russia’s independent prerogatives, and gain recognition of its privileged role in the CIS. Thus, strategic partnership with China entails co-ordinating policies towards the UN, Iran, Syria, Central Asia and the Korea Peninsula, even as China pursues Russian interests in East and Central Asia.

Russia’s recent thinking about multipolarity refines and expands this original concept, transforming the space within the unaltered framework of the concept. Multipolarity and the processes that stimulate its development constitute a double-edged-sword, generating opportunities and risks, if not threats. Multipolarization introduces new poles in the form of major political and military powers that strive for power and access to resources. Russia’s 2009 National Security Strategy (NSS) situates the nation in the context of globalization and interdependence that increases the vulnerability of all states to new challenges and threats based on a qualitatively new geopolitical situation where new centers of economic growth and political influence grow stronger.

This situation fosters double-edged trends. One trend outlined in the 2009 NSS is “Searching for the resolution of existing problems and the settlement of crisis situations on a regional basis, without the participation of non-regional forces.” Allegedly, Russia’s growing clout enables it to exclude (or at least to demand the exclusion) of extra-regional actors from the CIS. But multipolarization also brings threats along with opportunities. The NSS states that this long-term focus in world politics will engender struggle over energy resources in areas vital to Russia: the Middle East, the Barents Sea shelf and other areas of the Arctic, the Caspian Sea Basin and Central Asia. Furthermore, it states that resolving emerging problems by military force is not excluded under the conditions of that struggle for resources.

Thus, we see a rivalry with China over Arctic energy access. Furthermore, any state’s effort to dominate world politics stimulates other actors to augment their national strength and triggers a general heightening of everyone’s aggressiveness and competitiveness. While Moscow must compete and negotiate with Washington and others to reduce current threats, obstructing the US inevitably stimulates the rise of China and other powers posing serious policy challenges to Russia. Such thinking has several policy consequences.

First, Moscow must negotiate with Washington to constrain its unilateralism. Second, Russia’s 2010 new foreign policy approach talks of “anchoring China” to Russia. But China cannot be anchored and will reject such anchorage. Although Russia must freely relate to all states, but especially major actors in Europe and Asia, on the basis of unnumbered, tactical, bilateral, and multilateral political, economic, social, cultural, and military relations, it also creates new multilateral organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to integrate the CIS, present itself as a “system-forming state,” and justify its claim to global status. Russian efforts to form strategic triangles with China and India, the BRIC summits, its quest for a seat in the ASEAN Regional Forum, South American security organization, and promotion of various collective security schemes for Europe, the Persian Gulf and elsewhere, exemplify this policy. Russian officials and analysts often even openly proclaim that their concept of multipolarity aims to regulate the political life of smaller states without their presence, thereby revealing Moscow’s real thinking about Europe and the motives behind Russia’s continuing efforts to persuade Asian states to break with the US and form partnerships with Russia at the expense of other, smaller states.

Russia’s campaign for multipolarity is different in Asia because Russia cannot assert itself as an independent balancer as it can in Europe and Eurasia. Russia’s partnership with China is primarily a global, not a regional, anti-American contrivance and conceals its effort to balance China regionally, but with inferior and unavailing means. Consequently, multipolarity often means Russia must bandwagon with China and even become economically dependent upon it. In many ways East Asia exposes the illusory nature of Russia’s pose as a regional or global great power, its unsustainable global aspirations, and failed policies in East Asia. Russia is also failing at economic competition within the CIS.

Russia’s failed attempts at modernization undermine its pretensions to polar status in a multipolar order and generate dependence upon China. Although Russia tries to use China to leverage US policy towards it, it actually lacks a viable strategy to confront China’s rise. It is losing ground to China in East and Central Asia, and risks becoming a raw materials appendage to China. Asia’s primacy in global economics heralds major transformations in world politics. But Russia may find that multipolarity does not enhance its status and role in world politics, but actually adds new threats to an already stressed political system.

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