

What's Wrong with Security Cooperation in Eurasia?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 21

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August 2008

Because national security outlooks are determined by objective factors such as geography, resources, and historical and cultural traditions, different understandings and meanings of the term and concept of "security" exist among states. This has an impact on security cooperation in Eurasia. Contemporary Russia is ready for the "economization" of security; Western partners and some states in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) are reluctant to move in the same direction. Many CIS states prefer a realist approach to security and pay more attention to military and security matters.

National security policy is a policy of the elite. The elites in Russia, its CIS neighbors, and the United States have different experiences and educational backgrounds and, hence, different values and traditions. To comprehend their approach to security policy, therefore, it is very important to know what and how they think about the world. The contemporary Russian elite may be more pro-European than pro-American, but this does not mean they are anti-Western. The current elite in most CIS states are pro-European, pro-American, and, unfortunately, anti-Russian.

Rhetoric in democratic societies plays a very important role. Anti-Russian rhetoric in the United States is more destructive than anti-American rhetoric in Russia. Anti-Russian rhetoric in some CIS states does not play a significant role in the short-term.

Evolution of the Term "National Security" in Russia

Why is it always so difficult to talk about national security? Security may be a "hot topic" for public discussion, but few pay attention to its theoretical aspects. There are two philosophical categories that make up the term "security": the first includes safekeeping and stability, while the second encompasses development and change. These two categories are related: to provide security, one should provide both stability and development. What happened in the late USSR and during the first years of democratic Russia was that there was too much development and not enough stability.

The concept of national security has gone through several phases in Russia (and the USSR). Before the 1917 Revolution, security was understood to mean the safeguarding of the interests of individuals, society, and state in a variety of realms, including foreign policy, public safety, and the safety of property. Between 1917 and 1985, “national security” meant state security. Security had two dimensions: domestic security, including political and military security, and external or international security. The main priorities for Soviet authorities were to provide safety and security for state institutions and borders. Values, a national way of life, and human security were not considered priorities. Around 1986, a “romantic period” began which ended abruptly at the start of the 1990s. This was a time when leading Soviet scholars and academic institutions published several books and materials elaborating on a new “softer” approach to security and began to talk about the economic, humanitarian, ecological, and informational dimensions of security.

After 1992, a new meaning of security developed. In March 1992, the new law “On Security” was signed by former Russian president Boris Yeltsin. This was the first time Russia officially adopted the term “national security.” In December 1997 the first Russian national security concept was released, and in January 2000 a new edition of the national security concept was issued. The term “national security” has lost its narrow meaning, today comprising all different types: military, political, economic, cultural, health, humanitarian, and human.

Different Roles for the Concept of Security

The concept of national security plays an important role in the United States. It is an instrument for creating bipartisan support and the mobilization of a population traditionally hostile to foreign policy issues. The U.S. administration needs public support for an expanded foreign policy agenda. As political scientist Barry Buzan has noted, securitization legitimates the use of force.

While this may be the case for other Western democracies as well, the situation is different in Russia and most of its CIS neighbors. Russia (like the USSR) does not need such justifications to take exceptional measures or utilize force. It has another kind of foreign policy decisionmaking process, based on its own strategic culture. It is well known that traditionally Russia is a collectivistic society and that Russians consider their obligations to the state a priority. The first priority is to serve one’s homeland – to protect the interests of the state and society. Unlimited discipline and self-sacrifice are important characteristics of Russian (as well as other Slavic and Caucasian) political cultures. It is easier in Russia to mobilize public support to promote state interests and well-being than in the United States.

“Security” for Russia today means stability, economic prosperity, and predictability. Russia is in the best financial, political, and military position it has been in since the end of the Cold War. All post-Soviet conflicts are well past their critical phases. Russia’s borderlands have settled. Terrorism may be very much alive, but it is not really a strategic threat. Put simply, the era of the “post-Soviet space” is coming to a close and a new era is dawning in Eurasia. However, the players have different weights, interests, and resources. For states like Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, security means survival (with regard to territory), whereas for Russia security means stability. So far, the United States plays a “hard security game” in Eurasia by helping those states

and not Russia. This is why Russia views the European Union as a more reliable and preferable partner. The EU and Russia have “economized” their bilateral security agenda while the United States and Russia have not.

Different Decisionmaking Processes

From the formal point of view, Russia’s national security structure looks like that of the United States with one exception. The National Security Council (NSC) plays a limited role in Russia. It has become a “comfortable institution for former politicians” who have lost their influence and importance.

The president and members of the presidential administration are responsible for developing foreign policy and the security agenda. That is why it is important to understand how they think and feel. The humiliation they experienced in the 1980s has likely had an impact on the evolution of national security policy. By his own confession, “the destruction of the USSR broke [Vladimir Putin’s] heart.” In addition, everywhere outside Russia, new national elites share an anti-Russian mood.

Russia is still making its way through its leadership “transition.” Various power clans are still waiting for the “final battle.” Wars among these power clans for the control of defense and energy industries are ongoing, while wars for the control of the justice and legal systems are only now beginning to rage. This means that in the short term, Russia might have new elites who are responsible for developing its security agenda, and the influence of the former KGB officers is likely to decrease. As a result, Russia will be looking for security more through stability than will some of the other CIS states, who still seek change and development.

Meanwhile, leaders of most CIS states, including Russia, are using nationalism to fill the gap left by the disappearance of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Nationalism in Eurasia has been a reliable tool for mobilizing the population. As a result, the role of religion has been increasing in Eurasia, and immigration has become a new security issue.

A new group of political elites led by President Dmitry Medvedev believes that Russia should rely primarily on itself for security and for securing its place in the international community. They believe that Russia has the potential to revive as a regional power. They argue that Russia will not be incorporated into Western structures and that it should focus on protecting its interests, especially in the “near abroad.” A notable phenomenon in Russian society and among the Russian elite in particular is a rise in pro-European attitudes, rather than pro-American ones. This does not mean they are against liberal and democratic values, however.

The Different Roles of Rhetoric

Rhetoric plays an important role in contemporary political processes. Exaggerated expectations among some American scholars, experts, and politicians concerning democratic development in Russia and some other CIS states have had an impact on their analyses and assessments.

Rising anti-Americanism in Russia and an anti-Russian mood in the United States and some CIS states (including Georgia and, to some extent, Ukraine) are worrisome. There is a difference, however, between these trends. Anti-American rhetoric in Russia may change overnight because there are no historical, cultural, or institutional roots for it. The situation in the United States and (for example) Georgia is different.

Unfortunately, many scholars, experts, and journalists are expanding the anti-Russian agenda. For several years ahead, it is likely that we will observe more anti-Russian initiatives in the United States and Eurasia.

What's Wrong With Security Cooperation in Eurasia?

- The honeymoon is over.
- We have realized that we have different understandings of security.
- Anti-“somebody” rhetoric plays a destructive role.

So what? Does this make Russia a less predictable and reliable country? Does it make security cooperation in Eurasia impossible? Does it give the United States a privileged position? The answer is no.

The United States, as a leading power in the world, has experience working with different kinds of regimes and states. Russia, as a key player in Eurasia, is ready for cooperation based on economic interests, unless that means interference in Russia’s domestic affairs. There is no real nostalgia for empire and great power status in Russia. While some experts and politicians harbor such sentiments, Eurasia has changed and Russia has no resources available to achieve such status.

The honeymoon period in U.S.-Russian relations was not based on common values and principles, but it was a period when some very important agreements were reached. As always happens after a honeymoon, however, real life has begun. We moved too fast in the last fifteen years. Russia adopted some liberal principles, like human security, but it was too early to do so. The political elite has since corrected the agenda.

As some specialists have mentioned, both states seem to “require” tension. The next three to four years of U.S.-Russian relations will be characterized by friction and intense competition in Eurasia (mainly on economic matters). Neither state seems able to mobilize without having an “image of the enemy” in front of it, though the United States needs this type of rhetoric more than Russia. Still, we are at the start of a great new era of international negotiations on various weapons treaties, national missile defense, nonproliferation, Georgia, the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict, and new pipelines. Perhaps Russia and the United States will work better in a hostile environment, as they did in the 1970s.

Still, Russia has changed. A stronger Russia might be a predictable partner for the United States. Rising Russian investments in the U.S. economy would change the attitude toward Russia among Americans. In the end, rhetoric matters.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, or the Carnegie Corporation.

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