



Asymmetry Is Not Destiny

“Military asymmetry” has become the fashionable cliché among pundits to characterize a still-unnamed war pitting a high-tech superpower against bearded holy warriors and cave-dwelling terrorists. Examined more closely, however, all other aspects of the conflict—psychological, cultural, territorial, and economic—are also asymmetrical. Consider for example what one might call the “psycho-geographical-historical asymmetry” between the United States and its unexpected new wartime ally, Russia. It is an anomalous coupling, fraught with difficulties yet alive with promise, including the prospect of working with Moscow to lessen the oil power of the Persian Gulf sheikdoms.

Or so it occurred to me during an autumn visit to Moscow and its celebrated ring of ancient cities: Vladimir, Rostov, Suzdal, and Yaroslav. My wife and I had left a New York still reeling from the disasters of September 11. Friends confessed to avoiding subways, tunnels, skyscrapers, and even museums perceived as terror targets. Across the country, many Americans apprehended for the first time that their coasts were vulnerable, their freedoms at risk, and their country mortal. So great was the jolt in Washington that sworn enemies of big government began voting billions for new federal programs, and a president hitherto indifferent to foreign affairs began to speak of little else. (If a special Providence does look after the United States, as Bismarck reputedly remarked, Providence shows a streak of dry humor.)

Thus did 9/11 erode the certainties of 9/10—and thus, one is tempted to add, did Americans move closer to the omnipresent anxieties of half the world’s inhabitants. The human initial American impulse was to hoist the flag, and to seek past models of articulate resolution, notably Teddy Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, both subjects of overnight bestsellers. Still, as the conflict persists, and as the pundits move beyond stock phrases like “closure,” “wake-up call,” and “defining moment,” we will need to think more boldly about the post-9/11 world.

The Power of Empathy

We arrived in Moscow ten days after September 11. What we found attested to the power of empathy. A landfill of flowers, candles, icons, and consoling messages smothered the outer wall of the old U.S. Embassy on Novinsky Boulevard. The language was universal: we are with you, we know violence, we know fear. Strangers struck up conversations, most memorably in Suzdal, a city famous for its medieval church architecture, where a middle-aged local inhabitant hearing us speak English hove toward us and stabbed the air with a forefinger, “Amerikanskii? New York! Crash,” adding as we waited apprehensively, “World War Two. FDR. Uncle Joe. Friends again” (a line we were glad to lend to Dr. Harvey Sloane for his article in this issue). Another refrain we heard among liberal-minded Muscovites went like this: “We did some terrible things in Chechnya, and I condemn them, but perhaps now you will better understand our frustrations.” Colleagues at foreign policy

think tanks pored over the fine print in Russia's developing entente with Washington. At the Carnegie Moscow Center, the historian Dmitri Trenin noted that President Vladimir Putin, while visiting Germany in September, referred for the first time to Western powers as "allies" rather than "partners," the accepted usage.

Dr. Trenin is the author of a prescient new book, *The End of Eurasia?* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: 2000), in which he analytically scrutinizes Russia's western, southern, and eastern borders—in his own words, the Western Façade, the Southern Tier, and the Far Eastern Backyard. Writing before 9/11, he asked whether it was possible or desirable to resurrect the former Soviet empire. Nationalist believers in "the phoenix model" recall that twice before, during the Time of Troubles in the seventeenth century, and then again during revolutionary turmoil in the twentieth century, Russia endured foreign intervention and loss of territory, only to recover and become bigger than before. So can it happen again? Dr. Trenin offers his judgment in his final paragraph:

Russia-Eurasia is over. To the west of its borders, there lies an increasingly unified Europe, a natural place for Russia's own integration *as a European country* [author's italics] in an appropriate form. To the east lies an increasingly interconnected Asia, where Russia must either establish itself *as a country in Asia* [ditto] or face the mounting pressure to withdraw west of the Urals. To the south, there is the challenge of Islamic activism whose source is both internal and external. All of this places Russia in a highly uncomfortable position, demanding vision and the capacity for action, which is not very much in evidence at the moment. Yet the end of Eurasia, a real catastrophe, is no tragedy. It is merely the end of a long era. But it is not the end of Russia, for which a new and potentially happier era can now start.

The desired "capacity for action" is well evidenced by President Putin. Besides fully collaborating on security matters, Mr. Putin waived objections to a direct U.S. military role in formerly Soviet Central Asia. Previous sticking points in Moscow's relations with the Bush administration—NATO expansion, even the viability of the ABM treaty that President Bush has now abrogated, and arms sales to Iran—have for the present faded into the background. To be sure, it is a courtship that could turn sour, as Ian Bremmer and Alexander Zaslavsky warn elsewhere in this issue, given the adverse weight of powerful domestic constituencies in Moscow and Washington. Polls suggest that most Russians either oppose or are at best ambivalent about a sharp turn to the West. Moreover, as Martin Walker reports in his essay, Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians are less than thrilled about welcoming Russia as a partner or eventual member of NATO. The more reason, therefore, to reexamine the asymmetry that has haunted U.S.-Russian relations.

The Past as Imperfect Prologue

In their security concerns, the two countries present a mirror image. Before September 11, Americans assumed almost as a birthright their relative immunity from overseas attack. No foreign armies have invaded the continental United States since the War of 1812, when the British sacked Washington. Pearl Harbor was a profound shock, but Hawaii was offshore, and after 1945 a nuclear America was able to check even the threat of hostile nuclear deployment, as shown by the Soviet withdrawal of its stealthily installed bases from Cuba in 1962. Few great powers have been so favored for so long, which helps account for the abiding appeal of isolationism and its current variant, the quest for a foolproof missile shield that could extend protection to the very heavens.

Russia's experience is the obverse. Save in the north, it enjoys no protective oceans. The main physical features of its heartland are forest and steppe, so that Russia (in Sir Bernard Pares's words) is "the land of vast horizons, distant dreams, active life, and constant danger." As Pares elaborates in his classic *History of Russia*: "With few natural barriers, the great hosts from the East moved wholesale, bag and baggage, men, women and children, horses and cattle, and even habitation. Every such invading people was a vast army, torn from its bearings, holding land by no title but war, and bound to fight to the finish." And not just from the East. A short list of the peoples and countries invading or intervening in Russia would include: Scythians, Goths, Huns, Magyars, Vikings, Mongols, Teutonic Knights, Poles, Swedes, Ottoman Turks, France, Japan, Germany, Britain, the United States. (America's intervention came about in 1918 when Woodrow Wilson ordered an expeditionary army to Siberia, purportedly to extricate a trapped Czech legion, as chronicled by George Kennan in two volumes, while the British intervened to depose the Bolsheviks over a far wider front, as described by Richard H. Ullman in three volumes.)

Expansion has been Russia's equivalent of a missile shield. Over three centuries, the Tsarist realm grew at the formidable average of 55 square miles a day. The empire crumbled after the Bolshevik Revolution, only to be stapled together again as the Reds retook Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus, then Central Asia and Outer Mongolia. Stalin partitioned Poland, reannexed the Baltic States, won slices of Finland in the 1940 Winter War, and in 1945 further shielded the heartland with a ring of satellite states in Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe, plus half of Korea and the Kuril Islands that the Tsars had lost in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War. Even as Indochina and Cuba joined the world's "socialist sixth," Moscow kept pressing outward to arm and aid leftist regimes in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Algeria, Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, and, more fatefully, Afghanistan. Thus did Russia acquire the "strategic depth" so coveted by apostles of expansion.

All this provides one measure of Russia's historic fears, and the colossal energy of the response. A visitor to Moscow and its environs everywhere senses the immanence of this past. In Yaroslavl, an industrial city of 630,000 inhabitants, it is but a few minutes walk from the eleventh-century walls that were attacked by Mongols, Norsemen, and Poles, past the statue of Lenin, arms gesturing, in front of the city hall, to a promontory where one can see the bridge across the Volga that withstood a Nazi assault in 1942. The old outlook is captured in a saying of Tsar Alexander III, still emblazoned on the wall of the General Staff Academy in Moscow: "Russia has only two friends in the world, its army and its navy." Even among the young, this martial past is its allure. In the year 2000, at the time of Putin's election, students at a Moscow high school were asked if they favored the restoration of the Russian Empire; more than half said yes.

On its face, it is a legacy that augurs poorly for a lasting relationship with the United States. But recent events time and again have confounded the notion that the future replicates the past. To the surprise of everyone, and to the consternation of many, the Soviet Union yielded up its empire without firing a shot; it did nothing as the Berlin Wall fell, and peacefully withdrew 700,000 troops from its satellites—and having done that, the USSR itself proceeded to implode, in defiance of all precedents and prophecies. Experience has not been kind to the Iron Template theory of history. As Omar G. Encarnación reminds us elsewhere, Spain, too, was long believed to be prisoner of its red and black past; it was ostensibly a country lacking the democratic vocation, with its hard-fisted army, its reactionary clergy, its extremist politics, and its ethnic brawls. Like Russia, so observers sagely remarked, and unlike the rest of Europe, Spain never had its Enlightenment. But mercifully, asymmetry is not destiny.

The Pipelines That Bind

It is now conventional wisdom that the Soviet imperial project stunted Russia's growth as a nation-state, galvanized a Western counteralliance, and left as its legacy the dead weight of a bloated bureaucracy. Given the Soviet doomsday arsenal, its silos stacked with missiles and its tons of biological weapons, we can all be grateful it did not end with a bang. How and why it did happen is convincingly related in an admirable new book by the Princeton scholar Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Ironically, as the author explains, what indirectly doomed the empire was the quadrupling of world oil prices in the 1970s, an economic coup engineered by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) after the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

What was an "oil shock" to the West and most of the Third World proved a windfall for the Soviet Union. Its oil industry seemed to rise from nowhere. Though geologists as early as the 1920s found petroleum in the marshland forests of West Siberia, not until 1959 did serious pumping begin. In a decade, the Soviet Union began to export oil, rapidly becoming the world's number two producer. From 1973 to 1985, energy exports accounted for 80 percent of Soviet earnings, and when OPEC prices spiked, newly rich Arab states embarked on a buying spree in the Soviet arms bazaar. Flush with cash, the Brezhnev regime deferred the unpopular and difficult task of reforming a rustbelt economy, and squandered its oil wealth on improvident Third World comrades.

That was the first chapter in a story as interesting as it is commonly unfamiliar. A second chapter followed during the chaotic 1990s, when the oil industry fell into decline, the result of predatory swindling, devaluation, sinking world prices, and persistent neglect. Add to that a war in Chechnya, which disrupted vital pipelines and refineries, and the discovery of vast oil and gas fields in and around the Caspian Sea, no longer under Soviet rule—with the added twist that legal claims to Caspian oil were disputed by newly independent republics. At this point, Western companies vied for Caspian options, and as a carrot jointly proposed a new pipeline from Baku in Azerbaijan that would bypass Russia and carry petroleum to Ceyhan, on Turkey's Mediterranean coast. In Russian eyes, this was an intolerable intrusion, a replay of the old imperial Great Game, and Moscow did what it could to frustrate Western pipeline schemes.

Now comes a new chapter. With an air of surprise, a recent *New York Times* editorial commented that Russia "has quietly become a behemoth in the oil business, a development with important political and economic implications for the United States." Within two years, Russian output has jumped by about 15 percent, partly the result of new technologies and rising world prices. Siberian oil now accounts for close to 10 percent of world production. The change in attitude to foreign investment was underscored after September 11, when a major deal that had been long held up by uncertainty about future tax rates came to fruition. A consortium led by ExxonMobil announced agreement on developing an oil field near Sakhalin Island in Russia's Far East, with an initial investment of some \$4 billion, a record high for foreign firms since the collapse of communism.

The deal coincided with the opening of a \$2.6 billion pipeline from Kazakhstan to Russia's Black Sea port at Novorossiysk. Constructed by a consortium led by ChevronTexaco, the pipeline will bring oil from huge Caspian reserves through Russia into world markets at a significant level—the initial pumping capacity is 600,000 barrels a day. At the same time, Transneft, the state-owned pipeline company, announced the opening of a Baltic Sea terminal with a capacity of 240,000 barrels a day.

Yet within all this news lies the basic asymmetry of the global oil economy. America, the industrial West, and Third World nations alike all benefit from low world oil prices, but Russia does not. Every dollar per barrel decline in oil prices results in a loss of \$1 billion, plus or minus 20 percent, in Russia's gross revenues. Thus after 9/11, as softening world demand drove prices down, Russia opened its spigots wider both to recoup lost income and to expand its market share. OPEC exporters joined with non-OPEC members Mexico and Norway to plead for a reduction in Russian output. Yet as Thane Gustafson, the Eurasian expert at Cambridge Energy Research Associates, declared in mid-November (as quoted in yet another eye-widening *New York Times* account), there was no sign of a willingness to do so by either oil companies or the government: "If Russia were to slam on the brakes now, it would be Ben Hur pulling back suddenly on his chariot while it's going full speed ahead."

On December 5, Russia threw a sop to OPEC. Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov announced that Russia would cut exports by about 150,000 barrels a day in the next four months, in the hope that others would follow suit and that oil prices would stabilize at roughly \$20 to \$25 a barrel. Oil experts were quick to note that in harsh winter months Russian exports always decline by about that much, and that Moscow's gesture simply buys time and avoids a confrontation with OPEC. These few months thus offer an extraordinary chance for the United States to strike an imaginative grand bargain with Russia that would provide an underpinning of solid shared interest to a new partnership.

The most ingenious idea I have seen has been put forward by Ira Straus, a Fulbright professor of international relations at Moscow State University and U.S. coordinator of the Committee on Eastern Europe and Russia in NATO. He begins by pointing out that OPEC has quietly invited Russia to join the oil cartel, a step favored by some Russian companies, and that Russia is very likely to follow a pro-OPEC policy "unless the West does something to change the structure of its incentives, so that low oil prices cease to cost Russia." And how can that happen? He suggests: First, bring Russia into the Paris-based International Energy Association (IEA), an autonomous body with 26 member countries, whose mission is to disseminate information and promote rational energy policies. Next, set up a price-compensation scheme within IEA so that oil-exporting members would have an incentive to keep prices low. A likely scheme would be to agree on a fair price, say \$20 a barrel, and for Russia to be compensated by all other IEA members who gain from cheap oil: Europe, the United States, Japan, with possible compensation to other non-OPEC members. This would free Russia to compete ruthlessly against OPEC, and it would lead to a surge in Western imports from Russia. In return, Russia would grant Western countries control over some pipelines and renounce the right to restrict the flow of oil from those pipelines, thereby guaranteeing Russia a huge market and ensuring the West stable supplies independent of Gulf sheikdoms.

This strategy, says its advocate, is a win-win proposition since with each drop in oil prices, importers would gain ten times as many dollars as the compensation paid to Russia: "It's an investors dream: for each \$1 put into compensation transfers, we lock in a \$10 return for the long run. It's a net profit for both Russia and the West." Additionally, as an IEA member, Russia would get a full role in planning global energy strategy together with the West—a well-earned role, not a make-believe one. To be sure, as Martin Walker says in his sobering final paragraphs, any such Russo-Western alliance risks galvanizing a Chinese-Islamic-Third World counteralliance. That and much else needs to be discussed. Suffice it to say that we need bold thinking in this changed world, and Ira Straus's intriguing idea belongs on the drawing board. ●

—Karl E. Meyer