



The Conference of Defence Associations
Executive Director's Focus Brief

27 August 2007

Russian Bear: Back in Tooth and Claw?

Dear Colleagues,

The Conference of Defence Associations would like to draw your attention to the spate of recent media reports about the so-called “return” of the Russian Bear, and to highlight the issues involved in analyzing such a phenomenon and what it means for Canada.

(Note: links to relevant articles in each section are listed at the end)

A New Cold War?

In numerous press reports, attention has focused on recent activities by the Russian military and political establishment. These include, among others:

- Increased defence spending to the tune of \$200 billion dollars (US).
- The reinstatement of long-range bomber patrols by the Russian air force, with recent reports of incursions into NATO airspace.
- Assertions that Russia is looking to deploy warships in the Mediterranean in its quest for a warm deepwater port.
- Joint large-scale military exercises with China under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.
- Russian claims to sovereignty in the Arctic and its recent mission to lay claim to it.
- Diplomatic spats with its pro-Western neighbours, such as Georgia, as well as with Britain over allegations of espionage and the poisoning of a Russian dissident.
- Russian opposition to a proposed American anti-missile interceptor system in Europe, and Russia's subsequent withdrawal from the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty.

Most commentators take the view that Russia's increasing boldness is a harkening back to the days of the Cold War. Russian motivations are described as a desire to re-establish Russian domination over the old imperial and Soviet territories, and an increased confidence due to economic development and a flood of revenue from the export of petroleum. Allusion is also made to a strengthening alliance between Russia, China and Central Asian states in order to counter the Western influence in the region. Various statements from Russian officials claim a desire for a more multi-polar international system. Russian nationalism is resurgent, with rewriting of history, massaging of its Soviet past, and a clamp-down on anti-Kremlin political parties and civil society groups. Russian nationalists also loathe the indifference and disdain with which the West has treated it since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and are looking for a way to regain lost prestige.

Questionable Motives

However, contrary to these often-alarmist and negative portrayals of Russian activities and intentions, some analysts have offered alternative interpretations of Russian motives, which the CDA would like to draw your attention to.

In a piece for the *Toronto Star*, Paul Abelsky comments that it is difficult to pinpoint the defining ideas of Putin's reign, one that has been a "heady mixture of nostalgia, reflexive patriotism, paranoia about the West and oil-fuelled financial vigour [that] have been the convenient props of Putin's time in office."

In a piece for *The Washington Quarterly*, Dmitri Trenin argues that Russia's foreign policy motives today are "completely dissimilar to those of the recent Soviet and the more distant czarist past." Instead, Russian foreign policy is driven by a "bureaucratic capitalism" dominated by political and government officials who simultaneously control various state-owned corporations. Russian strategy is thus driven by their commercial interests, in a style of foreign policy where "everyone can be a partner," where each concession comes at a price and pragmatism is more important than ideology or questions of morality. He concludes with the expectation that as Russian capitalism continues to evolve, the more likely it is that Russian standards will grow "more modern" and "Western."

A Worse Bark than Bite?

Some analysts have noted that Russia's bark, while loud and clear, is often mismatched to its actual capability.

In a piece for the *Telegraph* (see link below), David Blair notes that "far from being a rising power like China or India, Russia is locked in long-term decline." The author notes Russia's weakness stems from a rapidly falling population and increasingly depopulated country, an economy based on volatile energy prices, and increasingly unfriendly neighbouring states.

In an article for the *International Herald Tribune*, Nina Khrushcheva states that Vladimir Putin's Russia is a paper tiger that purports to G-8 membership and military greatness, while in reality being a "KGB-controlled sham" where the official line is that, "[the] economy is great, Gazprom is great, the military is great, Putin is great: The empire remains ours."

While outlining the steps taken by Russia to reassert its military posture, Fred Weir in the *Christian Science Monitor* notes that it is doubtful whether "Russia's weak industrial base can deliver on the Kremlin's ambitions to restore a global military presence."

In a piece for the *National Post*, Chris Wattie quotes an analyst saying that the Russian military build-up is merely repeating the mistakes of the Soviet era by spending on a military that the country cannot afford. The analyst is also quoted as saying that the incursions of NATO airspace by Russian bombers "do not pose a direct threat to NATO nations" because of outdated equipment.

In a piece for *Reuters*, Guy Faulconbridge notes that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is unlikely to turn into an anti-Western club due to the ambiguous relations between Russia and China, especially given the latter's demographic, economic and military growth.

Hugging the Bear?

Some commentators note that instead of viewing Russia through a negative or alarmist lens, more should be done to engage with Russia and recognize that its 'rise' is not necessarily a negative or hostile phenomenon for the West. In a piece for the *International Herald Tribune*, Henry Kissinger notes Putin's initiative to link NATO and Russian radar warning systems as a possible "harbinger of a future posing entirely new creative opportunities" for cooperation between Russia and the West.

Former Canadian Ambassador to Moscow Christopher Westdal, in a piece for the *Globe and Mail*, argues that the popular notion that Putin is leading Russia into "oppression at home and aggressive confrontation with our interests abroad" is contrary to the facts. Regarding the Arctic, Westdal notes that Russia is playing by the same Law of the Sea rules that Canada endorses. He also notes Putin's success in less than a decade in leading Russia from domestic disorder and international derision to "stability, progress and a new respect," along with territorial integrity and economic prosperity. He emphasizes Putin's large domestic approval rating for his actions both at home and abroad.

Conclusion

After considering the evidence, the CDA concludes that it is too early to draw any definitive conclusions about the motivations and capabilities of Putin's resurgent Russia. Attributing a country's foreign policy to a single motive and stereotyping is a risky move, foreclosing any creative thinking on how to engage elements of the Russian establishment more productively. Furthermore, one has to be mindful of whether Russian ambitions are regional or international, and whether it has the long-term capability of force projection from its borders. A study of the intersection between Russian motives and capabilities would be instructive in these regards.

Canada should engage with Russia with an open mind but be mindful that its influence is enhanced, as in most of its foreign policy and defence endeavours, through an integrated approach with its allies, with the use of instruments of international law and a robust response backed by relevant capabilities.

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LINKS:

A New Cold War?

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Questionable Motives

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Hugging the Bear?

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Christopher Westdal. "Don't demonize Putin." *Globe and Mail*, 21 August 2007. Available online at: <http://www.libertypost.org/cgi-bin/readart.cgi?ArtNum=197869>

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