



# Slouching Toward Eurasia?

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**Related Categories:** Russia

Since Vladimir Putin's assumption of the Russian presidency in December of 1999, Moscow's foreign policy has changed course. The norm is no longer President Yel'tsin's sometimes halting embrace of Europe and the West, which persisted in spite of pressures both from hard-liners within his own government (such as Foreign Minister -- and later Prime Minister -- Yevgeny Primakov) and from the secret police and intelligence organs. Instead, under Putin's direction, Russia's manipulation of foreign affairs -- despite fluctuations in tone -- generally appears to be more aggressive and "geopolitical," raising worries about renewed imperial aspirations on the part of the Kremlin.

The post-1999 foreign policy approach is based on an ideological infrastructure. Long relegated to ultranationalists and a handful of "new right" thinkers, the previously obscure doctrine of Eurasianism has emerged as a major force in Russian politics. It is noteworthy not only for its appeal as the basis for a renewed quest for national greatness, but also for the degree to which its tenets appear to have begun to animate many of President Putin's international maneuvers.

Eurasianism's renaissance is not surprising. Its early 20th-century concepts -- advocating the cultural and political struggle between the West and a distinct Russia-led "Eurasian" subcontinent -- were, in their day, championed by such prominent Russian political figures as Count Nikolai Trubetskoi and later Lev Gumilev. In recent years, the noticeable reversion to "new right" balance-of-power politics that has taken place among the Russian policy-making elite has breathed new life into the movement. Indeed, by all indications, growing emphasis on geopolitics from all corners of the Russian political spectrum is rapidly elevating Eurasianism to the level of a mainstream ideology.

A great deal of this newfound appeal can be attributed to Eurasianism's main ideologue -- Alexandr Dugin. Despite his checkered past (a former member of the radical anti-Semitic Pamyat' organization and later of the racist Conservative Revolution, alongside controversial writer/opposition figure Eduard Limonov), Dugin is now viewed as Russia's premier geopolitician. He serves as international affairs adviser to a number of senior Russian parliamentarians, including the communist-"patriotic" Duma speaker Gennady Seleznev, as well as to high-ranking officials in Russian defense and foreign policy circles. (2) His writings on strategy reportedly have had profound influence not only on Communist Party leader Gennady Zuganov, but on members of the Russian General Staff as well.

Dugin's leading work, *Osnovi Geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoye Budushiyey Rossiye* (The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia), serves as the cornerstone of the new Eurasianism. In it, he articulates the tenets of his revised, updated version turn-of-the-century balance-of-power politics:

'LAND' VS. 'SEA' POWERS -- Adopting traditional theories from such strategists as Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Halford Mackinder, Dugin postulates a struggle for international dominance between "land" powers (embodied by Russia) and "sea" powers (principally the United States and the United Kingdom). This is compounded by the globalist "Atlanticism" of these countries, which is incompatible with, and antagonistic to, a sense of Russia's "Eurasian" distinctness. As a result, Dugin believes that "the strategic interests of the Russian people must be oriented in an anti-Western fashion (deriving from the imperative to preserve the identity of Russia's civilization)." (3)

EMPIRE AS DESTINY -- The creation of a Russia-dominated Eurasian space, stretching from the Levant to the Asia-Pacific, is central to Dugin's theory. According to him, the Russian people are ethnically, culturally, psychologically, religiously and, above all, historically destined to recreate Russian greatness, which is not fulfilled today by ephemeral constructs like the CIS and the Russian Federation. In short, Russia "cannot exist outside of its essence as an empire, by its geographical situation, historical path and fate of the state." (4)

ALLIANCE BUILDING -- Given Russia's current diminished international stature, Dugin stresses the need for alliance building as a tool for political and economic dominance. These alignments, based on the common "rejection of Atlanticism, strategic control of the USA, and the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate us," can serve as the basis for a "political and strategic union" with other like-minded nations. (5) Accordingly, in the Middle East, Dugin stresses the importance of a Moscow-Tehran axis and the creation of a zone of Iranian influence to which regimes in the region will gravitate. In Europe, he advocates a Moscow-Berlin pivot, which he sees as essential to the creation of a cordon sanitaire against Western influence in the former Soviet bloc. And in Asia, he speaks of a Moscow-Tokyo axis as necessary for the creation of a "pan-Asiatic" alliance to offset geostrategic competitors such as China in the long term. In Russia's present, weakened state, according to Dugin, such unions will serve to fulfill Moscow's ambitions by creating "an empire of many empires." (6)

Not surprisingly, this ambitious invocation of Derzhavnost,<sup>(7)</sup> the idea of Russia as a Great Power, has resonated among Russians discontented with their country's diminished international status. Nothing illustrates this more than the runaway popularity of Dugin's newly established "Eurasia" movement. The fledgling political initiative, unlike previous (failed) far right offshoots, boasts the broadest spectrum of political/religious affiliations under one umbrella in more than a decade. <sup>(8)</sup> In addition to prominent politicians and former KGB operatives, the movement has become home to members of the spiritual leadership of the Russian Orthodox and other religious communities.

Eurasianism also has rapidly gained currency among the Russian foreign policy establishment. Affiliates of the movement include such prominent figures as Dmitri Riurikov, a former foreign affairs adviser to President Yel'tsin and currently Moscow's ambassador to Uzbekistan, and General Nikolai Klokotov, former head of the General Staff's military training academy. <sup>(9)</sup> At a recent panel discussion, even experts from the influential Council for Foreign and Defense Policy officially concluded that Russia must adopt Eurasianism in order to prevent disintegration and reestablish its international status. <sup>(10)</sup>

Most significantly, however, Eurasianism's influence is increasingly evident in President Putin's conduct of foreign affairs. Since his rise to the presidency, the former KGB spymaster has echoed the concepts of "multipolarity" and geopolitics that were the hallmarks of his foreign policy predecessor -- Yevgeny Primakov. Notably, Primakov was in his day rumored to be an adherent of Eurasianism, although the KGB veteran never articulated this publicly. <sup>(11)</sup> With Putin, however, the influence of Dugin's concepts of Russia's international importance, "Eurasian" cultural distinctness, and economic-political alliance building can clearly be felt. In a recent editorial, the president himself -- echoing Dugin's writings -- affirmed that "Russia has always seen itself as a Euro-Asiatic nation." <sup>(12)</sup>

In turn, Dugin, a strident opponent of former President Boris Yel'tsin's efforts at globalization and Western integration, has lauded Putin's policies. His "Eurasia" movement, at its founding conference, articulated its "total support" for Putin's efforts, which Dugin has called a "shift in foreign policy direction" for Russia and a sign of its "new Eurasian politics." <sup>(13)</sup> Indeed, Dugin has much to praise -- a great many of President Putin's recent foreign policy initiatives appear to have been lifted directly from the strategist's playbook:

In Central Asia, Putin has come a long way toward resuscitating Russia's Cold War influence and cementing Moscow's position as the preeminent power in the "post-Soviet space." Responding to the security concerns of the fragile Central Asian republics, the Kremlin, along with the governments of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Tajikistan, established a regional "rapid reaction force" to counter local Islamist insurgency in May of 2001. The task force, which will operate under Russian command, effectively places Moscow at the helm of security planning for much of Central Asia. <sup>(14)</sup>

Likewise, building on Dugin's principle of economic interdependence, President Putin on June 1 officially launched his much-vaunted Eurasian Economic Community, which unifies many of the Central Asian republics in an oil-rich, Moscow-dominated economic alternative to the European Union. Finally, the nearly simultaneous transformation of the so-called "Shanghai Five" into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (with the addition of Uzbekistan) and the historic July Russia-China summit, at which the two countries signed a multi-decade "friendship and cooperation" accord, are indicative of Moscow's concerted efforts to create a new balance of power in Central Asia, one which excludes Western influence altogether. <sup>(15)</sup>

In the Middle East, in line with Dugin's recommendations, Putin has placed great emphasis on the strengthening of the Russo-Iranian strategic partnership. In March of 2001, he and Iranian President Mohammed Khatami concluded a landmark cooperation agreement worth a reported \$7 billion, signaling a new phase of strategic alignment between the two countries. <sup>(16)</sup> Iran, in turn, has grown in both power and influence, signing a defense accord with Saudi Arabia in April 2001 cementing its dominance in the Gulf, as well as exhibiting a renewed focus-- one mirroring Moscow's plans -- on the Caspian region. <sup>(17)</sup>

Dugin's influence is also visible in Russia's recent rapprochement with Germany. Since his assumption of power, Berlin has become the centerpiece of President Putin's European policy. In the spring of 2001, he and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder held intensive talks regarding bilateral cooperation, prompting a dramatic warming of relations and Putin's declaration that "Germany is Russia's leading partner in Europe and the world." <sup>(18)</sup> Since then, Moscow has worked hard to cement Berlin's diplomatic and economic support, all the while promoting European dependency on Russian-controlled Central Asian energy resources. These tactics have had concrete results: In a recent article in the German *Die Welt* newspaper, Schröder praised both Russia's adherence to the "European community of values" and its "key role in the efforts for lasting security and stability in Europe." <sup>(19)</sup>

Given the striking similarities between Eurasianism's postulates and many of Putin's policies, it is no wonder that Dugin has welcomed the president's maneuvers as "the start of a new, Eurasian direction" for Russia. <sup>(20)</sup> Of course, Russian foreign policy is both multifaceted and multidirectional, and may well evolve along a different path over time. There is no denying, however, that Eurasianism's tenets are rapidly gaining strength in the Kremlin's corridors of power. The extent of their influence on Russia's long-term foreign policy direction remains to be seen, but it is alarming that Putin apparently takes Dugin's dreams of Eurasian empire seriously enough to try to put some of them into practice.

#### Notes:

1 Ilan Berman is a Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council and Director of its Eurasia Program.

2 Charles Clover, "Will the Russian Bear Roar Again?" *Financial Times*, 2 December 2000.

3 Alexandr Dugin, *Osnovi Geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoye Budushiy Rossii* (Moscow: Arctogia - Centr, 1999), p. 190. (Author's translation)

4 Clover, op. cit.

5 Ibid.

6 Dugin, op. cit., pp. 214-249. (Author's translation)

7 This concept also has domestic implications, in that it raises the state above its citizenry. As Russian Duma Deputy Sergei Kovalev remarked, "Derzhavnost is the view of the state as a highly valuable mystical being that every citizen and society as a whole must serve." *New York Review of Books*, 9 August 2001.

8 Victor Yasmann, "Rise of the Eurasians," *RFE/RL Security Watch*, Vol. 2, No. 17, 30 April 2001.

9 Marina Latysheva, "The Eurasia movement: mystics, priests, and secret service agents," *Versiya*, No. 19, 29 May-4 June 2001.

10 *RFE/RL Security Watch*, Vol. 2, No. 25, 28 June 2001.

11 Charles Clover, "Dreams of the Eurasian Heartland," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 2, March - April 1999, pp. 10-11.

12 Vladimir Putin, "Rossiya vseгда oshchushala sebia evroasiatskoy stranoy," <[www.strana.ru](http://www.strana.ru)>, 13 November 2000.

13 Aleksandr Dugin, "U Rossiye Novyye Evrasiyskiy Kurs," <[www.strana.ru](http://www.strana.ru)> 14 November 2000; RIA-Novosti, 21 April 2001.

14 See The American Foreign Policy Council's *Russia Reform Monitor*, 27 May 2001; <[www.afpc.org](http://www.afpc.org)>.

15 These developments are not inconsistent with Dugin's theories: Given Moscow's current difficulties with Tokyo, Dugin sees Sino-Russian alignment as a viable strategic partnership in the near term, to be replaced later by a Russo-Japanese bloc. See Clover, "Will the Russian Bear Roar Again?"

16 Middle East Newline, 23 February 2001; *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1* (Tehran), 1030 GMT, 16 March 2001; transcribed in FBIS-NES-2001-0316, 16 March 2001.

17 For a detailed analysis of the convergence of Russian and Iranian foreign policies, see the author's *Russia and the Mideast Vacuum*, IASPS Research Papers in Strategy No. 12 (Washington, DC: Institute for Advanced Strategic & Political Studies, June 2001).

18 Angelo Codevilla, "Europe's Dangerous Dalliance With The Bear," *Wall Street Journal Europe*, 7 June 2001.

19 Ibid.

20 Dugin, "U Rossiye Novyye Evrasiyskiy Kurs."