**Russian exceptionalism: past and present**

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The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Russia as a new political and state community without clearly defined social ideals or developmental reference points has revived interest in the idea of a “special path” for Russia.

The basic postulates of the foreign policy of the Atlanticists can be expressed in a set of formulas:

—national interests do not play a decisive role in foreign policy or in world politics as a whole;

—the crucial role in international politics is played by international law and international organizations;

—the West is Russia’s natural partner, and hence Russia cannot accept the concept of a multipolar world; and —the main threats to Russia come not from the West but from the East.

Russia into its economic and military-political organizations, did not regard Moscow as a real partner (either an equal or a junior one), and ignored Russia in resolving the most important issues of world policy (the crisis in the Balkans in the 1990s became a benchmark), a search began within the Russian political elite for concepts that would offer an alternative to Atlanticism. One of these alternatives came to be neo-Eurasianism.

The neo-Eurasianists regarded Russia’s unambiguous orientation toward the West during the period of Atlanticist dominance as a strategic error and argued that Moscow must develop its foreign policy in both geopolitical directions. The neo-Eurasianists agreed with the liberals that the East posed quite a few threats to Russia and that the country should therefore pay the closest attention to this region in terms of national security. Unlike the Atlanticists, however, they saw in the East not only a threat but also an opportunity for Russia to play its role in the world and obtain numerous economic, military–political, cultural, and other advantages from cooperation with this region. The neo-Eurasianists emphasized that Russia had long-established ties with many of the newly formed states of the Caucasus and Central Asia and that their economies and societies were closely interwoven. Given that the developed countries of the West were in no hurry to welcome Russia into their own community, it would be irrational to lose traditional ties with the former Soviet republics and with the developing countries of Asia and Africa. Moreover, the East includes not only underdeveloped countries but also the so-called newly industrialized countries (South Korea, Taiwan, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations countries) and such economic giants as Japan and China.

The neo-Eurasianists were among the first to assert that Russia must make the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) its top geopolitical priority. They welcomed the creation both of the CIS itself and of its military–political structures, including the Tashkent Collective Security Treaty of 1992 and subsequent agreements. They criticized the Yeltsin–Kozyrev team for not paying enough attention to this organization and for not developing military and technical cooperation within the CIS rapidly enough. They also tried to draw the attention of both politicians and the public to the situation of the Russian-speaking population in the post-Soviet space, demanding that Russian leaders protect Russian compatriots abroad.

Another indubitable merit of the neo-Eurasianists was that they were among the first to introduce into circulation and try to decode such basic concepts of international relations theory as “national interests” and “national security.” The preceding schools, including the Atlanticists, had not devoted proper attention to these categories. At the same time, the neo-Eurasianist interpretation of these concepts was often unscientific and had a coating of romanticism. Thus, one of the founding fathers of neo-Eurasianism, S.B. Stankevich (then a presidential adviser on political questions), quite rightly supposed that a country’s geographical position, history, culture, ethnic composition, and political traditions determine its national interests and that one may draw a distinction between permanent and temporary national interests. But he also tried to link this interpretation of national interests—traditional in international relations theory—with the different and not altogether scientific concept of the “national idea.”

In one of his works Stankevich states: “Between permanent and temporary basic interests lies a set of interests that reflect what may be called the ‘national idea.’ The national idea is the self-identification of a nation. This is a very emotional theme, a theme that touches on the changing course of national history. It is not a scientifically substantiated system of values but an aggregate of ideas about a nation’s past and future.”5 It is not altogether clear why the national idea lies between permanent and temporary interests and why it cannot incorporate both. It is also not clear why Stankevich draws a distinction between the identity of a nation and its system of values, although in reality they are intertwined. Why are values always “scientifically substantiated”? Why can they not be the result of a nation’s long-term historical and cultural development (including emotional perceptions of its past and future)?

Russian adepts of *geopolitics*  took the baton from the neo-Eurasianists in debates about the “special path” and Russian uniqueness. It is ironic but true that they take their inspiration not from indigenous Russian thinkers (like those who inspired the neo-Eurasianists) but, increasingly, from Western geopolitical theorists (Alfred Thayer Mahan, Halford Mackinder, Karl Haushofer, Nicholas J. Spykman, and others). Russian geopolitical writers have paid special attention to

Mackinder’s theory of the Heartland, because this theory assigns a key role to Russia, which has traditionally controlled most of the Heartland. As is well known, Mackinder formulated the essence of his theory in three celebrated maxims: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island controls the world.”

Guided by this theory, Mackinder thought that the sea powers should not allow continental powers to control the Heartland. In practice, this approach led to constant wars and to the redivision of spheres of influence. Russia, occupying a central place in this geopolitical construction, has been drawn willy-nilly into global competition. Because Russia has paid a high price for these geopolitical

“games” over the last three centuries, contemporary Russian writers on geopolitics have proposed a world order that would halt the futile and expensive competition and turn the Heartland into a means of stabilizing the system of international relations. Of course, this view assigns to Russia a central place in maintaining security in the region and throughout the world. Developing Mackinder’s theory, Pozdniakov has proposed his own formulation of the geopolitical maxim that at the same time describes a system of global security: “Who controls the Heartland has a means of effective control over world politics, and above all a means of maintaining the geopolitical and power balance in the world. Without such a balance, a stable world is unthinkable.”

Russian geopolitical writers believe that the West has committed a grave error by shifting the geopolitical boundary eastward and fragmenting the Heartland. Pozdniakov emphasizes that the Heartland cannot maintain the equilibrium of international security if it is fragmented. If that happens, the Heartland will itself be in a state of imbalance and chaos that may spread to the rest of the world. In the words of the Russian theorist, “from this flows Russia’s geopolitical role and task as the center of the Heartland; here lie the sources of its fundamental interests as a nation-state.”

In the 2000s, a *hybrid* version of Russian “autonomy” emerged in the Russian literature on problems of Russia’s foreign policy and domestic development.21 This hybrid incorporated the intellectual baggage of neo-Eurasianism and geopolitics while adding certain new elements. From neo-Eurasianism the new theory of Russia’s “special path” took the perception of our country as a special civilization with a worldwide cultural–historical mission and equally important interests in the West and in the East (and, of course, the view that Russia’s own interests must predominate and Russia not be absorbed into other civilizations). From geopolitics the “hybrid” borrowed the idea of the eternal striving of the West (and other “poles of power”) to humiliate and dismember Russia. It is Moscow’s task to repel the latest assault by foreign enemies and restore the geopolitical balance on terms favorable to Russia.

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Let us add that the adepts of dynamic conservatism also inherited from classical Eurasianism many ideological assumptions and clichйs about the need to create supranational (suprastate) institutions,

the need to introduce the strictest, most detailed regulation of all aspects of political, economic, social, and cultural life (extending even to the activity of circuses!), the struggle against the unconditionally hostile policy toward Russia exhibited by the West in general and the United States in particular, and so on. As for the new elements in the hybrid version of the “special path” doctrine, its supporters began to place greater emphasis on the need for spiritual renewal—above all, of the Russian ethnic group (and other Slavic peoples)—based on the values of Orthodox Christianity. This concept cannot be dismissed as a crude version of nationalism, because in the final analysis this school of political thought seeks the prosperity of all Russia’s peoples and the formation of a supraethnic state identity (the only kind of state identity possible in a multiethnic and multifaith country). These authors emphasize that because the Russian ethnic group has suffered most from the dislocation of recent decades, renewal must begin there, with that ethnic group becoming a sort of “locomotive” pulling the development of the state as a whole. Another new element is that the predecessors of today’s advocates of uniqueness (both neo-Eurasianists and theorists of geopolitics)

for the most part confined themselves to academic philosophizing and abstract appeals to politicians, who as a rule remained deaf to these appeals. By contrast, the new generation of supporters of the hybrid view—as they pass through the school of practical work in various spheres of state, political, and public activity (business, the executive and legislative branches of power, state service, the mass

media, nongovernmental organizations, etc.)—have already gone beyond good intentions to propose quite concrete programs of action. An example is the so-called Sergiev Project and its “Russian doctrine,” which uses extensive if eclectic historical material to describe in depth the causes of the collapse of the Soviet project, analyzes the current situation, and presents a detailed program for

bringing the country out of crisis and strengthening its position in the world—the so-called Fifth Project.

Let us emphasize that this generation of supporters of the “special path” are betting on modern “social engineering” techniques—the network principle of control and interaction, strategies of goal setting and manipulation of mass consciousness, information technologies, and so on.23 Like the current Russian leadership, they consider that successful reform in Russia requires the active

introduction of innovative technologies—not only in the economy but also in the system of social control. In contrast to the official approach, supporters of this school hold that the management of innovation projects must not be left in the hands of corrupt and often incompetent bureaucrats: managers with good reputations should be recruited from the private sector and subjected to strict

public oversight.