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The Island of Russia

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CAN RUSSIA BECOME A SUPERPOWER AGAIN—AND DOES IT REALLY NEED IT?

Discussions in Russia about the modernization program and the rhetoric that surrounds every Russian-U.S. summit produce a strange impression: as if Russia keeps something back. Why does Russia want to modernize itself? What goals does it pursue in the global arena? And more broadly, how does it perceive itself in the world? What is the purpose of its program for reequipping the Army and the Navy?

The answer suggests itself. Of course, we realize that Russia is not the Soviet Union. Russia has other resources, a potential that cannot even compare to that of its predecessor state, and, therefore, less capability to influence global development. However, certain indications make us still believe that Russia is a superpower—or, more precisely, the second strongest and most influential power in the world after the United States, to which we assign the leading role.

At the same time, there is no greater joy for a Russian intellectual than to speculate about a decline of America. The problem is that the Russians still do not see any other worthy role for their country in the 21st century than the role of a superpower, as a state that realizes itself primarily through influence on global processes. Characteristically, such sentiments are widespread not only among the elites, but also among the public at large. This is true for people in their 45s-50s who remember the Soviet Union fairly well, and for young people who never saw the superpower that actually destroyed

itself in the late 1980s. And there are no signs of an alternative vision of Russia—as a country for itself and for its citizens.

In this context it would be a good thing to look into what a superpower is. Is the superpower status peculiar to Russia? Is there any chance for Russia to regain it in the foreseeable future? And if not, what is the alternative?

WHAT A SUPERPOWER IS

The term ‘superpower’ became widely used during the Cold War years, when the world was divided into two blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union. The term emphasized that the military and other power of each of the two countries distinguished them from the other states and put them beyond the traditional relations among the others. In fact, in simplified terms, world politics was reduced then to relations between these two powers. On the one hand, there was a quality gap between them and the rest of the world; on the other hand, both countries actively struggled for global domination. A superpower in itself and for itself, isolated from the rest of the world, like for example the Inca Empire, hardly makes sense by definition.

Were there any superpowers in the past? Obviously, yes. If we do not go back into the centuries BC and do not take Ancient Egypt or Alexander the Great’s empire, which existed but briefly, the Roman Empire in the 1st-2nd centuries AD is, of course, the most vivid example which suggests itself. Its potential put it above the rest of the world, which was reduced then to territories around the Mediterranean. It perceived itself precisely as a superpower, even though there was no such definition at the time, because it was guided by a superpower mission—namely, to civilize the surrounding world in the image and likeness of Rome. As in the case of the U.S. and the Soviet Union (until the latter began to decay rapidly), there was a huge gap between Rome and the other countries—not in two or three criteria but in the entire set of indicators characterizing national power. These indicators are as follows:

- the size of the country/empire;
- the size of the population;
- GDP (as nearly as it could be calculated in those remote times);
- GDP per capita;
- labor productivity;
- trade turnover with the outside world;
- gold and currency reserves;
- the strength of the armed forces;

- weapons that were in service with the army.

The absolute parameters of the might of Rome are impressive even today (Table 1).

Table 1. Main indicators of Rome's national power

Territory, thousand square kilometers (AD 14)1	Population, thousand people (AD 14)1	Army, people (AD 211)2
3,339.5	44,000	442,000

Sources: 1. Angus Maddison. *Contours of the World Economy 1-2030 AD*. Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 35.

2. Ramsay MacMullen. *How Big Was the Roman Imperial Army?* *KLIO*, 1980, p. 454.

Over the next 1,700 years of human history, there were many other empires that were far ahead of others in terms of power. These were the empire of Charlemagne, the Arab Caliphate in the times of the first caliphs, the empires of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, the empire of Charles V, and Turkey in the times of Mehmed the Conqueror and Suleiman the Magnificent. Strictly speaking, none of them possessed the full set of characteristic features of a superpower. There was always something missing: either an empire was driven by expansionist impulses; or it lacked an economic base, or an articulated ideology, or an efficient state machine, without which no country can be called a real superpower. The power and fury of an expanding empire were based exclusively on the personality of its leader. The world mission of empires was largely reduced to destruction, rather than creation.

There is no point discussing the examples of China under the Manchu dynasty, or the Mughal Empire in South Asia in this article, although in some parameters—territory, population, and industrial and agricultural production—they were far ahead of the largest states in Europe in those times. Despite the great voyages of discovery and the struggle for colonies, until the second half of the 19th century world politics was concentrated in the Greater Mediterranean.

Was the Byzantine Empire a superpower? No, never, even in the time of Justinian and Belisarius. It had many characteristic features of a superpower for several centuries, yet the main one was missing, namely an aggressive strategy towards establishing hegemony over the world. The empire had no positive orientation to the future—throughout its 1,100 years,

except (however strange this might seem) its last crisis-loaded century, Byzantium lived in the past. Also, it was not strong enough to view itself as a superpower. All the brilliant victories of Byzantium, of which there were many, were scored rather easily—either an opponent was very weak (for example, when Belisarius reconquered Italy), or due to brilliant diplomatic maneuvers or just because of historical luck, as was the case when it clashed with the Arab Caliphate.

Or take France under Napoleon. Quite a superpower, was it not? Albeit for a very short period of time. But no, it was not. Indeed, within a few years Napoleon built state and legal systems that were much more modern and efficient than those of any other European country at the time. He conquered almost the whole of Europe, and certainly he had a hegemonic drive. But he did not have enough power. His empire was not a single state, not even a loose confederation. France remained France, and the rest of Europe comprised conquered and partially conquered territories that were in a state of near riot or near sabotage. That was why England on its own defeated France at sea, while Russia, also on its own, defeated it on land. If Napoleon had broken the continental blockade and consolidated his territorial gains within more or less reasonable boundaries, and if he had not made the hasty decision to invade Russia, then perhaps everything would have been different. But history knows no ifs.

There is another story worthy of special mention. This is the spectacular success achieved by relatively small European countries in building vast colonial empires. One of them is Spain. Hernan Cortes led an army of 500 soldiers armed with arquebuses and defeated the Aztec Empire with a population of 15 million people. Another country, Portugal, which had a territory of 90,000 square kilometers, colonized Brazil, 8.5 million square kilometers wide. The Netherlands, where two million people lived on a territory of 40,000 square kilometers, subjugated Indonesia, with a population of 13 million and a territory of 1.9 million square kilometers.

Were all of those facts manifestations of being a superpower? I don't think so; this is a different phenomenon. There were several worlds on Earth simultaneously. In most simplified terms, there were three worlds. One of them was Europe. Another was what became of the once-great civilizations in North Africa, the Middle East, India and China. And the third world comprised all the other territories. These three worlds existed simultaneously but at different historical stages and at different levels of the development of productive forces and

social organization, and, naturally, they used different warfare means and methods.

When these worlds clashed, naturally, a musket was 100 or even 1,000 times deadlier than a spear; a machine-gun was 100 times more efficient than a flint-gun; and a steam-propelled ironclad warship was 100 times superior to a felucca. That was why Lord Herbert Kitchener, leading an army of 8,000 soldiers, easily defeated a 50,000-strong Mahdist army in the Sudan and killed 10,000 of them. Kitchener's force lost only 48 men. A similar thing would happen if, God forbid, a UFO from a planet orbiting Tau Ceti landed on Earth tomorrow and if 15 Tau Cetians stepped out of it, armed with gravity guns. Russia's SS-18 and America's Minuteman would be equally helpless against them, as spears are against machine guns.

Certainly, the civilizational and technological gap in such clashes works with stunning efficiency. However, once these worlds merge, no matter how this happens—through conquest or absorption—the effect ceases to work. Why was Algeria not defeated by France, and Vietnam by America? And why are Somali pirates successfully terrorizing the entire civilized world taken together? (Incidentally, Somalia is one of the most backward countries in the world, which does not have any industry, nor even statehood of its own.) Because, among other things, North Vietnam and the Vietcong fought with Soviet-made weapons, which were as efficient as American ones, and Somali pirates have modern high-speed boats and are armed with AK-47 rifles and RPG-7 grenade launchers.

Technological superiority still matters. At certain stages, the role of this factor may even increase, as shown by the first and second Iraq wars. But in principle, the globalization era is evening up the alignment of power in the world—not meaning that power is now spread evenly around the globe, like a mushy porridge on a flat plate, but that the dependence of power on its primary sources—the size of the population and territory—is becoming increasingly direct. Today, small Holland would never conquer half of Asia.

WHEN WAS RUSSIA A SUPERPOWER?

Now let us speak about Russia. Was it ever a superpower before its Soviet period? No, it was not. In the Middle Ages, for more than 200 years it existed as a protectorate of the Golden Horde. In the 16th century, it fought unsuccessfully for access to the sea and for joining the first league of European powers. At the beginning of the 17th century, Russia even lost its statehood, which was restored with tremendous effort. Simultaneously,

Russia resolved a historical dispute with Poland over whether East Slavs would consolidate around Warsaw's or Moscow's axis.

The rest of the 17th century, especially its second half, was marked by the growing state and social stagnation, despite national resurgence in 1613. Russia's reunification with Ukraine was the only bright spot. The end of the century saw Peter the Great's modernization, which was a must because without it Russia would have quickly turned into a semi-dependent and semi-colonial state on the sidelines of European civilization.

After that, things kept improving. Almost throughout the 18th century, Russia was ruled by women: Catherine I, Anna, Elizabeth and Catherine II, also known as Catherine the Great. Under Catherine the Great, born as a German princess of Anhalt-Zerbst in a provincial Prussian town of Stettin, Russia became a true empire and firmly established itself among the five largest and strongest European powers. These powers decided the fate of not only Europe but, to an increasingly larger extent, the fate of the world. Russia became an empire—but not a superpower, because in all important parameters that make the notion of “national power” Russia was among the first, but not the first, ahead of its rivals in some aspects but behind them in others.

The year 1812 saw the peak of Russia's national revival throughout its history. (Even the year 1945 did not bring such strong positive emotions, as many of the victors and those freed from Nazi slavery returned to Russia from the fronts and Nazi concentration camps only to find themselves in Stalin's labor camps.) Under Alexander I, after the Treaty of Paris and the establishment of the Holy Alliance, initiated by the Russian emperor, Russia became the most powerful nation in Europe militarily—on land, not at sea—and remained so until its defeat in the Crimean War in 1856. Yet the gap in strength between Russia and other powers was not overwhelming: it was not stronger than all the other countries taken together, as was later the case with the Soviet Union and the U.S. In addition, the British Navy ruled the sea, while England increasingly asserted itself as a “world factory.” The “bricks” carefully gathered by the English East India Company formed the edifice of the great British Empire, the most extensive empire of all time. Meanwhile, Russia once again faced the phenomenon of stagnation, this time the absurd anachronism of serfdom. Actually, the defeat in the Crimean War demonstrated this systemic weakness of Russia.

Then came the year 1861 when Alexander II abolished serfdom. Recently, Russia marked 150 years of this most glorious date in Russian history with admiration and respect. Alexander II was not a genius, yet he was a brave and worthy man and a reformist politician, with a vision of his own and a reform agenda. It was an epoch of Russia's national revival and the growth of healthy, positive nationalism. Russia defeated Turkey in the war of 1877-1878, liberated Bulgaria and raised the issue of the status of the Black Sea straits. It joined in the struggle for control over Central Asia and achieved great success in its efforts. It built a modern army and a navy. It could now again speak with Britain, France and united Germany as equals. Russia was again a first-class power, one of the largest and strongest in the world. But, again, it was not the largest (except for the size of the population among European countries) and not the strongest. And of course it could not be described as a superpower.

This period of revival was followed by the unsuccessful reign of Nicholas II, marked by a progressive decay of the regime and a veritable war unleashed by an aggressive and destructive minority in Russia against its own state, with the connivance of a sympathetic society and an actual betrayal and non-interference of the tsarist regime. Other momentous events included the demoralizing defeat in the war against Japan and the ill-prepared entry into the war against Germany. This war, which initially stirred nationalist passions in Russia, very quickly brought people's sufferings and indignation to a head. It only remained for the Bolsheviks to set a match to that powder keg.

After the revolution, throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, the Soviet Union was in a hostile encirclement, actually in a state of siege. So it turns out that this country enjoyed a superpower status from 1945 to 1990—that is, during 45 out of the 1,100 years of its written history (which is believed to begin with the half-mythical fixing by Prince Oleg of his shield to the gates of Constantinople). There is no centuries-old tradition of being a superpower. There is a habit and the memory of two postwar generations, who conveyed it to their children, grandchildren and now great-grandchildren.

Consequently, it is not a matter of following tradition but of reversing it, if we want Russia to become a superpower. I will not discuss here why so many people sincerely want this. Let us focus on another issue, namely: Is superpower status achievable at all? Answering this question we should not forget the rule that I mentioned when analyzing small Holland and the Aztecs: during long historical periods the aggregate power of a

state and its ability to position itself in the world almost directly depend on the size of its territory and its population. Let me emphasize once again that in the era of globalization this dependence is becoming still more direct.

So, does Russia have a chance to become a superpower in the 21st century, in accordance with the laws of history?

WILL THERE BE SUPERPOWERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

However, before delving into this issue, we must first answer a key question: Will there be superpowers in the 21st century at all? This is not an idle question. Russia has proposed the principle of multipolarity as one of the tenets of its foreign-policy doctrine, which by definition implies non-recognition of superpower status for any of the poles. There are widespread discussions about analogies with the 19th century, with its Concert of Powers, or even about a return to the Era of Warring States.

Of course, everything is relative. If we stick to the strict interpretation of 'superpower' as a phenomenon unique to the Cold War period, then, of course, there can be no superpowers in the 21st century. But in reality this interpretation does not solve anything. Also, little will change if we describe some countries not as "superpowers" but, for example, as "great powers of the first category," and if they have characteristics basically different from those of other international players.

But if we look into the essence of the problem, we will have to admit that two countries will be precisely in this position in the foreseeable future (unless something extraordinary happens, for example, if one of them faces fundamental internal destabilization). These countries are the United States, already today, and China in 15 to 20 years. Table 2 illustrates the gap between these two countries and the rest of the world, projected into 2050.

This author does not share the theory of the United States' gradual decay. Even if it does decay, it is doing this very-very slowly. This is why, even when China leaves America behind in GDP, the U.S. will most likely remain superpower number one for a long time yet—and not only due to its military strength. It is due to a set of parameters of power that the United States has systemic leadership over others in finance, communications, technological innovations, science, education, sports, popular culture, etc., whether we like it or not. America is a country that offers people around the world its own model of how to live: this

concerns clothing, food, sports, friendship, love, etc. And this is also a characteristic feature of a superpower.

For all the enthusiasm about Chinese culture and cuisine, it will take a very long time yet before the huge competitive advantages gained by America come to naught, for example, in the number of foreign students, Nobel Prize winners, registered patents, or consumers of American films, CDs and books. But this will certainly happen some day—just as the road-roller of China’s growth some day is destined to stop. And then, perhaps, we will again see a world without superpowers.

The main parameters of national power that the leading nations of the world may have, for example, in 2050 are summarized in Table 2.

This table gives a vivid picture of possible power distribution in the world in the middle of this century. Of course, there is also military strength proper, and we can assume that the military element could compensate for Russia’s relative demographic and economic weakness in the middle of the century, but this factor has limitations of its own.

Table 2. Projected parameters of national power of the leading nations in 2050

	Territory, mln sq. km	Population, mln people¹	GDP, U.S.\$bn (2009)²
U.S.	9.629	439	37,876
Russia	17.098	109	7,559
China	9.596	1,303	59,475
India	3.287	1,656	43,180
Brazil	8.514	260	9,762
Japan	0.377	93	7,664
Germany	0.357	71	5,707

1. U.S. Census Bureau, *International Data Base*

2. PricewaterhouseCoopers, *“The World in 2050”*, January 2011, p.

I think it will suffice to illustrate this argument with the data on the share of defense spending in GDP of three countries: Russia, the U.S. and China.

Table 3. Defense spending share of GDP of the U.S., China and Russia

	Defense spending, U.S.\$bn (2010)	Share of defense spending in GDP, % (2009)
Russia	52.5	4.3
U.S.	687.1	4.7
China	114.3	2.2

Source: *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database*

Since no serious forecast provides even approximate figures regarding the strength of national armed forces and defense spending in the world in 2050, let me project these percentage figures. The gaps between the three countries in military potentials will remain roughly the same as the gaps in population and GDP. This ratio can be upset if some country sharply increases the share of its defense spending in GDP, but in this case we would be speaking of a different model of the political, social and economic system. In other words, if the now-prevailing trends persist, Russia will not obtain superpower status by the middle of the 21st century—for objective reasons.

But can Russia reverse these trends? Yes, it can, because it has a vast territory and rich natural resources. But it will need to forge ahead with three things: mass immigration, a strong pronatalist policy, and forced modernization. Soft authoritarianism will not be enough to meet the three conditions; fulfilling them will require real, full-scale totalitarianism. But is the superpower status worth such a price?

OPTIONS FOR RUSSIA

Now we can finally approach the main question. Since we cannot hope to obtain superpower status without overstraining ourselves, what shall we do? Here are possible options for Russia, including the most absurd ones:

- self-destructing (this option also exists; see the example of the Soviet Union);
- accepting the current situation but, at the same time, slowly fading away in historical nostalgia;
- becoming a satellite of the United States;
- becoming a satellite of China;
- joining the European Union and accepting all of its draconian rules; that is, becoming, in fact, a large Poland;
- following its own way.

Obviously, it is the last option that makes sense for the purposes of serious practical politics. And here Russia must turn its minuses into pluses, and weaknesses into strengths. Let me point out, once again, that the main reason why Russia cannot become a superpower is its insufficient population. If, by some miracle, Russia quickly solved its demographic problem, it could become a superpower due to two factors: the size of its territory and the wealth of its natural resources. In very simplified terms, the position of Russia in today's world is primarily determined by the following characteristics: a huge territory and rich natural resources, plus a sparse yet still quality population and still strong armed forces.

This means that a relatively small population can live very well, if society sets a realistic goal for itself: namely, building a strong and modern country capable of defending itself, its territory and natural resources (otherwise real superpowers will try to bite off some pieces), and not driving itself into a historical dead end by seeking superpower status, because if we choose to follow that way, we would face a collapse even more terrible than the one we had in 1991. Russia needs strong armed forces, as well as a strong state to keep order and promote modernization. But most importantly, the nation must focus its efforts on the creation of a modern, highly efficient economy, without which it will not achieve a consistently high quality of life, even despite the rich natural resources.

It is time to stop fueling negative emotions over the 21st century. Yet this is a difficult century; its algorithm is largely set by sharp changes that are often difficult to predict. One needs to adapt to these changes, but more often one needs to protect oneself from them.

What decisions should Russia make?

It should become a kind of island, the Island of Russia, an island that feels confident and comfortable among the continents of America, Europe, China and India; an island that is not prone to

superpower arrogance or to false humility of a society that has renounced its past.

Using this metaphor, the author is aware of the pitfalls it may have. Some may expect that the bugbear of isolationism will now come out of the closet, and recall the book, *The Island of Crimea*, by Vassily Aksyonov. This metaphor does give cause for such allusions; however, of more importance here is the idea of an island as a strong, monolithic structure amid a turbulent ocean of change; a structure open to changes, yet protected against their costs and excesses, because one can and must protect oneself against international terrorism, illegal immigration, strange diseases, and even natural disasters, including tsunamis.

We all remember a successful example of the implementation of precisely such a concept of an island state—Britain (one could also recall Venice, but it was too long ago). From the era of the Great Geographical Discoveries to the beginning of the 20th century, for almost 500 years, Britain remained the fastest-developing country in the world, largely due to its dependence on maritime trade. But to be fair I must say that the British experiment would not have taken place if the English Channel had not protected Britain from waves of conquest, which regularly swept across Continental Europe. The Channel and the British Navy saved Britain at least three times—from Philip II of Spain, Napoleon and Hitler.

Such protection through a set of compensatory measures—alas, Russia is not an island—would be very useful to this country in the 21st century, especially considering that its two close neighbors will be much stronger in the foreseeable future.

Russia does not need to seek EU membership or an alliance with the United States or China. It must understand that, despite its 140-million population, it cannot become a superpower, yet it can be strong enough to be on its own and live better than many other countries do, although not all of them—we must be realists, after all. So let us thank Cossack Yermak Timofeyevich and explorer Yerofei Khabarov for our territorial vistas, and let America and China envy us.

Building an “Island of Russia”—an island of wellbeing and quality life in today’s rapidly changing and unpredictable world—could serve as the basis for our national idea and modernization platform.

A SPECIAL CASE

Let us now return again to the main question of this article: Can Russia regain the superpower status? And, if it can, should it embark on this path? The above analysis, for all its superficiality, shows that setting this goal now would be hopeless or self-destructive.

However, the paradox is that, unless the Russian elite proposes an alternative to superpower aspirations and unless society accepts this alternative, games over the superpower status will continue. In the meantime, Russia is not following this path, as it would require much more sacrifice and self-discipline from society—something which no one is now ready for. However, for all its illusoriness, this nostalgic desire for superpower status—exclusively at ideological, political, psychological and, especially, attributive and advocacy levels—impedes the search for a real national idea and the formation of a really working national strategy. The super-high energy prices, which, unfortunately, may not decrease for a long time, create an illusion that Russia has the resources to become a superpower.

I hate saying platitudes, but Russia is a special case in world history. It is a multinational and multiconfessional country. It is built around the Russian ethnos and Christianity, but its faith is not Roman Catholic but Orthodox, and it has inherited not the Western Roman but the Eastern Roman, Byzantine, tradition. It has developed a highly painful perception of the West, because it is from there that deadly threats to Russia's independence and very existence came—the Teutonic Knights, Poles, Swedes, Napoleon, the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War, and Hitler—as well as all modernization impulses, especially under Peter the Great. Hence our chronic fluctuations between ingratiating admiration of the West (the latest such case was in the early 1990s) and aggressive and arrogant disdain for it. Now we have a similar ambivalence towards China.

Understandably, with such psychological baggage, promises of a comfortable life on an “island” of one's own are no substitute for a national idea. If it were so easy to formulate, this would have been done long ago. Nevertheless, I would like to present some key considerations.

First, no serious discussions about Russia's future are possible without a decisive and irreversible renunciation of the superpower myth.

Second, a national idea and a national strategy of Russia must necessarily take into account the national historical tradition, developing it in a critical manner, and the peculiarities of the world that is emerging before our eyes.

Third, force will apparently remain the basic factor for a long time yet, which will determine the status of countries in the world, but the content of this notion is changing dramatically. The classical formula expressed in Stalin's famous question "How many divisions does the Pope have?" will be even less relevant in this century than in the previous one.

Fourth, we have reason to hope that the 21st century will be better, brighter, more comfortable, safer and more merciful than the 20th century was—simply because no other century was more brutal and darker than the past one. But still, this does not mean that there will now be universal love and brotherhood. The coming decades will certainly not be a time for the weak and the inert.

We must aim at achieving Russia's real, not rhetorical, positioning as an independent center of power—not as a superpower, but as a great country capable of standing up for itself (not only against Georgia) and having power not for its expansionist projection in the world but for guaranteeing a better material and spiritual life for its people. This goal will be conceptually productive for the formation of a national strategy and a modernization platform. This is the only meaning of the metaphor "the Island of Russia"—an island of security and sustainable development in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world.

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