

Russia's Foreign Policy
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"Russia," as Winston Churchill once noted, "is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." They are not so mysterious if we understand what Russia is, what its internal problems are, and how they have had a consistent foreign policy for the past century.

Russia's emergence as a country only began in the 10th century, making it far younger than the rest of Europe, starting with Greece 2500 years ago and the Roman Empire about 2000 years ago, bringing its laws, urban life, and international order throughout Europe and North Africa to the borders of the Persian Empire. The only thing that makes Russia "European" was the introduction of Christianity in 1000 AD. But even its Christianity was different and less subject to challenges over time than Catholic Christianity. Russian Orthodox Christianity was inseparable from its monarchy. State and church dictatorships kept a largely peasant population under control, perpetually ignorant, and near starvation.

In the 19th century, Russia became the world's preeminent land power, extending 170 degrees of longitude, almost halfway around the globe. Its principal outlet to the sea is in the north, unusable most of the year.

Insecure, as all land powers are, they must expand or be conquered in turn. Russia's flat expanse has no natural borders and affords no protection. Because Russia lies north of the 50th parallel (Canada is at 49th), it has difficulty feeding itself.

Robert Kaplan, a political geographer, notes "Harsh seasonal cycles, a few, distant rivers, and sparse patterns of rainfall and soil fertility controlled the lives of the ordinary peasant; and the ebb and flow of nomadic conquerors often seemed little more than the senseless movement of surface objects on an unchanging and unfriendly sea." This makes for a landscape of anarchy, every group permanently insecure. Russians colonized and were constantly at war with the natives beyond the Urals and across the Asia, fighting with Muslims, both the enlightened ones across the Silk Road to China, and the fanatics today.

Russia's religious and communist totalitarianism harkens back to this feeling of defenselessness in the forest close to the steppe, which makes for a policy of conquest. The Russian Empire has expanded, collapsed, and revived several times. Geography and history demonstrate that we can never discount Russia. Russia's partial resurgence in our own age following the dissolution of the Soviet Empire. (Kaplan).

Russia is at a low ebb today because of its low birth rates and high death rates (alcoholism and excessive tobacco use), high rate of abortion and low immigration. Russia's population of 141 million today (half of what it was at the start of World War II) may drop to 111 million by 2050.

As much as the educated elites would like to follow the path of liberal Western Europe and the United States, they are out of line with Russia's majority. The masses are plugged into Russia's eternal structure: a "strongman" to protect them from the dangers that surround them. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a psychological blow to many. Their strongman is the right man at the right time for them, the clever Vladimir Putin, an "elected" dictator.

Putin is pursuing the only policy that he can in Russia's weakened position: he cannot credibly wage hot war on us, but can wage a different kind of war on his democratic enemies: disinformation warfare. Sowing chaos and playing on existing fault lines can put such stress on liberal (rule of law) democracies that people elect enemies of democratic institutions. The first victims of such attacks are on the press (by accusations of fake news) and the courts (discrediting judges). Poland and Hungary have already succumbed. The European Union may be next, and we are having a close call ourselves.

The Mueller investigation will help us find out how much Russian meddled in our presidential election and how Congress can do its duty to save us from more attacks. We all need to revisit how valuable our institutions are to our identity as Americans. Our geography and history work in our favor. Our minds (and votes) must do so also.

683 words

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