

Russian Geopolitical Thought on Asia-Pacific Region Role in World Policy

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Geopolitics proved to be popular political practice and academic discipline in Russia after the end of the Cold war. Once again events in Crimea (2014) have intensified academic debate about geopolitical factors in world policy. To answer the question how Russian adepts of Geopolitics interpret the role of Asia-Pacific region in international relations one need to start from evolution of Geopolitics in modern Russia.

Russian writers inherited ideas of the two political thought camps: from neo-Eurasianists with their debates about “special path” of Russia in world policy and from western geopolitical theorists.

In the last case western tradition related more deep with the names of A. Mahan, H. Mackinder, K. Haushofer, N. Spykman rather than Russian scientists including N. Danilevsky, L. Mechnikov, N. Trubetskoy, V. Ilyin, P. Savitsky, V. Semyonov-Tyan-Shansky. Modern Russian geopolitical writers (A. Dugin, N. Pozdnyakov, N. Nartov) paid special attention to Mackinder’s theory of Heartland because this theory assigns a key role to Russia which for a long time controlled a large part of Eurasia. Russian writers tried to renew Mackinder’s theory with the next points.

- They suggest that state of war is not inevitable. Starting from Mackinder’s thought that sea powers will fight with continental powers to control Heartland Russian adepts of Geopolitics propose possibility to find new principles of world order to stabilize international system.
- System Eurasian and, as consequence, of global security depends on balance of power. For example, E. Pozdnyakov wrote: “Who controls the Heartland has a means of effective control over world politics and a means of maintaining the geopolitical and power balance in the world”¹
- Western states made an error when began to move geopolitical border to the East expanding NATO and fragmenting Heartland. This move undermines

¹ Pozdnyakov E. *Filosofia politiki*. - Moscow: Paleia, 1994. Vol.2. P.282.

global security because disintegrated Heartland cannot maintain the balance. Moreover, fragmented Heartland will spread chaos and imbalance to the rest of the world.

- Due to her geopolitical position Russia's destiny is to play a crucial role in world policy. Russia's national interests and foreign policy objectively include global scale tasks and global responsibility.

In spite of some "modernization" geopolitical theories still have intrinsic conceptual and methodological defects because the role of geographic factor significantly changed by the end of twentieth century. The huge territory doesn't guarantee strategic invulnerability in the era missile weapon and space communication. Geopolitical division of states on "sea" and "land" powers looks obsolete.

As for the role Eurasia as an axis of world policy it is evident that even inside classical Geopolitics one can find Spykman's theory about dominance on coast line (Rimland) as key element of power. In this theoretical framework Russia definitely loses key position in world policy. Today great powers try to control Asia-Pacific region rather than Eurasia. In these circumstances it is no wonder that some experts call the new "wave" of Geopolitics as "overcome of Geopolitics" or even "pseudo-Geopolitics"².

The rise of China stimulated Russian proponents of Geopolitics to make more emphasize on Spykman's theory. From this point of view geopolitical situation in Asia-Pacific region has changed due to fast growing of China's power. If during the cold war China interpreted as a space adjoined to coast line where fight between sea and land powers occur, in the modern political landscape China became a self-dependent factor of world policy. China is considered as possible threat to Russia if it chooses the northern direction for future development rather than southern one. For this reason Russia interested in cooperation with regional challengers to China: Japan, India, and some Islamic states in Central Asia³.

The problem is that traditional Geopolitics can't explain in its own terms how and why China changed her status from Rimland as subject of external influence into self-independent factor (by the way, unclear – sea, land or still Rimland?) that can press both land-power Russia and sea-land U.S.? If the reason is the fast growth of economy, how

² Tihonravov Yu. Geopolitika. – Moscow: Infra-M, 2000. – P.253.

³ Dugin A. Kitay – Brosok k okeanu // Izvetiya. 2003, July 3.

Geopolitics explain interdependence between sea/land status and economy? If the reason is geographic factors it is unclear what did change with China?

Another camp of modern Russian Geopolitics started from idea of “special path” that may be reduced to the next beliefs of neo-Eurasianists:

- Russia doesn't need to follow Western foreign policy as it was in early Yeltsin's presidency years. Moscow must develop its own foreign policy both in the west and east directions.
- The East is seen as a source of few threats but also as opportunity for cooperation in economic, military, political, and cultural dimensions. This cooperation opens perspective to rise Russian influence in the region and in world policy.
- Due to the West's reluctance to welcome Russia in its institutions, Russia has to use traditional ties with the East, especially with former Soviet republics as well with the countries of Asia-Pacific region, and developing states of Asia and Africa.
- The top geopolitical priority for Russia should be control over the Commonwealth of Independent States. Neo-Eurasianists have welcomed creation of military and political structures like Tashkent Collective security Treaty (1992), and later Shanghai Cooperation Organization (2002) to provide cooperation with post-Soviet states. Neo-Eurasianists support Putin's policy aimed on protection of Russian-speaking population living in near abroad.
- Neo-Eurasianists were among the first who introduced in Russian political discourse such important concepts as “national interests” and “national security” as well idea of interrelation between domestic and foreign aspects of national security.
- Many Eurasianists asserted specific features of Russia as “national idea” reflecting her identity rooted in historical and cultural traditions. This national idea as well as civilization uniqueness shapes Russian “special path” in foreign policy.

The new wave of Geopolitics appeared in 2000s as hybrid versions that comprise above ideas of “special path”, world-wide mission of Russia as special civilization,

striving western states intention to disassemble Russian territory, the need to restore geopolitical space and influence. “Hybridization” of Geopolitics means few innovations.

Religious-secular “symphony”

The first innovation aimed to place greater emphasis on the need for spiritual renewal based on the values of Orthodox Christianity. This school of political thought seeks the prosperity of all Russia’s peoples and maintaining of a supra-ethnic state identity implying multi-ethnic and multi-faith principle of the statehood. At the same time these authors emphasize the role of Russian ethnic group as a kind of “engine” that pull forward the development of whole state in spite of the fact that Russian suffered most from disintegration after dissolution of Soviet Union.

According to Alexander Dugin, Russia has always remained an Orthodox Empire once united under the dual political/religious leadership of the Tsar and Patriarch. Now the world is on the brink of a secular disaster, and only Russia can restore her spiritual authority and provide religious revival of mankind. Russia is portrayed as a universal Heartland based on metaphysical significance⁴.

Transition from metaphysics to politics is made through assertion that human can’t realize God’s kingdom individually but needs collective political existence. Religious-secular governance in the state provides the “symphony of powers” that constitutes a harmony in society. Obviously, Dugin’s interpretation “Russian Heartland” is more an ideology and value-maden rather than geopolitical concept.

In this theory Russia has the key role in Eurasia as an integration pivot for all states to the south of Siberia including China to create “strategic Asian block” under the leadership of Moscow. Russia’s high destiny originates from her position of sacral center for whole Eurasia. A. Dugin suggests that Russia serves the source of high spirit and strong-willed readjustment of the world that overcomes passive vision typical for Confucian, Lamaiste and Hindu civilizations and gives them a chance for historical dynamics⁵. Obviously, even if one recognizes cultural uniqueness of Russia it is unclear

⁴ Dugin A. Absolutnaya rodina. Moscow: Arktagaya. –P.217, 249, 266.

⁵ Dugin A. Puti Absolyuta. – Moscow: Arktagaya, 1999.

how can Russia with her weak modern economy become a leader of Asian strategic block.

Maintain uniqueness through social activity

The second example of Geopolitics' innovativeness is a new interpretation of uniqueness based on active social activity. If previous generation of Geopolitics adepts mostly appealed to philosophy, the supporters of hybrid version insist on practical work. They develop a program for real social actions in various aspects of state policy and public activity including mass media and non-governmental organizations. For example, the so-called "Sergiev Project" uses historical data to describe the causes of the collapse of the Soviet project, analyses current situation and presents a detailed program for recovery and strengthening Russia's position in the world⁶.

Supporters of this school argue that successful reforms in Russia require innovative technologies both in economy and system of social activity and social control accomplished by state. But the problem is that innovation projects have to be withdrawn from the hands of corrupted and often incompetent bureaucracy. New generation of managers should be recruited from private sector and be the subject of public oversight.

This version of Russia's "special path" presents a serious attempt to turn from marginal and abstract theory borrowed from imperial times into influential school of modern political thought that stands on traditions firmly rooted in Russian public consciousness and culture that must not be ignored or oversimplified.

According to this school the geopolitical landscape in Asia-Pacific region dramatically changed due to the shifts in political and military balance initiated by China. Today the two superpowers, the U.S. and China compete for the control over Asia-Pacific region. After the North Korea became nuclear power (with help or at least approval of China), Japan is forced to develop nuclear weapon in medium-term perspective. Claiming nuclear status by official Tokyo will start rebalancing between U.S. and Japan. American influence in the region will diminish after Japan refuses from vassalage. As consequence, China will get less asymmetric strategic position in the face

⁶ Kobiakov A.B., Aver'anov V.V (eds.) *Russkaya doktrina*. Moscow: Iauza Press, 2008. http://www.e-reading.link/bookreader.php/1032020/Kalashnikov_-_Russkaya_Doktrina.html

of American preeminence. In the future China can increase strategic pressure on Russia because of insufficient own resources and overpopulation.

Social activity proponents explain unique position of Asia-Pacific region in modern international relations as resulted from refusal of regional states to follow neoliberal economic model based on free market principles. East-Asian and South-East Asian states including China and India maintain mixed model of economy with high level of state regulation of production, financial flows and with essential state property. Competition between Western neoliberal and Eastern mixed economic models shows that in the nearest future the most effective will be the last one based on significant sovereign economic modules. Russia needs to follow Eastern approach providing real economical development rather than neoliberal one that gives only mechanism of redistribution in the global market and minimal development⁷.

Geopolitics in the framework of globalization

The third way of innovation changes from strategy oriented vision of policy to global scale. From one hand, “global” means a complex of interdependent aspects of influence (economic, military, socio-cultural) resulting in political influence. From the other hand, global scale implies that sources of power can’t be limited by either national or geographic borders. Geographical factor became less significant comparing to more traditional versions of Geopolitics. If traditional view seeks a source of state power in ability to control space, the global view considers power as a complex of different tools of influence including control of spaces. For example, multi-polarity is treated as objectively existing spatial entities that are able/or not able to have significant influence.

Global view adepts modify status of Russia as central part of Eurasia. For them Eurasian distinctiveness means “openness” to the West, South, and East. Geopolitical centrality demands balanced mutli-vector foreign policy and Russia’s great power status is turning to collective security provider⁸. This way global view neutralizes geographical determinism in explanation of foreign policy.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gadzhiev K. Vvedenie v geopolitiku. Moscow: Logos, 2003. P.38-39, 68-70, 314-315.

Another version of global Geopolitics stresses elements of global governance exercised by international elites. World politics becomes a result of competition between different platforms of development called “global projects”. According to Sergey Kurginyan, during the last 500 years the project “Modernity” dominated in Europe. This project infused secular values of bourgeois-democratic revolutions and rationality as alternatives to absolute power of monarch and religion consciousness. Practical realization of Modernity interpreted as protracted confrontation between the West and the rest of the world including Russia⁹.

Current history is the final stage of Modernity project and the rise of geopolitical rivalry manifests itself the new round of competition between elites for the next global projects. As the process of globalization is directed by western elites to stagnate any non-western project, Russian political and scientific elites have to resist western plans and to mobilize all society for this purpose. Western globalization destroys mental values underlying Russian civilization. Russia has to develop and impose its own project called “Super-Modern” to survive under press of globalization otherwise it disappears¹⁰.

This school of Geopolitics views Asia-Pacific region through prism of great world triangle “U.S. – China – Russia”. All these states are obliged to seek optimal balance between two extremes – cooperation and rivalry. Chinese global project implies to reach leading position in the world by offering huge resource of cheap labour on the global market while the U.S. try to take control over Asian production through global financial instruments. In this competition American elites demonstrate opposite attitudes toward China. While Wall Street Journal accuses Beijing of violation of WTO rules, Intel Corporation claims enter into a market the first consignment of the newest microprocessor made in China. Having no global project Russia has limited opportunities to exert influence on relations between the two giants. Russian elites show lack of serious efforts and political will to engage. In return, such indistinct policy evoke both the U.S. and China to undertake political actions unfavorable for Russian interests¹¹.

⁹ Kurginyan S. Sut' vremeni-1 // www.kurginyan.ru/publ.shtm?cmd=add&cat=4&id=77; Kurginyan S. Sut' vremeni-3 // www.kurginyan.ru/publ.shtm?cmd=add&cat=4&id=80

¹⁰ Pavlenko V., Shtol' V. Proekt “Globalizatsiya”: rol' I mesto vo vseмирno-istoricheskom protsesse // *Obzrevatel'/Observer*. 2013. №5. P.14-15.

¹¹ Kurginyan S. Sovremennyyi Kitay: aktivnaya igra na vseh ploshadkah // <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1054504560>

Civi- Chrono- Spatial Politics

The fourth model of Geopolitics authored by Vadim Tsymburskiy is a kind of conceptual fusion. It comprises ideas of Heartland (Mackinder), co-existence of civilization (Huntington), “special path” of Russia, and cycling nature of world history. Image of Russia as isolated civilization “Russain Island” and lasing from Baltic to Korea is a pillar of this theory. In the history Russia couldn’t merged neither into Europe or Asia because of cyclic moves in opposite directions – rivalry or converging. This ambiguity explains why modern Russia is still relatively isolated.

In contrast to S. Huntington, V. Tsymburskiy suggested that civilization consists of ethno-cultural “nuclear” and “periphery”. While the last may gravitate toward “nuclear” or converge with neighboring civilization there it is no well-defined criteria to explain belonging of “periphery” people to civilization. This is especially true for multinational Russia.

Changing geopolitical situation after the end of cold war requires from Russia to develop the skill of selective regional cooperation and compromise to neutralize military conflicts in near abroad. At the same time Russia needs to compensate economical and demographic imbalance in the eastern regions to preserve stability of “Russian Island”. According to V. Tsymburskiy, Russia will face with hostility of the West over the whole post-Soviet space that results in strengthening of isolationist and conservative tendency both in foreign and domestic policy. Renewed Geopolitics needs to study changing interaction of ethno-cultural “nuclear” and “periphery” rather than to limit itself with oversimplified Huntington’s “clash of civilization” concept.

While Tsymburskiy’s approach is quite attractive one can see that his version of Geopolitics manifests itself as an eclectic set of speculative statements, Geopolitics, and ideology. His concept of “civilization” remains even more fragile comparing to Huntington’s one. In this circumstances his attempt to define civilization by appeal to “deep psychological origins” looks as not accidental¹². In fact, Tsymburskiy offers to use maximal broad definition or to deduce it intuitively.

¹² Tsymburskiy V. “Ostrov Rossiya” za sem’ let, ili priklucheniya odnoy geopoliticheskoy kotseptsii http://www.archipelag.ru/ru_mir/ostrov-rus/cymbur/67/. See also: Ilyin M. Problemy formirovaniya “ostrova Rossiya” I kontury ego geopolitiki // Vestnik MGU. Ser.2. 1995. №1.

In this perspective Asia-Pacific region looks as a part of a space separated from “Russian Island” with a wide zone consisting of Limitrophe states and lasting from the Baltic Sea to Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia, Tibet, Manchuria, and to Korean peninsula. The Limitrophe space dividing Western-European, Russian, Indian, Arab, and Chinese civilizations serves a stage for main strategic battles of the XXI century. While relations with the West remain hostile Russia has a chance to cooperate with civilizations of Asia-Pacific region if develop her own key regions - Siberia and Far East. Strategic goal of Russia should be creation of trade and transport communications between Asia-Pacific region and Europe going on the three directions:

- from Ural through Trans-Siberian railway to Far East,
- from Chinese-Kazakhstan border to Ural,
- from Iran ports to Caspian basin, to Russia and Eastern Europe.

Ural and Siberia should become the Heartland of innovative development of Russia and provide economic expansion to Asia-Pacific region.¹³

Postpositivist turn: from identity to territoriality

The fifth version of hybrid Geopolitics closely related to so-called “postpositivist turn” in theory of politics evoked by intellectual crisis in western political thought. Mainstream of these research projects is to explore how political identity constitutes particular ways in which Russian territory exists.

Post-positivist turn in political sciences (in IR represented by post-modernism, constructivism, postmodern feminism, post-marxism) based on the belief that political discourse not simply shapes but constitutes social reality including facts, political processes and institutes. This statement becomes possible when proponents of post-positivism see subjective nature of truth in absolute terms while subjective and objective, language and social reality consider as identical entities.

Applying to Geopolitics, post-positivism suggests that political discourse forms geopolitical representations in line with all other social images. Discourse constitutes “belonging to territory”/territoriality of a man that shapes political activity to control

¹³ Tsymbuskiy V. Pyataya skrepa // <http://stra.teg.ru/lenta/innovation/1482/print>

definite territory. This way social constructing by means of language creates geopolitical spaces. According to Vladimir Kolosov and Maria Zotova, Geopolitics itself becomes a kind of discourse called as “Discursive” or “Critical Geopolitics”. This school of political thought originally is western but during last years it became popular in Russia¹⁴. Adepts of Critical Geopolitics agree that discourse often initiated and maintaining by mass media usually serves to interests of elites¹⁵.

The key point of Critical Geopolitics is to distinguish and study the two levels of discourse, “high” (produced by government officers, elite of political science and mass media) and “low” (the rest of society). Evidently, both discourses influence each other but “high” definitely prevails in decision-making on foreign policy providing theoretical concepts, national strategies, assessments of global processes. Critical Geopolitics aimed to research specific socio-economical, historical, cultural factors affecting each level of discourse as well their interrelations. Research focus of the Critical Geopolitics may be especially helpful when political leadership seeks additional support from citizens. Legitimacy will be strengthened if “high” and “low” geopolitical discourses agree with each other.

In spite of narrow vision of policy limited by discursive practice and doubtful philosophical principles Critical Geopolitics offers promising sociological tendency in geopolitical studies. It demonstrates how society or different social groups define identity of political opponent. For example, sociological studies shows that Russian identity looks diverse: 36% of students consider themselves both European and Asian, 15% European, and 29% more closed to Europe than to Asia. Identity of China as giant economy and growing power produces quite contradictive reflections in student auditory. Positive assessment corresponds to the fast economic development while negative moods correlate with a fear of viable Chinese uncontrolled economic expansion to Russian Far East. At the same time analysis of students’ interviews showed feedback of geopolitical pressure on Russia: the growing isolationism in Russian identity and shrinking

¹⁴ See, for example: Toal G. Critical Geopolitics: the Politics of Writing Global Space. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997.

¹⁵ Kolosov V., Zotova M. Geopoliticheskoye videnie mira rossiyskimi grazhdanami: gijchemu Rossiya ne Evropa? // Polis. 2012. №5. С.170-171.

territoriality¹⁶. This way Critical Geopolitics helps to observe dynamics in “low” political discourse resulted from different political, economical and strategic factors.

Conclusion

Status of Geopolitics as an academic discipline remains ambiguous, contestable and in part obsolete due to different reasons. The most important are:

- lower role of spatial dimension in policy;
- vanishing of the difference between “sea” and “land” powers;
- changing of the sources of state power (access instead of ownership of natural resources, soft power against hard power, advanced technology against mass production).

Efforts to adopt Geopolitics to new realities resulted in tendency to embed all sciences in Geopolitics: geography, history, philosophy, strategic studies, international relations theory, anthropology and even religious philosophy. This situation can be treated in two ways: Geopolitics becomes “science of sciences” or Geopolitics dissolves in adjacent disciplines.

Modern stage in evolution of geopolitics may be called as “fusion”. Interdisciplinary tendency mainly reduced to eclectic combination of concepts, methodology, and normative principles from different schools of political thought and disciplines.

As for interpretation of Asia-Pacific region’s role in world policy by Russian Geopolitics it can be assumed in the following points.

- In the center of discussion Russian adepts of Geopolitics are prone to place China rather than Asia-Pacific region itself. It shows that at least implicitly China considered as a key actor in the region. Russian writers prefer to discuss future relations between Russia and China rather than with region as an integrated space.
- Proponents of traditional Geopolitical schools can’t explain the rise of China from subject of external influence (part of Rimland) in self-dependent factor of

¹⁶ Ibid. ; Kolosov V. “Nizkaya” i “Vysokaya” geopolitika // http://magazines.russ.ru/oz/2002/3/2002_03_05.html

world policy. Modern hybrid schools of Geopolitics with the exception of “religious- secular symphony” look more convincing.

- China is successively rebalancing against the U.S. in regional relations with the use of soft power: economic, political and diplomatic instruments. Engaging in relations between all regional actors including the U.S., Japan, North Korea, and Republic of Korea China stimulates more independent defense policy of Japan and maintains enough influence to North Korea. Both processes significantly weaken American influence in the region.
- Another source of China’s power and unique role of Asia-Pacific region originates in specific economic model that essentially differs from neoliberal one. Mixed economy with high level of state regulation of production, financial flows and with essential state property demonstrate that the region has favorable perspectives for the future. Asian economic model is more effective in terms of real economy and technological gap between West and East will continue to shorten. Moreover, this model is more attractive to Russia rather than neoliberal one.
- As the West continues to press Russia from different directions geopolitically the only favorable development is possible with the Asia-Pacific region. Russia still has some opportunities to influence the regional policy using special relations with China and other states.
- In spite of promising perspectives from cooperation Russian society and politicians have quite contradictory comprehension of China. Giant economy and population are interpreted as possible threat in the form of uncontrolled economic expansion to Russian Far East and Siberia.
- The main problem for Russia is absence of clear strategy of business elites and government toward the region as a complex system with different actors. Such a situation stimulates pulling out Russia on the periphery of regional policy.
- For effective cooperation with Asia-Pacific region Russia needs to develop her own Eastern regions and create trade and transport communications to become kind of hub connecting East Europe, Indian Ocean and Asian-Pacific region.