

Russia's return as superpower



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CONTENT

Introduction	1 / 3
What is a superpower?	1 / 3
Can Russia again act as superpower ?	1 / 3
Position of the Netherlands	3 / 3
Conclusions	3 / 3

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, speculation remain to continue about a Russian return as superpower. Return, because from the 18th century there was already talk of a superpower. As known, this power eroded since 1989. Whether Russia is back on track again to become one of the leading powers and what the consequences of this development will be for international relations and for the Dutch position in international politics is discussed in this essay.

Russia was chosen because it is an important country, it is part of Europe and because its security and economic policy has also impact on Dutch politics.

WHAT IS A SUPERPOWER?

A superpower is a modern type of state that emerged after the end of WW II. Such a state has a number of characteristics. First it has global influence and is able to send international developments and to set these to its own hands. This requires creation of a vast military force and the availability of an extensive nuclear arsenal.

For example, the United States has great influence in most parts of Europe (NATO), South America and other Third World countries. They can now play a dominant role in the world thanks to the lack of relevant opponents.

Moreover, a superpower has to serve an ideology of universal pretensions: the United States advocates democracy and economic liberalism, the Soviet Union went out of Marxism-Leninism. Such an ideology serves a vision, and is present to legitimize and to justify any interventions in other states.

Was the Soviet-Union, as measured by the above mentioned criteria, a superpower? In 1945 there was an unique situation in world politics. Moscow had made an important contribution to defeat nazi Germany. By the disappearance of the latter country, a vacuum raised in Central and Eastern Europe. The Soviet domination could settle in several states. All were imposed the communist ideology.

Later, in 1955, these countries were military united in the Warsaw Pact. The Soviet Union devoted much attention to the construction of a military machinery and a nuclear arsenal. Regarding the latter, she reached around 1970 parity with the United States.

By the Cold War Moscow was also able to let grow Russian influence outside Europe. The country had important basis in North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba (Communist states) and left-radical regimes like Syria. In important areas of conflict, influence of the Soviet Union is always present.

Thus, the Soviet Union could world-wide play the role as superpower by its empire in Central and Eastern Europe, military power, nuclear arsenal, by the presence in conflict areas as through its ideology, which had been a source of inspiration for many countries, especially Third World countries.

CAN RUSSIA AGAIN ACT AS SUPERPOWER?

What are the prospects of the Russian Federation to take again the old position of the Soviet Union as a superpower? What are the plans to achieve this status and what is the real situation? Looked is at the diplomatic (foreign policy), military, economic and ideological factors.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the current federation inherited a large nuclear arsenal and a permanent seat in the Security Council, but there was no talk of a superpower anymore. (1)

It lost not only the dominion over the satellite states in Eastern Europe, but also the Ukraine, through which, according to U.S. security advisor Zbigniew Brezinski, the federation was even no imperium anymore. (2)

However, the new Russia wants to play again an active role as member of the international community. The country aims to develop sufficient strength to gain influence in key decisions in world politics. Moscow is still looking at the former satellite states as its sphere of influence. Efforts of these states to withdraw from this influence regularly leads to retaliation, such as meat and milk boycotts, stopping oil flow and the five day war with Georgia in August 2008.

However, against of this it has to be said that CIS (Commonwealth Independent States), established 1991, has hardly any performance and can not give foundation for a partnership between former Soviet states. (3)

In addition, the country is part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organsiation (SCO), with China and with India and Pakistan as observers. However, this alliance can not be compared with the (in 1991 dissolved) Warsaw Pact, because the independent positions of the participating countries. (4)

At the end of 2008, Moscow presented a concept for a new foreign policy, titled 'Russia, finally recovered', with the aim to take over the position of the U.S in the world. (5) The relationship with the Western European Union can be described as competitive. (6)

By increased globalization, Russia sees new threats. To ensure a safe national development, a national security strategy has been developed, including with the aim of making Russia a superpower again. (7)

The current army however, is still in a deplorable state. The army is lacking manpower and skills to efficiently carry out operations, which can reach beyond small campaigns, such as against Georgia in 2008. (8)

Outlooks for the Russian economy too, in spite a brief revival in the recent past, is less encouraging. Russian share in global economy is only 1,5%, fifteen times smaller than that of the European Union. (9)

The current economic crisis will shrink GDP by eight percent and is expected to stagnate in 2010. Inflation is even 12%, a budget deficit will occur.

Despite these setbacks, Russia is preparing itself for a return to international bond markets. Within 3 years it will gather usd 60 billion for large Russian companies. One is expecting that oil prices will rise again and that economic reforms will be followed out. (10)

It is also of importance that Russia is part of the BRIC countries (Brasil, Russia, India and China), who will play on world stage an major role. (11)

On a role concerning ideology one can be brief. Russia wants not play an ideal model for the world anymore, such it had done during communistic era in former Soviet Union. Her diplomacy serves specific economic interests. (12)

The above shows that there are important external and internal obstacles that prevent Russia to take position as global superpower. The country has ambitions but its objectives can not be achieved (yet?), primarily caused by lack of military and economic means. The main obstacle is the NATO, which is penetrated deeply in Eastern Europe by membership by former satellite states.

Speculations in the media and scientific debate on a return by Russia as a superpower will continue worldwide. Russia is gaining confidence, the era of humiliation since 1991 is over. The West must therefore realize that the new Russia should be approached in a different, more respectful attitude. The low point of the nineties is over. The Russians continue to believe in the idea that their country can only survive as great power, as was mostly the case from the 18th century.

POSITION OF THE NETHERLANDS

Above the current position of Russia is described, which can not act yet as the former Soviet Union as it did in the past. It is quite true that the country, through its enormous nuclear arsenal and its geographical position, can influence not only the immediate regio, but also the rest of Europe. Moreover, the country has the disposal of an authoritarian government, which increases uncertainty about its foreign policy.

Potential crises in Europe can deliver two different forms. Many states of the former Soviet Union are unstable, for example Ukrain. Russia can use this to intervene and establish there its rule. Such developments have implications for NATO and therefore also for the Netherlands, that can through this be involved in conflicts in former Soviet states.

Another danger is that NATO, for example by a different arrangement of the United States or conflicts within the organization itself, can not offer credible counterweight to possible Russian expansion. In such a situation Russia is able to influence political developments across Europe in profound ways and even control these developments. The old spectre of a Finlandisation of Europe, as some feared during the Cold War, will then rise again. This is a gloomy expectations, but worst case scenarios in international politics are sometimes a starting point.

A strong NATO, with the United States as most important partner, is therefore of importance. The Netherlands have to pay attention to the above notion and promote that the Western alliance stay intact. The Netherlands should remain Atlantic oriented, the military power of Western Europe has hardly any relevance.

Another issue is energy supply. Russia is a very important partner concerning energy. Europe, and also the Netherlands, imports almost all its oil and gas from Russia. The Netherlands has ambitions to work as a gas hub for Northwest Europe. The share that Gasunie has acquired in the Northstream project, is therefore essential.

Europe wants to secure supplies and Russia the demand. Both are dependent on Western companies like Shell to invest and operate gas and oil fields. Good mutual energy relationship is mutually beneficial. Although Gazprom, when it is on the European energy-market, has to comply with European rules, disagreements over bills take care of gas supply problems. Energy should therefore be much more of a binding element in the relationship with Russia in stead of a source of division.

Cooperation with the Russians would lead to greater mutual trust.

CONCLUSIONS

Russia is currently only a major regional power, not a global superpower. For this there are internal and external obstacles. Firstly, there is scope for the Netherlands as bridgebuilder to strive peacefully after especially economic cooperation. Secondly, there are possible dangers. The country has a hegemonic position in the region of the former Soviet republics, and may even be tempted to change the status quo in Europe if NATO will become too weak or desintegrates. The situation remains uncertain; the Netherlands should therefore promote optimal Atlantic cooperation, when there are no alternatives.

There is therefore talk of ambiquity, unfortunately a feature of international politics.

Attachment: Literature

- General literature:

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