

20. The Russian Saga – A Geopolitical Standpoint

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ABSTRACT

The end of WWII signalled the start of a new era - The Cold War, which especially marked the rise of the Second World. It was a counter-narrative to the Capitalist forces in the world. The cold war was an ideological conflict between Capitalists and Communists with a fragile peace and nuclear arms race which terrified the world. The loose ends of the cold war continue to do so. The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine is one of such loose ends. To understand the idea of re-rise of the second world, we need to look into the Russian Saga from the beginning. This paper covers the history of the Russian empire from a geopolitical perspective. In addition, it will also offer Kautilya's viewpoint on Geopolitics and its relevance in contemporary times.

Keywords – Russia, Geographical Pivot, Cold War, Ideology, Power, Geopolitics

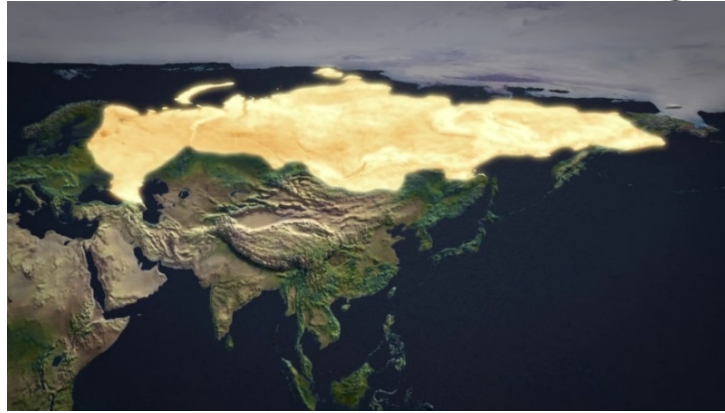
Introduction

Tzarism persisted in medieval Russia. It was an emerging country lacking in new age crops like maize & potatoes and precious metals like gold & silver, which were backboneed the contemporary world trade. The world didn't even bother about Russians until they found their natural treasure– Siberia. Natural resources, rather than gold, would be essential in reshaping the global economy. Russia is the most dramatic example of it.

In 1570, Russia was a destitute outpost on the outskirts of Europe. Russia had become the world's largest country by far. The enormous stretch of forests and mountains known as "Sib Ir"- "the sleeping country"- makes up most of the Russian territory today. The man who had awoken in Siberia was the man who made modern Russia– Tzar Ivan. Tsar Ivan faced a dilemma. How could he make his country a significant power on the European stage when it only had primary agriculture and a few natural resources? The answer was hidden in the forests– 'Fur' of the Arctic Animals.

Temperatures began to decline globally, starting in the 1550s intensely. We call this the Little Ice Age. At this period, the Thames began to freeze solid, Iceland was blocked off from the rest of the globe by sea ice occasionally, and there were significant snowfalls in Spain and Portugal. Wearing fur was one of the only ways to stay warm before the invention of modern textiles.

Tzar Ivan seized the opportunity in the crisis and changed the course of entire Russian history. He plundered the Siberian Fur. Siberia offered a jackpot of fur. For example, a black fox's fur was worth more than its weight in gold, and the supply of the fur in Siberia was limitless. It was nothing but endless trading of wealth and power.



To reach the Pacific Ocean, the Russians only needed 60 years to travel the 4,000 miles across Asia. We can't imagine today's Russia without Siberia. It would be just like any other country in Eastern Europe. Siberia is home to most of Russia's natural resources, including 80% of its gas and coal reserves and 90% of its oil reserves. And the maximum of it is yet untouched - the basis of its modern Russian power.

From Old Russia to New Russia: Impact of Enlightenment-era

Old Russia practiced the Serfdom. Serfs owned by aristocratic landlords accounted for 22 million Russians. Serfs were property, just like slaves, and were forced to perform any task. A lot of people have been abused physically and sexually. The arrangement stifled the economy, which was dependent on old-fashioned agriculture. But Enlightenment was in the air. In the wake of Russia's humiliating defeat at the hands of Western forces, the new Tsar, the reforming Alexander II, knew that Russia needed to abolish the serf economy if it was going to be able to compete with the industrial powers of the West. But it's easier to say than to do.

The Russian aristocracy and landowners were prepared to fight to the death to preserve their status and wealth. For instance, Leo Tolstoy, a titan of Russian literature and the author of War and Peace, once was a landholding aristocrat. He was a key player in the political drama gripping Russia- the fight to throw off Serfdom. Tolstoy was different from other landowners. Tolstoy was a radical reformer who was willing to take risks. In order to free his serfs, Tolstoy gave them land or sold it to them. The land was worthless without the serfs, and the serfs would starve without the land. Infuriated local landowners shunned Tolstoy. All around the world, it was the landowning class with their privileges and traditions who'd be the most threatened by change. Also, Tzar Alexander's reforms were nothing but words. His plan turned out that the serfs would be free in name, burdened by debts and many rules. It was a tragic missed opportunity. Russian history would have been very different if the Tzar had pulled this off.

Due to this half-hearted attempt and disrespect shown to the enlightenment ideas, there was a great wave of anger and disappointment. There were nearly 2,000 serf revolts. Alexander's pseudo reforms had failed. Furthermore, many serfs drifted to the cities, where they would eventually become the foot soldiers for a revolution that would sweep away old Russia. The desperate, oppressed people of Russia finally revolted against the Tsar. British & German wanted to pour oil on the fire so Russia would withdraw from World War I. They expected a Russian anti-war extremist to seize power and withdraw Russia from the war. One such man lived quietly and modestly in exile in Zurich in Switzerland. His name was Vladimir Ilyich

Ulyanov. We know him better as 'Lenin'. We know Marxism today because of Lenin. Marxism before Lenin was nothing but a philosophy; Lenin was the person who practiced it.

In 1917, Lenin was a leader of the Bolsheviks, a revolutionary communist faction that wanted Russia out of the war. He was desperate to get back to Russia and try to seize power. In October 1917, there was a successful Bolshevik revolution under Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks. In the span of eight months, he went from being an unknown in exile to being at the peak of becoming the leader of millions of Russians in the first communist state in the world. In March of 1918, Soviet Russia withdrew from World War I, protecting the country from its effects. When World War I finished in November 1918, two new powers had been firmly established on the world stage. One capitalist and the other communist. The modern world would be dominated not by empires but by these two mass ideologies and the new superpowers wielding them.

Stalin Era:

After Lenin and Trotsky, Vladimir Stalin became the sole authoritarian of Russia. He practiced the science of class war in Russia, a pseudo-science. His ideas of collectivism in agriculture, economy, and administration helped them stay staunch in the difficult times of the great depression in the 1930s. But in the longer term, the ideas were nothing but a utopia. Russian people have paid the price for the romantic notions of a beguiling leader. Stalin has shaped Russian history not with ambition but with terror. Communist Russia under Stalin had overseen a famine that destroyed the villages. The streets of Kyiv were littered with the dead and dying, so bad that families ate their children. All of it because of the reds.

Khrushchev to Gorbachev:

Communism did more harm to Russia than the benefits. It was a counter-force to Capitalism but an expensive one that demanded the lives of ordinary Russians. Nikita Khrushchev disagreed with the idea and improvised the idea of Communism substantively. Rather than an isolated foreign policy, Khrushchev actively engaged with the enemy USA for a better and peaceful world in the high race of the Cold war. This series of talks between the USA and USSR via new hotline communication is popularly known as the 'Camp David Spirit'.

But, China under Mao rejected the Camp David spirit. It further resulted in the Sino-Soviet split between Radical Mao's China and Mild Khrushchev's Russia over the way of Communism in the 1960s. Mikhail Gorbachev further continued this milder nature of Khrushchev. The slow nature reforms were hastened in by Gorbachev. He believed in the Brezhnev Doctrine, i.e., tight control in domestic and foreign policy was replaced with the Sinatra doctrine, i.e., a liberal and more independent domestic and foreign policy. He practiced the idea of Glasnost and Perestroika, which meant decentralization of power and decentralization of economy, respectively.

For his futuristic and broad vision, Mikhail Gorbachev was offered the Nobel Prize for Peace and the 'Person of the Year' title by Time Magazine in 1990. Soon these flagships of the leader turned into a profound paradox for the country.

The fall of the second world:

Ronald Reagan, in his speech at Brandenburg Gate in Berlin (Germany), famously known as the Berlin Wall Speech, appealed to the leader of the USSR and the people of Russia. He

appealed, "General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, Open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, Tear down this wall!" And the wall was torn down in the 1990s, not just the Berlin Wall, but the ideological Iron Curtain, which divided the world for more than half a century. The USSR was disintegrated into 15 separate states. Francis Fukuyama, a fantastic academician, already predicted this event as the 'End of History'. It established 'US Hegemony' worldwide, a victory of Liberal Democracy and Capitalism over Authoritarianism and Communism. It seemed that the only way that remained in the world was 'Capitalism'. Was it the end of something or the beginning of something? One still cannot be sure.

Experts of Political Geography believe that Russian foreign policy is not guided by 'Ideology' but by its 'Geography'. The key cities of Moscow, St Petersburg, and Postgrad are important centers, located on Russia's western border. The Siberian region has not a favourable environment for human settlement; hence the population density is maximum on the west border of Russia. Therefore, Russia has to go for a buffer state for the security of peripheral states. Hence, it is not the ideology but the geography that has made Russia 'an expansionist state' and 'Trans-continental power'. Due to geography, authoritarianism and Strong Intelligence (e.g., KGB) must exist.

Putinism in Russia:

Russia's first President, Boris Yeltsin, was wildly unpopular for cooperating with the West. This is where Vladimir Putin enters politics. He left the KGB in 1991 and, with the help of Russian oligarchs, managed to ascend to the upper echelon as the President in 1999. Oligarchs who supported Putin are rewarded, and those that don't are eradicated. His intentions were clear from the beginning.

When the Berlin wall fell, a 40year old Putin was waged as an undercover spy in East Germany for the Soviet security agency, the KGB. The Soviet Union disintegrated into 15 new countries, including the new Russian Federation. In Putin's eyes, Russia had lost two million square miles of territory. He later called this a major geopolitical disaster of the century. Now, Vladimir Putin has been ruling Russia for the last 23 years and can be rightly said as the most powerful man in the world. His intent from the beginning was to push back the Western world order and give the glory back to Russia, which it had during the times of the Cold-war era.

Putin is not a civilian leader; he has a military background. And he believes in the philosophy of 'Once the KGB, Always the KGB'. Soon under his tenure, Russia launched a widespread and devastating war against the so-called separatists in Chechnya. In less than a year, Russia has successfully reclaimed control over Chechnya. Russia invaded Georgia, a former Soviet country, in August 2008. It's a show of force and hostility by pro-Russian separatists. Russia annexed two minor areas of Georgia, Ossetia and Abkhazia, fast, garnering international censure. In 2014, Putin's vision came to fruition with the bombing of Ukraine, another former Soviet state. Putin sent in the Russian troops and occupied Crimea in early 2014. For this annexation, Russia was kicked out of the G-8. Putin, on the other hand, refuses to budge.

Putin's aggressive foreign policy successfully weakens his neighbours while rallying Russians around him. But he has done all this at the expense of his people. His invasions have prompted

harsh sanctions from the West, barring Russian businesses from trading in Western markets. The Russian currency has plummeted in value, and the energy industry that Russia relies on is collapsing. It's hard to imagine Russia can continue under these circumstances. Putin's idea of achieving glory back in Soviet Russia may come true in the future. But again, innocent people will be killed for the big Ideas of a deluded tyrant'.

Kautilya's perspective:

Kautilya's Arthashastra is an excellent book on statecraft which contains advice on how to govern a kingdom. It is often termed the first textbook on Geopolitics in the Indian Knowledge System.

The Mandal Siddhant advocated that Neighbor states are natural enemies of a state and its geopolitics. So, a Vijigishu (King) should grab the Neighbour's (i.e., Ari or Enemy) land. Hence, in geopolitics statecraft, there are no permanent enemies or no permanent friends. After grabbing Ari's land (Neighbour), Mitra (Extended Neighbour) becomes Ari (Enemy). The subtle ideas in Kautilya's Geopolitics are also quite applicable to Russian Geopolitics.

What's next in the Russian Saga?

"The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people".

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It's essential to recognize that Vladimir Putin has been preparing for the war for many years, and without any complexity, it was a plain sight. For two decades, Putin saw no consequences for his actions actually for his crimes, which ultimately built his confidence to go deep down. The rest of the world deals with the problem through banks rather than tanks. That is the right step in the longer duration, and it will also hurt the rest of the world. Plus, the West needs to understand the geographical necessity of Russia and avoid promoting democratic ideas at gunpoint in Eastern Europe and former Soviet states.

If this continues, Russia will be isolated. China is there, but it won't compensate Putin for his losses. China is just an opportunist country waiting for Western responses so that it can contemplate similar actions against Taiwan. And what will happen with Ukraine and other East European countries immediately? We cannot predict.

The world needs to understand Putin is at the center of a worldwide assault on political liberty. As we have witnessed in history, every dictator has collapsed so will Putin. Putin's regime will flop, but again, it'll be like an agony of a dinosaur, and the agony of a dinosaur could be very damaging for those who are nearby. If he is not stopped right now, 'winter is Coming' not just for the Russian people but for all the comity of nations. The Russian Saga will continue further, but it will be more isolated and less trustworthy. It will be the responsibility of Russians to support leaders who will believe in the idea- Knowledge is better than Ignorance and Superstition; Abundance is better than Wants; Life is better than Death; Freedom is better than Coercion; Health is better than Sickness; Andfinally, Happiness is better than Suffering. The Russian Saga will continue, happier or unhappier. The choice is theirs.

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