

## CHAPTER 9

# The Geopolitical Position of Russia in the World

Now that we have considered the main economic and political reforms of the last 30 years, it makes sense to look at the Russian Federation and the other countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU) with respect to their geopolitical position in the world. Although Russia is a successor state to the Soviet Union, it only has half of the U.S.S.R.'s population and merely 70% of its territory; it is much more ethnically homogeneous; and it is far less influential in global affairs, its leadership's ambitions notwithstanding.

"Geopolitics" may be defined as "the analysis of interactions between . . . geographic settings and . . . political processes" (Cohen, 2009, p. 5). We may think of geopolitics as politics expressed in world's affairs and mediated by the geographic situation of the interacting entities. The early geopolitical studies of Friedrich Ratzel, Halford Mackinder, Alfred Mahan, and Rudolf Kjellen sought to elucidate the general principles of the global world order in the periods before and between the two great wars of the 20th century. Particularly salient for us is Halford Mackinder's (1904) "Heartland" (i.e., continental Eurasia, more or less coterminous with the Russian Empire) as a pivotal world region that he thought was destined to control the rest of the world and could not be subdued by anyone. Mackinder's "Heartland" can be contrasted with Nicholas

Spykman's later idea of a "Rimland" (1944), the coastal margins of Europe, Asia, and North America. The Heartland has a strategic advantage over the Rimland in having more natural resources and less vulnerability when attacked by conventional weapons over land. The Rimland, however, has a strategic advantage in leveraging the waters off the coast in any warfare that involves aircraft carriers and submarines. Although the developments of the last 20 years have given much greater prominence to the Asia-Pacific and North Atlantic Rimland, the Heartland theory did receive some validation when the Soviet Union developed to rival the United States as the second world's superpower during the Cold War. It is still an interesting starting point for discussions about the present and future of Northern Eurasia.

Of interest to geographers is how the layout of the land of Northern Eurasia makes its states more or less competitive in the global world of politics and economics. The Russian Empire was at its largest geographically at the time of the Crimean War in the 1850s, when the country stretched from Poland in the west to Alaska in the east. By that time, it already included much of trans-Caucasus and Central Asia, and it was poised to enter into several prolonged battles: with the Ottoman and British empires over the

Balkans; with Persia over the Caspian Sea basin and the Caucasus; and with Japan and China over Manchuria (Figure 9.1). The only empire in recent history that was physically bigger was the British Empire, which controlled about 25% of the world's surface by 1913, whereas the Russian Empire controlled about 17%. The British Empire accounted for 13.6% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) in that year, while Russia's accounted for 8.3%. The U.S.S.R. was a similarly shaped, but smaller, entity than the Russian Empire because the latter also included Alaska, Finland, and Poland. The Soviet Union did expand farther into Central Asia and the Caucasus than the Russian Empire ever did. After World War II, the Soviet Union came to dominate the affairs of Eastern Europe, Cuba, and parts of Southeast Asia and Africa by setting up Communist governments there, but its own territory did not include overseas locations.

As one of the victorious powers in World War II, the U.S.S.R. became a dominant force in global affairs, along with its allies (the United States, Britain, and France). The four countries established themselves as permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, with veto powers (the People's Republic of China was added in the late

1960s). They thus greatly influenced the composition and decision making of the entire United Nations and the postwar world order in general. With its socialist satellites, the Soviet Union controlled close to one-quarter of all U.N. votes. Nuclear parity with the United States was largely achieved by the mid-1960s. Although the Soviet Union was trailing the United States in developing atomic and hydrogen bombs in the early 1950s, it was the first to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by the late 1950s, and the first to put a man in space in 1961. The development of nuclear weapons and space research ensured that the Soviet Union began to be taken seriously everywhere in the world. It was the only country besides the United States capable of destroying the entire planet in a nuclear war—a true superpower.

How is Russia today different geopolitically from the U.S.S.R.? First, it is much smaller. Although Russia did retain the bulk of the richest extractive and manufacturing zones and about 70% of Soviet manufacturing capacity, it lost access to about half of the productive agricultural areas in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan; some essential mining areas (chromium and uranium ores in Kazakhstan,



**FIGURE 9.1.** A former Russian Orthodox church in Harbin, now a museum, testifies to the strong Russian presence in northeast China between 1880 and 1940. *Photo:* K. Wong.

manganese ores in Georgia); and most of the coastline along the Black and Baltic Seas. A lot of high-tech manufacturing and final assembly of machinery and equipment used to take place in Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states. Much of the infrastructure built in the Soviet period with nationwide efforts (e.g., hydropower plants in Tajikistan and Georgia, or nuclear stations in Armenia, Lithuania, and Ukraine) became divided among the successor states. The Russian military had to pull out of most republics, notably the Baltics, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. The nuclear warheads and missile ingredients that were deployed in Ukraine and Kazakhstan were dismantled and moved to Russia, in accordance with international agreements with the United States and Europe. However, much of the civilian infrastructure (radiolocation and generation equipment, military bases, railroads, powerlines, pipelines, etc.) has been given over to the respective national governments, with no compensation to Moscow. One can of course argue that this is only fair because the entire U.S.S.R. participated in their production. Nevertheless, Russia's share in constructing these was greater than its proportion of the population. Moscow did retain some control over a few of these assets within the FSU (e.g., the Sevastopol naval base in Crimea, at that time in Ukraine; an early-warning radar station in Gabala, Azerbaijan; the Baikonur space launching pad in Kazakhstan). However, given the skewed distribution of production in the Soviet period, it is safe to say that Russia did not benefit from the collapse of the U.S.S.R. as much as the newly independent periphery did.

Second, Yeltsin's agreement with the presidents of Belarus and Ukraine in December 1991 essentially accepted the Soviet internal boundaries as the new international ones: The outlines of the FSU republics today are the same as they were in the Soviet period. This was probably the easiest choice, and it helped to prevent major conflicts from developing. However, those internal boundaries only loosely conformed to where the respective ethnic groups actually lived in the U.S.S.R., as they had never been intended to be permanent international borders. They were physically unmarked, had no checkpoints, and frequently did not follow any physical landmarks. Locals used to cross them routinely on the way from home to

work, just as residents of the two Kansas Cities do in the United States when they travel between Missouri and Kansas every day. The Soviet republics' internal borders were of administrative convenience for the Communist planners in the 1920s through the 1950s, not matters of international politics.

Today, however, the international community recognizes the borders of each new country. Unfortunately, they were not always optimally located. Large Russian minorities (totaling about 25 million in 1991) lived in Estonia and Latvia; in eastern Ukraine; on the Crimean Peninsula and much of Ukraine's Black Sea coast; in eastern Moldova; in northern and eastern Kazakhstan; in parts of Kyrgyzstan; and elsewhere. Russians had only moved to some of these places during the last 70 years or so, but they had lived in others ever since permanent settlements of any kind were established by the expanding empire. (The special case of Kaliningrad Oblast—an "exclave" of Russia that is now completely surrounded by other FSU republics—is described in Vignette 9.1.) Similarly, millions of Ukrainians lived throughout Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Russian Far East. Ossetians found themselves divided between Russia (North Ossetia-Alania) and Georgia (South Ossetia). The Abkhazy people in Georgia, who are closely related to the Circassians and Adygi people of the Russian northern Caucasus, were now part of independent Georgia—a country with a very different predominant ethnicity and (in 1992) a strongly nationalistic government. Many Armenians, Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Estonians, and members of other ethnic groups lived in large numbers in most big Russian and Ukrainian cities, in villages along the Black Sea coast, in the Caucasus, and so forth. All of these people were suddenly thrust into dealing with the increasingly nationalistic governments of the new states. Many chose to move abroad, but most stayed and had to adapt to the new realities. A few are still living as unrecognized citizens of the now extinct country, without passports or even a path toward full citizenship. This is a most notable problem in Latvia and Estonia.

Third, Russia lost much of its international influence outside the former Soviet borders. The Soviet Army withdrew from central Europe (in

### Vignette 9.1. Strategic Kaliningrad

If you look at a map of present-day Russia, you may wonder why a triangular piece of its territory is isolated between Poland and Lithuania, right on the Baltic Sea coast. Historically, this was part of the now extinct country Prussia, populated by the Baltic people of the same name. However, the ethnic Prussians were absorbed over several centuries by the Polish, Germanic, and Slavic inhabitants of this region. The German Teutonic knights made this area one of their Baltic strongholds and brought Roman Catholicism here in the 1300s. Later, Prussia became the first country in the world to adopt Lutheranism as its state religion. Under a post–World War II arrangement, the Soviet Union claimed the territory for itself in order to gain a strategic foothold in Central Europe and to help cover the enormous costs of postwar reconstruction. The territory is small (slightly under 15,000 km<sup>2</sup>), but it is strategically important for Russia. The total population is just under 1 million.

The city of Kaliningrad was formerly called Königsberg, “the city of kings.” It is known, among other things, as the birthplace of the famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who lived and is buried there. The city’s architecture and layout show strong German influences. It is a big seaport. Manufacturing in the region includes ships, railroad cars, automobiles, and TVs. Kaliningrad Oblast is also one of the leading areas of amber production and has thriving fisheries. More significantly for Russia, its ports serve as a gateway to Europe. Since 2004, the oblast has been surrounded by EU territory from all sides except the sea. Its residents must have visas to visit Lithuania or Poland. Without visas, they cannot travel to Russia except via direct airplane flights or an express train that crosses Lithuania without stopping. There is also an unfinished highway to Berlin, which ends at the Polish border and bypasses most inhabited areas.

The strategic importance of this exclave lies in its geographic position close to Europe and in the southern part of the Baltic Sea. The city of Kaliningrad is the closest port in Russia to Europe. Because of its southerly location, it is also the only Baltic Sea port that does not freeze in winter. About 14 million metric tonnes of goods pass through the port every year. There are separate oil, general cargo, and fishing divisions. The oblast enjoys a special economic zone status with favorable tax rates for foreign investors, to stimulate local industry. It is also one of the few areas where Russia can locate its early-warning radiolocation stations to keep an eye on possible NATO expansion and can stage its anti-aircraft missile complexes and fighter jets. The latter is very controversial because Russia has a number of advanced systems already deployed that may be in apparent violation of earlier missile treaties. Finally, the region has a high tourism potential because of its sand dunes and pretty beaches, as well as cultural landmarks (Figure 1).



**VIGNETTE 9.1, FIGURE 1.** Ruins of the medieval German castle in Neman (Ragnit), Kaliningrad Oblast. *Photo:* K. Leek.

particular, East Germany) and from Afghanistan in 1989. It also left dozens of allied countries in the developing world (e.g., Cuba, Angola, and Vietnam) without crucial economic assistance. Gorbachev's decision not to oppose unification in Germany led to a hasty withdrawal of the Soviet troops from East Germany, with virtually no compensation from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In fact, Gorbachev made an extremely generous gift to the West: Not only did he not request any financial support for the troop withdrawal and resettlement, he did not even ask for a firm political guarantee from NATO that it would not expand its borders toward the U.S.S.R. (or later Russia). Gorbachev did ask for and received plenty of financial loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and various Western governments (which Russia repaid with interest), but he obtained little free assistance in democracy building. Billions of rubles' worth of assets in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and East Germany were simply left behind. Vladimir Putin's final task as an official of the KGB in East Germany was to personally oversee the destruction of sensitive archives there, as well as to dispose of all Soviet assets in a last-minute "fire sale." The Soviet troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan in that same year led to the creation of a power vacuum, which eventually was filled by the Taliban movement. By 1990, the Baltics were de facto free, and the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991 left each country of the FSU pursuing divergent goals in a new geopolitical space.

## RUSSIA'S NEIGHBORS

Table 9.1 illustrates the position of Russia vis-à-vis other nations in the world today. It remains an important player worldwide: It is still the biggest country by size, with plenty of natural resources, one of the three strongest militaries on the planet having thousands of nuclear warheads, and billions of dollars' worth of arms sales to dozens of countries. It is far less significant in cultural and "soft" economic endeavors. For example, lots of Russian movies are being made, but they are little known outside the country—Nigeria or India produce significantly more; Russian computer

**TABLE 9.1. Selected Rankings of Russia in Relation to Other Countries, 2018 (or latest available)**

Characteristic	Ranking
Area	1st
Land border length	2nd (after China)
Population size	9th (behind Bangladesh, ahead of Japan)
Active military personnel	5th (behind North Korea, ahead of Pakistan)
Number of nuclear warheads	1st
Conventional arms sales	2nd (after the United States)
GDP purchase parity (total)	6th (behind Germany, ahead of Indonesia)
GDP purchase parity (per capita)	73th (about the same as Malaysia, Turkey, or Greece)
Coal production	6th (behind Indonesia, ahead of South Africa)
Petroleum production	3rd (after the United States and Saudi Arabia)
Natural gas production	2nd (after the United States)
Nickel ore production	2nd (after the Philippines)
Potassium fertilizer production	1st
Diamond production	1st
Motor vehicles production	15th
Electricity production	4th
Arable land	4th (after China, the United States, and India)
Roundwood (logs)	2nd (after the United States)
Full-length movies produced	15th
Tourists sent abroad by total spending	11th

*Note.* Data from many sources, including the U.S. Geological Survey, the CIA World Factbook, US EIA, UNESCO, UNWTO, and others.

software is less widespread and, with the exception of the Kaspersky Internet Security suite and a few video games, is virtually absent from Western stores; Russian furniture cannot compete with Italian or Swedish furniture on global markets; Russia is only 15th largest automaker on the planet; and so on.

Russia is located on the largest continent, Eurasia, with 16 direct neighbors (see the next section) and lots of other countries it does business with. Only China has as many neighbors. It is convenient to divide Russia's geographic neighbors and other related countries into four tiers: immediate neighbors (Tier I); second-degree neighbors (Tier II); more distant countries with which Russia has strong past and/or present ties (Tier III); and the rest of the world (Tier IV).

### **Immediate Neighbors (Tier I)**

Tier I includes Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, China, North Korea, Japan, and the United States (via Alaska). Of these, Finland and the three Baltic countries are European Union (EU) members. The Baltics and Norway are also NATO members and staunch U.S. allies; they have an ambivalent relationship with their big eastern neighbor. On the one hand, they are worried about the resurgence of the Kremlin's imperial ambitions and a Crimea-like scenario playing out sooner or later along their eastern flanks. On the other, pragmatically speaking, these countries greatly benefit from transshipment of Russia's oil, gas, metals, and timber, as well as from Russian tourists and investment opportunities. The stickiest points from Russia's perspective are the lack of full citizenship for some Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia; the sometimes uncivil behavior of Baltic politicians with respect to the past (e.g., the rise of neo-Nazis in Latvia, with tacit approval or even encouragement from the nationalist politicians, as well as the desecration of Soviet war memorials there); and arguments over portions of the common border between Estonia and Russia near Lake Peipus/Chudskoe.

Because of its autocratic president, Belarus is a marginalized country in Europe right now.

However, as described at the end of Chapter 8, it is a critical partner of Russia in two areas: shipping goods to and from Europe (Belarus ships more freight to and from Russia than any other country), and shared manufacturing ventures. Politically, Belarus is Russia's strongest ally: It even negotiated a formal union (Union State or *soyuznoe gosudarstvo*) between the two nations, with shared borders, currency, armed forces, and a tax system planned for some point in the future. In recent years, Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko made overtures toward Europeans and Chinese leaders in seeking some political concessions in exchange for better trade. He also skillfully avoided, so far, a possible hostile takeover by the Kremlin, although his future grip on power in 2020 is highly uncertain with the mass protests challenging his oppressive rule.

Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia have all gone through a gradual process of disassociation from Russia, to a greater or lesser degree. For example, Azerbaijan has moved away from using the Cyrillic alphabet in its languages, and Kazakhstan is in the process of doing so. Both maintain pragmatic relations with Russia and do a lot of trade, but they do not allow ethnic Russians to occupy major positions of power in their political structures and neither supported Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Ukraine was historically divided into a nationalistic western and a pro-Russian eastern part. This came to an open conflict in 2014 when pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted after a few months of the so-called Maidan square protests, which in turn led to a military conflict in the east (Donbass separatist portions of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts) and Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (see Chapter 31). Ukraine remains the largest country in Europe by territory, if Russia is excluded, and is bigger than even France. Its historical connections to Poland also play a role in its current position. Many Ukrainians are slowly realizing that for better or for worse, they are already part of a greater Europe. However, they are also not exactly free of their mutual history with Russia (Figure 9.2). In early 2019, the Ukrainian parliament formally changed the Constitution to allow future integration into both the European Union



**FIGURE 9.2.** A monument to the *Holodomor* famine victims of 1932–1933 in Kiev, Ukraine. Almost two million are thought to have died in Ukraine and hundreds of thousands more in the Volga region of Russia. The famine was caused by dispossession of peasants of their lands, seeds, and livestock during the forced collectivization under Stalin. *Photo:* J. Lindsey.

and NATO, membership that may still be decades away. In addition, a new, independent president, Volodymyr Zelensky, was elected as a protest vote candidate, as people were increasingly frustrated with the corrupt practices and lack of economic progress under the previous president, Petro Poroshenko. It is still unclear how much or how little Zelensky will be able to accomplish, but his lack of political experience (he was formerly a stand-up comedian) and his personal ardor to effect change may yet bring fruit and revitalize the forever stagnant Ukrainian economy.

Although both the Georgian and Russian cultures have been greatly influenced by the Orthodox Church and have much in common, recent political relations between Georgia and Russia have been turbulent. After the fall of Communism, the brief rule of the ultranationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Georgia led to a war in Abkhazia and the rapid secession of Abkhazia from Georgia in 1992. After this loss, the Gamsakhurdia regime promptly collapsed. Russian peacekeepers were positioned in both Abkhazia

and South Ossetia as part of a U.N. peacekeeping force. Russia encouraged separatism within Georgia, and the escalation of conflict in South Ossetia in August 2008 brought renewed international attention to the unresolved issue of maintaining peace in the self-proclaimed republics. After 10 years of the fiercely pro-independence presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, who was partially responsible for renewing the conflict in South Ossetia, the country's leadership began to take a more pro-Russia stance. Salome Zourabishvili was elected the first female president in 2018, backed up by the so-called Georgian Dream movement, which had the financial backing of Georgia's only dollar billionaire, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his fortune largely in Russia. The United States supports Georgia's territorial integrity and does not recognize secessionist republics, but Russia recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, easily giving their residents Russian passports. Clearly, the situation is far from being permanently resolved.

Kazakhstan is the richest of all the Central Asian states and at the moment is craftily treading a middle ground among Russia, the West, and China—a tricky business indeed. It attracted substantial investments in its western Caspian oil fields from U.S., European, Chinese, and Russian companies. China is building oil and gas pipelines into Kazakhstan and is helping to develop its railroads. At the same time, Kazakhstan is one of only five members of the Eurasian Customs Union (with Russia being the main member) and a member of the Organization for Common Security that connects with Russia militarily (Figure 9.3). Also, it is dependent on Russia for manufactured goods, processed foods, and transit of goods to and from Europe overland. It also has a large minority of Russian speakers—mainly in the north and east, where the Russians constitute a majority of the population in many industrialized cities (e.g., Ust-Kamenogorsk, Petropavlovsk, and Pavlodar). Russia and Kazakhstan share the longest common border in the FSU (7,200 km). Kazakhstan is a buffer country between Russia and volatile Central Asia. A major negative impact of Kazakh independence from Russia's perspective was the dissection of the historically Russian-settled central Siberian corridor along the south branch of the Trans-Siberian Railroad by two international borders. This is not simply a political issue; rather, it is a major economic inconvenience because more than half of all freight and electric energy from Europe to Siberia used to flow through the Petropavlovsk corridor during Soviet times. Introduction of the joint customs union largely solved the issue. Recent developments in China include Kazakhstan railroads as a major freight shipping corridor from East Asia into Europe as part of the One Way One Route initiative, which is designed to provide massive investments of Chinese money into seaports, railways, and other transportation infrastructure of Eurasia.

Azerbaijan is almost 100% dependent on petroleum exports for foreign revenue. The completion of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline in 2005 allowed direct shipments of its petroleum to Turkey through Georgia, bypassing Russia, and a new major gas pipeline was completed from Azerbaijan across Turkey toward Bulgaria in 2019. A large number of Azerbaijanis

live all over Russia and in other FSU republics where their economic specialty is flower and vegetable trade in farmers' markets and Caucasian cuisine restaurants. Many experience some harassment from the locals. By contrast, relations between Russia and Azerbaijan at the state level remain pragmatic and reasonably friendly. More Azerbaijanis live in Iran than in Azerbaijan, thus necessitating close relations with the southern neighbor as well. Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan all supported the acceptance of Azerbaijan into the Middle East economic community. A ceasefire continues in Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia over control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which Azerbaijan effectively lost in the early 1990s, ended in 2020. Armenia is a major thorn in the Azeris' side. In the spring of 2020, new escalation of the frozen conflict led by Azeri and Turkish forces brought the war back.

Mongolia and China have extensive land borders with Russia (3,005 and 4,300 km, respectively). Mongolia was sometimes dubbed “the 16th Soviet republic” because of the extent of its integration into the Soviet economy. Recently Mongolia has developed much closer ties with China and the United States. It receives about 95% of its petroleum from Russia, but China is its largest trade partner. Mongolia remains an arid, landlocked country with underdeveloped human capital. China has a very short common border with Russia in the Altay and a much longer one along the Amur River. Some portions of this border were disputed in the 1960s and 1970s but are now firmly fixed. On the grand scale, China is the rising superpower, already bigger than the United States by purchasing power parity adjustment as the world's largest economy (and perhaps by 2030 as the biggest military power as well). China presently views Russia as a convenient source of military technology (especially missile-, jet-, and space-related) and raw materials (oil, gas, iron ore, metal scrap, timber, grain, etc.). Russia in turn is eager to provide all these products, hoping that any direct political confrontation with its big southern neighbor can be avoided. China supplies 18% of all imports into Russia (Germany is the distant second at 12%), and it receives about 10.5% of Russia's exports (higher than any other country with the Netherlands in second place at 9.5%). The demographics

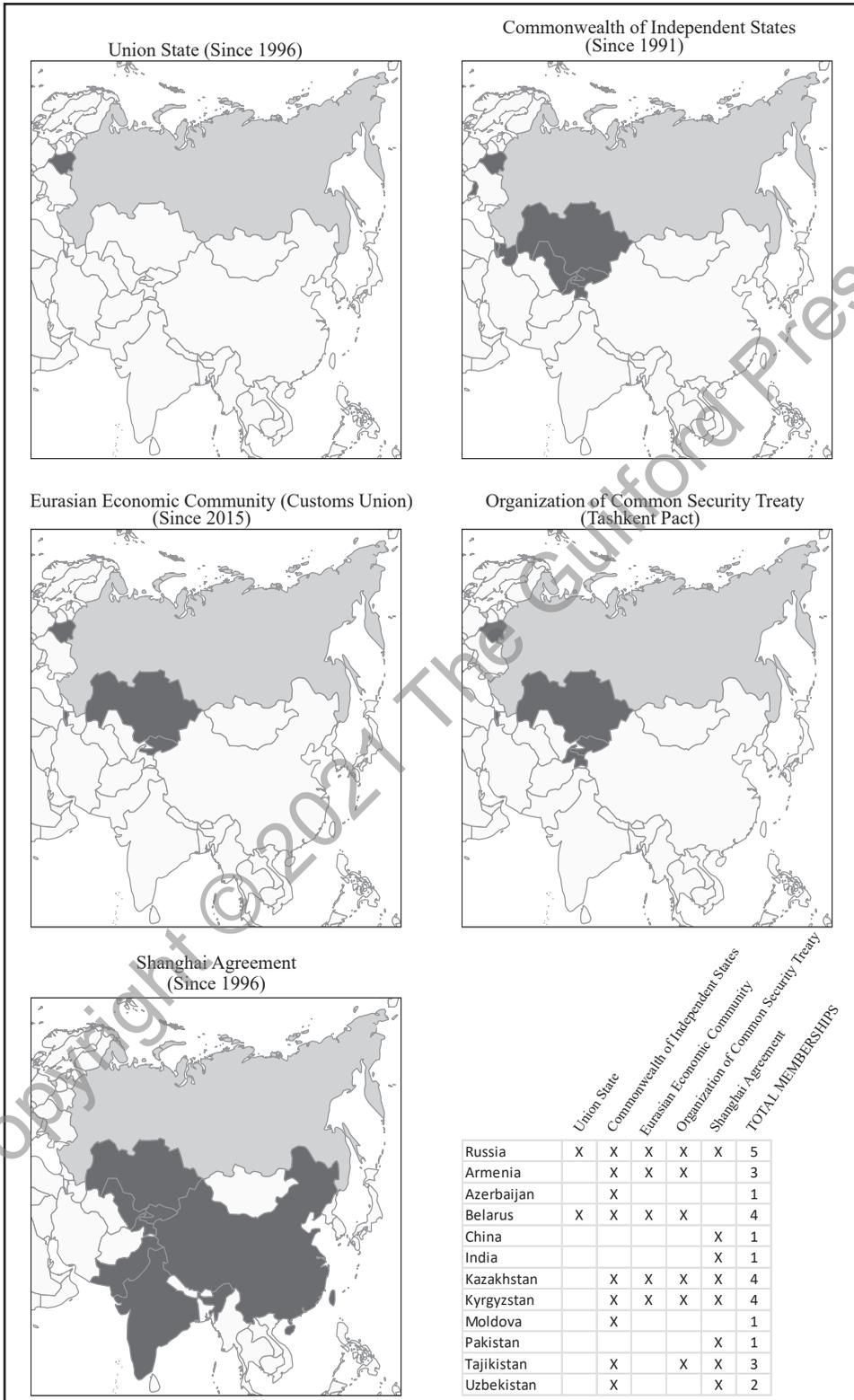


FIGURE 9.3. Russia's international alliances as of 2018. Map: J. Torguson.

are not in Russia's favor; only about 5 million people live in Russia east of Lake Baikal. At the same time, two northeastern provinces of China have over 100 million people living within a day's journey of the Russian southern border, and the rate of Chinese immigration into Russia is slowly rising.

As incredible as it may seem, Japan and Russia are still technically at war with each other. At the end of World War II, Russia reclaimed the southern portion of Sakhalin Island (which had been lost to Japan in 1904) and captured all of the Kuril Islands. Japan insists that the four southernmost Kuril Islands—Shikotan, Habomai, Kunashir, and Iturup—must be returned before it will sign a formal peace agreement. Russia does not want to give up either the military advantage that the islands afford (naval bases, early-warning air defense systems) or the fisheries of the northwestern Pacific, which are among the richest in the world. In 2018, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan and President Putin of Russia announced that they planned to formally sign a peace agreement. Japan apparently expects a compromise with Russia and asks for only two of the four southern Kuril Islands to be returned. Only 15% of the Russian population thinks that this would be a good idea, so it is a hard sell for Putin domestically. Economically, the two countries are on friendly terms, with each accounting for about 3% of the other's share of exports/imports. A quick visit to Siberia reveals that about half of the cars driven on Siberian roads in Russia are Japanese models, many with the steering wheel on the right side (as they are made for the Japanese market). The Japanese are also eager tourists to Russia, with many coming to resorts on Lake Baikal, to Kamchatka, along the Trans-Siberian Railroad, and of course to Moscow and St. Petersburg. Few Russian tourists go to Japan because it is an expensive and remote destination from Europe; however, local visits are common along the Pacific Coast.

It may amaze you that the United States is also a country in Tier I. The two countries are merely 20 km apart at the Diomedes Islands in the Bering Strait. In fact, a charter flight on Bering Air from Nome, Alaska, to Uelen, Chukotka, is shorter than the commercial flight from Anchorage to Fairbanks. In contrast, an average

commercial flight from New York to Moscow takes about 10 hours across the Atlantic and parts of Europe. The United States and Russia are really very distant on the globe—except where they almost touch in the Bering Strait. The potential for joint exploration of the oil and gas on the Arctic shelf, and even for the construction of a cross-hemisphere railroad tunnel under the strait, exists. Each country, however, is suspicious of the other's intentions. For example, recently the Russian government flatly refused to let foreign companies invest in the development of the massive Shtokman gas field in the Barents Sea. The Americans have never been keen about letting Russian companies drill in Alaska either.

Strategically, the United States sees Russia as a convenient counterbalance to China in global affairs and as a partner (among many others) in the war on terrorism. Russia imports many U.S.-invented things (ranging from software to iPhones to Boeing aircraft) but has no problem holding its own line when it comes to the true economic competition: Both countries fiercely compete in weapons trade around the world. Another competition is in supplying natural gas to European customers where Russia is adding a new dual pipeline under the Baltic Sea, while the United States is promising plentiful deliveries of liquid natural gas from Texas via tankers.

The post-Soviet policy of the United States toward Russia has been inconsistent at best. For example, the very unfair Jackson–Vanik trade amendment (largely a punishment for the Soviet restrictions on Jewish emigration) of 1974 put Russia at a huge disadvantage when trading with the United States and was not repealed by Congress until 2012. In addition, the United States unilaterally pulled out of the Anti-Missile Defense Treaty with Russia in 2002 to deploy its missile shield in Alaska, ostensibly against a North Korean missile threat. The Kremlin's subsequent moves in Ossetia, Crimea, Donbass, and elsewhere came as a nasty surprise to some Western observers but were entirely predictable. Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016 as the U.S. president, more animosity has developed between the American political elite and the Russian counterparts, with sanctions and countersanctions flying in both directions. In some respects, the current situation is beginning to look more and

more like Cold War 2.0, with the important distinction that politically the major ideological divide of Communism versus capitalism no longer exists to divide them. What is really happening is competition for influence around the world and an imperialist fight for markets and resources, with Russia playing the *enfant terrible* challenging U.S. global hegemony through both legal and illegal means. This is the case despite the many benefits the United States has reaped from close cooperation with Russian intelligence in the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, or from Russia's support in imposing sanctions against Iran at the U.N. Security Council. Ironically, whereas politicians may have their convenient Cold War mindset that suits both sides, the public in both countries remains reasonably well disposed toward each other, even after a few years of strong anti-American sentiment on Russian TV (and vice versa in the United States). The World Cup in 2018 attracted over 200,000 American fans to Russia, and they were warmly welcomed.

The level of mutual travel and commerce between Russia and the United States is far below what it could be. The overall trade balance between the countries in 2016 was \$4 billion in Russia's favor: Russia sold almost \$17 billion worth of goods to the United States, while the United States sold only \$12 billion worth to Russia. In comparison, the United States bought about \$40 billion worth of Chinese goods *every month* that year. The amount of physical travel is also low: In 2018, despite the World Cup happening in Russia, merely 250,000 American tourists managed to get to the country, and only 85,000 Russians visited the United States. Getting visas is now notoriously difficult due to political issues between the two, regardless even of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for Russians wishing to visit the United States as tourists or business travelers (the wait times for an interview approached 300 days in Moscow in 2019, and the visa cost \$160). This may change in the future because Russia and the United States are more similar than many people realize (both are major powers, both have claims for political and cultural exceptionalism, and both are eager to exploit other smaller nations around the world), so the potential for doing some big business together is there. However, relations remain strained.

### **Second-Degree Neighbors (Tier II)**

Tier II includes Moldova, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Eastern European countries that were formerly socialist allies (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro). All of these countries retain various degrees of political and cultural ties to Russia but are not as strongly connected to Russia as they had been to the Soviet Union. Armenia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are the most closely connected: All use Russian military and economic support as part of the Organization of Common Security, and they are also members of the Eurasian Customs Union (Evrases) (Figure 9.3). Tajik, Armenian, and Kyrgyz nationals have easier options for obtaining Russia's work permits or permanent resident status. Others are either pragmatic economic partners (Bulgaria) or obstinate political rivals (Poland) of Russia in the current world order. Many are increasingly distant from Russia in terms of politics but maintain strong economic relations with Russia for trade. The recent rise of political right parties in Europe led to some strengthening of ties with the Kremlin (e.g., Hungary since 2010 under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who advocates immigration controls for the EU). Critics of the Kremlin suggest that overt or covert financial support from Russia is behind the recent rise of the far right in the EU, an allegation that Russia largely denies. Overall, as in the U.S. case, there is more sentiment in favor of Russia in Europe among the public than among its politicians. Many Poles are fascinated by Russian pop music and books, for example, whereas Russians admire Polish fashions and arts. In addition, some long-standing family ties continue to connect the two societies.

### **Distant Nations with Various Strong Ties (Tier III)**

Tier III includes the rest of Europe, especially Germany and Cyprus; Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela in Latin America; some African countries with former socialist leanings (Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique); a few Asian countries (India, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand); some new trade partners (Turkey, South Korea, Taiwan);

and some Middle Eastern states (Israel, Syria, Iran, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya). This very diverse group is somehow connected to Russia by past or present political/educational ties and/or by current economic ties. For example, many professionals in Cuba and Ethiopia were educated at Soviet universities, and Russia remains a major investor in these countries. Currently, all of the countries in this category have business ties, as is reflected in usually favorable political relations. Some of these relationships are underappreciated. For example, few outsiders know how strong the economic ties are between Russia and Turkey based on tourism and trade (Russia is the single biggest supplier of tourists to Turkish resorts, while Turkey provides two-thirds of all lemons and almost all apricots sold in Russia and has been a major player in Russia's construction industry). Nor are most outsiders aware of the ties between Cyprus and Russia based on investment banking. Other connections are better known and discussed: for instance, the Russian military and nuclear ties to Iran or Russia's \$17 billion investments in the petroleum industry in Venezuela.

The relations between Israel and Russia are unique. On the one hand, the Soviet Union was a major supporter of the Palestinians, and Russia remains a strong supporter of the Bashar Al Asad regime in Syria today, whom Israelis view as a threat. On the other hand, over 1 million former Soviet citizens now live in Israel, and these people connect the two countries by countless business and family ties. Russian is one of the top three languages spoken in Israel. Israel also plays a special role for Orthodox Christians, being the premier pilgrimage destination to Christian holy sites. In addition, Israel provides an attractive, albeit expensive, option for winter vacations from Russia to its resorts on the Mediterranean and Red Seas. In 2007, Russia and Israel mutually abolished visa requirements for their citizens, in a major diplomatic breakthrough aimed at facilitating travel between the two countries.

### **Other Countries (Tier IV)**

Tier IV includes the rest of the world: most of Latin America, Canada, most of Africa and the Middle East, and the rest of Asia and Oceania.

Although these are not irrelevant, for most of these countries few ties to Russia exist. There are no open conflicts but also relatively little trade. The main connections are casual tourism and occasional business contacts. There are relatively large Russian and Ukrainian diasporas in Canada, Australia, South Africa, Argentina, and Brazil. Cambodia and Indonesia have become popular tropical destinations for Russian tourists. Many foreign students in Russian universities today hail from the poorest countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America because of the still relatively low cost of Russian university education and its perceived high quality. In the post-September 11 world, Arab and African students usually have an easier time qualifying for Russian visas than for U.S. visas. Russian military sales to Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and some Latin American countries are growing. On a recent flight from Moscow to Amsterdam, I met two Russian airplane mechanics on their way to Peru to repair a Russian-made SU-25 jetfighter there.

### **IS RUSSIA ASIAN OR EUROPEAN?**

The perpetual question regarding Russian foreign policy is where the country fits within Eurasia: Is it a European or an Asian state? This question began to be asked around the time of the Mongol invasions, when Russian princes such as Alexander Nevsky (1220–1263) had to side with western (Swedish-German) or eastern (Tatar-Mongol) realms, as the southern option (Byzantium) was rapidly diminishing in power. Nevsky generally chose the Mongols over the Germans, but he also was an independent-minded ruler who was trying to tread a middle ground. When Byzantium finally collapsed to the Turks in 1453 C.E., Russia started to position itself as the spiritual heir to the Orthodox patriarchs there. This decision further alienated it from the largely Roman Catholic Europe. The question once again came to the forefront at the time of Peter the Great's Western-style reforms in the early 1700s, designed to promote the rapid development of Russia's business ties with Europe, and then again in a debate between "Westernizers" and "Slavophiles" in post-Napoleon 19th-century Russia. The Westernizer thinkers

(e.g., Vissarion Belinsky and Alexander Herzen) saw Russia as fundamentally a European country, albeit with a backward political system in need of reform. In contrast, the Slavophiles (e.g., Aleksey Khomyakov and Ivan Kireevsky) saw Russia as a Eurasian entity with its own destiny, but more Asian than European.

In 1915, V. P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky, the most influential Russian geographer of his time, published a monograph on the political geography of Russia. His main thesis was that Russia was more similar to the United States and Canada than to any European or Asian country in that it represented a “coast-to-coast” settler system rather than a “Heartland” or a “Rimland.” He saw Russia’s biggest challenge as developing sufficiently dense settlements in the distant Far East, and he advocated major population shifts toward the empty middle of the country in Siberia as a line of defense against possible invasions from the outside. In the 1930s, the émigré community of exiled Russian philosophers continued debating the question of Russia’s “Eurasianness.” The geopolitical role of Russia (and of Northern Eurasia generally) in the world has been much debated in the Western political-geographical literature as well, especially in the works of British, German, and U.S. geographers.

Broadly, there are three main viewpoints (I am simplifying them a bit):

1. Russia forms a part of Western civilization and has been since at least the late 18th century. Its elite is Western-thinking; its society is mostly European in its culture; and its economic patterns of production follow those of Europe, albeit with some variation and usually with a considerable time lag. It is gradually embracing Western democratic ideals and is becoming a more and more fully realized member of the larger European community and the North Atlantic world. This is the view of Westernizers, from Peter the Great to Mikhail Gorbachev. Such a view is currently in retreat in Putin’s Russia.

2. Russia is part of the East (Asia) more than of the West (Europe). It is a politically backward society prone to violence, corruption, political oppression, and heavy top-down control by monarchical, maniacal tyrants. It is not a true

democracy and can never become one because democracy is contrary to its very nature. It will forever be antagonistic to Europe, North America, and the rest of the “free” world. Or, for those who prefer a more positive “spin” on things, Russia is a beacon of moral sanity for the decadent, corrupt West. In one version or the other, this is the view of some Russian ultranationalists (Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Aleksandr Dugin), Soviet-period Communists, American presidential advisors since World War II (especially Polish-born Zbigniew Brzezinski and Czech-born Madeleine Albright), conservative U.S. talk show hosts, some right-wing politicians in Europe, and conservative political scientists on both sides of the Atlantic (especially in Britain).

3. Russia is neither part of the West nor part of the East but is its own distinctly “Eurasian” civilization. This is the view of most Russian nationalists, most 19th-century Slavophiles, and a few influential 20th-century Russian thinkers, and it seems to be enjoying the endorsement of the current Putin–Mishustin administration as well. According to this more middle-of-the-road view, Russia has both Western and Eastern traits. More significantly, it has many fused elements and should be recognized as a distinct region with its unique identity and interests. Some of these thinkers tend to emphasize the uniqueness of Russian religion, specifically the Orthodox Church, as distinct from both Western Christianity and the Asian religions. To a certain extent, Ukraine and Kazakhstan would also fit this “mixed model.” Both are similar to Russia in the fusion of European and Asiatic elements in their cultures, although these elements are not expressed uniformly across the three countries.

This third viewpoint was popularized in the West by the late Samuel P. Huntington’s book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). His main thesis is that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between



## EXERCISES

1. Stage a classroom role-playing exercise in which Ukraine and Georgia are formally being accepted into NATO over strenuous objections from Russia. Use the following roles: a U.S. representative; a representative of an older NATO member that gets a lot of economic benefits from trade with Russia (e.g., Germany); a representative of a new NATO member that resents Russia's new influence (e.g., Poland); representatives from Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia; and a NATO secretary whose job is to keep everybody together at the negotiating table.
2. Investigate the borders between Russia and the other FSU republics. Which areas are contentious in any way? Where do you see the greatest potential for future conflict? How can such conflict be resolved?
3. Investigate the actual volume of investments or trade between the following countries, using both online and print sources: Russia and Ukraine (Tier I), Russia and Hungary (Tier II), Russia and Germany (Tier III), and Russia and Canada (Tier IV). To what extent does the four-tier scheme proposed in this chapter hold up when measured in terms of the actual amount of investments or trade between these countries?



## FURTHER READING

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## WEBSITES

- [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country\\_profiles/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm)—Up-to-date country briefs on most FSU countries from BBC.
- [www.gov39.ru](http://www.gov39.ru)—Government of Kaliningrad Oblast.
- [www.brw.org](http://www.brw.org)—Human Rights Watch.
- [www.imrussia.org/en](http://www.imrussia.org/en)—Institute of Modern Russia, a think tank established in 2010 in New York City with connections to Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a former oligarch and an outspoken critic of Putin's government.
- [eng.sectsc.org](http://eng.sectsc.org)—The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, including India, Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
- [www.state.gov/peur](http://www.state.gov/peur)—Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs of the U.S. Department of State.