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The Heart of the World

But if Russia was the last and the latest of the Eurasian empires, she was at the same time a European empire. And her ties to Europe made her, along with Great Britain, France, Germany, the United States, and Japan, one of a group of “chosen nations” of the 19th and 20th centuries whose expanse, military and state apparatus, and ideology seemed destined to make them a universal Empire. This progression of the Continent-State to the World-State that Russia attempted to accomplish through Europe, and that other nations attempted to thwart, is one of the central themes of modern geopolitics. It is the basis of the Testament of Peter the Great, a text disseminated by the *Secret du Roi* (French secret service) under Louis XV which was of doubtful authenticity but may have drawn on Russian sources. Even today, its prophetic nature remains amazing:

“Maintain the Russian nation in a perpetual state of war to keep the troops seasoned and on the alert, give them a rest only to improve the financial situation of the State... Thus war may serve peace, and peace war, in the interest of the growing prosperity and expansion of Russia... Play an active role in any and all affairs and disputes in

Europe, especially those involving Germany in whom, as our closest neighbor, we have a more direct interest... Divide Poland... split the country into parcels... Isolate Sweden, in order to take as much as we can from her.. For commercial purposes, favor the establishment of an alliance with England... Strengthen ties with Constantinople and India as much as possible... This accomplished, we can do without England's gold... Become close to and gather about you all disunited or dissenting Greek factions... Establish in advance a universal predominance through a type of royalty or of sacerdotal supremacy... Once Sweden has been dismembered, Persia vanquished, Poland subjugated, Turkey conquered, our armies reunited, the Black Sea and the Baltic guarded by our ships, we must then propose, separately and in utmost secret, to the court of Versailles and to that of Vienna to divide up the universal empire between us... If one of them accepts, which is inevitable, we shall use her to crush the other and then, in a struggle whose outcome we cannot doubt, crush the remaining one in turn... Thus can, and thus should Europe be subjugated!"

The text inspired the thought of 19th century Russian strategists, particularly in the circles of the Russian Geographical Society, many of whose members were Russo-Germans from the Baltic provinces. In 1855, during the Crimean War, Semyonov, second vice president of the Society and its foremost ideologist, thus defined the "universal mission" of the Empire: "Chosen by God to serve as intermediary between the Orient and the Occident, having received the Christian faith at Constantinople, capital of the Oriental Empire, adolescent hostage of Asiatic tribes, then thrust, by the brilliant will of Peter the Great, into the mainstream of European development, Russia...belongs at once to both parts of the world." We find it again in imperial General Staff studies published in the 1890s which celebrate the large number of wars fought

since 1700 and the fact that most of them—“thirty-six out of thirty-two” [*sic*] according to one of these texts—were “offensive rather than defensive”. This theme is also the backdrop to what was termed “the Great Game” of Anglo-Russian, then Anglo-Russo-German rivalry in central Asia. It influenced Stalin’s strategy and diplomacy, notably in the demands he presented to foreign partners—Hitler’s Germany, in 1939-40, and the Anglo-Saxon Allies between 1941 and 1945 and thereafter. In various works in 1904, 1919, and 1943, Harold Mackinder, founder of the Anglo-Saxon school of geopolitics, expresses the belief that the final struggle upon which the fate of the world hinges will be fought between the continental Eurasian Empire (“The Island of the World”, encompassing all of Eurasia, or the “Heart of the World”, which includes only its pivotal zone of the Baltic-Pamir- Amour axis) and a rival oceanic Empire. But he also notes that the continental Empire can acquire a solid foundation only if it controls Europe, or at least Central and Eastern Europe. “Who rules Eastern Europe rules the Heart of the World; who rules the Heart of the World rules the Island of the World; who rules the Island of the World rules the World.” Nicholas Spykman, whose 1942 and 1944 studies served as a master plan and blueprint for American strategy throughout the cold war and still remain a major reference, goes back to Mackinder’s analysis but emphasizes the vital importance for any oceanic rival of the control of the Eurasian maritime perimeter, the Rimland: Western Europe and the Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, the Indian sub-continent, Southeast Asia, Japan, Korea and, if possible, China.

East or West

But it is Admiral Raoul Castex, founder of the French school of geopolitics, whose 1936 essay *From Gengis Khan to Stalin, the Vicissitudes of a Strategic Manoeuvre* offered perhaps the best and the most subtle analysis of the link between Russia’s respective continental and universal vocations. According to Castex, the Eurasian Empire will necessarily split up into rival kingdoms and, ultimately, disintegrate when Asia becomes its priority. This happened to the

Mongols beginning with Kublai Khan, Genghis Khan's grandson, in 1252. If, on the contrary, it first consolidates its base at the heart of Eurasia and then turns towards Europe, as Genghis Khan himself had planned to do before his death in 1227, it can aspire to the universal Empire. Genghis Khan's successor Ogodai pursued precisely this course until 1241; in the space of a mere twelve years, the Mongols had seized Moscow, shook Poland and the Germanic Holy Roman Empire, traversed the Carpathians, conquered Hungary, and reached the Adriatic. They had been on the verge of taking both Constantinople and Rome. Castex perceives the long-term strategy of Russia, from the Ivanians to the Bolsheviks, as a new version of Genghis Khan's eutropism, using superior means and on an infinitely grander scale. Or, more exactly, a binary policy alternating phases of consolidation at the Russo-Siberian base and forays of expansion into the European promontory, the Mediterranean, India, and the temperate seas. The first decade of Bolshevism, from 1917 to 1927, was marked by an eastern policy bent on the re-conquest of the former tsarist central and eastern Asia, from the Caucasus to Sakhalin, with the ultimate conquest of China also in view. Stalin then imposed the return to a western-oriented policy directed toward Europe. At the time Castex was writing, this about-face was only half accomplished, since the Japanese still presented a direct military threat in the Soviet Far East. But events that followed would prove the French admiral right. In the spring of 1939, in a prodigious blitzkrieg (before the term was coined), Stalin crushed the Japanese in Manchuria in the war of Khalkin-Gol. Instead of taking further advantage of his position, he offered his foes a non-aggression pact confirming the existing frontiers, which the Japanese hastened to accept and would respect until 1945. This would allow Stalin to concentrate his forces in the West and finally, after the ordeal of World War II, to expand the Empire all the way to the Elbe.

The post-Stalin Soviet Union pursued Stalin's western policy with a success that, in retrospect, it would be vain to minimize. On the eve of its fall, under Brezhnev, the Empire extended in

five concentric circles of domination, from its center to its outer periphery. First, the Soviet system itself, including the USSR, Mongolia, and Eastern Europe, which included a high degree of military and economic integration in the form of the Warsaw Pact and Comecon, respectively, and centralized state control (under the “Brezhnev doctrine” of “limited sovereignty”). Then there were the para-Soviet countries, closely tied to the USSR without actually being a part of it, including Asian communist states such as Viet Nam and North Korea, or tropical states such as Cuba. The Third World “democratic states” in the Soviet orbit included South Yemen, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Angola, and the Congo, and the pro-Soviet Islamic revolutionary states gravitated around Algeria, Libya, Syria and Iraq. Finally, there were the dissident communist countries of China, Yugoslavia, Albania, and Rumania, who were politically and sometimes militarily hostile, but subject to extremely rapid reconciliation with the USSR, even “normalisation”, due to the relationship between the regimes. Finland, not a communist state but diplomatically and even strategically linked to the Empire, constituted the sole element of a third circle. Geopolitical allies such as India and Indonesia, who sought Russian support against a third hostile country such as Pakistan or China, made up a fourth circle. And finally, the fifth circle was comprised of countries such as West Germany and France who, for one reason or another, be it “national independence”, reunification, technological cooperation, or commercial prospects, wished to maintain their privileged ties to the USSR.

The supreme ambition of the Soviets was to add a sixth circle, Western Europe in its entirety, or even a seventh, the United States. Not through outright conquest, but via a sort of domestication or extended “finlandisation” in which those involved, while maintaining their independence, their economic and political systems, and a strong military capacity, would accept Soviet hegemony, or at least co-hegemony with the USSR. The strategic armaments control agreements (SALT and START) were part of this plan, as were the Helsinki accords. And the real meaning of the

Soviets' multiple military punches of the end of the 60s, the 70s, and the outset of the '80s—the war in Viet Nam, the Arab-Israeli conflicts, operations in Africa, the invasion of Afghanistan—was perhaps to convince the West that if it did not commit itself to this ultimate compromise with the Empire, it would risk encirclement and hence implosion.

But it was the Empire that ultimately met this fate. Since 1991, many Russians tend to interpret the collapse of their country as the failure of the western-oriented policy followed since 1945, or even since 1930. Consequently they imagine that an eastern-oriented policy, re-centred around Eurasia and Asia itself, will lead to recovery. These speculations take on many forms. Alexander Soljenitsyn is campaigning for the establishment of a new empire, strictly Slavic and Christian, composed of the current Russian Federation, the Ukraine, and Byelorussia, its geopolitical heartland situated in the Ural. Alexander Prokhanov, the “Kipling” of the Brezhnevian and Andropovian Empire of the 1980s who glorified the war in Afghanistan, favors an ultimate fusion with Islam and the Third World, and, in the interim, a tight alliance between Russia and the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia. In a more pragmatic vein, former Prime Minister Primakov believes Russia can only regain its great power status with the support of its former Arab clients and Iran. Igor Ivanov, who was Primakov's foreign affairs minister and then Putin's, believes Russia should form an “anti-hegemonic coalition” that would extend all the way to China and, if possible, the European Union, against the United States.

But does Russia still have the means to effect such plans of redefinition? In the '50s, Dwight Eisenhower once said that the power of a country was the product of three factors: the economy, the morale, and the population. The Russian economy remains archaic and chaotic on several levels, although progress is evident; the GNP has grown by an average of 6% since 1998. Nationalism has re-inflated Russian morale, the collective will to live. But can the country surmount the problem of demographic decline? Such elements as the drop in the birth rate, the aging of the population, and the

differential between two ethnic groups have long term effects that cannot be countered or corrected in a day, or, for that matter, a night. In the past, Russia's vast population made her what she was and permitted her to unify Eurasia, to her own profit. Without a sufficiently dense human fabric and an adequately young population, she can neither hold on to the territories currently in her domain nor, *a fortiori*, aspire to re-federate those of the surrounding Exterior.