

# Moscow looks eastward: forced choice?

Aldo Ferrari

27/10/2023

*Russia, which has always been attracted by the East as much as by Europe, is considered an anomaly. The consequence is the strengthening of the Asian pole as an alternative to the Euro-Atlantic camp.*

It is often said that Russia is a difficult country to understand, perhaps citing Winston Churchill's famous phrase that "Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." But the phrase of the English statesman is understandable only if it is quoted in full, with its conclusion: "but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest." The central point of the issue is precisely this, the national interest of Russia, as it was perceived by its political elites, at least from the middle of the 16th century. In fact, it was then, under Ivan IV (the Terrible), that Russia became an empire based on an ideology that – after the 1240 collapse of Kievan Rus, highly developed culturally and economically, but politically fragmented – was considered necessary for its very existence, so the country had to be strictly ruled by one hand. This is the autocratic dimension of power that, regardless of its institutional form (tsar, communist party secretary, president), characterizes Russia to this day, in contrast to Europe, which in recent centuries has instead experienced a progressive liberalization of the political system.

The difference in these political dynamics is usually interpreted in Europe/West as a Russian anomaly. This, however, is only true if we look at this country through the eyes of the West, as an unsuccessful part of Europe, an integral part of which it never became. But there is another approach, perhaps a more productive one, which consists in recognizing Russia's own political and cultural peculiarity, determined primarily by its Eurasian location. Actually, since the Middle Ages, Russia has had much more intense and lasting ties with Asia than with European countries. Of particular importance is the truly long period of subjugation to the Mongols, which lasted until 1480. Having gained independence under the leadership of Moscow, Russia experienced an extraordinary geographical expansion not only to the west, "gathering" the lands of Kievan Rus, but also to the east, occupying most of the Eurasian steppes. From a historical standpoint, the Russian Empire actually combined the Byzantine and Mongol heritages, absorbing in the course of its expansion a large number of "eastern" peoples and cultures that differed in many ways from the European colonial empires.

This Eurasian dimension was not erased by the strong cultural Europeanization that Russia experienced, especially under Peter the Great. The political and socio-economic dynamics of the country continued to differ in many ways from those in Europe. Think in particular about the continuation of serfdom until 1861

and autocracy until 1917. Even the long, tragic, and grand communist interlude, although based on an ideology of European origin, actually moved Russia/USSR further away from the European/Western model.

The collapse of the USSR and communist ideology seemed to make possible a new and significant rapprochement between Russia and the West, but this prospect turned out to be ephemeral. After the disastrous “Western” decade known under Yeltsin’s presidency, Russia actually began to follow an autonomous political path again. A fundamental role in this direction belongs to Yevgeny Primakov, the most important political figure in modern Russia, who in the late 1990s supported the need for a new international order based not on unipolar US hegemony, but on the conditions of multipolar equilibrium.

This multipolar vision, which has become central to Vladimir Putin’s Russian foreign policy, is based primarily on creating a close cooperative relationship with China. The first important result of this cooperation was the birth in 2001 of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which initially included Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; then Pakistan and India joined in 2017, and Iran in 2023.

Moscow’s drive to Asia intensified after the “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine (2003-2004) and NATO’s eastward expansion (2004), the negative consequences of which were clearly foreseen back in 1998 by George Kennan, the creator of the USSR containment policy during the Cold War. Even the birth in 2008 of the European Union’s Eastern Partnership, a Polish-Swedish initiative aimed at the post-Soviet republics of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, was perceived by Moscow as a new attempt to bring other post-Soviet countries closer to NATO, following the Baltic nations. In contrast to these expansionist processes of the West, Russia intensified its turn to the East, primarily with the creation in 2014 of the Eurasian Economic Union (which includes Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan) and with the birth in 2015 of the “Greater Eurasia” project, which provides for the further development of relations with China and other Asian countries. This was a turning point dictated not only by increasingly serious conflicts with the West, but also by the conviction that the latter has now lost its central role, and therefore it is more profitable for Russia to build privileged relations with Asian countries, whose growth radically slows down changes in the international scenario.

However, in the emerging new multipolar order, Moscow actually finds itself in a difficult position in relation to Beijing, very functional from an economic and political standpoint, but at the same time extremely risky in light of the growing gap between the two countries. The establishment of China as a dominant power – so close geographically and much stronger economically and demographically – will certainly not represent a positive prospect for Russia. Even without sharing the biased hostility of many Western observers to

Eurasian integration projects, one should ask the question to what extent this situation meets the interests of Moscow. But an equally legitimate question is whether the West is comfortable maintaining the short-sighted and arrogant attitude it has taken toward Russia over the past three decades. This position has greatly contributed to this country's pivot to the east and its rapprochement with China, which is the largest competitor of the West and, in particular, the United States.

ALDO FERRARI, SPECIALIST IN RUSSIAN AND CAUCASIAN HISTORY AT CA' FOSCARI UNIVERSITY (VENICE)  
Aldo Ferrari