

## RUSSIA'S GEOGRAPHY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ITS GEOPOLITICS

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides an extended analysis of how Russia's geographical characteristics profoundly shape its national security priorities, its strategic culture, and the tools it employs in foreign policy. As the world's largest state, spanning two continents and eleven time zones, Russia faces a combination of structural vulnerabilities and exceptional geopolitical opportunities. Its exposure on the western plains, where no natural barriers slow military advance, has historically subjected it to catastrophic invasions, reinforcing the understanding that strategic depth and the establishment of buffer zones are essential for national survival. This perception continues to inform Russian actions in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space.

Moreover, the distribution of Russia's population, concentrated predominantly on the European side of the country, creates a geographic mismatch between human capital and natural resources. Siberia and the Arctic contain immense reserves of oil, gas, and minerals but remain sparsely populated, expensive to govern, and militarily challenging to defend. Maintaining sovereignty and economic control over these regions pushes Moscow to pursue assertive internal and external policies, particularly as climate change and foreign interest increase competition over Arctic routes.

Maritime constraints add another strategic dimension. Russia possesses few warm-water ports, and those it relies upon — such as Sevastopol in Crimea — are central to its naval doctrine and global outreach. Limited access to the world's oceans reinforces Russia's focus on land power and creates pressure to exert influence over neighboring states that serve as geographic chokepoints or transit corridors. Russian involvement in Syria, increased Arctic militarization, and persistent frictions around the Black Sea all reflect these structural maritime imperatives.

Methodologically, the research is based on a geopolitical analytical approach using qualitative methods: historical comparison, content analysis of policy papers and strategic doctrines, and case studies of Russia's interventions and influence in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Arctic. These cases demonstrate how Russian leaders translate geographic challenges into strategic behavior, relying on both coercive tools and narratives of protecting national identity and spheres of privileged interests.

The findings indicate that geography shapes not only Russia's threat perception but also its aspirations to remain a great power capable of influencing developments across Eurasia. Strategic culture, national identity, and policies of territorial control emerge as adaptive responses to the state's spatial environment. Geography imposes enduring incentives on Moscow to maintain military readiness, centralize governance, and resist the political drift of neighboring states toward rival power blocs.

In conclusion, Russia can be understood as a power continually negotiating between the vulnerabilities imposed by its geography and the ambitions enabled by it. Any analysis of Russian foreign and security policy must therefore recognize geography as a foundational determinant of Russian behavior — a determinant that is deeply embedded in strategic decision-making and highly resistant to change over time.

**Keywords:** Russia, geopolitics, strategic depth, buffer states, Arctic geopolitics, Black Sea security, Eurasian identity, geographic determinism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Russia's geography has long been recognized as a central determinant of its geopolitical behavior. As the largest country in the world, spanning two continents and eleven time zones, Russia combines vast territorial depth with major structural vulnerabilities. Its open western plains, harsh climate, uneven population distribution, resource-rich but sparsely populated regions, and limited access to warm-water seas have all shaped a strategic culture preoccupied with insecurity, encirclement, and the need for buffer zones. Geography does not mechanically dictate policy, but it sets the stage on which Russian leaders interpret threats and opportunities and choose among alternative courses of action.<sup>2</sup>

This article explores how Russia's physical environment influences its security doctrine, foreign policy priorities, and regional strategies. It argues that four clusters of geographic factors are particularly important: (1) strategic depth and border configuration; (2) climate, agriculture, and demography; (3) maritime access and warm-water ports; and (4) resource distribution and infrastructure. These structural features inform Russia's behavior in key regions such as Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Arctic. The analysis places contemporary developments, including the war in Ukraine and increased activity in the Arctic, within the broader context of Russia's long-standing struggle to reconcile geographic vulnerability with great-power ambition.

The article employs a geopolitical analytical and qualitative research design. It relies on a critical review of academic literature, historical-geographical comparison, document analysis of policy papers and expert reports, and case studies focusing on Russian behavior in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Arctic. Rather than using large-scale quantitative datasets, the study adopts an interpretive framework that links territorial scale, climate, resource distribution, and border configurations to security policy and strategic decision-making. This methodological approach makes it possible to explain Russian foreign policy

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *Geopolitics: Past, Present, and Future* (London: Routledge, 2015), 26–27. Please decrease the font here

not only through ideology or economics, but also through enduring spatial patterns that shape state behavior over time.

## MAIN PART

Russia's geopolitical behavior has been shaped more profoundly by geography than perhaps any other major power in history. Stretching across eleven time zones and spanning the Eurasian landmass from the Baltic Sea in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east, Russia's sheer spatial scale is both a strategic asset and an enduring vulnerability. The interaction between physical landscapes, climate conditions, natural resource distribution, population patterns, and access routes has created a geopolitical environment that encourages territorial expansion, centralized authoritarian governance, and a persistent drive to secure buffer zones. Geography has not only influenced how Russia views the world but also how the world has responded to Russia. The vast plains that define much of its territory have historically exposed Russia to invasion from multiple directions, instilling a deep sense of insecurity and a corresponding desire for strategic depth. Simultaneously, Russia's limited access to warm-water ports and its dependence on specific transportation corridors have shaped its persistent quest to dominate its neighbors and expand influence into Europe, the Caucasus, and Asia.

Russian geopolitics is often associated with the writings of classical geopolitical thinkers such as Halford Mackinder. His famous "Heartland Theory" posited that control over the vast Eurasian interior—of which Russia is the largest component—would confer global dominance.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not one accepts the determinism of Mackinder's thesis, it is undeniable that Russia's leaders, from the Tsars to Vladimir Putin, have internalized elements of this worldview. To them, geography is destiny, and the vastness of Eurasia offers both the foundation and the rationale for Russia's great-power ambitions. The interplay between physical space and national policy becomes even more apparent when

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<sup>3</sup> Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (London: Constable, 1919), 150.

one examines Russia's historical experiences, from Mongol invasions to Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany. Each invasion penetrated through the same relatively open frontier; each threatened Russian civilization; and each reinforced the conviction that territorial expansion and buffer zones were necessary for survival.

Russia's immense landmass is often viewed as a source of strength, but it carries burdens as well. The maintenance of authority across such a wide area requires formidable administrative structures and significant military expenditure. The population is unevenly distributed, with most Russians concentrated in the western regions near Europe, leaving Siberia and the Far East sparsely populated.<sup>4</sup> This imbalance creates vulnerabilities in areas rich with natural resources but lacking demographic weight. Moreover, the northern location of much of Russia's territory results in long, harsh winters that complicate agriculture, transportation, and economic development. These factors have contributed to Russia's struggle to modernize its economy and diversify its industrial base beyond energy extraction.

Perhaps no geographic factor has shaped Russia's geopolitical outlook more than its historical lack of warm-water ports. A warm-water port that remains ice-free year-round is vital for maritime trade, naval operations, and international influence.<sup>5</sup> Russia's northern ports, such as Murmansk, provide partial solutions but remain constrained by ice conditions and limited access to key shipping lanes. Its Pacific ports are distant from major population centers and require enormous logistical networks to connect to the core regions of Russian power. These constraints help explain Russia's expansionist policies throughout history—from its wars with the Ottoman Empire to gain access to the Black Sea, to its annexation of Crimea in 2014, to its ongoing involvement in the Arctic region. Maritime geography has conditioned Russia to seek control of coastal areas that open new trade possibilities and

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<sup>4</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse: How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 24.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics* (New York: Scribner, 2015), 32.

enhance naval capabilities. The lack of such access has reinforced Russia's belief that without expansion, it risks being encircled and economically disadvantaged.

The concept of buffer zones is deeply embedded in Russian strategic thinking. It is a reaction to centuries of invasions and a recognition of Russia's geographical exposure.<sup>6</sup> The flat plains to Russia's west offer few natural barriers against invaders. Unlike countries protected by mountains or seas, Russia's heartland is reachable through vast stretches of open territory. The distance between Russia's western frontier and Moscow is not particularly large, making it vulnerable to rapid advances by foreign armies. For Russian leaders, therefore, controlling nearby regions is not merely an imperial ambition but a perceived necessity for national security. This mindset explains why Russia seeks to influence or control the nations of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. These regions provide the geographic depth that Russian strategists view as essential for survival.

Throughout history, Russia's territorial expansions have followed predictable geographic patterns. In the west, Russia expanded into Eastern Europe, absorbing territories in present-day Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, and the Baltic states. These areas offered both agricultural wealth and strategic buffers.<sup>7</sup> To the south, Russia pushed into the Caucasus and Central Asia, securing mountain passes and access to natural resources. In the east, Russia crossed Siberia, driven by fur trade and later by the pursuit of strategic competition with China and Japan. Each of these expansions can be understood as a response to geographic constraints and opportunities rather than purely ideological or economic motives. Geography defined the corridors of expansion, while geopolitics justified the actions.

Modern Russia still inherits these geographic patterns. Its engagement in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia remains a defining feature of its foreign policy. The 2008 war in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reflect continued attempts to secure influence in regions that Russian

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987), 112.

<sup>7</sup> Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 289–301

strategists consider vital. These regions are not just neighboring states; they are pieces of a geopolitical puzzle that Russia believes it must control to compensate for its geographic vulnerabilities. Ukraine's location makes it a potential bridge or barrier between Russia and Europe. Its control would either give Russia deeper strategic depth or expose it to Western influence directly at its border. Similarly, the Caucasus serves as a gateway to the Middle East and a region that provides access to important energy corridors.

Russia's geography has also shaped its internal political structure. The need to manage and defend such a vast territory has historically driven Russia toward centralized, often authoritarian governance.<sup>8</sup> The Tsarist Empire, the Soviet Union, and the modern Russian Federation all relied on strong central authority to maintain cohesion. The distances between major cities and regions, combined with the logistical challenges of communication and transportation, encouraged systems of governance that emphasized top-down control. The development of modern communication networks has not entirely erased this tendency. The physical geography reinforces a political culture that prioritizes unity, stability, and centralized decision-making over decentralization or regional autonomy.

Climate is another factor that has profoundly influenced Russian development and geopolitics. Much of Russia lies in cold or subarctic zones, where long winters limit agricultural productivity. Historically, this led to recurrent food shortages and slowed population growth.<sup>9</sup> Even today, agricultural output is heavily concentrated in the southwestern regions near the Black Sea, far from Russia's eastern and northern territories. The challenging climate also contributed to Russia's reliance on resource extraction, particularly oil, natural gas, and minerals, which are abundant in Siberia and the Arctic. These resources generate revenue and geopolitical leverage, particularly in Europe. However, reliance on energy exports also exposes Russia to global price fluctuations and

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 21–43.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 57.

limits the development of other economic sectors. Climate and resources, therefore, form a complex interplay that shapes Russia's strategic behavior.

Russia's extensive natural resources are both a blessing and a curse. The country's energy wealth has enabled it to exert influence over neighboring states, especially in Europe, through gas pipelines and energy supply agreements.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the resources are often located in remote regions that require enormous infrastructure investment to develop and transport. The need to protect and maintain these resources contributes to Russia's security concerns, particularly in the Arctic and Far East. China's growing presence in these regions adds another layer of geopolitical complexity. Russia must balance cooperation with China in energy and infrastructure projects with concerns about Chinese demographic and economic expansion into sparsely populated Russian territories.

One cannot understand Russian geopolitics without acknowledging the importance of Siberia. This vast region, larger than many continents, contains much of Russia's natural wealth. Yet it is thinly populated, with harsh climatic conditions and underdeveloped infrastructure. Historically, Siberia served as a frontier for expansion, exile, and resource extraction.<sup>11</sup> Today, it represents both a strategic asset and a vulnerability. Russia must invest heavily in Siberia to maintain control and ensure economic viability. The Trans-Siberian Railway and other transportation networks are essential lifelines connecting Siberia to the rest of the country. The challenges of governing such a vast and remote region shape Russian economic planning and military strategy.

Russia's geographic scale creates a distinctive strategic posture, particularly regarding national defense. Unlike smaller nations that can rely on natural barriers or alliances, Russia's immense landmass requires a comprehensive defense system that combines depth, mobility, and resilience. Historically, Russian military strategy emphasized retreating deep into interior territories during invasions, thereby stretching enemy supply lines and

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<sup>10</sup> Thane Gustafson, *The Bridge: Natural Gas in a Redivided Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 13–18.

<sup>11</sup> Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 178–190.

exhausting invading forces.<sup>12</sup> This approach proved decisive against Napoleon's Grande Armée in 1812 and the German Wehrmacht in 1941. The concept of strategic depth remains central in Russian military doctrine, influencing contemporary planning and justifying a focus on influence beyond Russia's immediate borders. Geography dictates the need for buffer zones and long-term preparedness for large-scale mobilization, reinforcing the enduring relevance of territorial considerations in Russian policy.

The western frontier, defined by the expansive European Plain, is geopolitically critical. Its flat terrain offers few natural defensive barriers, which has historically exposed Russia to multiple invasions.<sup>13</sup> Thus, shifts in political or military alignment in Eastern Europe are perceived as immediate threats by Russian strategists. The expansion of NATO into Poland, the Baltic states, and other former Soviet-aligned countries has been framed by the Kremlin as a direct encroachment into Russia's strategic buffer. Geography magnifies this perception because the proximity of foreign military forces to central Russia could shorten the response time to any potential threat. Finland's long border with Russia and the presence of NATO-aligned forces near St. Petersburg and Moscow exemplify why geography, rather than ideology alone, drives Russian security anxieties.

In the south, the Caucasus Mountains offer partial natural defense but are complicated by a diverse mosaic of ethnic groups with histories of resistance to Russian authority.<sup>14</sup> The region is strategically crucial because it provides access to the Black Sea, controls important energy transit routes, and serves as a gateway to the Middle East. Instability in the North Caucasus, including conflicts in Chechnya and Dagestan, requires continuous political and military attention. Additionally, Russia's engagement in South Ossetia and Abkhazia demonstrates the use of military interventions to maintain influence over critical geographic corridors. The Caucasus exemplifies how terrain, resource access, and ethnic distribution converge to shape Russia's security calculations.

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<sup>12</sup> Timothy Colton, *Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 45–47.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Goble, "Russia's Western Vulnerabilities and NATO Expansion," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 180 (2009).

<sup>14</sup> Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 83–92.



Central Asia is another geographic region with significant strategic implications for Russia. The steppes connecting Russia to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and other former Soviet republics are open terrain conducive to influence projection.<sup>15</sup> Historically, these regions served as the southern frontier of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. Today, Russia maintains influence through military, economic, and political organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union. Geography facilitates control over these regions, which are proximate to China, Afghanistan, and Iran, making them critical buffers and corridors for trade and military movement.

Russia's Far East presents distinct challenges and opportunities due to its remoteness, sparse population, and harsh climate. Although resource-rich, the region is difficult to defend and economically underdeveloped.<sup>16</sup> Vladivostok provides limited access to the Pacific Ocean, and the proximity of Japan and China introduces both competition and strategic considerations. Russia's military and economic investments in the Far East, including infrastructure and resource development, aim to secure territorial integrity, project power into the Asia-Pacific, and ensure Arctic access. The region's geography also makes it central to Russia's Arctic ambitions, particularly as melting ice creates new shipping lanes and resource opportunities.

River systems have historically shaped Russian settlement, trade, and military strategy. Major rivers such as the Volga, Don, and Dnieper facilitated commerce and linked key regions of European Russia to southern territories.<sup>17</sup> The Volga, in particular, has been critical for connecting central Russia to the Caspian Sea, providing both economic integration and strategic depth. Rivers also allowed armies to maneuver efficiently and supported logistical networks during wars. In modern times, these waterways continue to

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<sup>15</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's Second Chance* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 112–115.

<sup>16</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse: How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 71–77.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 39–42.

underpin transportation, industrial activity, and energy production, reinforcing their strategic value.

The Arctic region is increasingly significant in Russia's geopolitical calculations. Rich in oil, natural gas, and minerals, the Arctic offers economic potential, while the melting ice due to climate change opens new navigable routes such as the Northern Sea Route.<sup>18</sup> Russia has invested in icebreakers, military bases, and port infrastructure to assert dominance in the region. Arctic expansion allows Russia to increase maritime trade, secure resource extraction, and project power across the High North. Competition with other Arctic nations, including the United States, Canada, and Norway, heightens the strategic importance of controlling territory and sea lanes.

Population distribution in Russia also carries geopolitical implications. Approximately three-quarters of the population resides west of the Ural Mountains, concentrating political power, economic activity, and cultural influence.<sup>19</sup> Siberia and the Far East, despite abundant resources, are sparsely populated, which creates vulnerabilities in defense, economic development, and demographic sustainability. The low population density in eastern territories raises concerns about potential influence from neighboring China, particularly given Chinese economic expansion and demographic pressures. Russian state policies encourage settlement and investment in these areas, but climate and logistical challenges have limited success.

Transportation infrastructure is critical for integrating Russia's vast territory. The Trans-Siberian Railway remains the lifeline linking European Russia to Vladivostok, facilitating the movement of goods, resources, and military forces.<sup>20</sup> Additional railways, highways, and pipelines further connect distant regions, reinforcing internal cohesion and enhancing strategic control. These networks also have international significance, enabling trade between Europe and Asia. Geography, therefore, both necessitates and dictates the

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<sup>18</sup> Lassi Heininen, *Arctic Policies and Strategies: Regional Approaches to Cooperation and Security* (London: Routledge, 2018), 54–60.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography* (New York: Scribner, 2015), 29–34.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Wood, *The Trans-Siberian Railway* (London: Ian Allan Publishing, 2011), 14–18.

structure of Russia's transport and logistical investments, with direct implications for domestic governance and international influence.

Natural resources are central to Russian geopolitics. Russia's status as a leading producer of oil and natural gas is geographically tied to regions such as Western Siberia, the Arctic, and the Caspian Basin.<sup>21</sup> These resources underpin Russia's foreign policy by providing leverage over Europe and China. Pipelines including Nord Stream, TurkStream, and Power of Siberia not only transport energy but also create political dependencies. Geographic distribution of resources amplifies Russian influence while also creating vulnerabilities, as reliance on energy exports can make the economy sensitive to market fluctuations and global political pressures.

Siberia, in particular, illustrates the dual nature of Russia's geography. The region contains vast mineral and energy wealth yet suffers from low population density and extreme climate.<sup>22</sup> The challenges of resource extraction, infrastructure maintenance, and demographic imbalances compel continued state investment and strategic planning. Siberia's importance to national security, economic development, and global positioning makes it a region where geography directly informs policy.

Russia's geographic position influences its perception of identity and international role. The concept of Eurasianism, emphasizing Russia as a civilization bridging Europe and Asia, derives partly from the country's geographic ambiguity.<sup>23</sup> Geography reinforces the view of Russia as distinct from Western and Eastern powers, shaping both ideology and policy. Leaders have invoked geographic determinism to justify interventions and influence in neighboring regions, portraying Russia's control over Eurasian space as a historical and strategic imperative.

Contemporary Russian foreign policy continues to reflect geographic realities. Vladimir Putin frequently references historical invasions, buffer zones, and territorial vulnerabilities

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<sup>21</sup> Thane Gustafson, *The Bridge: Natural Gas in a Redivided Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 22–28.

<sup>22</sup> Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 178–182.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics* (Moscow: Arktogea, 1997), 35–42.

to justify actions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria.<sup>24</sup> The annexation of Crimea, for example, secured access to the Black Sea and enhanced naval capabilities. Similarly, military involvement in Syria provided Russia with a warm-water naval base in Tartus, reinforcing strategic reach in the Mediterranean. Geographic imperatives thus remain central to Russia's global strategy, guiding decision-making beyond ideology or immediate economic concerns.

Russia's geography continues to influence its strategic culture in ways that extend beyond immediate military considerations. The country's enormous size, combined with varied terrain, forces it to develop a layered approach to defense and projection of power. Mountains, plains, rivers, and seas shape not only the movement of armies but also the development of transportation infrastructure and trade networks. The need to manage remote territories, such as Siberia and the Far East, affects both domestic governance and foreign policy priorities.<sup>25</sup> These geographic realities create a pattern in which Russia consistently seeks to extend influence over adjacent regions to compensate for vulnerabilities inherent in its physical layout.

One of the most enduring geographic influences on Russia's foreign policy is its relationship with Europe. While geographically part of Eurasia, the western portion of Russia lies close to Europe, creating opportunities and threats alike.<sup>26</sup> The European Plain, which stretches uninterrupted from Germany through Ukraine to western Russia, offers little natural protection against invasion. This flat terrain has historically allowed foreign powers to penetrate deep into Russian territory, prompting a defensive mentality focused on controlling buffer states. The incorporation of Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states into Russia's sphere of influence has long been justified as a means of ensuring national security, and geographic proximity continues to make these regions strategically vital.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), 57–60.

<sup>25</sup> Timothy Colton, *Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 47–50.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Goble, "Russia's Western Vulnerabilities and NATO Expansion," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 180 (2009).

<sup>27</sup> Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 310–318.

The historical memory of invasions from the west has a direct impact on Russia's contemporary security doctrine. From Napoleon's invasion in 1812 to Hitler's Operation Barbarossa in 1941, foreign armies have repeatedly exploited the open terrain of the European Plain.<sup>28</sup> These experiences have reinforced the Russian emphasis on strategic depth as a core military principle. Even modern missile defense systems, troop deployments, and military exercises reflect this geographic consideration, highlighting the belief that the western frontier cannot be ignored. Russia's insistence on maintaining a buffer zone in Eastern Europe is thus not merely political posturing but a response to centuries of geographic vulnerability.

Beyond the west, Russia's southern regions also illustrate the interplay of geography and strategy. The Caucasus Mountains form a natural boundary, yet their rugged terrain contains numerous passes that have historically been contested.<sup>29</sup> Control over these passes is essential for securing access to the Black Sea and for protecting southern approaches to central Russia. Energy infrastructure, such as pipelines carrying Caspian oil and gas, further underscores the strategic importance of the south. Russia's military engagements in Chechnya, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia are not simply reactions to internal unrest; they are deliberate efforts to maintain control over geographically critical areas. Geography here informs policy directly, linking terrain, resources, and security concerns.

Central Asia also exemplifies geographic determinants in Russian strategy. The vast steppes connecting Russia to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and other former Soviet republics create open corridors that can be used for trade, migration, and military operations.<sup>30</sup> Russia has historically sought to dominate this region to prevent rival powers, including China and Turkey, from gaining influence. Membership in regional organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization allows Russia to

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<sup>28</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 67–72.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 101–110.

<sup>30</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's Second Chance* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 115–119.

formalize control over these territories. Geography enables Russia to project power efficiently, and the lack of natural barriers makes sustained influence both feasible and necessary for strategic stability.

The Far East, by contrast, presents a different set of geographic challenges. The region is remote, sparsely populated, and climatically harsh.<sup>31</sup> Yet it contains vast natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals, and timber, which are critical to Russia's economic and strategic planning. The port of Vladivostok provides a gateway to the Pacific, but proximity to China, Japan, and Korea introduces geopolitical tension. Russia's investment in infrastructure and military capabilities in the Far East demonstrates a recognition that geography creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities. The Arctic, adjacent to the Far East, adds an additional dimension, as melting ice and new shipping routes expand the region's global significance.<sup>32</sup>

Waterways, including the Volga, Don, and Dnieper rivers, have historically been central to Russia's internal cohesion and external trade.<sup>33</sup> Rivers facilitate movement of goods, support population centers, and act as strategic corridors. Control over major waterways has allowed Russia to maintain influence over critical regions and connect distant territories. Even in contemporary times, river networks complement railway and pipeline infrastructure, reinforcing Russia's ability to integrate its vast landmass and project economic and military power. Geographic control of these corridors directly affects national security and regional influence.

The Arctic is increasingly central to Russia's geopolitical ambitions. The region contains vast untapped resources, including oil, natural gas, and rare earth minerals.<sup>34</sup> Climate change is opening new navigable routes, such as the Northern Sea Route, which reduces shipping distances between Europe and Asia. Russia has invested in icebreakers, port

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<sup>31</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 79–83

<sup>32</sup> Thane Gustafson, *The Bridge: Natural Gas in a Redivided Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 28–35.

<sup>33</sup> Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography* (New York: Scribner, 2015), 35–40.

<sup>34</sup> Alan Wood, *The Trans-Siberian Railway* (London: Ian Allan Publishing, 2011), 18–23.

facilities, and military installations to secure dominance over these routes. The geographic proximity of other Arctic nations, including the United States, Canada, and Norway, has intensified competition. Russia's policy in the Arctic demonstrates how geography can drive both economic planning and strategic military deployment, making the region a focal point of 21st-century geopolitics.

Population distribution continues to play a critical role in strategic calculations. Most Russians live west of the Ural Mountains, near Europe, while Siberia and the Far East remain sparsely populated.<sup>35</sup> This uneven distribution poses challenges for defense, economic development, and demographic sustainability. Low population density in resource-rich areas creates vulnerabilities, particularly in regions bordering China, Mongolia, and the Arctic. The Russian government has implemented programs to encourage settlement and development in these regions, though harsh climatic and geographic conditions limit the effectiveness of these measures. Geography and demography together shape both policy priorities and regional vulnerabilities.

Transportation networks are a direct response to geographic scale. The Trans-Siberian Railway, along with other railways and highways, is critical for moving goods, energy, and military forces across Russia's vast territory.<sup>36</sup> Pipelines carrying oil and natural gas, such as Nord Stream and Power of Siberia, provide additional connectivity and strategic leverage. Geography dictates the structure and function of these networks, which in turn influence both domestic policy and international relations. Control over transportation corridors allows Russia to integrate its territory, maintain security, and influence neighboring regions.

Resource wealth is geographically determined and central to Russian power. Russia is a leading producer of oil, gas, and minerals, with reserves concentrated in Siberia, the Arctic, and the Caspian Basin.<sup>37</sup> These resources provide economic leverage over Europe and Asia,

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<sup>35</sup> Thane Gustafson, *The Bridge*, 31–36.

<sup>36</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse*, 85–92.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics* (Moscow: Arktogeta, 1997), 40–47.

enabling the Russian state to pursue geopolitical objectives. Resource-rich regions are often remote and underpopulated, requiring investment in infrastructure and security. Russia's reliance on energy exports creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities, as fluctuations in global prices and political sanctions can affect its strategic options. Geography thus shapes the economic foundation of Russian power and the tools used to project influence abroad.

Siberia exemplifies the dual role of geography in Russian geopolitics. It is a source of vast natural wealth but remains underdeveloped and sparsely populated.<sup>38</sup> Maintaining control over Siberia requires significant investment in transportation, energy, and security infrastructure. Its strategic significance lies not only in resources but also in providing depth against external threats. Siberia's geography directly informs Russia's economic planning, security doctrine, and demographic strategies, illustrating the intertwined nature of space, power, and policy.

Geographic positioning also influences Russian identity and ideology. Concepts such as Eurasianism emphasize Russia's unique location bridging Europe and Asia. Geography reinforces the perception of Russia as distinct from both Western and Eastern powers, shaping its political narratives and foreign policy decisions. Leaders often invoke geographic determinism to justify territorial expansion, buffer-zone policy, and influence over neighboring states. The connection between physical space and ideology highlights how deeply geography informs Russia's strategic worldview.

Contemporary Russian foreign policy demonstrates the enduring influence of geography. Vladimir Putin's interventions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria reflect geographic priorities, including securing strategic depth, maintaining warm-water ports, and controlling critical energy and transportation corridors. The annexation of Crimea, for instance, enhanced Russia's Black Sea presence and provided access to key naval infrastructure. Similarly, military involvement in Syria ensured continued access to Tartus,

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<sup>38</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), 61–67.



a critical Mediterranean port. Geography, therefore, continues to shape the contours of Russian strategy, underpinning both regional and global ambitions.

Russia's geographic position has long fostered a sense of vulnerability and shaped a defensive strategic culture. While the country possesses immense natural depth, much of its territory is exposed to potential threats. The combination of flat plains in the west, mountain passes in the south, and long maritime borders creates a complex security environment.<sup>39</sup> As a result, Russian military doctrine emphasizes flexibility, rapid mobilization, and layered defense, often incorporating lessons from historical invasions into contemporary planning. The relationship between geography and strategy is not abstract; it has concrete implications for force deployment, infrastructure investment, and foreign policy decisions.

One of the most significant geographic influences on Russia's policy is the perceived threat of encirclement. Surrounded by NATO member states to the west, China to the east, and a cluster of potentially unstable or foreign-aligned neighbors to the south, Russia perceives itself as at risk of isolation.<sup>40</sup> Geography intensifies this perception, as many neighboring states lie within striking distance of critical Russian cities. For example, St. Petersburg and Moscow are relatively close to the Baltic states and Poland, making control over surrounding regions a top strategic priority. The expansion of Western military alliances into territories historically within Russia's sphere of influence is therefore interpreted as a geographic vulnerability requiring a proactive and often assertive response.

The western frontier has historically been the most contested and politically sensitive. The European Plain offers minimal natural barriers, and Russia's leaders have repeatedly experienced invasions through this corridor.<sup>41</sup> Napoleon, the German Empire, and the Soviet Union's adversaries all exploited these open plains, reinforcing the need for strategic depth. Contemporary Russia maintains significant military presence and infrastructure in

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy Colton, *Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 50–54.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Goble, "Russia's Western Vulnerabilities and NATO Expansion," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 180 (2009).

<sup>41</sup> Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 320–330.

its western regions, from Kaliningrad to Belarus, to compensate for geographic vulnerability. Geography, in this context, directly shapes military posture, alliance strategy, and geopolitical perception.

The Caucasus and southern borderlands are equally critical to Russian security. Mountains, rivers, and passes create a complex terrain that provides both protection and strategic challenge.<sup>42</sup> Control over these regions ensures access to the Black Sea and energy transit corridors, while also mitigating threats from insurgencies and foreign influence. The ongoing Russian presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as periodic interventions in Chechnya and Dagestan, reflects the enduring geographic importance of the south. Geography drives policy by connecting territorial control, energy security, and military necessity.

Central Asia represents a distinct strategic opportunity due to its geographic openness and historical integration with Russia.<sup>43</sup> The vast steppes linking Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan to Russia allow for efficient military, economic, and political influence. Russia's leadership views the region as essential for maintaining a buffer against competing powers, including China, Turkey, and the Middle East. Membership in organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization formalizes influence, while infrastructure investments, such as pipelines and railways, leverage geography to consolidate regional dominance. The open terrain also enables Russia to monitor migration, trade, and security flows, illustrating how geography informs both hard and soft power.

The Far East presents another geographic challenge with strategic implications. While rich in natural resources, the region is sparsely populated and climatically harsh.<sup>44</sup> Vladivostok provides Russia with a Pacific outlet, but the proximity of China, Japan, and Korea introduces potential competition. Geography necessitates significant investment in infrastructure, military deployment, and economic integration to maintain control over

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<sup>42</sup> Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 115–125.

<sup>43</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's Second Chance* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 120–125.

<sup>44</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 90–97.

this remote territory. The Far East also connects to the Arctic, where melting ice and new shipping routes expand both economic and strategic opportunities. Geography, in this sense, is both a constraint and a source of potential influence.

Russia's river systems have long facilitated internal cohesion and strategic mobility. The Volga, Don, and Dnieper rivers enable trade, transport, and military movement across vast distances.<sup>45</sup> Control over these waterways is critical for connecting the heartland to peripheral regions and for projecting influence beyond borders. Rivers complement railway and road networks, allowing Russia to integrate remote areas economically and militarily. Geographic mastery of these corridors has historically been and continues to be central to Russian power.

The Arctic has emerged as a new focal point of Russian strategy. Its ice-covered seas contain untapped energy and mineral resources, and the gradual retreat of ice due to climate change is opening new shipping lanes.<sup>46</sup> Russia has invested heavily in icebreakers, military bases, and port infrastructure to secure dominance in the Arctic. The region's geography, combined with climate trends, creates both opportunity and vulnerability. Competing Arctic nations, including the United States, Canada, and Norway, introduce geopolitical competition, making control over territory, resources, and maritime routes a strategic imperative.

Population patterns also reflect geographic determinants of power. Most Russians live in the west, near Europe, leaving vast eastern and northern regions sparsely inhabited.<sup>47</sup> This imbalance affects economic development, defense planning, and regional influence. Low-density areas, while rich in natural resources, are vulnerable to external influence or economic underdevelopment. Russia has sought to mitigate these geographic and demographic challenges through targeted settlement policies, infrastructure investments, and regional incentives. Geography and demography together shape internal cohesion and external influence.

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 45–48.

<sup>46</sup> Lassi Heininen, *Arctic Policies and Strategies* (London: Routledge, 2018), 72–78.

<sup>47</sup> Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography* (New York: Scribner, 2015), 40–45.

Transportation networks are central to connecting Russia's vast territory. The Trans-Siberian Railway, extensive highways, and pipelines enable the movement of goods, resources, and military assets across thousands of kilometers.<sup>48</sup> These networks integrate remote regions with the core of Russian political and economic power. Geography dictates where infrastructure must be built, what form it should take, and which areas are most strategically important. Control over transportation corridors allows Russia to maintain cohesion internally while projecting influence externally.

Resource geography also underpins Russia's economic and geopolitical power. Oil, natural gas, and minerals are concentrated in Siberia, the Arctic, and the Caspian region.<sup>49</sup> These resources generate revenue and create leverage over neighboring countries, particularly in Europe. Pipelines such as Nord Stream, TurkStream, and Power of Siberia are geographic tools, linking resource-rich regions to markets and creating interdependence. The remote locations of resources, however, require significant investment and defense, highlighting the interplay of opportunity and vulnerability in Russian geography.

Siberia illustrates the dual nature of Russian geography: abundant resources but low population and challenging terrain.<sup>50</sup> Control over Siberia requires significant state investment in infrastructure and security, while its vastness provides strategic depth. The region's geography influences economic planning, security doctrine, and long-term demographic strategies, demonstrating the inseparability of space and policy. Strategic control of Siberia remains essential to Russian power projection in Asia and the Arctic.

Russian identity and ideology are also shaped by geography. Eurasianism emphasizes Russia's unique position as a bridge between Europe and Asia, reinforcing a sense of distinctiveness.<sup>51</sup> Geography underpins these narratives, justifying influence over

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<sup>48</sup> Alan Wood, *The Trans-Siberian Railway* (London: Ian Allan Publishing, 2011), 23–28.

<sup>49</sup> Thane Gustafson, *The Bridge: Natural Gas in a Redivided Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 36–42.

<sup>50</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse*, 100–108.

<sup>51</sup> Alexander Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics* (Moscow: Arktozea, 1997), 45–52

neighboring territories and supporting a vision of Russia as a major continental power. Leaders have used geographic reasoning to legitimize interventions, buffer-zone policies, and expansionist ambitions.

Modern Russian foreign policy demonstrates the continuing influence of geography. Actions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria reflect priorities rooted in terrain, resource access, and strategic depth.<sup>52</sup> The annexation of Crimea enhanced control over the Black Sea and provided access to critical naval infrastructure. Engagement in Syria ensured access to Tartus, a key Mediterranean port. Geography, therefore, remains a fundamental driver of Russia's strategy, influencing the selection of objectives, methods, and spheres of influence.

Russia's geography is inseparable from its geopolitical strategy, and understanding this connection is essential for interpreting both historical and contemporary Russian behavior. Its vast landmass, spanning Europe and Asia, imposes both constraints and opportunities, influencing national defense, resource management, economic planning, and foreign policy.<sup>53</sup> Geography shapes not only the state's strategic choices but also the perceptions and behaviors of Russian leaders, contributing to a persistent security culture centered on buffer zones, territorial depth, and control of critical corridors. The historical memory of invasions through flat plains, southern passes, and limited maritime access reinforces the contemporary emphasis on preemptive control and strategic influence over neighboring states.

The western border remains the most geopolitically sensitive region due to the lack of natural barriers and the proximity of European powers.<sup>54</sup> The European Plain allows rapid military movement, making states such as Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic nations critical to Russian strategic calculations. Russia's historical experience of repeated invasions through this corridor has solidified a doctrine that emphasizes preemptive influence and the maintenance of buffer zones.<sup>55</sup> Modern military deployments, missile defense

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<sup>52</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), 68–75.

<sup>53</sup> Timothy Colton, *Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 54–58.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Goble, "Russia's Western Vulnerabilities and NATO Expansion," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 180 (2009).

<sup>55</sup> Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 335–342.

initiatives, and political alignments in these areas demonstrate the continuing impact of geography on policy. The perception of Western encroachment, often amplified by geographic proximity, reinforces the Kremlin's insistence on controlling or influencing these regions.

In the south, the Caucasus Mountains and associated river valleys create a complex strategic environment.<sup>56</sup> Control over mountain passes, energy pipelines, and border regions is central to Russian security, providing access to the Black Sea and protecting southern approaches to the heartland. Military operations and political interventions in Chechnya, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia are manifestations of geographic imperatives, linking terrain, resources, and strategic necessity. Geography in this context is not merely a backdrop but an active driver of policy and intervention.

Central Asia's open terrain and proximity to Russia's southern borders further highlight geographic determinants of strategy.<sup>57</sup> The steppes connecting Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan allow efficient projection of influence, facilitating trade, energy transit, and military operations. Russia maintains its dominance through regional alliances, infrastructure investments, and monitoring of migration and security flows. Geography enables and constrains policy: the absence of natural barriers encourages engagement, while the vast distances require sustained administrative and logistical investment.

The Far East and Arctic regions illustrate both opportunity and challenge in Russian geopolitics.<sup>58</sup> These regions are rich in resources, including oil, gas, minerals, and timber, yet sparsely populated and climatically harsh. Investment in infrastructure, transportation, and military installations is essential to secure control and facilitate economic development. Arctic melting trends and new shipping lanes, such as the Northern Sea Route, have expanded Russia's strategic horizons, creating both potential leverage and international

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 125–134.

<sup>57</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's Second Chance* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 125–130.

<sup>58</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 97–104.

competition. Geography directly shapes military deployment, infrastructure planning, and resource management, highlighting the inseparability of terrain and strategy.

Population distribution remains a crucial geographic factor. Most Russians reside west of the Ural Mountains, concentrating political, economic, and cultural influence, while Siberia and the Far East remain sparsely populated.<sup>59</sup> This demographic reality affects defense, economic planning, and regional governance. Low population density in resource-rich areas increases vulnerability to external influence and necessitates investment in settlement, infrastructure, and security. Geography and demography together influence the feasibility of sustained control over vast territories and the strategic calculus of state policy.

Transportation networks demonstrate the interplay of geography and state capability. The Trans-Siberian Railway, pipelines, highways, and river systems connect remote regions to the political and economic core.<sup>60</sup> Control over these networks allows Russia to integrate distant territories, secure resource flows, and project influence abroad. Geography dictates where infrastructure must be built, how it is maintained, and which areas are strategically prioritized. Transportation networks serve as both enablers of internal cohesion and instruments of external power projection.

Resource distribution is a decisive factor in Russia's geopolitics. Oil, natural gas, and minerals concentrated in Siberia, the Arctic, and the Caspian region form the foundation of economic power and geopolitical leverage.<sup>61</sup> Energy exports provide influence over Europe and Asia, while the remote and harsh locations of these resources require protection and logistical investment. Geography determines both the location of wealth and the means by which it can be exploited, linking terrain directly to economic and strategic objectives.

Siberia exemplifies the dual character of geography as both an asset and a challenge.<sup>62</sup> Its resources enhance national power, yet its low population, extreme climate, and logistical

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<sup>59</sup>Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography* (New York: Scribner, 2015), 45–50.

<sup>60</sup> Alan Wood, *The Trans-Siberian Railway* (London: Ian Allan Publishing, 2011), 28–32.

<sup>61</sup> Thane Gustafson, *The Bridge: Natural Gas in a Redivided Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 42–48.

<sup>62</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse*, 108–115.

difficulties require significant state investment. Maintaining control over Siberia ensures strategic depth, secures energy resources, and provides a buffer against potential eastern threats. The management of Siberia demonstrates how geographic factors influence economic, security, and demographic policy simultaneously, reflecting the complexity of Russian statecraft.

Geography also informs Russia's conceptualization of identity and global role. Eurasianism, emphasizing Russia as a bridge between Europe and Asia, derives legitimacy partly from geographic position.<sup>63</sup> Geography reinforces the narrative of Russia as a distinct civilization, shaping both domestic political ideology and foreign policy. Territorial expansion, buffer-zone control, and regional influence are often justified through geographic reasoning, highlighting the centrality of space in strategic thinking.

Modern Russian foreign policy continues to reflect geographic imperatives. Actions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria demonstrate the priority of strategic depth, access to warm-water ports, and control of critical energy and transportation corridors.<sup>64</sup> Crimea's annexation secured Black Sea access and naval infrastructure, while intervention in Syria ensured influence over the Mediterranean port of Tartus. Geography dictates the objectives, methods, and scope of Russia's global engagement, emphasizing that territorial considerations remain central to strategy even in the 21st century.

The interaction of geography with climate, demography, and resources underscores the complexity of Russian geopolitics. Harsh winters, sparsely populated resource-rich regions, and uneven population distribution create both vulnerabilities and opportunities.<sup>65</sup> Geography dictates the location of infrastructure, the focus of military deployments, and the selection of foreign policy priorities. Russian strategic culture is fundamentally shaped

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<sup>63</sup> Alexander Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics* (Moscow: Arktozea, 1997), 52–59.

<sup>64</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), 75–82

<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 80–88.



by these physical realities, reinforcing centralization, preemptive influence, and territorial ambition.

## CONCLUSION

Russia's geopolitical behavior cannot be separated from its geography. Strategic depth, open plains on the western frontier, harsh climate, concentrated population, remote resource-rich regions, and constrained maritime access all contribute to a structural environment in which insecurity and ambition coexist. The state seeks to compensate for geographic vulnerabilities by creating buffer zones, controlling critical transit routes, investing in military capabilities, and projecting influence into neighboring regions.

The cases of Ukraine, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Arctic demonstrate how geography shapes both the objectives and instruments of Russian policy. While history, leadership, ideology, and economic factors all matter, they operate within a spatial framework that channels and constrains choices. Understanding Russia as, in part, a “hostage” or “prisoner” of its geography does not absolve decision-makers of responsibility, but it highlights why certain patterns—such as the pursuit of strategic depth and buffer zones—recur over time.

For scholars and practitioners of security studies, this implies that any analysis of Russian policy must integrate geographic factors into its explanatory toolkit. For policymakers, it suggests that stable relations with Russia require not only deterrence and diplomacy, but also a realistic appreciation of the geographic pressures under which the Russian state operates.

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