
Russia's Window on the World: Freezing Weather and Political Dynamics in Moscow

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Summary : Numerous Russian ports contend with challenges posed by ice and cold weather or rely on narrow straits controlled by other nations for access to the open sea. For example, Vladivostok, Russia's largest port, connects to the Pacific Ocean via the Sea of Japan, an area with ties to the United States. Moreover, this crucial port faces a four-month closure each year, and the absence of icebreakers would severely impede Russia's operations and trade. On the western front, Russian warships departing from St. Petersburg can navigate the Baltic Sea to reach the Atlantic Ocean. However, they must traverse the narrow Strait of Oresund, situated between Sweden and Denmark, adding to logistical complexities.

Part One

Amidst the chilly embrace of Moscow's wintry air and the shadow of the Cold War with the United States, I set foot in this historic city for the first time, attending a conference. Despite hearing tales of its beauty, experiencing it firsthand was an altogether enchanting affair. The picturesque landscapes often served as a temporary distraction from the biting cold, yet there were moments when the frosty air showed no regard for beauty or any other considerations, mercilessly numbing one's hands.

Sergei, a pharmacist by profession, shared that he occasionally drives taxis due to the challenging economic conditions. "Having lived in Moscow for 54 years," he reflected, "I've seen its beauty shine through when the city is snow-free, but alas, that's only about four months a year." Sergei attributed the prolonged snowfall from October to May to Russia's cold climate. Inquiring about the economic situation, Sergei shared that it was prosperous before the war in Ukraine, but now it's taken a downturn. Despite his family's lineage tracing back to the Romanov family of Russian emperors, Sergei declined to discuss politics, stating firmly, "I prefer not to get involved." During our drive to the hotel, Sergei shared some Russian phrases about the cold and offered insights on drinking vodka, which he proudly referred to as his country's national drink. With a hint of humor, he quipped about beer and wine, jesting that they couldn't withstand the cold like vodka could.

The bitter cold, known as "Moroz" in Russian, holds a significant place in Russian culture, influencing various aspects of life from social norms to political discourse. Russians believe that no season is inherently bad if one knows how to adapt to it. While this may not hold much significance for us, considering our experiences with summer heat reaching nearly 50 degrees Celsius, it refers more to the adaptation of Russian Orthodox culture and civilization to the Siberian cold.

Rousseau once posited that warm climates give rise to authoritarian governments, while cold climates breed harsh regimes, with moderate conditions fostering benevolent governance. Ibn Khaldun, on the other hand, traced the state's origins to the conflict between nomads and settlers, a topic of considerable nuance. I don't want to suggest a direct link between Russia's political system and its geography and climate, such an oversimplification overlooks the multitude of historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors at play. Instead, I want to emphasize that behind Moscow's windows, politics resembles the chilling weather, where the specter of hostility looms ever-present. A momentary lapse in attention can jolt one like a sudden shiver. Therefore, in today's geopolitical landscape of Russia, the state must stand as resolute as towering structures, fortified with formidable weaponry and comprehensive security measures to withstand threats, ensuring that adversaries do not overpower it like the relentless cold.

In 1939, British Prime Minister Churchill remarked, "From the Russian viewpoint, strength is paramount, and nothing is more invaluable than weakness, particularly military weakness." Sixty-six years later, Vladimir Putin, envisioning a revival of Russia's former glory, lamented the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the century, seemingly affirming Churchill's assertion.

Russia currently finds itself embroiled in both a tangible conflict and a cold war with the United States and Europe, and it's evident that geography and climate play significant roles in this ongoing struggle. With a sprawling expanse covering 17.125 million square kilometers, Russia stands as the largest country globally, roughly double the size of the United States and a colossal 40 times larger than Iraq. Remarkably, even in the 21st century, traversing Russia from one end to the other can take up to six days by certain measures. This vast terrain presents a persistent security challenge for the Kremlin, akin to navigating treacherous winter terrain. However, it also poses a formidable barrier for any entities aiming to conquer Russia, as subduing such a vast landmass requires substantial manpower and logistical capabilities. Additionally, soldiers must endure the grueling Siberian cold, further complicating any attempts to seize control.

Allen F. Chew vividly portrays the winter cold as a formidable Russian army general, prevailing against the invasions of King Charles XII of Sweden, Napoleon, and Hitler in 1708, 1812, and 1941 respectively. These historic conflicts, characterized by brutal Russian winters, led to the freezing of countless enemy soldiers. However, despite its role as a strategic ally in military defense, the cold also poses challenges for Russian geopolitics. It constrains Russia's ability to develop a robust naval force, a crucial element often deemed necessary for achieving global dominance. Thus, while the winter cold has historically bolstered Russia's defenses, it simultaneously impedes its ambitions to assert itself as a leading world power.

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Following Sweden and Finland, the remaining eight Baltic Sea countries are NATO members, an alliance initially formed to counter Soviet Union. From the southwest, Russia can employ its ports of Novorossiysk and Sevastopol (in Crimea) for military endeavors, yet it requires the consent of NATO member Turkey to access the Mediterranean. While Russia enjoys access to the Arctic Ocean from its northern borders, it faces a perpetual adversary in the region, leading to the seasonal closure and incapacitation of ports like Murmansk in the north for several months each year.

While on my way back to the hotel, I observed a location near Moscow City that had been targeted by Ukrainian drones. Russia's lack of significant geographical barriers, such as high terrain, extensive rivers, and vast valleys, makes it vulnerable to external threats. When considering these factors collectively, it becomes easier to comprehend Russia's foreign policy in Eastern Europe and its involvement in conflicts such as those in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria.

Although a British cartoonist may have been the first to depict a bear as a symbol of Russia, the Russians embrace this symbolism. The bear features prominently on Putin's party logo and is also present on the emblems of at least three cities. Known as Medved in Russian, meaning "honey-eater," the bear embodies qualities of wisdom and strength. While it may appear dormant at times, when provoked, its wrath is formidable.