One of the principal assumptions following the end of the Cold War was that geopolitics would become increasingly anachronistic. The removal of the bipolar confrontation of the past would be replaced by a new, positive-sum politics, while Russia’s national interests would be defined not in terms of ‘geopolitical alignment’ but instead in the ‘establishment of a high standard of living for its population and the preservation of human rights’ [Kozyrev, 1992b, p. 5]. While there would inevitably be differences on individual issues, the end of ideological confrontation between Russia and the West, and the de-ideologization of international affairs in general, would foster a cooperative atmosphere that would enable disagreements to be resolved on their merits, free from the baggage of the past.

By the end of the Yeltsin presidency, however, it was evident that these expectations had been misplaced. Economic factors and priorities certainly became more important, but they had yet to present a serious challenge to the continuing primacy of geopolitics in Russian foreign policy. Just as ideology retained its importance in Moscow’s world-view, so did zero-sum principles, balance-of-power concepts and notions of spheres of influence. For all the talk and deeds of international cooperation in promoting political stability, economic development, environmental protection and civil values, old-fashioned political-strategic competition showed few signs of abating. Indeed, with the enlargement of NATO eastwards and the outbreak of the Kosovo conflict, geopolitical attitudes within the Russian political elite hardened, if anything.
This chapter examines four key aspects of geopolitics in Yeltsin’s Russia. First is the phenomenon itself, whose durability at a time of globalizing and ‘economizing’ trends elsewhere was one of the more curious features of international politics during the 1990s. Notwithstanding realization of the obvious – that Russia could not in the foreseeable future match the United States – the memory and habits of the Soviet past were so strong that, as if through inertia, Moscow continued to think in terms of a circumscribed geopolitical calculus. This strategic culture was founded, in turn, on three conceptual building blocks: (i) a zero-sum mentality; (ii) the balance of power; and (iii) spheres of influence. The first of these was the life-blood of a geopolitically-based foreign policy. Driven by a 

\[ \text{ktu kogo} \] (‘who wins over whom’) mentality in which for every winner there must be a loser, zero-sum equations were crucial in shaping Moscow’s approach towards a whole range of issues: NATO enlargement, Iraq, Kosovo, strategic missile defence. If zero-sum was the ‘soul’ of geopolitics, then balance-of-power notions supplied its flesh and bones. Having made the judgement that the world remained a competitive and sometimes hostile place, the Yeltsin administration faced the task of adjusting to this reality by negotiating suitable arrangements to promote national security and economic interests. With the rough bipolar parity a thing of the past, it attempted to develop a range of mechanisms – alliances, ‘strategic partnerships’, pan-continental ‘consensual’ institutions, multipolarity, arms control agreements – that would, at least in part, ‘compensate’ for Russia’s declining position in the world and in particular vis-à-vis the United States. The multiplicity of mechanisms indicated not so much the emergence of an identifiably post-Soviet way of looking at the world, as recognition that the pursuit of geopolitical ends now required more multidimensional and subtle tools. Similarly, the concept of spheres of influence or ‘zones of special interests’, the final element of the geopolitical triad, took on a different cloaking in the Yeltsin era. No longer able to rely on military instruments to assert its primacy, except in the most restricted of circumstances, Moscow was nevertheless reluctant to jettison the principle along with the means. It continued to view the CIS as a region for the projection of Russian influence, and Eastern Europe as a buffer zone in which Moscow’s interests must be accorded priority. The bitter if ineffectual campaign against NATO enlargement highlighted the importance of such ideas, as well as the primacy of geopolitics more generally.