

American IR and Russian Foreign Policy

ABSTRACT

We examine some problematic narratives in the American IR scholarship on Russia, focusing on some implicit assumptions about the drivers of Russian foreign policy. Most prominently, this includes the idea that Russian foreign policy is driven primarily by the qualities of its internal regime. While domestic institutions undoubtedly matter, we argue that two other factors are key for understanding Russian foreign policy – the pursuit of primacy in its immediate neighborhood, and the pursuit of peer recognition with major Western powers. These forces are key for understanding Russian behavior abroad, transcend particular leaders and domestic institutions, and can help explain “unexpected” shifts in Putin’s foreign policy that purely domestic explanations tend to miss.

As a historical rival, Russia occupies a unique place in American IR scholarship. But being placed under an academic lens can distort as much as it clarifies. Here we outline some problematic narratives in the American IR scholarship on Russia, focusing on some implicit assumptions about the drivers of Russian foreign policy. Most prominently, this includes the assumption that Russian foreign policy is closely linked to – perhaps even determined by – the qualities of its internal regime. Thus a democratic (or democratizing) Russia, under late-era Gorbachev or Yeltsin, is assumed to be inherently peaceful toward the West. On the other hand, an autocratic (or de-democratizing) Russia is assumed to be inherently belligerent, revanchist, and aggressively anti-Western, as has been the case under Putin.

While domestic institutions inevitably shape foreign policy, we argue that focusing on the peculiarities of Putin’s rule misses two key drivers of Russian policies abroad. Both of these are independent (though never completely disconnected) from the regime’s domestic institutions, its governing ideology, and the qualities of its leader. The first driver is the quest for *primacy* in its foreign relations with smaller states in its geographic neighborhood. This primacy has often taken the form of formal empire, although its ultimate goal is not necessarily direct control but acquiescence to Russia’s influence in the region. This centuries-long geopolitical pursuit, mirroring America’s own long-term quest for a sphere of influence, transcends domestic institutions and offers a fundamental source of continuity that links Tsarist, Communist, and post-Communist foreign policy.

A second fundamental driver is the pursuit of *derzhavnost’* in Russia’s relations with major powers outside its neighborhood. Though difficult to render into English directly, *derzhavnost’* refers to the state of possessing – and being recognized to possess by others – clear status as a great power. It therefore includes elements of prestige, peer recognition, and a seat at the table in managing the global order. Putin’s attempts at rapprochement with the West are motivated in part by a quest to present Russia as an active and responsible partner in the modern community of nations. Likewise, Putin’s stances against the West (e.g. over Iraq or Ukraine) are part of a desire to project an image of a sovereign and independent regional power, not subject to what it sees as the whims of a capricious and hypocritical US-led order.

Like primacy, the quest for *derzhavnost'* is in key respects divorced from the ideological basis of Russia's domestic regime. It is concerned with power and status above all, and lends Russian foreign policy a flexibility that domestically-focused explanations tend to miss, leaving them unable to predict or explain pro-Western initiatives undertaken by Putin. Since these attempts at finding common ground occur in the context of growing Russian authoritarianism, the 'domestic sources' approach has trouble accounting for their sources. Putin's attempts at cooperation with the West (such as after 9/11, or over Iran's nuclear program) are erroneously viewed as surprising or uncharacteristic, and dismissed as cynical distractions, incoherent lurches, or signs of Russian weakness.

Divining the foreign policies of other states from their domestic institutions is a long-standing element of both American policy-making and international relations scholarship. It comprises an essential part of the Wilsonian tradition, and shapes widely accepted IR approaches like democratic peace theory. We therefore call this tendency the "Wilsonian bias" in American IR: the tendency to overestimate the extent to which domestic regime type influences a country's foreign policy, especially within non-democratic regimes. As we argue, the tight coupling of domestic ideology with foreign policy behavior ignores some key elements in the long-term determinants of Russian foreign policy.

Relatedly, and partly as a result of the above assumptions, Russian policy is sometimes conflated with Putin's foreign policy. This obscures the fact that Russia's drive for regional hegemony and major power recognition transcends individual leader motivations and will likely continue regardless of who becomes Putin's successor. This pursuit can also help explain Russian belligerence in Ukraine and elsewhere – a motivation sometimes ignored in American analysis of Russian behavior. Thus for a scholar like Michael McFaul (2014:171) to say that the roots of the Ukraine crisis are "about Putin and his unconstrained, erratic adventurism" misses the historical and geopolitical context in which the conflict takes place. To argue that in Ukraine "Putin made impulsive decisions that subordinated Russia's national interest to his own personal political motives," as Stephen Sestanovich (2014:172) does, reduces a centuries-long national interest to the delusional whims of an impulsive, bitter, and volatile ideologue. To be sure, none of this excuses Russia's belligerent behavior, but it does point toward essential motivations behind its

foreign policy that domestic or leader-oriented explanations tend to miss.

The remainder of this paper traces American scholarly analyses of Russian behavior through several key turning points in the US-Russian relationship since the 1990s. The analysis suggests that assessments of Russian behavior are based primarily on the country's domestic regime, and thus have a limited ability to understand sudden shifts in foreign policy.

American IR and Assumptions about Russia

Scholars of international relations recognize that their discipline often reflects political, ideological, and epistemological biases of Western or American culture. Different traditions of Western IR, including realism, liberalism, critical theory, and feminism, have been criticized as ethnocentric and insufficiently open to voices and arguments outside the West (Oyewumi, 1997; Inayatulla and Blaney, 2004; Shani 2008; Hobson 2012; Tickner 2013; Acharya 2014). Implicit in the argument is the importance of ideology, especially national ideology, in shaping the foundations of social science (Tsygankov & Tsygankov 2010). In Stanley Hoffmann's words, "Scholars do not like to think about their intellectual dependence on the status of their country, and on ambitions of its political elites; it disturbs their sense of belonging to a cosmopolitan, free-floating community of science (Hoffmann 1995, 225). In the case of the United States, an essentially national ideology claims to have universal status, and the positivist methodology then serves to shape knowledge in accordance with the standards of the particular local community – in part, for the purpose of shaping the world politically. As E. H. Carr observed in 1977, the "study of international relations in English-speaking countries is simply a study of the best way to run the world from positions of strength" (Carr 2001, xiii).

With respect to scholarship that seeks to generate ideas for policy makers, several assumptions and propositions make up what may be viewed as the core of policy-relevant American IR. A blend of realism and liberal institutionalism, these assumptions and propositions are centered on the idea of the United States' global leadership. American leadership is maintained through suppression of national security threats, development of international institutions, and promotion of economic openness and liberal democracy across the world. As Stephen G. Brooks, G. John

Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth wrote in their article “Don’t Come Home, America”, these ideas have become essential parts of U.S. grand strategy to achieve its interests over the long run: “For more than sixty years, the United States has sought to advance its core interests in security, prosperity, and domestic liberty by pursuing three overlapping objectives: managing the external environment to reduce near- and long-term threats to U.S. national security; promoting a liberal economic order to expand the global economy and maximize domestic prosperity; and creating, sustaining, and revising the global institutional order to secure necessary interstate cooperation on terms favorable to U.S. interests” (Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012, 11)

Although the authors do not include democracy promotion as a constant or defining element of U.S. grand strategy, in the post-Cold War world promotion of democracy has been essential to preservation of the U.S. leadership by all American presidents (with the possible exception of Donald Trump). Indeed, leading American commentators proclaimed the global spread of market democracy as soon as Soviet ideological decline became evident. In the words of *The Wall Street Journal* and *Foreign Affairs*, there was now only “one dominant principle of legitimacy, democracy” (Plattner 1988) and only one dominant power to uphold this principle due to the superiority of its military, economic, and ideological capacity (Krauthammer 1991).

Given its global importance and ideological difference from the U.S., Russia has been a key reference point for this American IR outlook. During the Cold War, U.S. government, social science, media, and popular culture often presented differences with the USSR as an irreconcilable struggle between two fundamentally different value systems. Americans defined themselves through the Soviet “other” while viewing their own country’s values as incomparably superior to and more legitimate than those of the USSR (Dalby 1988; Foglesong 2007). America was the land of freedom and equality before law, whereas the Soviet state was the oppressive empire that sought to dominate its neighbors through force. After the Soviet dissolution, Russia’s narrative took on the shape of a transformation story, with a contingent of American social scientists devoting their research to Russia’s “transition to democracy.” Following the failure of this transformation, American interest in Russia quickly waned; some of those who in the 1990s

saw the country as a successful case of democracy-building began to analyze it as a dictatorship.¹ Over the past decade and a half, Russia's role has been transformed from a weak but emergent element of the new liberal world into its principal opponent.

Three principal assumptions about Russia have defined the perspective of American IR in the post-Cold War world. Two of them are concerned with the domestic drivers of Russian foreign policy – namely, its values as embodied in its internal political system. Both of these key assumptions attempt to locate the sources of Russian foreign policy in its domestic institutions. The third assumption concerns the country's state capacity and national power relative to the U.S.

The first assumption is to equate Russian democracy with acquiescence to American foreign policy preferences. This assumption is guided by the looming example of Gorbachev's foreign policy pliancy in the late 1980s, which was tightly coupled with his efforts to democratize Russian politics internally. By this rationale, a democratic Russia will be peaceful and generally receptive to the America's global leadership. As Michael McFaul (1998, 6) wrote in a leading IR journal, Russia's democratic transition did not lead to belligerent international behavior because Russian liberals defined as those committed to markets, free trade, individual rights, and democracy have defeated their illiberal opponents. In policy terms, the assumption implies the need for the United States to support Russian liberals, and push for the country's democratic transition in the interests of global peace and stability.

The second assumption – perhaps the more salient one for today – is a corollary of the first. It argues that an autocratic Russia is much more likely to foment the narrative of Western threats at home, while also engaging in aggressive revisionist behavior abroad. It stands to reason, therefore, that the United States and Western nations are better off trying to contain or transform an autocratic Moscow, rather than engaging it as a partner in shaping the global system. The growing academic literature on “autocracy promotion” following Putin's assertive foreign policy has served to empirically support these positions. Vitali Silitski (2010), for example, describes an

¹ For examples of such evolution, see Fish 1995, 2005; McFaul 1993, 2001; McFaul and Stoner-Weiss 2008. For an early critique of transition scholarship, see Cohen 1999.

emerging “authoritarian international” that seeks to counter Western democracy promotion efforts. Thomas Ambrosio (2009, 2010) has written on “authoritarian diffusion” as a process through which Russia bolsters and supports imitators abroad. And Rachel Vanderhill (2013) has argued that autocracy promotion by countries like Russia and Iran is an important part of their strategy of counteracting democracy promotion by the West.

The third assumption concerns Russia’s state capacity and the country’s ability to challenge America’s global leadership. Here, most American IR scholars have argued that Russia’s material and political capabilities do not match those of the United States. Indeed, as the scholar and subsequently advisor to President Obama Celeste Wallander (2007, 140) wrote, Russia remains fundamentally weakened by the competition of rival clans within the Kremlin and the overall political class. Its strategy is “neither grand, nor strategic, nor sustainable,” and “whether Russia will survive as a great power in the 21st century is an open question” because it practices the culture of patronage and corruption that continues to reveal the ineffectiveness of the state. Russia’s international assertiveness is a bluff to conceal the nation’s chronically weak fundamentals, wrote two other scholars (Menon and Motyl 2007). Therefore, the U.S. remains fully capable of containing Russia should the Kremlin engage in revisionist behavior and the rational response from the Kremlin would be to look for ways to cooperate with Washington, rather than challenge it.

U.S. policy and official statements reflect this perspective on Russia held by American IR. While officials frequently identify the United States as “indispensable”, “exceptional”, and standing “taller than other nations”, the conventional wisdom on Russia is that it a declining autocratic power that is in no position to compete with the U.S. on a global scene. For instance, in the midst of the 2009 global financial crisis Vice-President Joseph Biden (2009) said, "The reality is, the Russians are ...in a situation where the world is changing before them and they're clinging to something in the past that is not sustainable." In her book “Hard Choices”, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described Putin as “thin-skinned and autocratic, resenting criticism and eventually cracking down on dissent and debate” (Taylor 2014). President Barak Obama in April 2014 publicly referred to Russia as a “regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbors not out of strength but out of weakness” (Wilson 2014).

The Record of Inaccurate Assessments

The above perception of Russia's motives and capabilities has regularly resulted in flawed assessments of the country's foreign policy. On some occasions, scholars and policy makers were surprised by the Kremlin's assertiveness, expecting Russia to largely comply with the U.S. policies. On other occasions, they were caught off guard by Russia's proposals of cooperation that in some cases implied a principal change in bilateral relations. This section briefly reviews several critical turns in Russian foreign policy after the Cold War – both toward conflict and cooperation – as they were assessed by influential American scholars and policy makers.

On at least three occasions, Russia turned away from expected cooperation toward an assertive foreign policy. In the mid-1990s, for the first time since the Soviet dissolution, Russia adopted a Eurasianist rather than West-centered foreign policy. New state priorities included improving relations with non-Western countries and integrating the former Soviet region under the tighter control of Moscow. The country's National Security Concept of 1997 identified Russia as an “influential European and Asian power” and recommended that Russia maintain equal distancing in relations to the “global European and Asian economic and political actors” and presented a positive program for the integration of the CIS efforts in the security area.² The newly appointed Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov sought to strengthen Russia's relations with China, India, and Iran, to guard Russia's financial independence from the IMF, opposed NATO's eastward expansion, and the West's intervention in Iraq and Yugoslavia.

Most American scholars and policy makers did not expect the Primakov turn, just as in November 1993 they did not expect the victory of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's nationalist party in Russia's parliamentary elections. Washington opposed Primakov's candidacy and expected it to be blocked by the Kremlin. As *Financial Times* editorialized, of all the possible successors to the first Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, Primakov was “probably the least welcome in Washington.”³ Influential scholars also did not expect the assertive turn. The already mentioned McFaul had little to say except argue that Primakov's policy was generally not able to “derail

² National Security Concepts and Foreign Policy Concepts are available in: Shakleyina 2002, Vol. 4, 51-90, 110-111.

³ “The need for a new Ostpolitik,” *Financial Times*, January 16, 1996.

Russian relations with the West” (McFaul 1997, 26). Others recognized assertiveness for what it was but were surprised by Primakov’s “capacity to extract concessions” (MacFarlane 1999, 244) from the United States despite Russia’s continuous decline in 1992-1997 and the lack of balancing options. One scholar noted, “Despite the sharp decline of its power, Russia has been far more successful and far less reticent in asserting its interests in the southern Near Abroad than is generally acknowledged” (Menon 1998, 148).

Another “surprising” turn of events came with Putin’s assertiveness in relations with the West in the mid-2000s, following the United States’ military intervention in Iraq and the democratic color revolutions that swept through the former Soviet region in 2003–2005. Russia signaled that it wanted a larger stake in the international system and was no longer content to be a junior partner of the West, as it was during the 1990s. In his bellicose speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2007, Putin (2007) accused the United States of “disdain for the basic principles of international law” and having “overstepped its national borders in . . . the economic, political, cultural, and educational policies.”

Western scholars, pundits, and policy makers expected Putin’s assertiveness from an “autocrat” and “nationalist” (Brzezinski 2004; Hoagland 2007; Lucas 2008) yet were surprised by its specific elements. The Kremlin’s intervention in Georgia in August 2008 and, ultimately, in Ukraine in 2014 came as shocks. Many IR experts viewed Nato expansion as largely irreversible and not subject to veto by Russia. They argued that the alliance’s expansion would help to promote democracy and security in Europe. When Russia’s Georgia intervention did take place, some of them saw it as evidence that Nato had to be expanded further (Asmus 2010, 221). U.S. policy makers likewise assumed that the process would continue. Although Russia was highly critical of the West’s decision to recognize Kosovo’s independence and Nato’s willingness to consider membership for Georgia and Ukraine, U.S. officials took these criticisms lightly. They pressed for the alliance’s Membership Action Plan for these countries during Nato’s summit in Bucharest in April 2008. Less than a month before Russia’s intervention in Georgia in August 2008, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice travelled to Europe and Georgia, but found no time to visit Moscow.

Similarly, with respect to Ukraine, the United States and the EU leaders endorsed the new government in Kiev following the EuroMaidan revolution without any regard for Moscow's criticism. The assumption, again, was that Russia was weak and unable to sustain its opposition confronted with the West's concerted actions and imposed sanctions against the Russian economy. In January 2015 President Obama said that the Russian economy was "in tatters", while Anders Aslund of the Peterson Institute for International Economics predicted a 10% drop in Russia's GDP during the year (Bershidsky 2015). During that year, Russia's economy contracted by 3.7%.

The next surprise came when in October 2015 Russia intervened in a military conflict in Syria on the government's side. Again, many American analysts and IR experts found the intervention to be in line with Putin's "autocratic" instincts and assessed it as yet another example of an "adventurist" foreign policy. Such policy, they warned, is not likely to stabilize Syria and may result in failure. As Angela Stent (2015) wrote, "Although it is tempting to search for a broader strategy behind Russian military activity in Syria, it's quite possible that Putin charged into the conflict without thinking through the endgame." President Obama even stated that "an attempt by Russia to prop up Assad and try to pacify the population is just going to get them stuck in a quagmire" (Bell and Perry 2015). The quagmire scenario never materialized and by the early 2017, the coalition of Russia, Syria, Iran, and Turkey defeated ISIS in Aleppo and Palmira, achieved cease-fire, and begun the process of political negotiations between Damask and the Syrian rebel factions.

Yet on several other occasions, Russia unexpectedly turned away from conflict and toward cooperation with the United States and the West. The example of Mikhail Gorbachev forms the key initial precedent. When he initially proposed Russia's turn to "New Thinking" along with *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the majority of American Sovietologists were skeptically greeted it as a clever ploy of the young Soviet apparatchik. As time passed, however, the revolutionary nature of the new Soviet foreign policy became apparent to many. Still, prominent IR scholars continued to dispute its sources. For instance, in 2001 two leading scholars presented the leader of New Thinking not as a conceptual innovator, but as the "overseer of the Soviet strategic retreat" who was simply reacting to the country's economic and technological decline. (Brooks and Wohlforth

2001) Responding to their argument, Robert English (2002) pointed out that Gorbachev had alternative courses of action and that the origins of New Thinking dated back to the late 1950s and 1960s, and had to do with domestic changes and the revival of cultural links to the West, not defense calculations and economic needs.

The second example is Putin's cooperation with the United States following the attacks of 9/11. Russia's president was among the first to call President George Bush to express his support and pledge important resources to help America in its fight against terror. Against the reservations of the political class and other areas of society, Putin offered America broad support for operations in Afghanistan that included intelligence sharing, opening Russian airspace to relief missions, taking part in search-and-rescue operations, rallying Central Asian countries to the American cause, and arming anti-Taliban forces inside Afghanistan. Determined to overcome skepticism at home and abroad, Putin pressed forward by stressing the broad positive potential of the new Russia-U.S. relationship including in the areas of counter-terrorism, nuclear security, energy, and regional stability. In May 2002 *The Economist* (2002) summed up these efforts in the following words: "America's relations with Russia are now better than at any time since the end of the Second World War and are improving."

Even though Putin's efforts to engage the United States predated September 11, many scholars did not expect them and could not offer a compelling explanation. As with the reaction to Gorbachev, American IR scholars and experts misunderstood the magnitude and sources of Putin's foreign policy. Some expressed deep skepticism, insisting on Moscow's expansionist beliefs, anti-Western political culture, and intent to undermine American hegemony (CFR 2006; Lapidus 2007). After all, as McFaul (2003) wrote, the new Russia policy was merely a part of the overall grand strategy of anti-democratic regime change. Others pointed to Russia's structural weakness and argued that Putin's policy was a case of siding with the strongest when Russia was in no position to balance American power (Mankoff 2011).

Finally, American IR is even more skeptical of Russia's interest in cooperation with the United States today. Neither Russia's proposal to develop an international process of eliminating Syrian chemical weapons in September 2013, or participation in joint efforts to limit the Iranian nuclear

program (resulting in the July 2015 agreement), as well as Putin's offer to cooperate on Syria in September 2015 are not considered sufficient evidence. Today Russia is being viewed as a leading threat to the American global order. Its annexation of Crimea, support for separatists in eastern part of Ukraine, and alleged hacking of the Democratic National Committee's site exacerbated fears of Kremlin's "autocratic expansionism." Leading American analysts of Russia such as Steven Sestanovich (2014) and Michael McFaul (2014) argued that Russian foreign policy grew more aggressive in response to Putin's authoritarian politics, not U.S. policies. Some have gone as far as to compare Russia's actions to those of Nazi Germany, which incorporated Austria in 1938 before breaking up Czechoslovakia and igniting a World War (Snyder 2014).

In this climate, Russia is expected to engage in further revisionist behavior abroad, not cooperate with the West. In line with these expectations, many Russia experts therefore advocate a stronger response to Putin than that adopted by the White House, centered on sanctions against the Russian economy. Continuing with the Nazi analogy, some insist the West must not appease an aggressive Russia and that only tough actions may stop it from further expansion.

Conclusions and Remedies

The analysis of Russian foreign policy described above suffers from at least two problems. First, because of its emphasis on the role of domestic autocracy in determining foreign policy, it tends to miss other sources of Russia's international behavior, namely the quest for primacy and peer recognition. The preoccupation with "autocracy" also leads American IR to exaggerated assessments of Russia's international ambitions, particularly with regard to autocracy promotion.⁴ Second, because of the stress on Russia's material weaknesses relative to the United States, such analysis tends to underestimate the sources of Russia's hybrid power, which allow it to mobilize its agenda despite Western sanctions and approbation. To apply the late Martin Malia's (2009, p. 9) diagnosis, "the West is not necessarily most alarmed when Russia is in reality most alarming, nor most reassured when Russia is in fact most reassuring."

⁴ For criticisms of the autocracy promotion literature, see Tsygankov 2012; Way 2015, 2016; Tansey 2016.

To be sure, these biases aren't universally present in the American literature on Russia, but they are common and widespread enough to warrant further critique. Paths to remedying these issues are clear though not necessarily simple. Expanding the boundaries of US scholarship on Russian foreign policy requires a more complex classification of its determinants – one that incorporates ideas like *derzhavnost'* as well as considerations of national security, national power, and international prestige. The main task for non-area specialists is to establish a meaningful context in which Russia acts and seeks to achieve these goals. This means examining the relevant historical, social, psychological and political background behind Russian decision-making, rather than reduce its actions to autocratic or sultanistic pathologies. Rather than viewing Russia as an implacably revisionist state, scholars of foreign policy might take into account how the actions of Western states may impact Russian beliefs and responses.

More generally, scholars of IR could benefit from continuing to develop an awareness of the cultural assumptions behind their research, as part of coming to grips with “the problem of difference” (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004). As a part of the modern IR discipline, studies of Russia continue to be heavily influenced by the burden of policy relevance and the Wilsonian coupling of domestic regimes with foreign policy. Unless the assumptions of the latter are loosened, Russia will continue to serve as the implacably autocratic Other. Former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara lamented late in life that the U.S. lost the Vietnam War because it failed to empathize with the enemy. This empathy was required, he noted, not to find sympathy for the Viet Cong but to understand their true fears and motivations. The same holds true for U.S. study of Russia in the present day.

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