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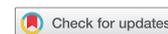
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The Wilsonian Bias in the Study of Russian Foreign Policy

Seva Gunitsky¹ and Andrei P. Tsygankov²

¹*Department of Political Science, University of Toronto,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

²*Departments of International Relations and Political Science, San Francisco State University, San
Francisco, California, USA*

We examine some problematic narratives in the American international relations 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 Russia's foreign policy: the pursuit of primacy in its immediate neighborhood, and the pursuit of peer recognition with major Western powers. These imperatives are key for understanding Russian behavior abroad, transcend particular leaders and domestic institutions, and can help explain "unexpected" shifts in Vladimir Putin's foreign policy that domestic explanations tend to miss.

INTRODUCTION

As a perennial rival, Russia occupies a unique place in American international relations (IR) scholarship. However, academic lenses sometimes distort as much as they clarify. 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 Mikhail Gorbachev or Boris Yeltsin, is assumed to be inherently peaceful and cooperative 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 of (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 explicit form of empire, although its ultimate goal is not necessarily direct control so much as 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. The term is difficult to render into English, but *derzhavnost'* refers to the state of possessing—and being recognized by others to possess—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 U.S.-led order.

Address correspondence to Andrei P. Tsygankov, Department of International Relations and Political Science, 1600 Holloway Ave. HSS, San Francisco, CA 94132, USA. E-mail: andrei@sfsu.edu

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, which leaves 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 policymaking and IR scholarship in the United States. It comprises an essential part of the Wilsonian tradition, and shapes widely accepted IR approaches such as democratic peace theory. We 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.

Our survey of academic and policy perspectives on Russia is not meant to be a systematic overview of the literature, which is diverse in its approaches and conclusions. Rather, our goal here is to highlight some recurring motifs in the policy-relevant scholarship, expert pronouncements, and official statements dealing with Russia. While a number of arguments assessing Russian foreign policy conform with the assumptions we have described, there are nevertheless important exceptions. Below we provide examples of approaches that embrace the Wilsonian biases uncritically, but also ones that take a more measured view.

Partly as a result of the above-identified Wilsonian assumptions, Russian foreign 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 analyses 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 U.S.–Russian relationship since the 1990s. The analysis suggests that assessments of Russian behavior that are based primarily on the country's domestic regime have 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; Inayatullah 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 and 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 the 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 policymakers, 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 the 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 considered essential to the preservation of 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, A20), 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 United States, Russia has been a key reference point for this American IR outlook. During the Cold War, government, social science, media, and popular culture in the United States 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 an oppressive empire that sought to dominate its neighbors through force. After the Soviet dissolution, the Russia 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 often defined the dominant 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 United States.

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 America’s global leadership. As Michael McFaul (1997, 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—had 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 Russia² 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 the emergence of Putin’s assertive foreign policy has served to empirically support these positions. Vitali Silitski (2010), for example, describes an 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 assumed that autocracy is inherently corrupt and lacks popular support; therefore Russia’s political system makes the country fundamentally weak and its institutional and material capabilities not able to match those of the United States. Indeed, as the scholar Celeste Wallander (subsequently an advisor to President Barack Obama) wrote in 2007, Russia had been fundamentally weakened by the competition of rival clans within the Kremlin and the overall political class. Its strategy was “neither grand, nor strategic, nor sustainable” (Wallander 2007, 140). Russia’s culture of patronage and corruption reveals the state’s ineffectiveness and raises the question of “whether Russia will survive as a great power in the 21st century,” wrote two other scholars (Menon and Motyl 2007), who described Russia’s international assertiveness as a bluff to conceal the nation’s chronically weak fundamentals. Accordingly, the United States was 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.

Not all American scholars of Russia share the Wilsonian bias, and there are some within academic and expert circles who resist that ideological tendency. These analysts view Russian foreign policy as a complex undertaking that reflects the country's perception of geopolitical position, power, and the international system. Examples of such scholarship include work by Angela Stent, Robert Legvold, and Andrei Tsygankov.

Both Stent (2014) and Legvold (2007, 2016) have analyzed U.S.–Russia relations as reflecting the two sides' different worldviews, unrealistic expectations, and misperceptions of each other's intentions. They both note that while Moscow wanted to build a strategic partnership with the United States on principles of sovereignty and equality, Washington aimed at having Russia become a junior partner supportive of America's global values and interests. The United States either did not understand Russia's claims to equality and respect or found those claims to be unreasonable. Likewise, Tsygankov (2012a) has documented Russia's historical perception of its national interest as rooted in the country's idea of honor and commitment to domestic constituencies, cultural allies, and great power status. And there are other American analysts (Hopf 2002; Clunan 2009; Donaldson, Noguee, and Nadkarni 2015; Kanet 2011, 2017; Gvosdev and Marsh 2014; Cohen 2017) whose thinking on Russia goes beyond the autocracy narrative.

The Wilsonian bias, however, remains a recurring and widespread element of analytical work and official U.S. statements on Russia. While officials frequently identify the United States as “indispensable,” “exceptional,” and standing “taller than other nations,” the conventional wisdom on Russia has been that it is a declining autocratic power that is in no position to compete with the United States on the 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.”³ In her book *Hard Choices*, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton described Putin as “thin-skinned and autocratic, resenting criticism and eventually cracking down on dissent and debate” (Clinton 2014, 202). President Obama in March 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” (Obama 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 policymakers

were surprised by the Kremlin's assertiveness, expecting Russia to largely defer to 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 toward cooperation—as they were assessed by influential American scholars and policymakers.

Conflict Turns

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,” 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 CIS efforts in the security area.⁴ The newly appointed foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov, sought to strengthen Russia's relations with China, India, and Iran, and to guard Russia's financial independence from the International Monetary Fund; he opposed NATO's eastward expansion and the West's interventions in Iraq and Yugoslavia.

Many American scholars and policymakers assumed that Russia was democratizing and therefore was not interested in challenging the West. The Primakov turn, like the victory of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's nationalist party in Russia's November 1993 parliamentary elections, came as a surprise. Even more surprising was the Kremlin's support for Primakov in his opposition to the West, and Russia's relative success in sustaining its foreign-policy course. Primakov was known in the West to be unlikely to support a pro-Western policy and Washington had lobbied against Primakov's candidacy. As the *Financial Times* editorialized, of all the possible successors to the first foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, Primakov was “probably the least welcome in Washington.”⁵ Nor did influential scholars hide their dissatisfaction with Primakov's appointment—but they expected that his policy turn would not work. The already mentioned McFaul had little to say except to argue that Primakov's policy in general would not be able to “derail 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 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 of having “overstepped its national borders in ... economic, political, cultural, and educational policies.”

Western scholars, pundits, and policymakers expected Putin’s signaling of his dissatisfaction, as an “autocrat” and “nationalist” (Brzezinski 2004; Hoagland 2007; Lucas 2008), yet they thought of Russia as too weak to resist the West and were surprised by its renewed assertiveness and willingness to use force. 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. Even after Russia intervened in Georgia, they continued to argue that expansion of the alliance would help to promote democracy and security in Europe. The Wilsonian bias prevented many from taking Russia’s determination seriously. Indeed, some of them saw Russia’s intervention in the Caucasus as evidence that NATO had to be expanded further (Asmus 2010, 221). U.S. policymakers likewise assumed that the process would continue. Although Russia had been 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 traveled to Europe and Georgia, but found no time to visit Moscow.

Similarly, with respect to Ukraine, both U.S. and European Union (EU) leaders endorsed the new government in Kiev following the EuroMaidan revolution without any regard for Moscow’s criticism. The assumption, again, was that the Russian “autocracy” was weak and unable to sustain its opposition when confronted with the West’s concerted actions and the imposition of sanctions on 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 percent drop in Russia’s GDP during the year (Bershidsky 2015). As it turned out, Russia’s economy contracted by 3.7 percent.

The next surprise came in October 2015, when 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 reflective of the regime’s domestic weakness (Marten 2015). Such a policy, they warned, was not likely to stabilize Syria and might result in failure. Even the usually cautious 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 went even farther by stating 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, however, and by early 2017, the coalition of Russia, Syria, Iran, and Turkey had defeated ISIS in Aleppo and Palmira, achieved a cease-fire, and begun the process of political negotiations between Damascus and the Syrian rebel factions.

Table 1 summarizes the described expectations about Russian foreign policy relative to its turns away from cooperation with the West.

Cooperation Turns

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 was the key initial precedent. When he first proposed Russia’s turn to “new thinking,” along with *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the majority of American Sovietologists greeted it skeptically, as a clever ploy on the part of the young Soviet apparatchik. As time passed, however, the revolutionary nature of the new Soviet foreign policy became more apparent. 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 that argument, Robert English (2002) pointed out that Gorbachev had alternative courses of action,

TABLE 1
Expectations and Conflict Turns in Russian Foreign Policy (RFP): A Summary

	<i>Expectation</i>	<i>RFP Outcome</i>
Mid-1990s	Moderate cooperation (weak democracy)	Defensiveness
Mid-2000s	Defensiveness (weak autocracy)	Assertiveness, intervention in Georgia
Mid-2010s	Defensiveness (weak autocracy)	Assertiveness, intervention in Ukraine and Syria

and that the origins of the “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 W. 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, including 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. On May 22, 2002, *The Economist* 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 in 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 for eliminating Syrian chemical weapons in September 2013, nor its participation in joint efforts to limit the Iranian nuclear program (resulting in the July 2015 agreement), or Putin’s offer to cooperate on Syria in September 2015, is considered sufficient evidence. Today, Russia is no longer viewed as weak. Rather, following the Kremlin’s assertiveness in Ukraine, Syria, and cyberspace, Russia is perceived in policy circles as a leading threat to the American global order. Its annexation of Crimea, support for separatists in the eastern part of Ukraine, and alleged hacking of the Democratic National Committee exacerbated fears of Kremlin’s “autocratic expansionism.” Leading American analysts of Russia such as Stephen Sestanovich (2014) and Michael McFaul (2014) argued that Russian foreign policy was growing more aggressive in response to Putin’s authoritarian politics, not U.S. policies. Some, including former

secretary of state Hillary Clinton (*Washington Post*, March 5, 2014), 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 and not to 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, which has been focused 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 can stop it from further expansion. In the meantime, the Kremlin has indicated a desire to cooperate by engaging in dialogue with Washington on Syria, North Korea, and Ukraine. Russia may defy expert expectations yet again.

Table 2 summarizes the described expectations about Russian foreign policy relative to its turns toward cooperation with the West.

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 important sources of Russia’s international behavior, such as ideas, security conditions, the external and geopolitical environment, and actions by outside powers toward Russia. The preoccupation with “autocracy” also leads American analysts to exaggerated assessments of Russia’s international ambitions, particularly with regard to autocracy promotion.⁶ 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 internal unity and resilience, which allow it to mobilize despite Western sanctions and to defend its interests. It is not that such analysis is necessarily wrong, but it is inevitably incomplete in considering the motivations behind Russian policies. To apply the late Martin Malia’s diagnosis, “the West is not necessarily most alarmed when Russia is in reality most alarming, nor

TABLE 2
Expectations and Cooperation Turns in Russian Foreign Policy
(RFP): A Summary

	<i>Expectation</i>	<i>RFP Outcome</i>
Late 1980s	Defensiveness, maneuvering (weak Soviet autocracy)	Cooperation
Early 2000s	Defensiveness (weak Putin autocracy)	Cooperation
Late 2010s	Assertiveness (strong Putin autocracy)	Limited cooperation

most reassured when Russia is in fact most reassuring” (Malia 2009, 9).

American scholars have assumed Russia’s weakness and inability to challenge the West and assessed that Moscow will either remain cooperative or will have to accept Western policies in Eurasia. The Kremlin, however, has grown increasingly resentful of Western international policies since the mid-1990s and views the promotion of democracy and expansion of NATO and the EU as unacceptable encroachments on Russia’s interests. Russian decisions such as the appointment of Primakov or the tough responses to Georgia and Ukraine might have been less surprising to American experts had they taken Russia’s quest for primacy in Eurasia seriously enough. The preoccupation with primacy is not a new reality; in the past, Russia went to war with Ottoman and Western armies over protection of Orthodox Christians and its perceived sphere of interests, and it may be prepared to do so again. It is not a matter of autocratic regime, but rather of Russia’s continuous and historically formed sense of geopolitical identity, national survival, and interests. Through long interaction with Mongols, Poles, Ottomans, and others, Russians learned that geopolitical primacy in Eurasia was the only way to preserve sovereignty and independence.

American scholars have also missed or misjudged important opportunities for cooperation with Russia because they assumed that “autocracy” makes the Kremlin unlikely to want rapprochement with the West. Yet Russia’s constant attempts to engage the United States in cooperation, including those following the 9/11 attack and over Iran and Syria, demonstrate the principal importance to the Kremlin of being recognized as a major power, or *derzhava*, in relations with the world outside Eurasia. Despite its internal institutional differences from Western nations, Russia sees itself as an indispensable part of the West and will continue to reach out to Western leaders in order to demonstrate Russia’s great-power relevance. This part of Russia’s historic identity too is well established and will always keep the country open to the West on international matters, even when the latter refuses to recognize Russia’s potential contribution.

To be sure, the above-identified 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 U.S. 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 reducing 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.

Paths to remedying these problems are obvious. Scholars of IR must develop an awareness of the cultural assumptions behind their research and come to grips with the problem of difference (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004). A long time ago, Stanley Hoffmann wrote about “the rude intrusion of grand ideology” (1995, 213) into the realm of social science. In his memorable formulation, “born and raised in America, the discipline of international relations is, so to speak, too close to the fire” (Hoffmann 1995, 240). Problems with Russia assessment persist because, 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 regime with foreign policy. Unless the assumptions of the latter are loosened, Russia will continue to serve as the implacably autocratic Other.

Moving beyond the self/other dichotomies such as “democracy/autocracy” in empirical research and engaging in dialogues on policy levels cannot happen without understanding the multiplicity of factors and contexts in which self and other act. The goal should be not to condone or justify Russian conduct, but to examine how American IR approaches the subject, and to highlight some potential problems with this analysis in order to reach a better understanding of both the scholarly process and the world at large. As Robert McNamara lamented late in his life, the United States 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 Russia today.

To challenge the cognitive consistency of what may be called the autocracy bias of American IR, one would have to be willing to process information on Russian foreign policy from various alternative angles. Analyzing how the Russians themselves describe their international objectives must be a part of establishing the relevant historical, social, psychological, and political contexts behind their decisions. A more practical approach to Russia would have to be based on different assumptions and seek different objectives.

1. It would assume that Russian foreign policy is shaped by a host of factors other than “autocracy,” including ideas of *derzhavnost’*, considerations of national security, and international recognition;
2. It would analyze, rather than assume, the level of power and confidence that provides the state with the required platform for implementing decisions, including material capabilities, institutional capacity, and the leadership’s character;
3. Rather than viewing Russia as an implacably revisionist state, it would take into account how the actions of Western states—whether directed toward

engagement or containment—may impact Russian foreign-policy responses. For instance, by providing various forms of support, even of the rhetorical sort, the outside world might have the power to encourage Russia to avoid revisionist behavior;

4. It would develop flexible policies toward Russia based on specific issues and factors rather the general “corrupt autocracy” approach.

Such an approach would go beyond the described grand ideology behind the American perspective on Russia and would contribute to the development of a nuanced understanding of the meaningful contexts in which foreign powers act and seek to achieve their goals.

Notes

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.
2. For an analysis of Russia’s political system and its Western perception, see Tsygankov 2014, 2017.
3. For Biden’s updated view, see Biden and Carpenter 2017.
4. National Security Concepts and Foreign Policy Concepts are available in Shakleyina 2002, Vol. 4, 51–90, 110–11.
5. “The Need for a New Ostpolitik,” *Financial Times*, January 16, 1996.
6. For criticisms of the autocratic expansion and autocracy promotion literature, see Tsygankov 2012b; Way 2015, 2016; Tansey 2016.

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