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## Russia and the question of world order

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### ABSTRACT



There is broad agreement among commentators and analysts that Russia seeks to undermine the US-led liberal international order. At the same time, there is considerable disagreement over the nature and extent of the challenge Moscow poses, the underlying drivers of Russian revisionism, and how the West should respond. In this article, we argue that it is possible to distinguish between three major perspectives. In brief, the first suggests that Russia is a 'revanchist power' that seeks to overturn the very foundations of the liberal world order. The second perspective holds that Russia is a 'defensive power' that works for incremental changes within the existing order. The third perspective contends that Russia is an 'aggressive isolationist', meaning that the Putin regime deliberately plays a spoiler role in international affairs to boost its domestic legitimacy. This article describes in detail the arguments of the three perspectives; it shows that each suffers from explanatory shortcomings and defects; and it outlines how the contributions to this special issue address the identified shortcomings.

### KEYWORDS

Russian foreign policy; world order; East-West crisis

## Introduction

In recent years, the US-led liberal world order that emerged after the end of the Cold War has been shaken. Developments within the West, such as the election of Donald Trump and his 'America First' agenda, Britain's decision to leave the European Union, and the rise of populist parties across Europe, have created a climate of uncertainty. In addition, the rise of China has triggered worries about a looming conflict between Washington and Beijing. In many ways, though, what has emerged as the most immediate challenge to the current international order is Russia's increasingly proactive and assertive behaviour. Examples include Russia's annexation of Crimea and meddling in eastern Ukraine; Russia's military intervention in Syria on behalf of the Assad government; the Kremlin's alleged interference in the 2016 US presidential elections; the funding of populist movements and parties in a number of European countries; and the promotion of new institutional arrangements like the Eurasian Economic Union and the BRICS-led New Development Bank.

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Moreover, Russian state officials have sharply criticized the post-Cold War arrangements, making it clear that they want to revise or even upend the existing order. As President Putin said in his (in)famous speech at the Munich security conference in 2007, 'I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world (...) [T]he model itself is flawed,' he added, 'because at its basis there is and can be no moral foundations for modern civilization' (Kremlin, 2007). A decade later, also speaking at the Munich security conference, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told his audience, 'I hope that [the world] will choose a democratic world order – a post-West one – in which each country is defined by its sovereignty' (quoted in Al Jazeera, 2017). Addressing the United Nations General Assembly a few months later, Lavrov doubled down. 'The process of creating a polycentric world order is an objective trend,' he concluded, adding some thinly veiled criticism of the United States and its Western allies. 'This is something everyone will need to adapt to, including those who are used to lording over others,' Lavrov said (quoted in CNN, 2017). Likewise, Evgeny Lukyanov, the Deputy Secretary of Russia's Security Council, suggested in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, 'We need to sit down [with the United States] and renegotiate the entire post-Cold War settlement' (quoted in Weber, 2015). The list of such statements could go on, but the point is clear: The Russian leadership has repeatedly and vociferously expressed its dissatisfaction with the existing US-led international order.

Not surprisingly, Moscow's rhetoric and actions have generated substantial media commentary and scholarly attention (see, e.g. Kanet, 2018; Krickovic & Weber, 2017; Lo, 2015; Radin & Reach, 2017). Building upon the existing literature, this special issue will engage with three sets of questions that cut to the heart of the ongoing debate about Russia's role in the present world order.

1. What are Russia's aims and objectives? Is Russia a highly revisionist power bent on overturning established rules and institutions, or is it best understood as a country with limited ambitions, aiming to make incremental changes within the existing international structures?
2. What shapes Russia's views on the global order and its consequent foreign policies? Can they be attributed to material factors such as changing balances of power, to domestic political factors such as the Kremlin's regime security concerns, or to ideational factors such as Russia's national identity and its perceptions of history?
3. What are the consequences of Russia's actions for the existing international order? And how should the United States and Europe respond to Moscow's behaviour? Should the West adopt a tough containment policy as it did during the Cold War? Should the West employ targeted sanctions and focus on punishing the Russian leadership? Or should the West instead pursue an engagement policy and try to accommodate Moscow?

To address these questions, this special issue brings together scholars who analyse Russia's world order policies through the lenses of different theoretical approaches, including the English School, E.H. Carr's classical realism, social constructivism, and a long *durée* perspective. In particular, the contributors focus on Russia's relationship with three major power centres: the United States, China, and the European Union. To be sure, the evolution of world order is affected by many factors, such as technological changes, economic developments, social movements, and so forth. At heart, however, international order is heavily

shaped by the leading powers of the time. Thus, this special issue seeks to shed light on Russia's role in, and views on, the existing international order by focusing on its relations with major power centres.

To facilitate this analytical endeavour, our introductory article proceeds in three parts. First, we outline the existing positions in the debate and their key arguments. Second, we show why they fail to provide fully convincing accounts of Russia's world order policy. And third, we preview the individual contributions to this special issue.

## **Russian foreign policy and the liberal world order: three perspectives**

According to John Ikenberry (2009, 2011), the US-led world order that emerged after the end of the Cold War can be defined as a liberal rule-based system that is characterized by three interrelated features: the spread of democracy, the globalization of trade and finance, and the formation of a dense network of international organizations. In recent years, Russia has challenged this order, or at least certain elements of it. As already noted, this has sparked an intense and sometimes heated debate among Western policy-makers, pundits, and academics. In particular, there is considerable disagreement about the nature and extent of Moscow's challenge to the present order, the underlying drivers of Russian revisionism, and how the West should respond. At the risk of oversimplifying a rich and fast-growing body of literature, we suggest that one can distinguish between three main perspectives. Of course, observers and analysts within each perspective do not agree on everything, but they share some distinct arguments and viewpoints.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Russia as a revanchist power***

One group of observers holds that Russia aims to overturn the foundations of the liberal world order. Moscow's revisionist agenda manifests itself in several ways. First, Russia challenges established rules and norms in the post-Soviet space, including the sanctity of international borders (Dibb, 2016, p. 8). The takeover of Crimea, in this perspective, was only the latest, and most extreme, example of a much broader pattern of behaviour. Over the course of the past decade, Russia has gone to war with Georgia; repeatedly interfered in the domestic political affairs of neighbouring countries; exerted various forms of economic pressure on states like Ukraine, Moldova, and Lithuania; and expanded its network of military bases in the post-Soviet region (Payne & Foster, 2017, pp. 18–33; Starr & Cornell, 2014). The ultimate goal of these activities is to establish an exclusive sphere of influence on the territory of the former Soviet Union. In the words of Kagan (2008, p. 17), '[Moscow's] grand ambition is to undo the post-Cold War settlement to re-establish Russia as a dominant power in Eurasia.'

Second, Russia seeks to exploit the West's openness and vulnerabilities – information systems, political pluralism, and socio-economic fault lines – to create divisions within the Euro-Atlantic community. Perhaps the best-known example is Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (Lipton, Sanger, & Shane, 2016). There are also rumours about Russian meddling in the 2017 French presidential elections. After all, the candidate of the far-right National Front, Marine Le Pen, met with President Putin in March 2017, and it became known that her party had previously received a USD 9 million loan from a Moscow-based bank (Seddon

& Stothard, 2017). More generally, Russia has established links with an array of far-right political parties and movements across Europe (Larrabee et al., 2017, pp. 56–60; Polyakova, 2014; Polyakova, Laruelle, Meister, & Barnett, 2016; for background, see Shekhovtsov, 2018). Russia has also used its media outlets, including RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik, to sow disinformation. The infamous ‘Lisa case’ – when Russian media falsely reported about the abduction and rape of a German girl of Russian origin by immigrants in Berlin – is a case in point (Meister, 2016; Wagstyl, 2017).

Third, Moscow is forging alliances with likeminded authoritarian regimes in countries such as Belarus, Iran, Syria, Venezuela, and, most importantly, China. ‘China and Russia together,’ writes Krauthammer (2014), ‘represent the core of a new coalition of anti-democratic autocracies challenging the Western-imposed, post-Cold War status quo.’ Indeed, in recent years, Russia has substantially deepened its economic, diplomatic, and military cooperation with China. This has involved the sale of advanced weapons, joint naval drills, and the conclusion of a massive natural gas deal worth USD 400 billion. In addition, Russia and China have set up their own institutional structures, such as the BRICS group and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, at least in part to counter existing Western-led institutions and organizations (Bolt & Cross, 2018; Cooley, 2013; Kagan, 2008, pp. 53–80; Walker, 2015).

Fourth, and closely related to the previous point, the leadership in Moscow has become a staunch promotor of conservative values in world politics and openly opposes liberal ideas ranging from same-sex marriage to free market capitalism (Engström, 2014; Whitmore, 2013; for background, see Chebankova, 2016). As Matthews (2014), the former Moscow correspondent of *Newsweek*, put it,

Like the old Communist International, or Comintern, in its day, Moscow is again building an international ideological alliance. (...) Putin is pitching for moral leadership of all conservatives who dislike liberal values. And again, like the Comintern, Putin appears convinced that he is embarking on a world-historical mission.

From this perspective, Russia seeks nothing less than to undermine the very foundations of the liberal international order.

The question of course remains: What lies behind Russia’s revisionist ambitions and policies? Scholars who subscribe to this perspective argue that Russia’s revisionism can be attributed to three factors. The first is a deep-seated sense of being wronged by the West over the course of recent decades. It is no secret that the leadership in Moscow maintains that the West has disregarded Russia’s vital interests after the end of the Cold War and side-lined it with respect to several important issues – most notably NATO expansion and the formation of a new security architecture in Europe. Crucially, however, the argument here is that these injustices are perceived rather than real. As Dibb (2016, p. 8) writes, ‘These are obsessive assertions with little basis in fact and are more a reflection of centuries of Russia’s paranoia about the vulnerability of its borders and its insecurity as a nation state.’

A second and related argument is that Russia’s political class has an imperial mentality, especially towards smaller neighbouring countries in central Eurasia. According to Marcel van Herpen, author of the provocative *Putin’s Wars: The Rise of Russia’s New Imperialism*, this mentality has its roots in the early modern period. ‘For the Russian state,’ he writes, ‘colonizing neighbouring territories and subduing neighbouring people has been a

continuous process. It is, one could almost say, part of Russia's genetic makeup' (van Herpen, 2014, p. 2). This line of thought dovetails with the notion of a Russian *Sonderweg* propounded by historians such as Pipes (1974) and Szamuely (1974), who argue that Russia's imperialist essence has remained immutable across the centuries, regardless of the regime in power.

Third, scholars accord significant weight to the fact that many members of the Putin regime have a background in the military and security services and to Russia's authoritarian form of governance. To quote, once again, van Herpen (2014, p. 56), 'the new Russian imperialism is clearly in the interest of Russia's ruling political and military elite, whose positions are strengthened and consolidated by a neoimperialist policy.' A similar point is made by Kirchick (2017), who asserts that

Russia seeks conflict with the West. That is because the Putin regime – nationalist, revisionist, territorially expansionist – cannot coexist alongside a democratic Europe willing to stand up for its principles. Moscow sees liberal democracy as a threat and therefore must defeat it.

In essence, the argument is that a confluence of historical, cultural, and domestic political factors drives Russia's revisionist attitudes and actions.

How should the West respond? The answer is clear. The United States and its European allies must resist Russian revisionism through a mix of containment and rollback. This means that they should reinforce diplomatic efforts to isolate Moscow, impose more severe sanctions, and increase NATO military deployments in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states (Kroenig, 2015). In addition, the West should provide military support to post-Soviet states that stand up to Russia, such as Georgia and Ukraine, and supply them with lethal weapons. Some scholars take this a step further and suggest that the West should try to create or foment unrest in Russia (Grygiel & Mitchell, 2014). The goal of such a strategy is to weaken Russia from within and, if possible, replace the current regime in Moscow with a more pro-Western government. As Kirchick (2017) writes, 'If a prosperous and democratic Europe is a core national security interest of the United States, as it has been for the past 80 years, then the Russian regime is one to be resisted, contained and ultimately dethroned.' Offense, in this view, is the best defence.

### ***Russia as a defensive power***

If the first group of observers sees Russia as inherently bent on overturning the liberal world order due to internal factors, a second group holds that the underlying drivers of Moscow's actions stem from external factors. The argument here is that much of Russia's recent conduct is intricately linked to the destabilizing and irresponsible practices of major Western powers since the end of the Cold War. The West's reckless behaviour has thereby forced Russia into a confrontation. Driven not so much by offensive as by defensive aims, Russian leaders are ultimately concerned with upholding a status quo that is undermined by the transformative agenda and military activities of the United States and its allies. Russia is thus not a traditional revisionist power seeking to overturn the existing order but rather a neo-revisionist power that aims to 'ensure the universal and consistent application of existing norms' (Sakwa, 2017, p. 131) and that wants to upgrade its own status in the present order (Romanova, 2018, p. 78).

According to this perspective, many of the Soviet and later Russian leaders were confident that the overcoming of the Cold War (a joint feat in their eyes) heralded a new era of cooperation. However, several developments prompted them to give up their hopes of building a genuine partnership with the West and revert to a more self-assertive stance. Chief amongst these is the eastward enlargement of NATO, which left the leadership in Moscow deeply resentful and distrustful of the West. Scholars have long debated whether a formal promise was made not to expand NATO after the end of the Cold War (see, e.g. Kramer, 2009; Sarotte, 2010; Shiffrinson, 2016). This debate sometimes gets entangled in legalistic quibbles. The fact is that while no official document appears to have been signed, numerous assurances by Western leaders to their Soviet counterparts were made to the effect that the alliance would – in the words of US Secretary of State James Baker – not move ‘one inch eastward’ (for the quote and background, see Savranskaya & Blanton, 2017). Failing to disband after its very *raison d’être* – the Soviet Union – had disappeared, NATO started instead to expand into former Warsaw Pact countries and Soviet republics.

From the beginning, NATO enlargement was opposed by policymakers in Moscow, who interpreted it as a sign of the persistence of Cold War bloc mentality and as a threat to Russia’s national security. Although President Putin set out to improve relations with the West and establish a partnership after he came to power, the promise made at the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit of eventual membership for Georgia and Ukraine set the stage for renewed competition (Charap & Shapiro, 2015; Legvold, 2016). Moscow’s concerns were further exacerbated by the fact that the enlargement of Western Cold War-era ‘prefabricated institutions’ left it on the outside (Sarotte, 2009), while Russian calls and proposals for the creation of a new security architecture in Europe were largely ignored. In the words of Sergei Karaganov, the ‘unfinished character of the “Cold War” in both institutional and intellectual terms’ and the lack of a ‘Europe-wide peace agreement’ (quoted in Sakwa, 2017, p. 143) were the ferment for renewed mistrust and competition between Russia and the West.

Moreover, while the EU was initially seen in benign terms by Russian policymakers, its increasing convergence with NATO in ideological, political, and operational terms gave the impression that ‘EU expansion is a stalking horse for NATO expansion’ (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 3). This, goes the argument, is why Russia was so opposed to the association agreement between the EU and Ukraine. Accordingly, the crisis that broke out in 2014 is best understood as a symptom rather than the cause of East–West tensions (Sakwa, 2015; Trenin, 2014). In a textbook case of a classic security dilemma, NATO enlargement had thus created the very risk that it was supposed to prevent (Saunders, 2016). For its part, the EU, as Sakwa (2017, p. 155) so eloquently put it, ‘suffered an extraordinary inversion: instead of overcoming the logic of conflict, it became the instrument for its reproduction.’ Issues such as the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002 and the subsequent project to establish anti-missile bases in Central and Eastern Europe further nourished Russian insecurities.

The profoundly normative language that accompanied NATO and EU enlargement rendered these processes even more indigestible to Moscow (Diesen, 2015). After 1991, Russia no longer offered an alternative ideology and did not contest the legitimacy of free elections and human rights. It did, however, increasingly resent the West’s claim to have the exclusive right to interpret these concepts (Medvedev, 2008). For example, Putin stressed



that '[democracy] must be a product of internal domestic development in a society' (quoted in Walsh, 2005). Lamenting Western double standards, Putin also pointed out that 'we are constantly being taught about democracy' but 'those who teach us do not want to learn themselves' (Kremlin, 2007). Thus, as the Russian scholar Lukin (2016, p. 94) notes, Moscow came to see and reject 'the bulk of these values as an ideological smokescreen for the West's attempt to impose its hegemony.' In this view, lofty ideals, operationalized through an agenda of 'democracy promotion', mask the West's geopolitical interests and ambitions.

Concomitantly, the normative agenda of the West also serves to deny Russia its rightful place in the world. Leaders in Moscow have long considered the possession of a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space essential for national security and as a sign of their country's great-power status. In insisting on the 'sovereign choice' of smaller states in post-Soviet Eurasia to choose their military alliances, the West thus undermines Russia's status and ignores the very real concerns Russia has regarding the world's most powerful military alliance creeping up to its border. Indeed, several scholars have argued that whether intended or not, NATO enlargement and the EU's Eastern Partnership have clear geopolitical externalities. Given this, it is not surprising that Moscow regards them as a threat (see, e.g. Casier, 2016; Charap & Troitskiy, 2013; Gehring, Urbanski, & Oberthür, 2017; MccGwire, 1998).

The policy prescriptions associated with this perspective emphasize accommodation as well as the recognition of Russia's legitimate interests. This means, first of all, that any plans to enlarge NATO must be scrapped and the alliance should limit provocative actions such as military exercises near Russia's borders. Such exercises only serve to exacerbate existing tensions and thus contribute to, rather than reduce, insecurity in Europe. Second, Russia's interests in its geographical neighbourhood must be respected. This concerns in the first place Ukraine and the states in the South Caucasus. Short of recognizing a Russian sphere of influence there, the United States and its allies should observe non-interference in countries that Moscow considers essential to its security. Third, the West should drop the current economic and diplomatic sanctions against Moscow. They only serve to estrange the Russian public while at the same time deepening and lengthening the conflict. As Tsygankov (2015, p. 299) argues, 'sanctions and military pressures (...) are likely to strengthen the potential for anti-Western nationalism inside Russia, thereby pushing Putin toward more hawkish and provocative actions with regard to Ukraine or other Eastern European nations.' The West, in short, must adopt a more accommodating policy and engage with Moscow.

### ***Russia as an aggressive isolationist***

A third group of scholars argues that Russia has neither the will nor the capacity to reshape the existing international order. Russia, after all, is a declining power weakened by economic problems, widespread corruption, and a severe demographic crisis. This places restraints on Russia's ability to overturn global governance arrangements and institutions. Nor does the Putin government have a particular ideology that it wants to promote internationally. This does not mean, however, that Russia is going to integrate itself smoothly into the existing global order. On the contrary, Russia has come to play a spoiler role in international affairs. The ultimate aim of the Kremlin is to inoculate Russia from Western

influences. Accordingly, Moscow's international behaviour can be described as a form of 'aggressive isolationism' – a notion coined by Krastev and Holmes (2015). 'Russia's geopolitical adventures,' they write, 'are driven largely by its leadership's deep anxiety about the country's domestic weaknesses' (Krastev & Holmes, 2015).

Russia's 'aggressive isolationism' has manifested itself in three major ways. First, the Kremlin is deeply fearful of the spread of democratic norms and values in the post-Soviet space, as they could spill over into Russia and thus undermine the Putin government's hold on power. Such fears have been stoked by the colour revolutions in the mid-2000s, the Arab spring in 2010–2011, and especially by the Euromaidan protests in Kiev in 2014. As Krastev and Holmes (2015) argue,

The surprising and disconcerting developments inside Ukraine, which led to a problematic Russian client being chased from office only to be replaced by an unabashedly anti-Russian successor, suggested that Western ways of thinking, not NATO tanks, were the most threatening forces advancing on Moscow.

Likewise, Orttung and Walker (2015, February 13) assert, 'Above all else, the Kremlin fears the rise of democratic governments on its border that could serve as an alternative model to Putin's "vertical of power."' Hence, the Putin government has worked hard to bolster authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space, such as the Lukashenka government in Belarus, and seeks to destabilize democratizing states like Georgia and Ukraine – if need be by military means. In this view, regime security considerations are the main driver of Russia's 'near abroad' assertion (Ambrosio, 2009; Lewis, 2016; Vanderhill, 2013, pp. 41–96; Wilson, 2014).

Second, the Kremlin deliberately creates external crises to stir up nationalist sentiments. The reason is simple. During much of the 2000s, the Putin government's legitimacy was based on economic growth. In other words, there was a social contract between large sections of the population and the government. The leadership in Moscow provided for the economic wellbeing of ordinary Russians in exchange for their political compliance. This social contract was effectively broken in the late 2000s when Russia's economy stagnated, largely due to the 2008 financial crisis and the slump in oil and natural gas prices. Real wages decreased, the standard of living declined, and unemployment soared. As a result, the popularity of the Putin regime took a hit. Moreover, after fraud-tainted Duma elections in December 2011 and before Putin's return to the presidency in May 2012, large-scale popular protests against the regime took place in Moscow and other major Russian cities. In response to these developments, the Kremlin took measures to curtail the activities of NGOs operating inside the country. In addition, Moscow adopted a more nationalistic and aggressive foreign policy, primary examples being Russia's takeover of Crimea and its military intervention in Syria. The ultimate goal of these operations has been to distract public attention from political and economic problems at home. As Shevtsova (2015) writes, 'for the Kremlin, the turn to expansionism is (...) a pressure release valve and a way to compensate for its weaknesses in other areas (including the economy).' In a similar vein, Aron (2015) concludes that 'Vladimir Putin's foreign policy can only be understood in the context of the regime's evolving domestic weakness.'

Third, and closely related to the previous points, the leadership in Moscow has promoted an anti-Western narrative and seeks to portray itself as a bastion of conservative values – not necessarily because Putin and his inner circle believe in those values, but

because it serves the narrower interests of the regime. The purpose is to mobilize conservative groups in Russia and create conflicts with the United States and other Western countries. It is against this background that Moscow's meddling in the US elections and its support for populist parties in Europe are best understood. As McFaul (2014) puts it, 'In addition to more autocracy, Mr. Putin needed an enemy – the United States – to strengthen his legitimacy.' In a similar vein, Snetkov (2015, p. 5) asserts, 'it [the Putin government] has adopted an aggressive and confrontational conservative-nationalist and anti-Western discourse as a way of solidifying an increasingly disgruntled and shaky domestic order.' In other words, President Putin and his associates deliberately fuel a 'besieged fortress' myth that pits Russia against the West to maintain popular support for the regime.

In essence, a number of scholars attribute Russia's assertive international behaviour to domestic causes. In that sense, there is some overlap with the first perspective, which holds that Russia's authoritarian form of governance is a root cause of its revisionist agenda. Indeed, some observers and commentators straddle the line between these two analytical positions (e.g. Lewis, 2016; Shevtsova, 2014). Yet there is an important difference. According to the first perspective, Russia's autocratic ideology pushes Moscow towards an aggressive foreign policy, the aim of which is to overturn the foundations of the liberal post-Cold War order. In contrast, the argument here is that the Putin government uses foreign policy in an instrumental and calculated fashion to shore up its legitimacy at home.

How, then, should the West deal with Russia and its self-isolationist regime? The answer to this question is less clear than it is from the previous two perspectives. If the United States and its European allies decide to pursue an engagement policy vis-à-vis Russia, this will only result in more trouble. After all, by the logic of the argument presented here, the Putin government seeks to manufacture external conflicts for domestic political purposes. Thus, accommodative policies towards Russia will lead nowhere. If anything, they will incite the Kremlin to create foreign policy crises elsewhere. If, on the other hand, the United States and its European allies decide to adopt a military containment posture vis-à-vis Russia, this will play into the Kremlin's hands by lending credence to its 'besieged fortress' narrative. Likewise, the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia will backfire, as it provides the Putin government with the opportunity to isolate the country further from the West. Krastev and Leonard (2014, p. 5) have put the point well: 'The economic costs of sanctions,' they write,

will allow Putin to hide the failures of the Kremlin's economic policies. Sanctions also provide Putin cover to push for managed isolation from globalization through policies designed to nationalize the internet, prohibit foreign ownership of the media, and limit travel.

Hence, the best option for the West might be a so-called constraint policy. This implies that the West should engage economically with Russia, but at the same time strengthen NATO to contain Moscow's troublemaking activities on the international stage (Götz, 2016, p. 256). In addition, there is a debate among analysts as to whether the West should impose further sanctions on President Putin's closest friends and cronies. On the one hand, this might increase the pressure on the Kremlin from the inside. On the other hand, the Kremlin might capitalize on targeted sanctions to unite Russia's elites, who have nowhere else to turn, behind the regime (for contrasting views, see Ashford, 2016; Dobrokhotov, 2017; MacFarquhar, 2018; Rutland, 2014).

Be that as it may, scholars who suggest that domestic political considerations are the chief motivating force behind Russia's confrontation with the West often take a more relaxed stance than those who subscribe to the two abovementioned perspectives. While Moscow can certainly cause trouble on the global stage in the short term, it does not have the material wherewithal or political will to undermine the existing international order. On the contrary, Russia's economic modernization depends on integration with the global economy and access to Western markets. In the medium to long term, therefore, Russia has strong incentives to establish good relations with advanced industrial states. In this view, the Putin regime is an anachronistic autocracy that finds itself on the wrong side of history, to borrow Barack Obama's pithy phrase. This means that if another, more democratic regime comes to power, there are good chances that Russia will fully integrate into the existing liberal international order.

### The three perspectives revisited: limitations and shortcomings

As shown in the previous section, one can distinguish between three major positions in the ongoing debate about Moscow's role in the present world order. [Table 1](#) summarizes the main arguments of each perspective.

All three positions are supported by anecdotal evidence and, at first glance, they appear to shed substantial light on Russia's international behaviour. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that each perspective is hampered by limitations and shortcomings.

To begin with, there are a number of reasons to be sceptical about the 'revanchist Russia' perspective. First, it adopts an overly deterministic position, which negates the open-ended character of history by underlining its predetermined course through certain 'iron laws' and the supposedly unchanging 'essence' of Russia. In so doing, this

**Table 1.** Three perspectives on Russia's world order policy

Perspective	Revanchist Russia	Defensive Russia	Isolationist Russia
What are Russia's main objectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– to overturn the Western-led liberal international order</li> <li>– to create a Tsarist-style empire on the territory of the former USSR</li> <li>– to promote conservative values in world politics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– to be treated as an equal by Western powers</li> <li>– to halt the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU</li> <li>– to defend 'state sovereignty' as a fundamental principle of international law</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– to stoke nationalism by creating crises with the West</li> <li>– to prevent the spread of democratic norms into the post-Soviet space</li> <li>– to divert the Russian public's attention from internal failures</li> </ul>
What drives Russia's world order policy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– imagined victimhood at the hands of the West</li> <li>– a deeply rooted imperial mindset of the Russian elite</li> <li>– Russia's authoritarian system of governance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Western encroachment (both geopolitical and normative)</li> <li>– a hunt for great-power status and prestige</li> <li>– national security concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– regime insecurity</li> <li>– parochial interests of President Putin and his close associates</li> </ul>
What should the West do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– pursue a containment policy</li> <li>– roll back Russia's geopolitical advances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– pursue an engagement policy</li> <li>– stop NATO and EU expansion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– pursue a constraint policy</li> <li>– impose targeted sanctions on President Putin's inner circle</li> </ul>

perspective effectively denies the role of individual agency: Whoever the leader is, or whatever the regime may be, Russians are subordinate to the quest for imperial greatness. This is a view that incidentally dovetails with that of extreme Russian nationalists, who see Russian history in similar holistic terms of a 'single stream' that connects Ivan IV, Peter the Great, Stalin, and Putin. However, Russia has experienced tremendous upheavals throughout history that dramatically changed its society and its relations with the outside world. This happened often at the instigation of one or a few individuals. Both the beginning and the end of the Soviet Union, for example, serve as powerful reminders of the role agency plays in affecting Moscow's internal and external affairs. Furthermore, essentialist claims about Russian identity do not offer much insight into the dynamics of Moscow's approach to the liberal international order, which has significantly fluctuated over time (Tsygankov, 2016).

Second, Russia's revisionist behaviour should not be exaggerated. Its intervention in Ukraine has remained relatively limited, as has its military activity in other post-Soviet states (Götz, 2016, p. 9). In fact, the scope of Russia's revanchist aims is a matter of debate. It is doubtful whether Moscow has a blueprint for an alternative international order with different norms and principles than the current one. Nor does its promotion of conservative authoritarianism seem to constitute a genuine agenda. As Lewis (2016) writes, 'the export of conservative social and political values (...) has so far not developed into a coherent campaign, but remains a rather ad hoc and inchoate critique by Russian politicians of "multiculturalism", LGBT rights and "political correctness" in Europe.' Furthermore, the 'revanchist Russia' perspective is unable to account for the numerous instances in which Moscow has adhered to the norms, rules, and institutions that are associated with the existing liberal order. While it might be a stretch to describe Moscow as a consistent defender of multilateralism (Lo, 2015), it has supported frameworks such as the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. It also acceded to the World Trade Organization in 2012 – after 19 years of talks – and continues to be a member of the European Court of Human Rights. The liberal goals and supranational methods of these institutions hardly fit with a revisionist imperial agenda.

Third, Moscow's behaviour is much more in line with that of an ordinary great power than the 'revanchist Russia' perspective makes it out to be. For one thing, Russia is by no means unique in its quest to establish a zone of influence in its near neighbourhood. As Carpenter (2017, January 19) points out,

Russia is hardly the only country to regard the [sphere of influence] concept as important for its security. Or do U.S. officials believe that Chinese actions in the South China Sea, Turkey's policies towards Iraq and Syria, and Saudi Arabia's actions in Bahrain and Yemen do not involve such a consideration?

For another, interference in the domestic affairs of other states is something of a habit for great powers. Whether they are democratic or authoritarian does not seem to make a difference in this regard. The United States, for example, has a long track record of meddling in the internal affairs and electoral processes of other countries (Levin, 2016). It is therefore unlikely that a more democratic Russia will substantially change its key foreign policy objectives and activities. Furthermore, the discrediting of Russian concerns over NATO enlargement as an 'imagined' threat, rather than a 'real' one, misses the mark. Any international relations scholar worth their salt knows that uncertainty about others'

intentions is central to security dilemma dynamics. Thus, Moscow's fears should not be brushed aside as idiosyncratic Russian paranoia. In conclusion, it seems fair to say that the 'revanchist Russia' perspective faces an array of explanatory challenges and shortcomings.

The 'defensive Russia' perspective is not entirely convincing either, for at least three reasons. First, the claim that Russia is a staunch defender of principles like state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs is problematic. Granted, Moscow consistently emphasizes these norms in official policy documents and promotes them in diplomatic forums. In practice, however, Russia has violated such principles repeatedly within the post-Soviet space. Examples are Russia's takeover of Crimea, its meddling in south-eastern Ukraine, and its longstanding support for separatist regions in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Moldova (Transnistria). As Lo (2015, pp. 71–72) rightly remarks, 'there is a stark disconnect between its [Russia's] formal allegiance to the "primacy of international law" and the territorial integrity of nation-states, and a highly selective approach toward implementing such principles.' Likewise, Bolt and Cross (2018, p. 30) note that, 'while Russia professes to champion sovereignty and non-intervention as standards for the world order, these guidelines somehow do not apply to Moscow's own behaviour in its immediate neighbourhood.' In other words, there is a gap between Moscow's rhetoric and actions, which does not square with the 'defensive Russia' perspective.

Second, it appears questionable whether Russia's assertive foreign policy is a natural and almost automatic response to aggressive encroachments, both normative and geopolitical, from Western powers. For example, it is highly debatable whether Russia's takeover of Crimea was a pre-emptive move, as some claim, to block NATO from establishing a naval base there (for contrasting views, see Milne, 2014, March 5; Motyl, 2015). Likewise, there was little risk that NATO would offer post-Yanukovich Ukraine a Membership Action Plan. According to then-Russian President Medvedev's own account, the alliance seemed to have understood the dangers of eastward enlargement and given up on it after the 2008 war in Georgia (Reuters, 2011). The financial crisis of that same year and the ensuing Greek debt crisis further contributed to enlargement fatigue among many EU member states. Consequently, there was little prospect for Ukraine (or any other post-Soviet state, for that matter) to join either of these two organizations in the short to medium term. Moreover, European militaries had downsized since the end of the Cold War, while the US was engaged in its so-called pivot to Asia. If anything, the direct threat posed by NATO to Russia was therefore dwindling. Against this background, it is difficult to interpret Moscow's takeover of Crimea and activities in eastern Ukraine as a purely defensive response to external pressures.

Thirdly, it is unclear why the West – and not Russia – should adjust its status ambitions and policies. As Freire (2011) demonstrates, Russia is a status overachiever relative to the power resources (economic, demographic, and military) that it controls. This means that Russia punches above its weight and occupies an extremely prominent position in world politics – at least in comparison to other countries with a roughly equal amount of material capabilities such as Japan, Brazil, or India. None of these countries is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, for example. This raises the question of how many great-power privileges must Russia be granted before its outsized status ambitions are satisfied. More generally, it is questionable whether the creation of a modern-day

concert of great powers, similar to the Concert of Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, is possible or even desirable. As Rynning (2015, p. 552) observes,

not only is concerted power in Europe unlikely, but its pursuit could be dangerous in so far as it could herald the type of unrestrained or flexible balance of power politics that presaged the great wars of the twentieth century.

Kagan (2017) likewise asserts that,

a return to spheres of influence would not calm international waters. It would merely return the world to the condition it was in at the end of the nineteenth century, with competing great powers clashing over inevitably intersecting and overlapping spheres.

In essence, both the policy prescriptions derived from the 'defensive Russia' perspective and its explanations of Moscow's international conduct require some elaboration.

The 'isolationist Russia' perspective, for its part, also encounters a number of challenges. To start with, there are good reasons to doubt that the main objective of Russia's 'near abroad' assertion is to prevent the spread of democracy in its neighbourhood. After all, Russia has used economic sanctions and other forms of coercive diplomacy in the post-Soviet space not only vis-à-vis democratic or democratizing states like the Baltic republics, Georgia, and Ukraine, but also towards authoritarian countries such as Belarus and Turkmenistan. In fact, in 2009 the Russian leadership aided and abetted the overthrow of a fellow authoritarian regime in Kyrgyzstan (Blank, 2010, April 14). Russia also played a key role in the democratic revolution in Georgia in 2003, when it helped broker a peaceful transition of power from Shevardnadze to Saakashvili. What is more, Moscow's relations with Georgia markedly improved after Saakashvili left office in 2013. By all accounts, Georgia has become more – not less – democratic since then (Way, 2015, p. 701). This suggests that regime type considerations have little effect on Moscow's neighbourhood policy. It is also worth noting that Moscow's ambitions to attain regional primacy go back to the early 1990s. At that time, a broad-based consensus emerged in Russia's foreign policy establishment to create a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. By late 1993, even President Boris Yeltsin and his liberal-minded Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev embraced this position (see, e.g. Hill & Jewett, 1994; Porter & Saivetz, 1994). All this casts doubt on the thesis that countering democracy is the fundamental motivation behind Russia's assertiveness in the post-Soviet region.

Furthermore, the argument that regime security is the main motive for Moscow's increasingly confrontational policy vis-à-vis the West is speculative. So far, the existing scholarship has not been able to present any clear-cut evidence in the form of policy documents, transcripts of high-level meetings, or statements by Kremlin officials. Of course, it is extremely difficult to gain access to internal government documents or records of the private deliberations of President Putin and his associates. Yet even the circumstantial evidence for this argument remains ambivalent. Consider the timing of Russia's turn towards a more assertive approach. Although it is difficult to pinpoint an exact start date, most scholars agree that the Putin government began pursuing a more muscular policy towards the West sometime in the mid-2000s (see, e.g. Lucas, 2008; Stent, 2014, pp. 135–176; Trenin, 2007). At that time, the popularity of the Russian President was increasing on the back of a booming economy. Thus, from a domestic political perspective,

there was little reason for Putin to lash out at the West and create a conflict, which, in turn, would boost his popular legitimacy. His approval ratings were already sky-high. There is, in short, a timing problem for the 'isolationist Russia' perspective.

In addition, and related to the previous point, Moscow's opposition to NATO enlargement preceded the Putin government. In fact, it can be traced back to the early to mid-1990s. After a brief 'honeymoon' period immediately after the Soviet Union's dissolution, Russian politicians of all stripes became increasingly opposed to NATO expansion and expressed this openly (Black, 2000; Dannreuther, 1999). At a high-level summit in Budapest in December 1994 for instance, President Yeltsin warned of a 'cold peace' if the alliance decided to move eastwards (quoted in Williams, 1994). This suggests that there is something more to Russia's anxiety about NATO expansion than parochial interests of President Putin and his entourage.

Finally, and more generally, it is easy to vilify Russia for being on the wrong side of history. Yet, this argument rests on an implicit liberal teleology of historical development, which foresees the spread of democracy and free market capitalism across the globe. Perhaps the strongest and most powerful expression of this perspective is Fukuyama's (1989) 'end of history' thesis – a thesis that has been criticized by an array of scholars on both normative and empirical grounds (see, e.g. Kagan, 2008; Mansfield et al., 1999; Stanley & Lee, 2014). Indeed, many of the so-called emerging powers in today's world are not transitioning towards liberal democracy. Nor have they fully embraced free market rules. Instead, they follow their own path of socio-economic development and pursue different forms of state capitalism (Bremmer, 2009; Kurlantzick, 2016). When seen against this background, it beggars belief to suppose that non-Western powers – such as Russia and China, but also India and Brazil – will fully embrace the existing US-led liberal international order. It seems more likely that rising powers will want to shape the global order in accordance with their own particular values and political agendas. As Kupchan (2012, p. 4) puts it,

rising powers will as a matter of course seek to adjust the prevailing order in ways that advantage their own values and interests. They have been doing so since the beginning of time, and the coming era will be no different (also see Stuenkel, 2016).

In that sense, Moscow's global-order goals and its international conduct appear more like 'normal' great-power behaviour than aberrations to be explained by the nature of Russia's political system.

In sum, all three perspectives are vulnerable to a range of criticisms. This does not mean that the existing accounts should be discarded, however. Rather, our point is that while the existing accounts face explanatory challenges, they provide for a structured way of thinking about Russia's international behaviour and its underlying drivers. Thus, we suggest that scholars need to adjust, modify, and expand the existing perspectives, or integrate different aspects of them, in order to address the identified challenges. In so doing, scholars will be able to gain new insights and develop a deeper understanding of Moscow's world order policy. That is the purpose of this special issue.

## Road map of the special issue

The first article, by Tuomas Forsberg, adopts a long *durée* perspective and examines Russia's role in shaping the European order at major postwar junctures. Forsberg looks at the Vienna



settlement of 1815, the Treaty of Paris of 1856 that ended the Crimean War, the 1919 peace conference in Versailles, the establishment of the post-World War II order in the 1940s, and the creation of Europe's security architecture after the Cold War. Forsberg not only reviews Russia's role in these order building moments, he also describes what lessons the political elite in today's Russia has drawn from them. His analysis demonstrates that Russia's role in shaping the European order at postwar moments has varied significantly over time and cannot be simply read off from the balance of power. This indicates, so Forsberg, that Russia's leadership has substantial agency in shaping its approach towards the European order. Moreover, he argues that the European security architecture after the end of the Cold War was not imposed on Russia, as the Putin government contends, but was created through a series of consensual agreements and treaties between the Soviet Union/Russia, the United States, and major European powers. Accordingly, it is misleading to suggest that the origins of the present crisis between Russia and the West can be ascribed to the formation of Europe's post-Cold War security order in the early 1990s. The article's bottom line is that scholars should not engage in historical essentialism. Instead, they should focus on recent events and developments to explain the current crisis in East–West relations.

The second article, by Kevork Oskanian, examines the same issue, albeit from a different angle. Oskanian applies insights from the classical realist perspective to shed light on the downturn in relations between Russia and the West. More specifically, he draws on E.H. Carr's famous book *The Twenty Years' Crisis* and offers a withering critique of Western policies towards Russia. Oskanian argues that the West has been committed to expand the liberal order eastward after the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. This has included the enlargement of institutional arrangements such as NATO and the European Union, the promotion of democratic governance structures, and the spread of free market capitalism. Although the West has couched the expansion of the liberal order in universalist terms, Oskanian holds that these initiatives were not geopolitically neutral. Quite the opposite, they have contributed to perpetuate US predominance and created structures that benefit the West's security and economic interests at the expense of Russia's power and status. In military, economic, and normative terms, Russia has been effectively side-lined in the present order. This, so Oskanian, is the root cause of the current crisis. He concludes that a pan-European security system can only be constructed when the United States and its allies give up the presumption that the expansion of Western-led institutions, democracy, and free trade is a positive-sum game for all involved, but recognize that some states – Russia, in this case – will lose out and therefore have strong incentives to push back.

The third article, by Roger Kanet, complements the previous two pieces by providing an overview of Russia's relations with the West from the honeymoon period of the early 1990s to the present crisis. His main argument is that the downward spiral in East–West relations is driven by two interactive dynamics. First, there is the eastward expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions, most importantly NATO and the EU, which undermines Russia's strategic interest to be the dominant power in the former Soviet space. The second development relates to Russia's strategic culture, which has become more assertive over the course of the last two decades. This can be partly explained by the increased level of external pressure from NATO and EU expansion, but also and above all by domestic developments in Russia. The Putin government's turn towards authoritarianism and its obsession with

regime security has resulted in a strategic culture that is characterized by a mix of paranoia and willingness to use force. Taken together, the expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions and the evolution of Russian strategic culture can explain Moscow's increasingly antagonistic attitude towards the West. Kanet's article concludes by briefly describing the likely effects of the Trump presidency for US-Russia relations and the liberal international order more generally.

The fourth article is by Marcin Kaczmarek. He focuses on Russian-Chinese relations and explores to what extent the world order visions and policies of the two countries overlap. Drawing on primary sources, Kaczmarek shows that there is substantial overlap between Russia and China regarding their publicly stated world order visions. Both resist Western interventionism, stress the importance of the UN Security Council, warn of the dangers of transnational threats, embrace traditional conceptions of state sovereignty, and emphasize the need to create new institutional arrangements at global and regional levels. Beyond the realm of rhetoric, however, there are growing rifts in the world order policies of the two countries. China is becoming an increasingly significant contributor to global governance. This includes UN peacekeeping operations, the fight against climate change, the provision of development aid, and the promotion of an open economic order. Beijing is generally interested in a stable and predictable international system. This is the prerequisite, after all, for its continued economic rise and domestic development. Russia, on the other hand, shies away from assuming global responsibilities. Moscow shows little willingness to accept international commitments and contribute to global public goods. Instead, it has emerged as a spoiler that thrives on uncertainty and insecurity in international affairs. Thus, despite much fretting by some Western observers about the formation of a Russo-Chinese axis in international affairs, such an axis is unlikely to come to fruition. According to Kaczmarek, the different world order policies of Russia and China will constrain partnership between them.

The final article, by Zachary Paikin, Kaneshko Sangar, and Camille-Renaud Merlen, builds on Kaczmarek's and seeks to understand the sources and prospects of the normative convergence between China and Russia. Using insights from Adam Watson's pendulum model, the article examines Russia's post-2014 Eurasian predicament. The authors argue that Russia's exclusion from the Euro-Atlanticist order after the end of the Cold War can be seen as an example of a (too) rapid rightward pendulum swing, that is, towards a more centralized international society. The emerging Sino-Eurasian order has not featured such a swing on normative issues and has consequently come to be seen in Moscow as a better fit for Russia. This means that the current China-Russia partnership rests on Moscow's disillusionment with the West and a normative convergence with Beijing on certain key issues, along with a sprawling set of international and regional institutions. Yet the developing partnership between Moscow and Beijing carries its own risks, chief among them – at least for Russia – that of becoming a junior partner to China. The authors thus conclude that the future of this partnership is anything but certain, with insecurities on Moscow's side potentially inhibiting the prospects of closer Russian-Chinese cooperation.

## Note

1. This overview and the following discussion build upon Götz (2016).

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