



Understanding Russian Foreign Policy

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IN REVIEW

Antoly Torkunov, editor, et al., *Russia and the United States in the Evolving World Order* (Moscow State Institute of International Relation, 2018).

The collapse in relations between the Russian Federation and the West over the past five years have produced much more recrimination than understanding. Americans and Europeans are angry at Russia's intervention in their democracies and fearful that Russia's use of force to seize Crimea has opened a new era of Russian militarism abroad. Yet, Western anger, fear, and frustration at Russia have not been accompanied by clarity about what Russia is up to. Indeed, Americans and Europeans appear if anything more confused by the sources of Russian conduct today than at any point in recent history. The Kremlin's foreign policy is said to be driven by fear of regime change, a need to distract its own population from domestic failings, fear of NATO enlargement, opposition to the European Union, or a desire to resurrect either the tsarist or Soviet empires. Properly diagnosing the drivers of Russian foreign policy is crucial if the United States and Europe are to devise effective strategies toward Russia.

In a new volume titled *Russia and the United States in the Evolving World Order*, a group of Russian academics from the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO) set out to explain U.S.-Russian relations and to provide suggestions for how to get the relationship back on track. MGIMO is a university that operates under the auspices of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and it has trained many of Russia's leading diplomats over the past half century. Its scholars are therefore well placed to explain how Russia's foreign policy establishment views the world and how it diagnoses the origins of the current crisis in relations between Russia and the West.

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It is worth noting at the outset that the key relationship, in the view of the volume's authors, is not between Russia and the West per se, but between Russia and the United States. Russia sees the United States not only as the key actor in transatlantic security affairs, but also as a crucial driver even of institutions such as the European Union. "The European Union cannot be the organizing center because it is not independent," writes one of the chapter authors. "It is torn between institutions, NATO and the United States." The volume's authors thus focus primarily on the bilateral U.S.-Russian relationship as key to understanding the evolution in world order.

The book is organized into several broad thematic chapters, such as "Russia in the Contemporary International Order" and "The World Today: System versus Conglomerate," as well as more regionally or topically focused chapters on areas such as nuclear weapons, Asia-Pacific, and the post-Soviet space.¹ Some of the regional chapters provide narratives with which American and European readers will be familiar and with which they may in part agree. The chapter, "Republic of Crimea: History and Return to Russia" presents a set of claims that mainstream American and European readers will find tendentious and objectionable.

For such readers, the volume is particularly valuable, however, for its articulation of what Russia thinks the United States (and to a certain extent Europe) has done wrong and what changes in U.S. behavior Russia thinks would be stabilizing. Needless to say, mainstream American opinion will find much to dispute in Russian critiques of U.S. foreign policy and could easily respond with many criticisms of Russian actions abroad. Nevertheless, the volume is an enlightening read for identifying and illustrating the gaps between Russian and U.S. perceptions of the bilateral relationship.

Consider, for example, the essay, "Russia in the Contemporary International Order," by Tatiana Shakleina, a distinguished scholar of U.S.-Russian relations and international politics more generally. Shakleina argues that a key factor in the destabilization of the contemporary world order is that the United States does not recognize Russia's proper status, and takes steps designed to ignore or even sideline Russia from what Shakleina argues is the country's rightful position in world affairs. She urges readers to consider recent American scholarship on Russia's role in global politics, citing books such as *Still Ours to Lead*, by Bruce Jones, in which, she argues, "Russia was defined as a disappearing power, and the future was described without it, as if you can easily ignore the biggest and richest country in the world with great power history." "Wishful thinking," she concludes.

Shakleina is not wrong in arguing that "America did not want or expect Russia's revival as a great power" and is right to note that Washington's main offer to Russia has been accommodation on U.S. terms—not something that Russians have been inclined to accept. Yet, many Americans wonder whether the current international order provides Russia not with too little status and voice, but rather too much. Long-gone are the days when Russia and the United States could define

¹ Disclosure: I co-teach a class with Dr. Igor Istomin, author of the chapter "From Nuclear Centrality to Political Instrumentalism: The Changing Role of Arms Control in Russian-American Relations."

international politics. Yet, Russia still retains many of the assets of the post-1945 settlement and the early Cold war, including a UN Security Council seat and one of the world's two largest arsenals of nuclear weapons. By contrast, its economy is far smaller than Germany, France, Japan, Britain, or India. Moscow has proven unable to provide effective governance in regions it long dominated, such as the post-Soviet space. Why, many in the West might ask, does Russia think it deserves a voice equal to other great powers? If anything, the rise of groups like the G-20 show that power continues to shift away from countries that dominated the post-1945 order. "One of the best scenarios for the international order could be the triangle core with the U.S., Russia, and China," Shakleina argues. Yet, the United States is unlikely to recognize Russia as an equal in great power terms, nor are European powers prepared to recognize Russia as superior.

Shakleina is clear in insisting, however, that Russia is willing to devote resources to be recognized as a first-class player. The past five years have demonstrated this vividly. "The desire of American and European scholars to construct an international order without Russia's active role and influential presence in key institutions is destructive for the international development," she writes. "The place that the Russian state occupied in world politics in history—being the Russian Empire, the USSR, or the Russian Federation—was and is very important if not indispensable. Its great historic experience in world regulation, its sacrifice, its geopolitical role and potential . . . should not be forgotten." This ongoing disagreement about Russia's status and its role in setting the rules in Europe and Eurasia represents a key disagreement between the United States, Europe, and Russia. Notable for American readers used to debating policy toward Russia through the lens of whether NATO enlargement is stabilizing or destabilizing, Shakleina places the NATO question not at the forefront, but rather within a larger context of disagreement about Russia's status and voice in the international system.

A second important divergence between Western and Russian views is highlighted in Alexey Bogaturov's essay, "The World Today: System vs Conglomerate." Whereas many Americans and Europeans assume that liberal democracy is the optimal end-state of political development, Bogaturov argues that this assumption is false and that efforts to shoe-horn other countries into institutions designed for Western democracies is coercive and should be avoided.

Bogaturov's argument about the non-inevitability of democratization is now widely accepted in the United States and Europe. "The usual beliefs about globalization as growing unity of the world do not fully reflect the diversity of the living reality," he argues, referring not only to political structures but also to persistent social and cultural differences. Bogaturov will find many readers that agree with his argument that it makes sense "to question the scenario of the 'linear-progressive' transformation into a single block of 'modernity', i.e., into a liberal and democratic global state." Indeed, in many parts of the world, this transformation appears to have halted or even reversed.

Bogaturov suggests that recognizing the persistence of diversity is crucial to developing a non-ideological understanding of international politics, implicitly

drawing a contrast with American and European assumptions about democratization, which many Russian analysts see is driven by ideology rather than realism. In Bogaturov's telling, Russian analysts have learned from the mistakes of the Soviet Union, when it was mandatory to see the world as driven by class struggle, and when Soviet scholars therefore misunderstood international trends. Today, he suggests, it is Russians who have a more realistic view of global trends. "The abandonment of the class approach," he argues, "allowed understanding the role of tribal and clan relations in the South Caucasus, in South-Eastern Europe, and in the Islamic republics of Russia," among other examples.

Here, too, Bogaturov's call for a realistic assessment of the extent to which political, social, and cultural institutions are converging on the Western model can only be applauded. He is right to note that many Americans and Europeans were too optimistic about the inevitability of democratization in the 1990s and 2000s, taking actions based on this assumption that clashed with more complicated realities.

Yet, even if many Western scholars will agree with Bogaturov's call for realistic analysis, his argument that politics traveling along "different historical trajectories" ought to be accepted or even embraced will strike many American and European readers as more debatable. Bogaturov perceives evidence of a "historical and messianic' hostility of the West toward non-Western ways of life." Yet, the universalizing tendencies that Bogaturov detects in Western thinking are also the source of the conviction, widespread in America and Europe, that certain rights are universal, regardless of the different historical trajectories at play.

Bogaturov notes that "global governance based on the League of Nations, The United Nations, the Bretton-Woods institutions and norms, and their variations in the form of 'G7' . . . has always been solely the product of Western thought, effort, and resources." But it does not follow that the principles underlying such institutions were necessarily "Western" principles rather than universal ones. The world's strongmen all justify their abuses on the grounds of their country's specific traditions and circumstances. In emphasizing the persistence of different political institutions, there is a risk of sliding toward an attitude of relativism. It is only a step further to say that certain societies are "not ready" for good governance. Bogaturov does not take such a step, but he does not close the door to it, either. Indeed, his hedged position seems roughly to correspond with the Russian mainstream view, which wants to carve out space for Russia to have "non-Western" politics, but which is wary of insisting that Russia is so different from the West that it should be assessed by a completely separate standard.

In contrast to the geographic and issue-focused chapters in *Russia and the United States in the Evolving World Order*, these broader thematic chapters underscore enduring differences between how Russia and the West see the world. Detailed and vigorously argued, this book is important reading for understanding Russian foreign policy. American and European readers will find much with which to argue. To understand how leading Russian experts view U.S.-Russian relations, there is no better book.

