

Domestic Politics as the Driver and the Limitation to Statecraft

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Russia and China have been “fellow travelers” in the emerging post-U.S. global order. The worldviews of their ruling elites have grown closer over the last decade, fueled by the processes of power centralization. Regime survival remains the top concern in both the Kremlin and the Zhongnanhai. Russia’s and China’s actions often mirror each other, creating the impression of coordination, as in the case of military pressure placed simultaneously on Ukraine and Taiwan. The trial and sentencing of Russian key opposition figure Alexei Navalny along with the crackdown on his supporters coincided with China’s introduction of the National Security Law in Hong Kong and an effective liquidation of the city’s autonomy. Under such conditions, scholars and policymakers alike have unsurprisingly directed greater attention toward Moscow and Beijing.

Still, China’s and Russia’s ultimate destinies in the international order appear to differ. The two books discussed here, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* by Kathryn Stoner and *Orchestration: China’s Economic Statecraft Across Asia and Europe* by James Reilly, clearly indicate that Moscow and Beijing perceive their respective roles and places in international politics through different lenses. The two states also deploy their influence in distinctive manners: one focuses on translating wealth into power, the other on amassing power with limited wealth.

Questions such as what constitutes power, how states exercise power at their disposal abroad, and how this power is linked to domestic political and economic arrangements are at the heart of both books. Stoner and Reilly reject the eternally popular metaphor of great powers as billiard balls defined by their material resources and acting rationally and strategically in the international realm. Instead, both authors strive to nuance popular understanding of state action and geopolitical and geoeconomic statecraft. Exploring the relationship between the domestic political-economic context on the one hand and engagement with the external world on the other, the two books delve into the limitations of successful statecraft and the obstacles encountered by states trying to convert their resources into influence.

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Stoner's first principal argument concentrates on the power at the Kremlin's disposal. She challenges a widespread belief that Russia has been a "power in decline" for the last three decades. Instead, she argues, Russia has managed to rebuild a substantial part of its power projection portfolio (Stoner, p. 235). This resurgence did not take place as part of a retrenchment strategy; on the contrary, Moscow "resurrected" itself against the backdrop of U.S. and European sanctions imposed after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Stoner vows to pay much more attention not only to assets of the Russian leadership but also to the leadership's "desire and ability" to use those assets for foreign and domestic policies purposes (Stoner, p. 236). Even if the Kremlin's assets are limited and incomparable in scale to those of the United States, China, or (economically) the European Union, its current leadership shows determination to translate latent power into instruments of influence.

The question that remains relates to the long-term strategic aims of Russian leadership (assuming that such aims exist). Despite rebuilding its influence in the neighborhood and employing a full repertoire of foreign policy instruments, Russia has neither managed to reverse the pro-Western orientation of Ukraine or Georgia nor prevent the rise of China's influence both in Central Asia and in other parts of the post-Soviet space (Stoner, pp. 67–68). It is Beijing's self-restraint more than anything that explains cooperative relations between Russia and China in their shared Eurasian neighborhood.

In the second part of the book, Stoner links Russia's assertive policy, especially since Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, with the ruling regime's search for a new source of domestic legitimacy. While Russia's foreign policy is often interpreted as a poster child of the realist tradition of international relations theory, Stoner persuasively argues that domestic political considerations are at least as important in driving Moscow's engagement with the external world. Assertive foreign policy has become the means to defend the patron-client network established in Putin's Russia and to maintain popular support in the face of worsening economic prospects (Stoner, p. 249). This explanation embedded in domestic politics counters first and foremost realist interpretations that see Moscow's foreign policy as either a response to Western (NATO's and the EU's) encroachment on Russia's neighborhood or a result of Russia's offensive power projection. Stoner's argument also constitutes the implicit defense of the "reset" policy pursued by the Obama administration in 2009–12 as a testimony to the possibility of different (i.e., cooperative) Russian-Western relations.

The emphasis on the relevance of a regime type, while undermining realist narratives, leads inadvertently to another set of simplifications. Stoner assumes that a (domestically) different Russia would conduct a completely different foreign policy, including the readiness to support liberalizing post-Soviet states such as Georgia or Ukraine, cooperate with the United States in the Middle East, and “create a united front against the rise of China” (Stoner, p. 263). Such a counterfactual seems to lose all the nuance that characterizes the volume and ultimately reduces all aspects of Russia’s foreign policy to its relationship with the West. *Russia Resurrected* portrays a hypothetical democratic Russia in black and white terms, a state that would throw all its weight behind the United States.

These two threads—the exercise of power abroad and the role of the domestic political context—are also central to Reilly’s book. His volume adopts a narrower approach with a focus on the attempts by Chinese leadership to translate wealth into (geo)political power and influence. Reilly recognizes economic statecraft as embedded in the ideas dominant in the People’s Republic of China since its inception and facilitated by its institutions (Reilly, p. 13). Unlike Stoner, he pays less attention to individual leaders, arguing that ideas and institutions have shaped economic statecraft practices across different leadership periods (from Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao to Xi Jinping). Reilly perceives China—with the Chinese Communist Party at the core of its political system—as uniquely positioned to employ economic instruments for political aims, yet he also identifies a number of challenges, with control and coordination at the top of the list (Reilly, p. 162). This area is where the orchestration approach, defined as a way of identifying subordinate actors who share the leadership’s priorities and encouraging them to implement their parochial as well as national goals, comes into play (Reilly, p. 2).

Reilly convincingly reconstructs how Chinese leaders have successfully employed orchestration tactics through leading, coordinating, and delegating. In most cases, they managed to align the priorities of the Chinese state and numerous domestic players, even if it sometimes required a learning process. Nonetheless, as China’s economic statecraft is ultimately about advancing political aims, a broader discussion centered on the latter seems to be missing. Analyzing the Western European case, Reilly singles out Beijing’s goals for the EU to lift the post-1989 arms embargo on China and for China to secure a market economy status for itself. He does not, however, elaborate on Beijing’s strategic aims. Does China want to separate Europe from the United States and would thus be willing to support the EU for that purpose? Or does it aim to divide the EU to force “the race to the

bottom” among the group’s members? Was the establishment of the “16+1” formula in Central and Eastern Europe thought of as a way to weaken the EU or was it a mere trial balloon of how to lead regional cooperation?

At times, the picture of relations between domestic politics and foreign policy seems a bit too simplified. Reilly analyzes CEFC China Energy as an example of a private Chinese company with murky ties. Initially, CEFC’s successful investments in the Czech Republic were aligned with Beijing’s aims, according to Reilly, but later on the company crossed certain boundaries, which led to its de facto nationalization and the arrest of its chairman (Reilly, pp. 110–12). At the time of building its influence in Central Europe, CEFC was supposed to buy a stake in Rosneft, Russia’s state-owned oil champion and the key partner of the Chinese energy industry. The failure of this transaction prevented China from gaining an invaluable asset in the Russian upstream oil market. In my reading, this case illustrates the primacy of domestic politics and political infighting over foreign policy priorities rather than a successful orchestration tactic.

To some extent, both volumes reaffirm the existing “specialization” of Moscow and Beijing in international politics. Russia tends to rely predominantly on military means, diplomacy, and sharp-power resources, whereas China employs a repertoire of economic statecraft tools, including credit lines, investments, loans, and development aid. This specialization does not allow for easy predictions though. Russia has been more successful than typically assumed in translating its limited socio-economic assets into political influence abroad. Chinese leadership, in turn, while skillfully mobilizing and directing the variety of its domestic actors, has failed to secure durable influence, especially in Western and Central Europe. More often than not, China’s economic statecraft has generated backlash, ultimately undermining its gains. In both cases, domestic politics have both enabled and constrained political leadership.

This focus on how and to what extent domestic politics and socioeconomic contexts drive and shape Russia’s and China’s external actions remains the most relevant contribution that these two books inject in the ongoing debates about non-Western powers and their attitudes toward the global order. Against the backdrop of reviving realist theoretical traditions and concepts such as “grand strategy,” the two books offer a nuanced picture of an often messy policymaking process and its numerous unintended consequences. 