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William C. Wohlforth and Vladislav M. Zubok

An Abiding Antagonism: realism, idealism, and the mirage of western-Russian partnership after of the Cold War

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ABSTRACT. Europe's security environment is critically dependent on nature of the relationship between Russia and the broader west. What are the obstacles in the way of a stable partnership? Against the conventional wisdom that foregrounds domestic politics, we establish the importance of an abiding clash of definitions of national interest on both sides. The US and Russian strategic perspectives draw on the modern historical experience of both sides, are consistent with well-established international relations theories and are independent of particular personalities such as Putin's. We demonstrate that though personalities, ideas, and contingency played their roles, these basic clashing perspectives existed even during the euphoric days of the Cold War's end. Success in negotiating an improvement of US-Russian relations will require a pragmatic compromise between deeply divergent interests. Stable economic and political relations may be possible, but the first step in attaining it is recognizing the scale of the challenge.

A stable partnership with Russia would do wonders for Europe's security. How to attain it? Much of the action centres on domestic politics. Policymakers and commentators in Europe highlight Russia's illiberal and corrupt domestic politics as the root challenge. Russian analysts look to the Trump Presidency as an opening for change. Throughout Europe, different political parties promise new approaches, suggesting that all it takes is governmental change to transform the West-Russia relationship. Without challenging the crucial role domestic politics can play, this paper establishes the importance of an underappreciated barrier to partnership: the clash of deeply embedded definitions of national interest on both sides. The way the west and Russia each seek security in an anarchic world is consistent over time and rooted in each side's historical experience, but the two approaches are hard to reconcile. These approaches are broadly 'rational', moreover, when viewed from the perspective of major theories of international relations. The fact that major theories can easily account for these policies undermines arguments that each side's (and particularly Russia's) approach is patently "irrational," "malevolent," or wholly the product of idiosyncratic domestic political incentives.

We proceed in three stages. We begin with the seemingly familiar US-led (and

EU-supported) western approach to statecraft, showing how its major successes come with serious strategic rigidities. We then contrast that approach with Russia's historical experience, which helps make sense of Moscow's concern for the continuous advancement of western alliances and institutions into what used to be Russia's territory and sphere of influence. In the third section, we establish just how deeply rooted these clashing interest definitions are by examining how they played out at the end of the Cold War and the early post-Cold War years. This fateful series of events set in motion the forces and perceptions that continue to haunt the relationship. It follows that any new negotiated improvement of the relationship must entail some compromise in each side's basic approach to pursuing its interests. That is why it is so hard. Whether the game is worth the candle given all the trade-offs involved cannot be resolved in the confines of this paper, but it is clear that the stakes are rising with each passing month.

THE US-LED WEST: INSTITUTIONALIZED REALPOLITIK

The hallmark of the US and western European grand strategic culture is the pursuit of national interests via multilateral institutions based on ostensibly liberal principles. A bedrock of western foreign policy for over seven decades, this approach fuses principle with raw power politics, sincere commitment to liberal ideals with rank hypocrisy. Four core postulates stand out:

First, US leadership is a necessary condition of institutionalized cooperation to address classical and new security challenges in Europe and its neighborhoods, which is, in turn, a necessary condition of the west's security.

Second, the maintenance of US security commitments to partners and allies in Europe (as well as in Asia) is a necessary condition of US leadership. Without these commitments, US leverage for leadership declines. America's partners in Europe tacitly or explicitly accept a subordinate role in a hierarchy in which they exchange deference on key strategic questions for US security provision. That bargain lies at the core of the west as a security community – specifically at the core of NATO.

Third, embedding US leadership in formal institutions often has major benefits for Washington and its partners: the classical functional benefits identified in institutionalist theory—focal point, reduced transaction costs, monitoring, etc.—as well as political and

legitimacy benefits, which mitigate the awkward aspects of US dominance.

Fourth, the foundational western institutions reflect agreed upon and transparent rules that ostensibly bind all members—but the US is the least constrained. The unwritten clause in the hierarchical bargain at the heart of the US-led liberal order is that, when push comes to shove, the US is not meaningfully constrained by its institutional commitments. America's partners periodically chafe at this inequality and when they do much ink is spilt about the fate of the transatlantic alliance, but at day's end differences are patched up and the bargain is sustained, if for no other reason than a lack of feasible alternatives.

Official European perspectives meld—albeit with oft expressed reservations—with this overall approach. As Smith (2016) argues, the 'shared agenda' between the US and EU was made clearer in the more 'realist' European Union Global Strategy [EUGS] than it was before. The EUGS reaffirms Europe's commitment to the core principles that no great power prerogative can trump a democratic European state's right to join the Union if it wishes and qualifies, and that the 'transformation' of neighboring states by the power of example is not only a rule-based right but also a potent enhancement of EU member states' security.

This approach has been by most accounts phenomenally successful, seeing the United States and its core allies through the Cold War, ushering in a post-Cold War era of unprecedented peace and prosperity, and facilitating the relentless expansion of the community of associated states. Yet it also comes with crucial downsides, the taproot of which is institutional rigidity. Scholarship from many social sciences leads to the expectation that institutions will be "sticky" and resistant to reform and adaptation. Because institutions are hard to build anew, conservatism must be the watchword. The conditions under which the US and Europe forged their current set of grand strategic institutions were unique—World War II, the Cold War and the imperative of balancing Soviet power, the United States' unparalleled position of power within the west. Thus, once you take down an institution like NATO, it will be practically impossible to recreate it. The result is extreme risk aversion concerning any major revision to accommodate new circumstances.

These rigidities generate two kinds of strategic costs. First is the opportunity cost of exclusion. The basic principle is that the maintenance of US security commitments to partners and allies in Europe and Asia is a necessary condition of European security, and those commitments are exclusionary by definition to those who do not want accept U.S. leadership. States against which those commitments are directed—especially China and Russia—can never be wholly integrated into the order. The result is to foreclose any alternative mode of great power concert. Securing the gains of institutionalized cooperation today may come at the price of having alienated potential partners tomorrow.

Second is the rigidity created by interdependence among all the parts of the western approach. The result is to create apparently potent disincentives to compromise. Compromise on any given principle—say the principle that any neighboring democratic state that meets the relevant criteria may join the EU or NATO—may make sense when each of these cases is considered individually. But if compromise anywhere saps the order everywhere, any individual step toward ameliorating the concerns of outside major powers will be extremely hard to take. When western officials are confronted with arguments for compromises with Beijing or Moscow, these concerns frequently come to the fore.

The west's international policies, with many layers of liberal discourse, institutionalism, and economic networks, reflect ideas and historical experiences unique to a few western countries, and especially the United States. The focus on using multilateral institutions to address problems that require inter-state cooperation resonates strongly with liberal theories as developed by scholars like John Ikenberry (2000) and Robert Keohane (2000; Keohane & Wallander 1999). So, too, does the role of the United States as a liberal (open market) hegemon using its power advantage to overcome the barriers to collective action among self-interested states (Keohane 2012). More controversially, we contend that the approach is also strongly consistent with offensive realism. To be sure, offensive realism has no theoretical architecture to explain the role institutions play in the approach, but liberal thought cannot capture key features the way Mearsheimer's (2001) theory can. Focusing on the US as the leading state in the western system, two perennial features stand out.

First is the relentlessly *preventive* nature of the approach. What strikes the observer is how frequently force is applied *now* to stave off highly conjectural *future* threats. Historical research suggests that for the United States, costly uses of force associated with containment and deterrence of the Soviet Union were strongly preventive in nature from the very beginning of the Cold War, given that the Soviet threat they were intended to counter had yet to materialize concretely. From the initial containment policy to the massive military buildups of the 1950s and 1980s, to the globe-girdling interventionism in the third world, western power-seeking in the Cold War was always responding to threats that were imagined or expected to materialize well in the future, often a decade or more away (Leffler 1992; Wohlforth 1993; Zubok, 2007). To forestall these future threats, U.S. governments undertook massive preventive investments in military power that always resulted in large power gaps in favor of the United States. Most U.S. interventions in the Third World—uses of force associated with the deaths of over 2 million people—were also preventive in nature, driven by such doctrines as “falling dominos,” that grossly exaggerated the adversary’s power. (Westad 2005). They were intended to forestall a “domino effect” of spreading Communist revolutions that would all miraculously succeed and yield regimes that would support Moscow geopolitically. To be sure, each intervention encompassed many aims, but security-driven preventive logic was generally a necessary condition of any large-scale action. The logic underlying these interventions was every bit as preventive as that underlying more recent interventions in the Balkans and Iraq.

Second is the relentless pursuit of *primacy*. U.S. conceptions of security during the Cold War demanded a decisive “preponderance of power” on all key indexes save the most expensive one: conventional military power in Europe. To compensate for the Soviets’ logistical advantages in Eurasia, the United States assembled alliances in Western Europe, in the Middle East, and in South-East Asia, that outmatched Soviet/Warsaw Pact GDP by factors of four or more. Having assembled this overwhelming preponderance, the United States could not tolerate a Soviet rival that had any expectation of political or status equality. The period of early *détente*, when several American governments acknowledged strategic “parity” with the Soviet Union, was brief,

limited to a few issue areas such as arms control, and ended with a resumed quest for US preponderance under Ronald Reagan.

The sudden advent of unipolarity in 1991, after the victory in the Gulf, and then the collapse of the Soviet Union, altered the constraints and incentives on the United States but had little discernable effect on this core behavioral pattern. The United States expanded its influence into areas where Moscow recently had held sway, made its policy of primacy all but explicit, continued military investments that further entrenched its dominance, and sought to revise rules and institutions to reflect its newfound power.

Thus, the western approach blends elements that are consistent with all the theoretical schools. It is a way to tame inter-state anarchy in a manner favorable to the long term security of comparatively open, liberal polities. Liberal domestic institutions and the ‘hands off’ style of government they thrive on need a world in which security threats are kept far at bay. Let the wolf (or bear) come to close, and pressure will build for anti-liberal “garrison state” policies that would spell the death knell for liberal governance (Friedberg 2000). The result is a powerful drive for a ‘maximalist’ approach to security (Sestanovich 2014). Though always coupled with the distinctive institution building aspect, this approach features in the leading state the expansionistic power seeking behavior predicted by offensive realism, which combines with liberal beliefs and a liberal-capitalist domestic system. The quest for primacy and the propensity to solve often-conjectural security threats via expansion are consistent with long-standing strains of realist thought, most recently exemplified by John Mearsheimer’s reformulation of realist theory. The penchant to export risks and costs to others in favor of maintaining national prosperity reflects domestic constraints identified in liberal theories, but they often require American governments to trample on their own liberal norms and ideals. The penchant to expand the ambit of liberal democratic governance is hard to suppress. Efforts to make hegemony more efficient via international institutions are consistent with liberal and constructivist theories, but in any trade-off between the pursuit of primacy and fealty to rules of its own design, U.S. governments almost always opt for the former.

RUSSIA: SECURITY AND IDENTITY

Western analysts are struck by Russia's apparent obsession with geopolitics and great power prestige. Angela Merkel famously opined after a meeting with Vladimir Putin that the Russian president was 'in another world' (Traynor 2014). Responding to Russia's annexation of Crimea, John Kerry protested that 'you just don't in the 21st century behave in 19th century fashion' (Dunham 2014). Western scholars argue that Russia's preoccupations with geopolitics and prestige are some kind of abnormality and are unrelated to the country's 'true' security needs. One problem with that argument is hypocrisy. Expansion and prestige-seeking under the guise of US leadership are intrinsic to the western approach to pursuing security, even though these are thickly shrouded in rhetoric, institutions, and rules. The second problem is that the more one knows about Russia's long career as a great power, including the period of the Soviet Union, the weaker that western argument becomes. For as Poe (2003) argues, Russia's great power career is a phenomenal success story. It is the only state outside Europe's western core to avoid subjugation by the powerful states and to stand as a great power for centuries. The only other state to compare is Japan, whose much shorter great power career ended disastrously with surrender and occupation. This basic story of success—albeit at fearsome cost to the Russians and other peoples ruled from St Petersburg and Moscow—is central.

As one of us has argued elsewhere (Wohlforth 2001), if you take the basic neorealist system of explanation developed by Waltz (1979) and apply it to Russia's circumstances, seeming "obsessions" with territorial expansion and great power status become all too easy to understand. Muscovy, the Russian empire, and the Soviet Union lived in tough geopolitical neighborhoods, with offense-dominant topography populated by more advanced expansionist states. Russian response to the threatening environments was to acquire and hold territory, by autocratic methods. The policy worked, while less autocratic states did not survive on the Eurasian plain. Indeed, Russia is by some measures the most successful imperial enterprise in history. It retained its peak territorial extent longer than any other empire, and for most of the last 400 years it has been the largest polity on earth (Taagepera 2007). For Russia, territory did bring prestige and, and prestige was a necessary condition of security. If you were not recognized as a great

power, you were not included in the political discourse that decided the fate of nations. Without this status, you become an object not the subject of international politics.

Leading western historians of Russia have stressed the dependency of the Russian state on geopolitical factors. As Lieven (2000, ix) puts it: “The demands of international power politics and of membership of the European and then global system of great powers were of overwhelming importance in Russian history. More probably than any other single factor they determined the history of modern Russia.” Rieber (2015, 3-4), writes about “persistent factors” in the history of the Russian state: porous or permeable frontiers, particularly in the west and in the south; multinational borderlands; relative economic backwardness in comparison with powerful neighbors, and cultural alienation. Geopolitical weakness, translated into the feeling of alienation and insecurity, Rieber sums up, “sets limitations on the range of policy choices... Different leaders will pursue different styles in conducting foreign policy, but they ignore only at their peril the restraints placed upon them by the persistent factors.”

The collapse of the outer geopolitical ramparts in Eastern Europe and then the breakup of the Soviet Union itself left the core part of Russia, in the form of the Russian Federation. One consequence of Russia’s past is that it remains the world’s largest state, bordering more other countries (14) than another state save China. Another consequence is memories and the inertial identity of a superpower. Size, victory in World War II, special role in the United Nations, nuclear weapons, and superpower pedigree are the chief sources of Russia’s claim to great power status today. And only on the geopolitical dimension and the past does Russia truly stand out. This may well help explain the appeal of geopolitical arguments that magnify the global significance of precisely this dimension. But Russia is hardly the first declining state to try to maximize the apparent value of things it still possesses in abundance. It took Great Britain half a century to adapt its foreign policy priorities to its declining power. It is not clear how long it would take Russia to do the same.

The popularity of geopolitics derives in part from plausible lessons that many Russians have drawn from their recent experience. Most of the new players in Moscow’s foreign policy game—including Vladimir Putin—claim to have learned a lesson from the Soviet Union’s experience that international politics is a highly competitive realm. They

tend to be critical of Soviet policy in the Cold War for having overextended itself and ultimately weakened the country. However, they are united in the conviction that Mikhail Gorbachev and his associates bungled the management of Soviet decline by making far too many concessions - based on a mistaken faith in the positive-sum, cooperative nature of contemporary international politics. Their discourse resembles a laundry list of the “myths of empire” (Snyder 1991) excoriated by western scholars; belief in the prevalence of bandwagoning in world politics, the possibility of falling dominos, the vital importance of a reputation for power in order to maintain the country’s status and security, and a strongly zero-sum conception of international security and economics. By explicitly rejecting those precepts, and implicitly buying in to frivolous western promises, Russian critics argue, Gorbachev allowed himself be taken for a geopolitical ride by less romantic and more savvy western policymakers (Zubok 2003, 2007).

More specifically, many Russian geopoliticians contend, the global importance of territory in general was demonstrated by the voluntary retraction of Soviet power from the river Elbe 1,500 kilometers east to the Soviet borders after 1989. From a relatively small economic base, the Soviet Union had formed one of two poles in a bipolar system. Geography is an important part of the explanation for how Moscow managed to pull off this feat. If one measures international prestige by how much attention is paid to a given state, then the Soviet Union obtained immense prestige by virtue of its polar status. And that status was coterminous with the expansion of Soviet power in Eastern Europe after 1945, and its withdrawal after 1989. This shift in territorial sovereignty or suzerainty brought an end to the forty-year old structure of international politics and utterly transformed the strategic desiderata of every major power and many minor ones. If ever an event advertised the importance of control over territory to world politics it was the decline and fall of the Soviet Union. It is not surprising that people who had gone through this experience should conclude that ignoring the geopolitical factors courts peril.

As in the case of the west’s approach, the Russian way of seeking security has major downsides. Above all, it means autocracy at home, which reached its odious peak under Stalin. The expansionist habit got both the Tsarist and Soviet state in serious trouble, from the Crimean war in the mid 19th century to Manchuria in the early 20th, to the latter

Cold War's Brezhnev-era self-encirclement and imperial overstretch. Many western analysts think Moscow is setting itself up for such episode today. The jury remains out on that debate, but the Cold War expansionism is not in the cards today. Only in most fervid imagination can Crimea and Donetsk be compared to Berlin, Korea, and Cuba. Rather, every government in Moscow since Evgeny Primakov's tenure as foreign minister in 1999 has translated the age old Russian approach to security into three prosaic postulates:

First, Russia is not a regional power. It is a 'great Eurasian power' and a temporarily wounded world power. Restoration of Russia's rightful status is a central goal. Status is not a goal in and of itself; rather it affords Russia influence over key politico-diplomatic negotiations in areas that matter to its long-term interests. Without this status, Russia finds itself marginalized and ignored.

Second, an excessive concentration of power and authority in the hands of the United States and expansion of US-led West in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Middle East is a threat to Russia's long term security. Russia must therefore at a maximum work to establish a multipolar world in some kind of alliance with China and other states or at a minimum eschew policies that serve to entrench US global and regional dominance.

Third, Russia's interests demand a sphere of influence in most of the former Soviet territory. Russia, in contrast to the Soviet Union, is prepared to keep such a sphere open to economic activities of the United States and other countries, yet insists that its neighbors could not be geopolitically alienated from Moscow and become members of alliances where Russia was not a member.

These three postulates of Russian foreign policy are all linked by geopolitical thinking. Domestically, they enhance public support for autocracy, shrouded in the language of Russian identity. They also justify Russia's reactions to the threat of NATO expansion, just as preventive and outsized, as the US reactions to perceived external threats. Putin argued in March 2014, that he had to act *now* to annex Crimea --the peninsula of special geographic and historic significance for the Russians -- in order to prevent the US military presence on the peninsula in the future.

As Mearsheimer (2014) has argued, these precepts are utterly unremarkable for a great power in Russia's position and with its endowment of power capabilities. Needless

to say, other scholars call these precepts into question. Defensive realists (e.g. Glaser 2010) hold that overly aggressive solutions to insecurity tend to backfire. Western theorists of globalization and the nuclear revolution stress the devaluation of territory in modern world politics. Liberals insist that the west's 'sphere of influence' is based on democratic principles and sovereign choice, while Russia seeks to deny democratically elected governments the right to choose alliances. Russian government is prone to respond that none of the other great powers appear to have gotten the memo. Even when ultimate territorial security is backed up by nuclear deterrence, China, Europe, Japan, India and especially the US act as if it still matters who holds sway in key regions. Thus, Russians insist, Moscow cannot stake its security on avowals of benign intent from western partners. Facts on the ground, including the location of military and intelligence capabilities that could in extremis be turned against Russia or its vital interests, must remain the lodestar. Moscow also claims that purportedly "democratic" choice of alliances by its neighbors, such as Ukraine, leaves Russia surrounded by US protectorates along its borders. Those in Russia, who argue to the contrary, are a scattered few. As recent history shows, a security dilemma between Russia and the US-led West, instead of generating democratic pressure on the regime from below, only tend to enhance domestic support for autocracy and conviction that liberalization would undermine Russia's stability and integrity.

The main point here is that in both the western and Russian cases, approaches to security are deeply rooted and resonate with major strands of IR theory. They are thus hard to dismiss as passing obsessions sparked by this or that international interaction, personality, or domestic imperative.

FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES: SOVIET COLLAPSE AND POST-SOVIET EUROPE

To see how the western and Russian perspectives on security clash to produce an abiding antagonism, it helps to examine the period when the Cold War came to an end. It is simply very hard to see how the two sides could have reached a conflict-avoiding bargain in the early 1990s without making exceedingly improbable compromises to their basic approaches to international politics. There is scant evidence that any alternative to

the west's approach ever had much chance in the official corridors of power. Nor is there much evidence to suggest that even the most westernizing governments in Russian history, led by Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, ever could have accepted real partnership on the terms the west was willing to offer.

For the west, 1989-91 powerfully validated the essential rightness of its core approach. One by one, communism imploded in Eastern Europe imploded and then the Soviet Union; Germany reunited on western terms, became a key member of NATO and European integration, and most importantly 'gratefully accepted' U.S. leadership. As the Soviet Union was in crisis, Washington pursued a policy of non-engagement in internal affairs of the USSR, and Bush sympathized with Gorbachev. But it was no partnership of equals: after all, Soviet power was collapsing, and, as far as the west was concerned, bargaining over the post-Cold War order would reflect that reality. In partnership with Gorbachev, the US government pursued American strategic interests: arms control, non-proliferation, the contraction of Soviet military and overall capabilities; withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe, and the end of support to Soviet clients, including Cuba, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and Angola.

Alternative approaches to restructure the European geopolitical architecture in a manner more inclusive of Moscow—from the French European confederation to Gorbachev's "common European home,"—had little chance. Eastern European states wanted to join western security institutions, above all NATO (Bozo et al. 2016). Washington effectively used its power advantage and alliance ties to put paid to schemes of integrating the USSR into the US-dominated European and trans-Atlantic institutions; even a hint of such intentions could question the priority accorded in US strategy to the states of Eastern Europe. Existing European security institutions, moreover, were seen as critical bulwarks of the western order—to put these in question in the search for more inclusive alternatives entailed risks few policymakers were willing to take. American strategic priorities hardly changed subsequently. Despite the declared 'Russia first' course of the Clinton presidency, the bottom line was that Russia should take a place in the US-led international order as a weak regional power with limited military capacities.

The United States' initial recognition of Russia as a leading power in the post-Soviet space soured as a fateful security dilemma began to emerge between Russia and

neighbouring newly independent states. Those states, notably Georgia and Ukraine, appealed to the United States and other western governments protect them from Russia's ambitions to restore its regional primacy. After 1994, the United States shifted the bulk of its assistance to Russia's neighbors. Geopolitical priorities became reaffirmed after the Clinton Administration invited Poland, the Czech republic, and Hungary to join NATO. Even if this happened 'in a fit of absence of mind', as some contend, it does not change longer-term consequences. (Goldgeier, 1999; Goldgeier and MacFaul, 2003). Western politicians assumed that Russia would ultimately accommodate the new realities, and that even if Moscow remained recalcitrant it had no capacity to stop the process. Russia received a consolation prize in the form of its membership of G-7, the prestigious club of world powers, and in the NATO-Russia Council, a unique institution designed to keep Russia attached to the alliance without any real voice in it.

On the Soviet-Russian side, serious attempts at partnership foundered on a lack of the necessary power to compel or entice the west to compromise its core approach. During the last years of the Soviet Union, the Gorbachev leadership attempted to transform the USSR's superpower status into the role of an essential partner of the United States. The integrationist rhetoric of 'new thinking' and 'common European home' notwithstanding, the Kremlin never gave up geopolitical interests. Gorbachev expected the United States and the integrated Europe to build a global order in a partnership with the reformed Soviet Union, rather than pursue a unilateralist strategy and deal with a handful of smaller, struggling states in the post-Soviet space. There was also an expectation that Soviet-German cooperation would help balance US power in Europe. (Chernyaev, 1997). Even before Soviet weakness and collapse buried these schemes, their unrealistic nature became obvious. Germany became a key American ally in NATO and in the emerging EU. Both structures were specifically constructed not to include the Soviet Union and then Russia.

Boris Yeltsin and his foreign policy advisers believed that the Soviet Union was not viable, yet they expected Russia to regain its world status and primacy vis-à-vis its neighbors, despite its temporary weakness. Meanwhile, the collapse of Russia's economic and military power, the most catastrophic since 1917-21, dictated pragmatic policies. 'Persistent factors' of porous borders and troubled multinational borderlands

(above all in the Caucasus) quickly reminded the Kremlin of their existence. In these dire conditions, Russia accepted US leadership in global affairs, but this was provisional and conditional. In return for its cooperation, the Russian leadership expected American financial assistance, recognition of its status as a global power, and acceptance of Russia's leadership in the post-Soviet space. Never—even during its most liberal and westernizing moments—did the Yeltsin government abandon the core precept that immediate neighbors other than the Baltic states could not be geopolitically alienated from Moscow and become members of alliances of which Russia was not a member.

As in the case of the Soviet Union's last-minute aspirations, Russian expectations of the 1990s were bound to be frustrated. Large-scale American financial assistance did not materialize. The bulk of western investments went not into the more open and democratic (though corrupt and unstable) Russia, but rather to authoritarian China, ruled by the communist party, with its pool of cheap labor and predictable state capitalism. For more and more Russians, the post-Soviet, post-Cold War period began to look as a punitive Carthaginian peace, imposed by the victorious United States.

President Vladimir Putin post-9/11 offer to the United States of a strategic partnership in the 'war on terror' revealed again US-Russia strategic inequality. The United States accepted Russia's assistance in Central Asia and Afghanistan, but failed to reciprocate on other issues of importance, from the ABM treaty to Iraq. As Russia under Putin experienced economic growth enabled by greater political stability, tax reforms, and oil prices, the United States continued to shift its support to Russia's neighbors. After 2002 the NATO began to consider and later to deploy a missile defense system in Poland, the Czech Republic, Rumania, and Turkey. In 2005 the European Union for the first time entered as an actor in the post-Soviet international politics, siding with the Ukrainian 'orange' forces. This development meant that the United States and its European allies, now including Eastern European and Baltic states, openly questioned Russia's interests not only in the region, but also in the international hierarchy.

In light of Russia's deep-set approach to grand strategy, the changing international situation in Eastern Europe presented Moscow with a familiar choice: to join the predominant constellation as a junior partner of the United States as well as European Union or to try to assert itself again as a major player. The issue of identity added to this

equation. In the 1990s Russia attempted to position itself as a democratic state opposite in identity to its predecessor; fifteen years after 1991 the benefits of this thesis diminished significantly, and traditional geopolitical identity was reasserted by the claims that Russia defeated itself or was ‘deceived’ by western powers in the end of the Cold War (Zubok, 2015).

In 2008 Russia shifted the centre of gravity of its strategy from enticing the west via offers of partnership to seeking to compel western accommodation via raising the costs of western approach. Two external developments prompted this change. First, the continuation of NATO advancement into the Baltics and the Balkans, and the US offer to Ukraine and Georgia to join the North-Atlantic alliance. The “reset” in the western-Russia relations offered in 2009 by the Obama administration did not end security dilemma in Eastern Europe and Moscow’s marginalization in its new architecture. Second, the US invasion of Iraq with the purpose of regime change ended in increased anarchy in the Middle East, war fatigue in the United States, and the weakening of the US international position. This produced a temptation in Moscow to try a more affirmative strategy: to use US weaknesses to contest head on the consensus on the post-Cold War security architecture.

The negotiations between Ukraine, Russia, and the European Union in 2013 had strategic significance for Russia, also from the viewpoint of the logic of offensive realism. Had Ukraine joined the Eurasian Union, it would have been a significant gain for Russia’s claims of multilateralism and regional leadership. Even a compromise between Russia and the EU would have been an acceptable development, as it would have meant international recognition of the Eurasian Union, centered in Moscow. The unexpected breakdown of Russia’s agreement with Yanukovich and the victory of ‘Euromaidan’ in early 2014 flipped the situation for Russia from relative gain to net loss. To avoid this net loss, Putin made a harsh decision to annex Crimea and intervene in eastern Ukraine, in violation of many post-Cold War agreements and treaties. This was the moment when the contestation process became a confrontation. Russia’s actions backfired, at least in the short term. The United States, NATO’s Eastern European members, the EU’s western members and the Kiev government all acted to counter Moscow’s intervention in Ukraine.

CONCLUSION: NEW PRESSURE FOR CHANGE?

The upshot of this analysis is that the path to a pragmatic, stable partnership with Russia that could alleviate challenges to Europe's security is steeper than commonly assumed. There were no easy 'missed opportunities' to integrate the USSR or post-Soviet Russia seamlessly into the west. To have achieved that outcome would have taken statesmanship of the sort rarely if ever witnessed in international politics. There was no obvious strategy Moscow could have followed that would have allowed it to avoid the effects of Soviet collapse and its retreat from Eastern Europe. Russians who think the west's approach is nothing but a vast conspiracy to keep their great nation down miss the real point: Russia is not an abiding preoccupation but rather an inconvenience for the west, which has strong reasons not to put its core approach to security at risk to accommodate Moscow. Western analysts and practitioners who dismiss the Russian approach as a function of a declining kleptocracy's efforts to cling to power domestically by stoking Russian pride are also off the mark. They exaggerate the linkage between Russia's security interests and the prospects of autocracy or democracy in Moscow. And they greatly underestimate Russia's predicament as a big country in a crowded and insecure geopolitical environment, the country that lacks the power to organize its space and defend its interests within existing international structures and alliances.

To say that analysts commonly underestimate the seriousness and staying power of the west's and Russia's conflicting approaches to security is not to say that nothing can change them. We know that since 1990 incentives to revise these approaches in the interest of alleviating rivalry between Russia and the west have not been sufficiently strong. What we cannot now know is whether changes are afoot that might alter these incentives.

Until the fall of 2016, the dominant bet in Washington and key European capitals was that sanctions, international isolation, and long term decline would compel Russia to back down on its claim to a sphere of influence in its near abroad and accept a bargain on Ukraine that would not compromise the west's core approach. We cannot predict the precise trajectory of Russia's power. Precipitous decline might compel retreat, and there is little doubt that Putinist Russia has failed to create the truly innovative and competitive political economy a 21st century great power needs. But our analysis casts doubt on the

prospects that 'strategic patience' will deliver a dramatically more accommodating Russia. Barring a much speedier and steeper decline than most experts now forecast, Russia is more likely to react according to the logic of neorealism: seeking to maximize its security by building new partnerships, concentrating its resources even more in the hands of the state, and acting as a spoiler behind its nuclear 'shield,' using numerous means at its disposal to try to compel United States and its allies to negotiate terms that acknowledge Moscow's great power perquisites. Graham and Rojansky (2016) sum up: 'Moscow cannot simply be defeated or contained in the emerging multipolar, globalized world order.'

Perhaps more importantly, the pressure on changing the west's approach is if anything greater than what Moscow faces. China's rise makes sustaining the United States' position in East Asia more expensive and dangerous than at any time since 1991, raising the opportunity cost of renewed tension in Europe. The widely perceived failure of US and European policies in the Middle East and North Africa (notably in Syria and Libya) weaken the west's ability to counter Moscow's newly assertive policies there. And the rise of populist nationalism in Europe and the United States may well present the greatest challenge of all to the sustainability of the core western approach. Burgoon et al. (2016) provide strong evidence that the forces propelling the new populist wave are deeply lodged at the intersection of globalization and domestic politics, and that they corrode the basic foundations of the transatlantic alliance and the European Union.

Systemic, economic and domestic factors thus all conspire against many of the basic liberal precepts of the western approach, weakening the west's bargaining hand. Russia's efforts to position itself as the champion of the new nationalism, hammering away relentlessly at the alleged failures, compromises, and hypocrisy of key liberal precepts of the US led western order appeared to begin to pay dividends. Notwithstanding its manifold deficiencies and the unattractiveness of its domestic political model, Moscow began to acquire new sympathy among some European governments. Domestic volatility, caused by fears of migration and terrorism, the Brexit and the presidency of Donald Trump created new pressures on western European states to act as intermediaries between Russia and NATO, and move beyond reiteration of their (weakening) unity based on common principles and values. The uncertainty about US global and European

leadership may make France, Italy, some Central European states, and Turkey act more according to the neorealist logic and seek negotiated bargains with Russia.

Long term trends therefore do arguably undermine both sides' long-held strategic approaches. Russia is not strong enough to compete with the west on the west's terms but not weak enough to foreswear its identity and security interests. The west's approach has clearly lost momentum—the heady idea of endless liberal expansion is weaker than at any time since the publication of Fukuyama's 'End of History' article—but it is still backstopped by gigantic material and soft-power advantages over Russia. As Smith (2016) argues, strategy is about relating ends and means. The EU's inability to do this helped contribute to the current impasse. While our analysis does lean toward an expectation of continued deadlock, nothing in it rules out a new appreciation in both Russia and the west of the need to trim expectations of what ends they can pursue closer to long term power realities.

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