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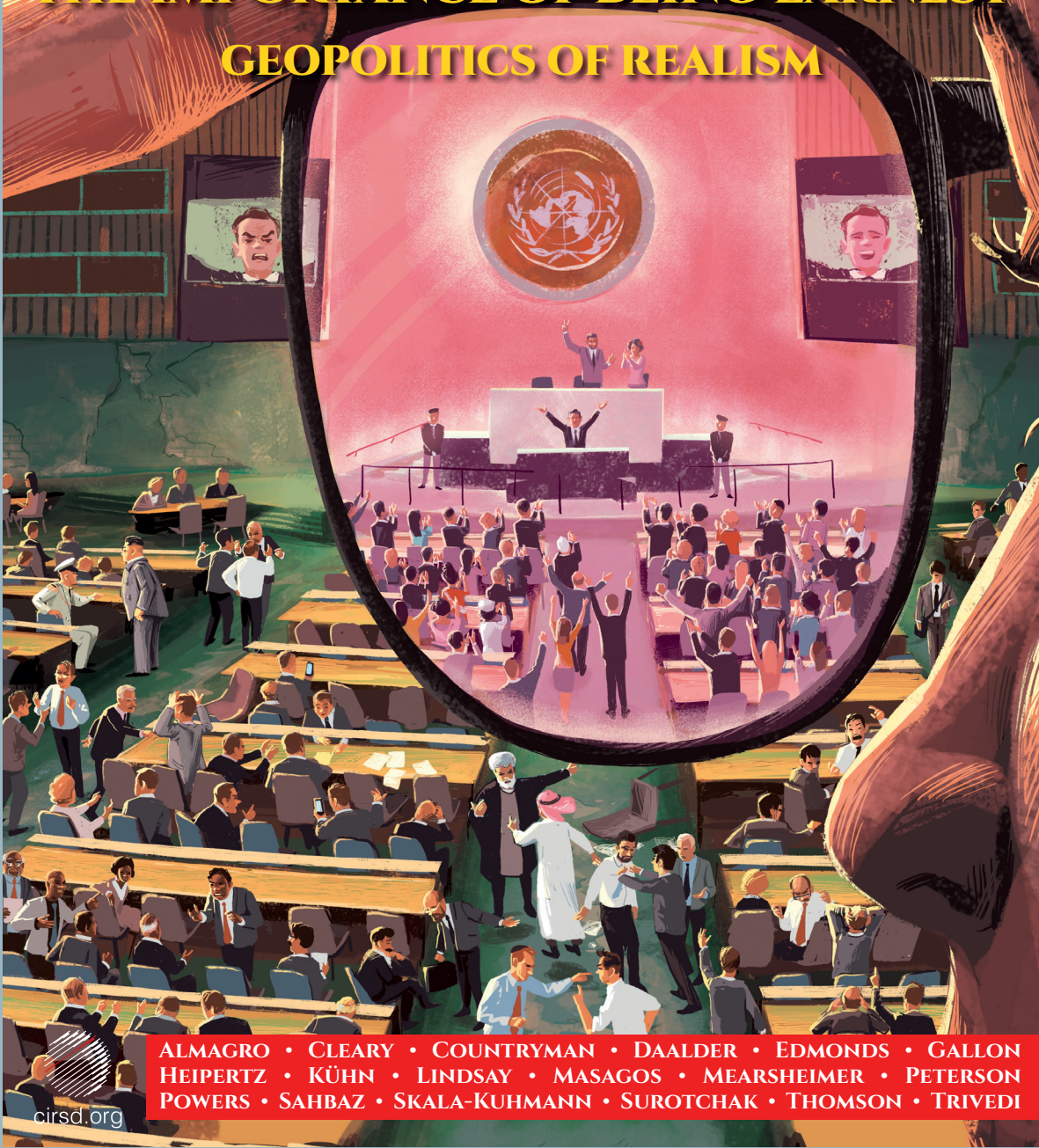
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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST GEOPOLITICS OF REALISM



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THE CONTINUING DECLINE OF U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS

Jeffrey Edmonds

A DEEPLY held sense of honor and place, coupled with resentment and fear, have led the Russian leadership to pursue actions that fundamentally misunderstand America's domestic dynamics; these have, in turn, guaranteed that U.S.-Russian relations will continue on their negative trajectory with little hope of changing anytime soon.

Russian feelings of betrayal by the international order following the fall of the Soviet Union run deep and have shaped an antagonistic narrative portraying Russia versus an American-led initiative to keep Russia weak and ultimately replace its regime with something more malleable to Washington's interests. Despite the reality that American interests in Russia have only been minimal since the end of the Cold War,

the Russian leadership is convinced otherwise. This has led to coercive policies designed to signal the United States, NATO, and their would-be supporters, while at the same time directly targeting Western institutions.

The Russian leadership's ultimate goal is the creation of a new polycentric world order in which great powers have spheres of influence and privilege over smaller countries. In targeting the American election process, however, the Russian leadership miscalculated the consequences and created a level of anti-Russian sentiment in the United States unknown since the height of the Cold War.

The United States, for its part, must make hard decisions as to how it is to respond to the Russian challenge, all

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*Miscalculations and unfulfilled expectations:
Presidents Putin and Trump at a joint 2018 press conference*

the while undergoing its own internal debate over the fundamental character of the United States and its place in the world. Regardless of how the United States might evolve in terms of exercising its foreign policy, it must make clear its national security interests and understand the consequences of using the tools of national power to achieve those interests.

RUSSIAN DESIGNS FOR THE WORLD ORDER

Many of us in the United States and Europe who witnessed the end of the Cold War remember a feeling of victory and hope that a new

Russian Federation would become an ally and would help usher in a new era of partnership and common goals. By and large, the Russian people had a different feeling, however, as they witnessed the near dissolution of their country, with many stranded in the outer remnants of the Soviet Union. What they inherited was a broken, impoverished state, and a deep sense of humiliation.

Through a lens that continued to perceive Russia as a global power, the Russian leadership began to see the actions of the United States and Europe as lacking respect for Russian national interests. The real impetus behind this

antagonistic view of the West originated in the expansion of NATO, and in particular the Alliance's 1999 intervention in Yugoslavia. Policies and actions such as these were interpreted by the Russian leadership as the United States and NATO—power hungry and unchecked—ignoring core Russian national security interests.

Since that time, the interpretation of American foreign policy as being inimical to Russian core interests has cascaded from the perceived motives behind subsequent American actions worldwide. From the American support of the Color Revolutions in Europe, the Arab Spring, and ultimately the 2014 change of leadership in Ukraine, the Russian leadership has interpreted American foreign policy as seeking regime change in countries whose policies are not conducive to U.S. foreign policy interests and, furthermore, wholeheartedly believe that regime change in Moscow is the ultimate intent of the United States.

In response to the above, Vladimir Putin and the Russian leadership have crafted a narrative for the Russian people to bolster support for the regime in Moscow, playing off worsening tensions with the West as a result of Western malintent.

This is perhaps best captured by the short documentary that concludes a tour of Moscow's State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia.

The film features a short survey of key events during the Cold War and finishes with a globe encased by a stone hammer and sickle facade falling through space, shaking and suddenly beginning to crumble, capturing that horrible feeling mentioned earlier during the fall of the Soviet Union. The hammer and sickle shatter and fall away leaving a perfectly shining silver globe. In what is a masterful piece of propaganda, the shining globe's fall through space is arrested by the outstretched claw of the double eagle of the Russian coat of arms—a coat of arms from Tsarist times that was outlawed in the Soviet Union.

The message is clear. Putin is not trying to return Russia to great power status, he is trying to remind the world that Russia has always been a great power. It is not about rebuilding the Soviet Union, it is about linking Russia back to its imperial heritage.

TOOLS OF ITS TRADE

It is this sense of honor and place in history, and perceived lack of respect, that drive, in many ways, the

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ishes with a globe encased by a stone hammer and sickle facade falling through space, shaking and suddenly beginning to crumble, capturing that horrible feeling mentioned earlier during the fall of the Soviet Union. The hammer and sickle shatter and fall away leaving a perfectly

policy decisions of Russia's governing elite, and particularly Putin himself. For the Russian leadership, the international order that emerged out of the end of the Cold War does little in Russia's favor and actively seeks to keep Russia marginalized.

As an alternative to the current world order, foreign policy professionals in Moscow speak of the need for a polycentric world order, with great powers at the various centers of geostrategic hubs. It is important to note that this view includes the implicit assumption of a hierarchy in the international system, with each great power being the ultimate arbiter of events within its respective sphere of influence. In this framework, smaller countries do not get to choose their own strategic orientations. For example, a country like Ukraine does not get to decide on its own that it is going to pursue a Western trajectory.

In attempting to reshape the world order, Russian leaders are pursuing policies across domains that ultimately seek to weaken the current international order. Russian foreign policy seems to be led by the idea that preventive, offensive measures somehow coerce and convince states to comply with Russian national security interests.

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The pattern is clear. Russia, in response to some perceived threat or out of spite, takes some offensive action and then offers to talk about steps that need to be taken to avoid such future actions.

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Examples include the flying of bombers up the English Channel in 2015 with their transponders turned off, disrupting international air traffic, only to later offer talks for a proposal on air safety. Most recent is the offer to sit down with the United States to discuss a non-interference pact to protect election integrity—most in Washington will balk at such a proposal.

Or take Putin's speech in March 2018, wherein he showcased new nuclear weapons and even portrayed a nuclear attack on Florida. When speaking with security professionals in Moscow, the most common answer I got for the purpose of the speech was that it was an invitation to arms control talks. That is not at all the message received in Washington.

Most recently, Russian actions in the Kerch Strait show a clear and continued policy of disregarding the sovereign rights of countries along its border. Russian ships fired on and ultimately took prisoners from Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait that were on their way to Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov, abiding by an earlier 2003 joint Russian-Ukrainian agreement on the use of the Kerch Strait. In shutting down the Strait and seizing the Ukrainian ships and sailors, Russia was signaling to Kiev, and the world at large, its commitment to its own territorial claims and the annexation of Crimea. Again, concerns over Ukrainian sovereignty are not the concerns of the Russian leadership.

RUSSIAN MISCALCULATION

Russia's approach to foreign policy, and the United States in particular, outlined above suffers from a deep misunderstanding of the United States, the role of the President, and the domestic forces that shape its foreign policy. I recall Putin voicing contempt that President Barack Obama had let an article run in a popular paper criticizing Putin, leaving all of us in the room scratching our heads until we realized that he honestly thought Obama had some say over whether or not the story ran.

One would think that a casual experience with the American press would quickly lead one to understand that the press writes what it wants but, for many Russians, this is not the prevalent conclusion. Many Russians see the political developments in Washington through the same lens that they view their own country—ultimately a struggle for power and interests among elites. Through this lens, the United States displays only the trappings of democracy while hiding its own elites, who use the press to keep the American population subdued and believing that they live in an actual democracy.

Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election is the best example of such a misunderstanding. The Russian leadership has long assumed that the United States meddles in the affairs of other countries, including Russia, seeking to create disorder and bring about regime change in those countries that oppose American foreign policy interests.

Over and above the ongoing desire to undermine Western democratic institutions, a generous reading of the election interference would say that it

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was an attempt by the Russian leadership to signal to the American leadership that it must stop interfering in the internal affairs of Russia. Most Russians who cared were actually surprised that President Trump won and envisioned an opportunity to get out from beneath sanctions and have an American government amiable to Russian interests.

This was a gross miscalculation of domestic dynamics in the United States that many in Moscow have since come to understand. I do not believe it hyperbole to say that the United States is undergoing one of the greatest internal political debates it has had in 150 years. This debate has boiled up due to deeply divided views on social issues, foreign policy, and the role of government.

This debate had nothing to do with Russia, but Russian meddling has changed all of that. While Americans understand that the divide is domestically driven, they cannot ignore the Russian fingerprints left on a deeply divisive election. While there may be differing views on whether or not the current administration colluded with Russia, there is little real disagreement over whether or not the

Russians interfered in the election and attacked the United States at its core.

While the Russian leadership has always believed that it faced a deeply anti-Russian lobby in Washington, their actions have broadened that anti-Russian sentiment to most of the country. Whereas the Republican Party was historically more hardline toward Russia, it is now the Democrats who consistently have Russia in their crosshairs.

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And while some in the Republican Party have been more silent on Russian transgressions due to loyalty to Trump in the context of the domestic political conflict, this will not last beyond the Trump presidency. Once Trump is out of office, it is difficult to imagine a member of either the U.S. House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate whose constituency would prefer their legislator to be pro-Russian. Counter to the common Russian view that politics in the United States is some sort of kabuki theater meant to please the masses, Russian meddling in the election has rendered any chance of a rapprochement between Washington and Moscow—not that there was ever much of a chance after Ukraine—a near impossibility for the foreseeable future.

GOING FORWARD

In responding to Russia's challenge to Western institutions and the liberal international order, the United States needs to do the hard work of more clearly delineating its core national security interests.

By all appearances, Washington has accepted that we are moving into a new era of what everyone is calling great power competition. But it is not enough to just say that we are competing or to just say that we are going to counter everything Russia does with which we do not agree. To do that would be to ignore the trend toward retrenchment and to once again risk overstretching American resources at best, or walking into unintentional conflict at worst.

Obama clearly understood the limits of American power and the need to recover from the excesses of the unipolar moment. While nowhere near the transition of the Soviet Union, any great power's transition from a focus on expanding its interests abroad to focusing more on domestic issues is likely to be a messy process, frequented by the remnants of the policies of its former orientation.

One can see this in the American policy toward Syria. "Assad must go"

was the mantra, but the United States was not willing to take the steps to make that happen. It is important to realize that this was a conscious decision and not one based on a lack of power or capability. The United States could certainly have toppled the Assad regime regardless of whether or not the Russians were there. Our public rhetoric was simply more aggressive than our willingness to act and become embroiled in yet another conflict.

In response to this retrenchment, one often hears from Russian strategists that the United States is in decline and is likely to lash out as it sinks further into irrelevance. This is another misunderstanding of what is actually happening.

Two points need to be emphasized here. First, history has few instances of great powers launching military campaigns in response to losing ground in the international order and entering a period of retrenchment. Second, not all retrenchment is equal. The United States still has far and away the world's strongest economy and military. It also does not suffer from the recurrent lack of rule of law or investment attractiveness that have plagued Russia and kept its growth marginal at best. In the United States, business owners

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do not call on the security services to settle business disputes, as recently happened in Russia against Michael Calvey, founder of the Baring Vostok private equity firm in Moscow.

What does this American retrenchment mean for competition overall and for U.S.-Russian relations in particular? It is likely that the United

States will continue into a period in which it tends to focus more heavily on domestic affairs in proportion to its desire to act internationally. There are also some indications that the United States may enter into a mild recession. The point to take away from this is that the United States is not in some state of perpetual decline wherein its ability to act in defense of what it decides are its core national security interests is largely atrophied. The Russian leadership needs to understand this, and not to underestimate the American ability and will to respond to issues it believes to be in its core national interests.

American policymakers also need to be careful in their assumptions of the trajectory of the Russian Federation. For example, the topic of Russia's declining population often rears its head in policy discussions. While Russia may have demographic issues toward

the middle of this century, it is not as if policymakers are going to wake up tomorrow with an empty Russia that no longer poses a threat. Also, the Russian economy, while perpetually weak at its core, is not on the verge of collapse

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and will likely muddle on. We cannot smugly hold our breaths and think that the challenge of U.S.-Russian relations is going to disappear in the near future.

That being said, one does get the sense from public discussions in Russia that there is growing disparity between the vision that the Russian leadership is painting and the one being felt existentially by the Russian population. However, Western policymakers should not get overly excited about this. There is not an American inside every Russian just waiting to break out with the right leadership. Russians worry about instability and there is no real alternative to the current leadership. What is left is a Russian population that is subtly signaling its concern over the country's direction to the Russian leadership.

And while Americans promote individual sovereignty as fundamental, this is not a universal viewpoint and one not assumed by the Russian mindset. This would explain a higher tolerance for greater state

control at the expense of personal freedoms in exchange for guaranteed stability. It is the contrast and tension between freedom and stability that Western policymakers need to understand when making judgments about how Russian domestic dynamics impact regime stability and longevity, and what this means for Russian foreign policy.

As Russia struggles to assert itself as an alternative to the United States and to create its polycentric world order, America must decide what kind of a world order it is itself seeking and, in so doing, decide that for which it is willing to fight. So far, Washington's response has been to use its tool of greatest advantage—namely sanctions.

With each Russian transgression, the U.S. Congress has leveraged sanctions, some of which have been particularly damaging to certain sectors of the Russian economy. And while there is room for additional sanctions without bringing down the Russian economy, there is a limit to their effectiveness. As former U.S. Treasury Secretary

Jack Lew and sanctions master Daniel Fried have pointed out, sanctions are not a silver bullet and are not without negative consequences for the United States, such as driving other members of the international community away from the dollar.

Deterrence is a psychological game that rests fundamentally on communicating with the country being deterred. In order for deterrence to work, the deterred must clearly understand the way out of the punishment. If the targeted country believes that the actions taken to deter it are actually actions taken to destroy it, it will strike back.

Sanctions purportedly seek to deter Russian malevolent activity. What must be understood is that deterrence is a psychological game that rests fundamentally on communicating with the country being deterred. In order for deterrence by punishment to work, the deterred must clearly understand the way out of the punishment. If the targeted country believes that the actions taken to deter it are actually actions taken to destroy it, it will probably strike back.

This is a potential danger with Moscow. If the Russian leadership believes that the United States will sanction it with the hope of creating unrest that will ultimately lead to the downfall of the regime, it may seek highly dangerous courses of action to escalate tensions in an attempt to get the United States to back down.

None of this is to say that Washington, with clearly articulated core interests, should not continue to use sanctions as one of a number of tools to defend itself and its vision of the international order. But it should clearly understand the stakes, so as to avoid strategic surprises.

The outlook for U.S.-Russian relations appears bleak, at best. Thoroughly ingrained Russian perceptions of the United States, driven by the former's sense of privilege among other states, has led to an aggressive Russian foreign and military policy that threatens the world order that has been pursued by the United States since the end of the Cold War.

In its attempts to reshape that world order, Russia has taken steps arguably against its own national interests, misjudging its ability to undermine Western democratic institutions and alter the course of American foreign policy.

The real challenge for the United States is to clearly understand and communicate its core national interest during a time of unprecedented domestic division. In so doing, it needs to better understand Russia and the drivers behind Moscow's policies. Without such an articulated view, the tools of national power will not work toward a clear end-state that's advantageous to the United States. ●