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## Russia's Challenge: A Declining Power's Quest for Status

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For many U.S. and Western observers, Russia has emerged as the most aggressive and assertive challenger to U.S. leadership and the American-led liberal world order. Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine confronts the long-standing prohibition against using force to make territorial changes, one of the hallmarks of the post-WWII international order. Its intervention in Syria goes against the informal prerogatives the United States established for itself as the global policeman and main outside arbiter in the Middle East. Russia's meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, and in European elections, is seen as a serious danger to liberalism and democracy. Even the Trump administration, which initially promised to improve relations with Russia, [calls](#) the country a "revisionist" power seeking to "undermine the legitimacy of democracies" in its 2017 National Security Strategy.

Russia's challenge has found its way to the top of Washington's agenda. Yet, mainstream International Relations (IR) scholarship offers little guidance to leaders in the way of understanding Russia's behavior or formulating policies to address it. As such, Russia not only represents a challenge to U.S. leadership and the liberal international order, but also to established IR theories, which have failed to recognize how Russia's anxieties about declining status have pushed it toward a confrontational revisionist foreign policy. Though deeply committed to preserving Great Power status, Russia's revisionist aims are constrained as its leaders are well aware of the limits of their country's power. For policymakers, the fundamental challenge lies not in containing Russia, but in encouraging it to bolster its status in peaceful and constructive ways.

### **Dominant IR Paradigms**

Liberal IR theorists assumed that Russia would be integrated into the existing liberal international order. This assumption rested on what Michael Doyle has [called](#) the "three

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pillars of liberalism”: institutions, interdependence, and democracy. Russia would be able to accommodate its interests through participation in the international order’s open and liberal institutions; economic interdependence between Russia and the West would make conflict too costly and foster cooperative and pacific relations; and the spread of democracy to Russia would mitigate its security concerns vis-a-vis the West because of the Democratic Peace theory (that democracies do not fight wars against each other).

All three pillars of liberalism have failed in the Russian case. Russia was formally integrated into Western institutions. It was invited to join the G-7 (which became the G-8), the Russia NATO Council (RNC) was created to give Russia a formal consultative role within the alliance, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe’s purview was expanded as it was transformed into the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). But, in practice, none of these new institutional mechanisms gave Russia the say it felt it was due. The G-8 excluded Russia from discussions on economic issues. NATO countries were careful to establish a unified position before consulting with Russia in the RNC, thus presenting Moscow with a fait accompli when it came time to discuss issues where Russia felt it had a stake. The OSCE largely ignored the issues of hard security that Russia wanted it to address, instead focusing on human rights and democracy—issues where Russia was open to intense criticism.

Economic interdependence was established between Russia and Europe, with the EU becoming Russia’s largest trading partner and Russia consolidating its position as the EU’s key energy provider. Instead of fostering cooperation, interdependence bred suspicion, mistrust, and charges that Russia was “weaponizing” Europe’s dependence on its energy. A Democratic Peace between Russia and the West failed to materialize. Contrary to the hopes of many, Russia has not become a liberal democracy. U.S. efforts to promote democracy have become a major source of friction between both countries, as the Kremlin sees them as primarily designed to weaken its influence in the former Soviet states and foment a revolution within Russia that will bring a more compliant, U.S.-friendly government to power.

Some liberals have tried to explain Russia’s growing geopolitical assertiveness and anti-Americanism as products of its corrupt and authoritarian regime, which, according to their arguments, is trying to stoke-up Russian nationalism and illusory external threats to divert public attention away from its domestic failures. However, the regime does not face the kind of crisis of legitimacy or domestic political opposition that would warrant such a drastic policy. Moreover, studies of public opinion demonstrate general satisfaction with the regime’s domestic performance, particularly its ability to deliver social stability after the chaotic 1990s. Rather than being a diversionary tactic by a bankrupt regime to shore up its legitimacy, Russia’s challenge reflects the genuine beliefs and commitments of both publics and elites.

Realist theories also have a hard time accounting for Russia's behavior. According to realism, a country's foreign policy should at least roughly be commensurate with its material capabilities. Moscow's open and direct confrontation with the United States is way out of line with Russia's still comparatively limited material capabilities. By most measures, U.S. power dwarfs Russia's, Russia's economy is less than 1/10 the size of the U.S. economy, and its military spending is 1/8 of that of the United States. The United States has over 800 military bases worldwide, while Russia has seven outside the post-Soviet region: six in support of its intervention in Syria and limited docking rights at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam.

Some realists (most notably John Mearsheimer) have argued that Russia is simply reacting to Western policies that threaten its vital security interests, such as NATO enlargement and the U.S. development of an Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense (ABM) system. Yet in reality, Russia is safer today than perhaps at any time in its history. Neither NATO enlargement nor the ABM system represents a direct threat to its physical security. Though NATO has expanded to Russia's borders, the forces it deploys in new member countries are small and could easily be overrun by Russian conventional forces. In enlarging NATO to include states that its core Western members may not have the political will to defend, the North Atlantic Alliance has become more vulnerable to Russia's attempts to test alliance commitments. The ABM system is not a threat to Russia's nuclear deterrent. Even a fully functioning ABM system would be overwhelmed by a massive Russian retaliatory strike or even by a more limited one using the advanced hypersonic weapons that President Vladimir Putin unveiled in his March 2018 address to the Duma.

Another branch of realism, Power Transition (PT) theory, sees great power confrontations as stemming from the age-old conflict between rising powers and declining hegemony. One could argue that the United States is a declining hegemon, especially in relation to the growing power of China. But it would be a stretch to argue that Russia is a rising power. Russia has managed to recover from its post-Soviet collapse, but by any metric, its power remains in decline: its energy and resource dependent economy is set to stagnate over the next few decades and its share of global GDP, which reached 8 percent at the Soviet Union's peak of power in the 1970s, is set to decline from around 2 percent today to 1 percent by 2030. By comparison, the United States has about 22 percent and China 16 percent of global GDP. At the Soviet Union's height, its population was 9 percent of the global population, while Russia today is at only about 1.5 percent and this is expected to shrink to 1 percent by 2030.

Russia's soft power is also in decline. There are 70 million less Russian speakers worldwide today than in 1990 and Russian is even beginning to lose the status as lingua franca in the post-Soviet space, giving way to local languages, English, and Mandarin. PT theories have a tough time accounting for why China, the preeminent rising power, has generally avoided direct confrontation with the United States and looked to

integrate into the existing order, while Russia, the declining power, has behaved the way rising powers should.

### **Pursuing Status**

What these dominant IR paradigms have missed is the pivotal importance of status to Russia. Status is the collective belief held by states and statesmen about a country's ranking in the international hierarchy based on valued attributes, such as military capabilities, economic wealth, culture, and socio-political organization. Most studies of status focus on its social and psychological dimensions. States want to improve their status because of its integral importance to individuals' and groups' sense of identity and self-esteem. But states also pursue status because it has instrumental value. It is the "currency" of international relations; when a state has status, it does not have to use its material resources to get what it wants.

Status concerns have played a pivotal role in Russian foreign policymaking throughout the post-Soviet period. Under its first post-Communist foreign minister, Andrey Kozyrev, Russia pursued democratic and liberal reforms not only because it would improve the material wellbeing of its people, but also because its leaders believed Russia would be allowed to take its rightful place alongside the democratic and liberal powers of the West. When this strategy of status seeking through social mobility failed, Russia, under the stewardship of Yevgeny Primakov, former foreign minister and prime minister, sought to increase its status through limited geopolitical competition with the West. However, it was still too weak to counter U.S. power effectively. Its efforts to do so, such as Primakov's attempts to form a strategic triangle with China and India to balance the United States, or the hasty decision to dispatch Russian paratroops to Kosovo to beat out the arrival of NATO peacekeepers in 1999, yielded few results, making Russia look impotent, incompetent, and out of touch with reality.

Russia abandoned these seemingly quixotic policies during Putin's first two terms and again tried to find its place in the U.S.-led order. This time not by transforming itself into a model, liberal, democratic state but by establishing itself as a valuable partner for the United States in the post-9/11 "War on Terror" and by using its natural resource wealth to modernize its economy and emerge as an energy super power. Neither of these aspirations came to fruition. The United States did not accept Russia as an equal partner and it continued to pursue policies, such as NATO enlargement, that led to further status losses for Moscow. Russia's resource-led growth model exhausted itself domestically and was undermined by larger changes to world energy markets.

As a result, Russia has again turned toward geopolitical competition with the United States. U.S. relative decline and Russia's limited recovery from the Soviet collapse make this strategy more effective this time around. Moscow can leverage its still formidable military, diplomatic, and espionage capabilities to act as global spoiler to Washington.

Russia's goal is not to knock the United States off the top spot in the global status hierarchy and assume this position for itself. Instead, Russia is trying to force the United States to recognize Russia's continued relevance and get it to acquiesce to a "grand bargain" on the international order that is more favorable to Russia's status aspirations.

What IR liberals missed is that Russia could not join the liberal international order on the terms that were acceptable to its leaders and public. Russia would not only have to accept a subordinate role to the more powerful United States, it would also have to accept a lower status to Germany, Japan, and Great Britain, which are more advanced in other attributes that are valued inside the liberal order such as democracy, human rights, and economic liberalism. For their part, IR realists failed to recognize the importance of status and how it could push a declining power such as Russia to pursue policies that are not commensurate with its capabilities. Russia opposes NATO enlargement and ABM not because they are a threat to its security but because they undermine its status as regional hegemon in the post-Soviet space and nuclear equal of the United States.

Status concerns are particularly important to declining great powers, such as Russia today or Austria-Hungary in 1914. These powers face the *predicament of decline*: they have inherited a large patrimony of interests from the times when they were great and powerful, yet they have a declining material capability to defend this patrimony. They must rely on status to defend their interests and thus fiercely resist its decline.

Russia is not the typical challenger envisioned by PT theories. It is not trying to completely overturn the order and replace it with governance structures of its own design. It is more accurate to characterize Russia as a "reactionary challenger," using the term "reactionary" strictly in its definitional rather than pejorative sense, as referring to a person or entity's preference for a return to the status quo ante. In place of U.S. unipolar dominance, Russia would like to see the return of multipolarity enshrined in a Great Power Concert where the United States would have to share power with other great powers. A Great Power Concert serves Moscow's status aspirations in that it firmly entrenches Russia's position as one of the leading states in the international system—even as its relative power continues to decline.

### **Policies and Conclusions**

How should the United States and its Western allies deal with a declining challenger such as Russia? One seemingly rational policy might be to ignore Russia for the time being and to postpone the day of reckoning to the future, when Russia will be weaker. This was the approach largely followed by the Obama administration. However, it provokes Russia into engaging in even more reckless and destabilizing behavior in order for it to have its voice heard—as Obama soon found out in Ukraine and Syria. Containment, the policy now favored by many Russia hawks in Washington, risks

dangerous confrontation with a country that, despite its weaknesses, is still a nuclear superpower with a formidable military. What's more, containment is unnecessary. Russia's leaders are well aware of the limits of their country's power and are not looking to overtake the United States as the global hegemon or to take over management of the international system. Accommodating Russia's status aspirations will not embolden it to pursue more radical revisionism.

Instead of ignoring or containing Russia, Western leaders must try to find ways to channel its status-seeking behavior in constructive ways that contribute to global peace, stability, and development. Russia's efforts toward economic reintegration of the post-Soviet space may have been such an opportunity. From the very start, Russian leaders made it clear that these efforts were not aimed at creating a closed neo-Soviet trade block, but were designed to strengthen Russia's position in the larger process of pan-European integration with the EU. Eurasian economic integration could have contributed to the economic development and stability of a problematic and dangerous region while also allowing Russia to improve its international status through peaceful and constructive means. Instead of engaging with Russia's regional integration efforts, the United States and the EU pushed back against them, threatening Moscow with further status losses and provoking (what should have been) a predictable backlash.

Other opportunities to engage Russia's status seeking in a constructive way will present themselves in Syria, Ukraine, and in the geopolitical realignments that China's rise will generate. They will confront Western policy makers with difficult choices that will force them to find a balance between their beliefs and values and the harsh realities of power politics. In making these choices, they must understand just how important status concerns are for Russia and realize that the bigger dangers come not from empowering a declining Russia through accommodation, but from ignoring its status aspirations or seeking to constrain them.