

When Revanchism Does not Equate to Revisionism

TAKING STOCK OF THE NEW U.S.-RUSSIAN GREAT POWER RIVALRY

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 674

November 2020

By Zachary Paikin¹

Global Policy Institute, UK

The events of recent years are less representative of a shift in Russian strategy than they are of the fragmentation of the international order. The end of the Cold War brought with it a Western-led attempt to render the liberal international order synonymous with international order writ large. The return of great power rivalry indicates that this project has failed. Emerging in its wake is a struggle over the contours of the first truly global order in modern history – one in which formal empires and superpower blocs have been abandoned in favor of an order of global scope rooted in universal sovereignty. In this sense, at least, both the United States and Russia have become [equally revisionist](#) – as they have become locked in a zero-sum struggle over the shape of European security arrangements – even as they both claim to defend the status quo. This highlights the fragile state of Euro-Atlantic security and underlines the need for communication and caution in instances where interests may diverge. Accusing Russia of being uniquely revisionist is rooted in two flawed Western assumptions – first, that the Western-led liberal international order is akin to rules-based order itself, and second, that the rules-based international order overlaps perfectly with the contemporary global order.

International Order: Contested Contours

Russia's relationship with Europe – and later, the West – has been both long and complex. A desire to “catch up” to the West framed Russia's international engagements for significant periods of its modern history. By the mid-18th century, the country had been admitted as a full participant in the European balance-of-power system. After the Cold War, having been severed from half of the continent for decades by the Iron Curtain, Moscow again espoused a desire to “return to Europe” and pursue “shock therapy” to join the liberal West.

¹ Zachary Paikin is Senior Visiting Fellow at the Global Policy Institute, London, UK, and an expert with the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Kent.

Yet in the wake of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and especially since the 2013-14 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine and the subsequent war in the Donbas, it has become commonplace to label Russia a revisionist power. To his detractors, Russian President Vladimir Putin's aims include subverting Western values and undermining transatlantic unity. As the EU and Russia confront the potential geopolitical consequences of the protests in Belarus, it is worth re-examining the fundamental nature and goals of Russian foreign policy.

Can a country that just three decades ago sought to integrate into the Western political community truly be considered revisionist? The answer to this question lies in how one conceives of the contemporary international order, as well as in the substance of Russia's evolving relationships with the West and with its so-called near abroad.

Rising hostility between Russia and the West in recent years – in addition to failed wars in the Middle East, the rise of China, and uncertainty over the future of U.S. foreign policy – has led many to contend that the so-called liberal international order is in crisis. However, the breadth and scope of that order are often taken for granted. In addition to pushing for stringent adherence to democratic norms and market reforms, the liberal order is often cited as being reliant upon a structure of power rooted in Western leadership. Yet even beyond their failure to modernize fully in line with Western expectations, the notion that powerful countries such as Russia and China would agree to the notion of “Western leadership” in perpetuity – accepting second-class status in the global order and agreeing to operate on terms set by others – was always doubtful. This inherently imposes limits on the potential for the liberal international order to achieve global scope.

The more neutral term “rules-based international order” is often invoked as well, given the polarizing Western cultural origins and normative assumptions that underpin liberalism. However, Russia's violation of its neighbors' territorial integrity, its recent poisoning of opposition activist Alexey Navalny, and its stern line against possible “external interference” in the current protests in Belarus raise questions concerning its commitment to upholding the norms and principles that it agreed to in the Paris Charter of 1990, the document that effectively marked the end of the Cold War by envisioning a “Europe whole and free.” This, in turn, has [led to doubts](#) regarding Moscow's international adherence to rules-based interaction itself.

That said, one could argue that while Russia may have pursued territorial revisionism in Europe for tactical reasons in recent years – most notably in Ukraine – its overall strategy remains geared toward [preserving the status quo](#). In other words, Moscow employs spoiler or “[raiding](#)” tactics in its relationship with the West to avoid losing something that it already possesses, namely its great power status. From this perspective, it is possible to [contend](#) that – whether for pragmatic or idealistic reasons – it is the West that is, in fact,

revisionist, having taken advantage of Russia's post-Cold War weakness to redraw the contours of the Euro-Atlantic security system.

Moscow's increasingly assertive behavior is the inevitable by-product of a key conclusion gradually drawn by the Russian leadership over the course of the post-Cold War era, namely that joining the West is impossible without forgoing Russia's ability to remain an independent and sovereign decision-maker in international affairs. As Kadri Liik of the European Council on Foreign Relations [contends](#), the EU's notion of a "friendly Russia" is one that privileges Russia's integration into European structures and convergence toward European norms, contrasting with Putin's view that one can "trade favors" in the absence of shared values.

While an "internationalist" or "multilateral" dimension to Russian foreign policy certainly exists, the extent to which it serves an instrumental purpose is a matter of contention. Vocal support for international law and the United Nations could be attributed in part to the fact that the UN Security Council enshrines Russia's great power status. Some regional multilateral ventures—such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—are partly aimed at carving out or preserving a Russian sphere of privileged interests in Eastern Europe or Central Eurasia. Even the question of whether Russia's future lies with Europe is marked by debate over whether this will allow Moscow to retain its position as an independent great power.

A more complete perspective, then, acknowledges that the rules-based international order is but one element of a broader set of norms, ideas, and practices that inform interstate interaction. The [English School](#) theoretical approach to the study of international relations would call this the international "society" of states. Among these ideas is the notion of great power management—that great powers are accorded a special responsibility to uphold and preserve the international order. In this sense, Russia's continued insistence on its great power identity and the privileges bestowed by this status can be understood as a *conservative* tendency rather than a revisionist one—less a rejection of the rules-based order and more so a defense of some of international society's established principles.

Spheres of Influence?

It could be argued that insisting on great power status amounts to backing de facto recognition of spheres of influence. A "Yalta-type" order would certainly run up against the notion of the "freedom of States to choose their own security arrangements," as stipulated in the Paris Charter. However, an alternative perspective asserts that the Yalta and Helsinki agreements that effectively enshrined mutual recognition of spheres of influence remain part of the contemporary European security order as well, and that the Paris Charter's pre-dating of the Soviet Union's collapse implies that Moscow never intended for it to apply to countries such as Ukraine. Yet there is a deeper reason not to equate Russia's desire for an "equal partnership" with Europe with a revisionist posture:

Moscow's opposition to NATO expansion in the 1990s and 2000s was rooted less in perceived security threats and more so in a [sense of exclusion](#).

In the nuclear age, the threat of a land invasion from the West has [reduced in relative importance](#), negating the significance of "strategic depth" to a certain extent. While the presence of NATO allies on Russia's borders is not without strategic consequences, it is the notion of a historically hostile alliance consolidating a new political and security order on the continent without Russian participation that riles Moscow the most. That this occurred precisely as Russia was planning its "return to Europe" rendered the matter even more sensitive. Disputes surrounding Kyiv's geopolitical orientation that played out on the Maidan in 2014 further highlighted the contested nature and reach of Russian post-Soviet nationhood, raising further questions over whether Russia's "natural home" was truly situated in Europe.

Yet ironically, continued disagreements between Russia and the West over Europe's future have caused matters of identity to be downgraded in favor of a more zero-sum strategic logic. The [rise of universalist ideologies](#) in the 19th and 20th centuries led to the erosion of Europe's shared dynastic principles, with a raw balance of power taking their place in the leadup to World War I and a Manichean contest between superpowers emerging after World War II. Similarly, now that any pretense of a "Greater Europe" from Lisbon to Vladivostok rooted in shared norms and values has been extinguished, geopolitical considerations feature prominently in the Kremlin's thinking regarding the situation in Ukraine and now Belarus, especially given Minsk's status as Russia's last remaining buffer and ally in Europe.

Nonetheless, although the 2013-14 Ukraine crisis represents a breaking point in Russia-West relations that has inaugurated a period characterized most often by zero-sum hostility, this does not imply that Russian foreign policy has suddenly adopted a distinctly revisionist character. Moscow's behavior may have grown more assertive in recent years, but Russia's overall aim of restoring its national power and obtaining recognition of its rights as a great power has not changed. Revanchism does not necessarily equate to revisionism. Spoiler (or even revisionist) tactics employed to achieve status quo aims are not the same as a revisionist strategy. While Moscow [may be unhappy](#) with a post-Cold War outcome that has "sidelined its security interests," the "Western-centric system of liberal democracies" [never succeeded](#) in entrenching itself as a fully legitimate and universally accepted global order.

Moscow's attentiveness to European normative pronouncements may have waned as its declared "pivot to the east" has accelerated in the years since the Ukraine crisis. However, Russia still maintains that the EEU is designed to complement the EU through a potential future integration of equals. Nor is Moscow's deepening strategic partnership with Beijing necessarily a sign of a revisionist global strategy. While Russia and China have been pushed closer together by their respective deteriorating relations with the United States,

the process of normalization of ties between them dates to the late Cold War period. It is in Moscow's interest to pursue good relations with a country with which it shares a lengthy border, just as it is natural for Russia to seek to avoid isolation in the strategic triangle composed of itself, China, and the United States.

Conclusion

The assumption until now has been, at the very least, that the rules-based international order – marked by a universal commitment to multilateralism and the proliferation of robust international institutions – is synonymous with the contemporary world order. Yet the growing consensus that global multilateralism is in crisis demonstrates that a plethora of divergent ideas about how to organize the world continue to co-exist. This should encourage Western countries to rethink their policies toward Russia and revisit some of their ingrained beliefs regarding the nature of the contemporary order.

Questions surrounding Russia's supposed "European" or "Eurasian" geopolitical and cultural orientation may still be relevant to uncovering the nature of Moscow's global aims, even as they inform continuing debates over the legitimate boundaries of the Russian national community. But a "pivot to the east" – an official shift in emphasis from the "European" in favor of the "Eurasian" – is not in itself an indication that Russia's preferred normative arrangements for global politics have changed. The events of 2014 have not fully eliminated the legacies of 1945 and 1991. The implications of any conservative turn in Russian politics will continue to co-exist alongside the established Soviet and liberal features of Russian governance, political institutions, and national identity. And while these may not be the only drivers of Russian foreign policy behavior, they nonetheless cast significant doubt on the extent to which Russia is driven by "revisionist" impulses.