

# Russian Revanche: External Threats & Regime Reactions

Keith A. Darden

*Abstract: Has the development of post-Soviet Russia in an international system dominated by a democracy-promoting United States bred an authoritarian reaction in Russia as a response to perceived threats from the West? Beginning with the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, Russian elites have increasingly seen the United States as a distinctively threatening power, one with a strategy to exploit civic organizations, ethnic groups, and other forms of domestic pluralism as “fifth columns” in an effort to overthrow unfriendly regimes. With each new crisis in U.S.-Russian relations – Ukraine 2004, Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014 – the Russian leadership has tightened controls over society, the press, and the state. The result is that the United States’ muscular promotion of democracy abroad has produced the opposite of its intended effect on Russia, leading successive Russian governments to balance the perceived threat from the United States by pursuing greater military and intelligence capacity to intervene abroad, and by tightening internal authoritarian controls at home to prevent foreign exploitation of the nascent internal pluralism that emerged in the wake of Communism.*

KEITH A. DARDEN is Associate Professor at the School of International Service at American University. He is the author of *Economic Liberalism and Its Rivals: The Formation of International Institutions among the Post-Soviet States* (2009) and *Resisting Occupation in Eurasia: Mass Schooling and the Creation of Durable National Loyalties* (forthcoming).

For the first post-Soviet decade, the pole star for Russia and much of Eurasia lay in the West. While championing their country’s distinctiveness, Russian elites sought investment, modernization, and integration into a set of world institutions and a liberal economic order that was designed and dominated by the U.S. and European states and companies. They measured their progress by the standard of Western states and institutions, and success was defined as access to the markets and influence in the institutions of Europe and the United States. Alternatives to Western liberalism, and in particular alternatives to liberal democracy, were certainly explored, but the basic standard remained.<sup>1</sup>

That is clearly no longer the case. Over the past decade, and accelerating in the past three years, we have witnessed Russia’s deliberate distancing from Western (U.S.) values, institutions, rules, and norms, and

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from the cooperative role that Russia had been expected to play in international affairs. This has challenged every aspect of Russia's rocky relationship with the United States and Europe. Internally, we have seen the tightening of societal controls, increasingly limited political competition, and a resurgence of nationalism and conservatism in ideology and rhetoric.

Is there a connection between Russia's geopolitical turn away from "the West" and its turn away from liberalism at home? Traditionally, if the link between Russia's political regime and its international relations has been discussed at all, the assumption has typically been that Russia's undemocratic internal politics and political economy drive its oppositional foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Whether it is because of the economic imperative of low soil yields or the ideological imperatives of pan-Slavism and revolutionary communist ideology, scholars have repeatedly argued that Russia's domestic character drives it to expand and project power outward.<sup>3</sup> In contemporary writing, it is often assumed that as leaders of a nondemocratic (kleptocratic,<sup>4</sup> fascist<sup>5</sup>) regime, Russia's elite relies on distracting its population with military victories and imaginary external threats to stay in power. Putin pursues war abroad to gain legitimacy at home.

The arguments are familiar, if not taken for granted. Less attention has been given to the converse thesis: that the current Russian regime is partially the product of the post-Cold War international environment in which it developed – an environment that Russian elites, rightly or wrongly, have progressively come to see as threatening to their state's survival. Russia, in the twenty-five years following the end of the Cold War, developed in an era of unprecedented American power. Power need not imply threat, but it is the exception to the rule for states not to find the preponderance of power threatening. And over the course of the past twenty-five

years, and especially following the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, American power and influence have come to be perceived in Russia as a multifaceted Western threat. By 2016, the predominant Russian view – expressed in official statements, state media, and elite policy circles – sees the United States as the preeminent military power in the world and leader of a military alliance that has marched relentlessly to the Russian border and has used force and funds to overthrow and infiltrate rival regimes.<sup>6</sup> Russian restrictions on civil society and NGOs, on foreign aid and assistance, on the media, and on the control of strategic economic assets – all critical features of its authoritarian regime – have been justified as a need to internally balance against an external Western threat. Even if we grant that such fears are not fully grounded in fact, is it possible that a genuine perception of external threat has driven some of the Russian leadership's decisions about domestic control, and that an alternative international environment would have led to a very different, more democratic Russia?

These questions afford no definitive answers, since we cannot remove Russia from its international context and see how its regime might have developed in different conditions. But that is precisely the point. We cannot presume that the international environment in which Russia was situated had no effect on the internal changes that took place, nor that international relations will have no future effect on Russia's internal developments. In this essay, drawing on the sequence of contentious international events of the past two decades and Russia's inward turn toward authoritarianism, I explore the prospect that there is a vicious cycle at work in which external threats and internal closure feed one another, driving the Russian state deeper into a nondemocratic, reactive spiral in its relations with the United States and with its own citizenry.

We do not typically think of U.S. predominance as a source of nondemocratic regimes. In the past decade, the authors who have begun to examine the role of the international environment in shaping domestic political regimes, both as a general phenomenon and within postcommunist Europe, have consistently viewed Western influence as a contributor to greater democratization. These authors have suggested that (liberal) international and regional organizations promote democratization by socializing elites, by leveraging the economic benefits of membership to shape the regimes of potential members, and by enhancing the linkage of nondemocratic regimes to the economies and politics of democratic states.<sup>7</sup> Many have examined the longer-term impact of international democracy assistance programs and the construction of civic organizations and media that provide the basis for democratization, as well as more bilateral ties of linkage and leverage among neighboring states and allies.<sup>8</sup> Others explore the role of transnational activist networks in mobilizing for democratic change in response to rigged elections.<sup>9</sup> Democratic international society assimilates states through socialization, sanction, and transborder networks and interactions. There is no shortage of works that look at democratizing international influences.

Yet these works have a distinctly benign or liberal view of the international environment and the nature of international influence. External influences are primarily “benevolent” in the sense that outside actors are helping societies to overthrow the shackles of their nondemocratic leaders, and international influences work in the direction of democracy. This is a valid but nonetheless quite narrow view of the role of international influences on domestic political regimes. Significantly, perhaps, it is not the view of international relations one encounters in Moscow or Bei-

jing. It neglects the role of external threat or perceived concerns about national security and territorial sovereignty, and the effect of conflictual geopolitical relations among states on their internal development.

These are major omissions. Early social theorists drew a connection between external threats and internal freedoms, or the “constitution” of states. Otto Hintze, the military historian and contemporary of Max Weber, noted that to focus solely on the internal sources of political regimes was “in effect, to wrench each single state from the context in which it was formed; the state is seen in isolation, exclusive in itself, without raising the question whether its peculiar character is co-determined by its relation to its surrounds.”<sup>10</sup> In keeping with the Realist tradition in international relations, the “surrounds” that influenced regime development were characterized as threatening, with the degree and nature of the threat determined by geography and proximity to other powers. States were not directly socialized by the other states that constituted their environment; their constitutions were a response or reaction to the security environment they faced. States were influenced not by the “values” of their neighbors, but through existential competition with them.<sup>11</sup> For political scientist Harold Lasswell, heightened levels of war and external threat would breed undemocratic “garrison states” at home.<sup>12</sup> The sparse contemporary literature on how external threats have shaped the development of political regimes suggests that external threats and interstate conflict work against the development of democracy.<sup>13</sup>

To assess the role of external threat it is useful to examine both the realities of relative power as well as Russian perceptions of threat. What is the international environment in which Russia has found

itself over the past twenty-five years? It is a world in which the United States is militarily dominant, active, and increasingly present on Russia's borders. During Putin's first term as president, from 2000 to 2005, U.S. military spending increased from \$415 billion to \$610 billion and its share of overall world military spending rose above 40 percent.<sup>14</sup> The NATO alliance – at American impetus – steadily expanded: to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in 1999; to Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, and the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – in 2004; and to Croatia and Albania in 2009. The alliance made clear that its doors were open to new members, raising the possibility that additional territories that were once part of the Soviet Union would become part of the NATO security architecture.<sup>15</sup> At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO explicitly stated that Georgia and Ukraine “will become members.”<sup>16</sup>

Along with the increase in relative U.S. military power and expenditure and the expansion of U.S. alliances was a shift in U.S. doctrine to define foreign democratization and human rights as a primary national security interest and to explicitly advocate interference in the internal affairs of other states. This shift in U.S. doctrine was bipartisan – as much characterized by the “muscular liberalism” of the Clinton administration's actions in the Balkans and the expansion of NATO as by the Bush administration's intervention in Iraq – but it was most clearly articulated in George W. Bush's Second Inaugural Address in 2005:

We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.

America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. . . . Advancing these ideals

is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.

*Keith A. Darden*

So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.<sup>17</sup>

If the perception of threat derives from a combination of capability and intent,<sup>18</sup> one would have to be strongly committed to the idea of the benevolence of American power and influence not to find the United States threatening in the post-Cold War period.<sup>19</sup> Russian elites do not have strong priors regarding Western benevolence. The stated commitment to intervention “in every nation and culture” was perceived not as liberal benevolence but as the pretext for the use and expansion of American power. From the Russian government's perspective, the past twenty-five years have been a progressive revelation of the threat emanating from a preponderance of U.S. power.<sup>20</sup> Kosovo 1999. Iraq 2003. Ukraine 2004. Georgia 2008. Libya 2011. Ukraine 2014. Each crisis sparked and reinforced a growing elite narrative about the dangers of a powerful, interventionist United States.

What effect did liberal American dominance have on Russia? Some have raised the possibility that the collapse of one pole in a bipolar system has meant the end of effective opposition,<sup>21</sup> or at least the end of an alternative normative standpoint.<sup>22</sup> Michael McFaul argued that in the “unipolar” world that followed the collapse of the USSR, the removal of competitive pressures, combined with the singularity of the democratic, capitalist model, meant that the United States no longer feared revolutionary regime change; other states were no longer in a position to provide external

assistance to authoritarian regimes that repress popular opposition.<sup>23</sup> The effect of the international environment on domestic regimes would be to move them closer to democracy. In a sense, in a world with one normative pole and center of power, the only available option is to jump on the bandwagon.

Russia, of course, has done the opposite. In response to the build-up and repeated use of U.S. expeditionary forces, Russia increased military expenditure and undertook major reforms of the structure of the armed forces, creating a far more capable and less corrupt force.<sup>24</sup> Russia initiated limited reforms in Putin's first term and increased expenditure considerably, although military spending as a share of Russian GDP and overall government expenditure stayed relatively constant at approximately 4 percent and 10 – 11 percent, respectively.<sup>25</sup> Following the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, however, the Russian government pursued a series of transformative reforms under Defense Minister Anatolii Serdyukov, shifting from an officer-heavy mass mobilization force to a more effective mobile force based more heavily on well-equipped, well-trained professional soldiers. Spending increased while personnel were cut. The basic model of the Russian military was transformed. Snap inspections and readiness drills became the norm. Russia invested heavily in the production of a new generation of tanks and aircraft, and increasingly equipped its units with advanced weaponry. Russia continued to rely on nuclear weapons as a response to existential threats, but created well-trained mobile special-operations units that could be deployed quickly and quietly to counter conventional threats.

The Russian government also increased the repression of dissent at home. To what extent has the closure of Russia's political regime been a response to the increasing perception of a threatening international

environment as a result of these crises? Many raise the possibility that Russian leaders simply frame the international environment as threatening as a tool to preserve a corrupt and closed regime, and Russia is often labelled a kleptocracy. But a country whose regime is primarily devoted to the personal enrichment of its leaders should not invest over a tenth of its government budget in its militaries, especially not in actual preparedness through costly regular exercises. Kleptocrats – those who rule solely for the purpose of personal financial enrichment, such as Yanukovich in Ukraine or Mobutu in the Congo – take the money for themselves while allowing all aspects of the regime not critical to political survival to atrophy. If the Kremlin were simply ginning up the perception of external threat to stay in power, it would not have made real investments in defense. The government's spending suggests that the official statements about external threat are not solely propaganda for domestic consumption.

As noted above, we simply do not have access to a counterfactual world in which the United States were weaker and did not fuse democracy promotion abroad with military power. We can, however, gain some leverage by examining the timing and sequence of regime changes in Russia. If external threat is contributing to restrictions on domestic freedoms, then salient U.S. or NATO actions should be followed by closure of Russia's regime. Each new crisis in external relations should be met with a serial closing of Russia's doors to the international liberal order, with investment in coercive capacity and with a tightening of authoritarian controls at home. The Russian leadership's response has been to progressively balance against U.S. power and influence – a kind of “conservative realism” – manifest through tighter political control at home and more use of force abroad.

Judging from officially issued security documents, such as the Foreign Policy

Conception of the Russian Federation and the National Security Conception of the Russian Federation, the critical turning point in Russian perceptions of threat came with NATO's offensive military operations in Kosovo. Prior to this point, the United States and U.S. power were not presented as a threat to Russia in official government security assessments. NATO expansion – which began in the mid-1990s – was not well received in Russia, but NATO expansion alone appears to have been insufficient to raise the specter of a threat to Russia's territorial integrity.<sup>26</sup> Russia's security doctrine in 1997, which followed the invitation of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join the NATO alliance, did not explicitly identify NATO or the United States in the list of threats Russia faced. Indeed, external military threats hardly merited mention. Even NATO's first (ever) major military engagement, the offensive operation in Bosnia against the Bosnian Serb forces, was undertaken with the approval of the UN Security Council. NATO expansion and the use of force were uncomfortable, perhaps, but not sufficient to lead to a fundamental rethink of the nonadversarial perception of the United States that had been in place since Gorbachev.

This changed with Kosovo. The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 shifted perceptions completely: it showed that the alliance could (and would) be used for offensive out-of-area operations to intervene in the internal affairs of a sovereign state without United Nations approval. Russian leaders immediately registered the potential threat. The link of external (U.S./NATO) military power with internal opposition (the Kosovo Liberation Army) to undermine a rival government came to be perceived as a new model of warfare and the “foundation of a unipolar world.”<sup>27</sup> In Russia's October 1999 National Security Concept – the first following the Kosovo War – international influence in Russia's

internal politics was identified as a threat to national security.<sup>28</sup> An expansion of the domestic control of the state was articulated as strategically necessary to prevent external actors from undermining Russia's internal security. In a world of asymmetric Western power, the notion that a state's internal opposition could be exploited by outside powers to undermine a regime created a perverse incentive for some regimes to circumscribe or eliminate the internal pluralism essential to democratic rule. The astute observer of Russian security policy and future National Security Council director Celeste Wallander noted in early 2000 that “many Russian analysts believe that bilateral relations [between the United States and Russia] are approaching Cold War levels of mistrust.”<sup>29</sup>

Shortly after the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999, Russia took an inward authoritarian turn.<sup>30</sup> Yeltsin selected a former KGB officer as his successor and the Kremlin tightened its vertical of power and invaded Chechnya to restore central government control, foreclosing the potential for a Kosovo-style Western intervention in Russia on behalf of an active separatist movement on Russian territory. The first terms of Putin's presidency saw a dramatic expansion of state control. State corporations and banks acquired key television media assets. The heads of state corporations and banks, in turn, were replaced with loyal cronies, typically with ties to the security sector (the *siloviki*).<sup>31</sup> Natural resource assets were renationalized, with those personally loyal to Putin placed in control. Private wealth-holders either demonstrated political loyalty to the regime (Mikhail Fridman, Vladimir Potanin, Vagit Alekperov) or were expropriated (Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, Boris Berezovsky). Foreign investors were pushed out of key sectors. New military districts were created and the elections of regional governors came to an end.

All of these developments, in turn, worsened relations with the United States. U.S. presidents criticized Russian actions, which in many ways simply reinforced the Russian view that in a world of overwhelming U.S. power, and a willingness of the United States to intervene in the domestic affairs of states, all potential internal opposition – whether ethnic/separatist, liberal, or humanitarian – was a potential fifth column waiting to be exploited by an overwhelmingly powerful external enemy. American concerns with internal Russian affairs reinforced the assumed link between the necessity of internal control and the countering of external threat.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq and the color revolutions heightened the sense that predominant U.S. power presented a novel kind of threat and continued the downward spiral.<sup>32</sup> The color revolutions in Yugoslavia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Ukraine (2004) were particularly significant. Like Kosovo's Liberation Army, the opposition in these cases were perceived not as popular movements for freedom and democracy, but as organizational pro-Western proxies used by the United States to oust unfriendly leaders. Even when direct involvement of the U.S. government in these revolutions was not evident, many Russian elites assumed that the United States had a role, and that the "freedom agenda" shrouded a general U.S. strategy to oust unfriendly leadership. The assumption of a link between Western support and domestic opposition was not entirely groundless. Political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way point to the organizational linkage of the West to a country's business and NGO communities as a key factor influencing democratization.<sup>33</sup> As McFaul has noted regarding Ukraine, external assistance from the United States and European countries "played a significant role in underwriting the activities of civic organizations that helped get out the vote and then protect it" and "one of the

most effective media outlets, *Ukrainska pravda*, relied almost exclusively on external financial support."<sup>34</sup> Transnational networks did train activists and mobilize external support.<sup>35</sup> The triad of support for NGOs, election monitoring, and media organizations became an essential part of U.S. foreign assistance and international democracy promotion efforts.

Following the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Russian security doctrines revealed yet another dark turn in Russian perceptions of the role of the United States in its internal affairs. Countering U.S. unipolarity was not simply a matter of building up Russian military capability to counterbalance U.S. strength. The goal was also to limit the U.S. "freedom agenda," which was posited as a vehicle for the extension of U.S. power and intervention through "hybrid warfare." Beginning in the early 2000s, Russian leadership articulated the view that the United States extended its influence through infiltration and subversion of unfriendly governments, that the United States exploits domestic and international law when and how it suits its relentless pursuit of power, and that much of the international order is a mechanism for imposing U.S. influence and designs. Regime change was equated with U.S. subjugation. Norm entrepreneurs and the domestic civil society organizations linked to them are the tips of the American spear. By January 2005, Russian state media was openly stating that Russia was the target of a new Cold War, waged "by political provocation, played out with the help of special operations, media war, political destabilization, and the seizure of power by an aggressively activated minority . . . with the help of velvet, blue, orange etc. revolutions."<sup>36</sup>

The perceived link between the United States and domestic opposition – real or imagined – also negatively affected the domestic regime.<sup>37</sup> In May 2005, the head of the FSB (Federal Security Service), Nikolai Patrushev, warned in a speech to the

Russian Duma that foreign intelligence services were using NGOs to infiltrate Russian society and that “under the cover of implementing humanitarian programs in Russia, they lobby for the interests of certain countries and gather classified information on wide ranges of issues.”<sup>38</sup> The Russian government responded to the December 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine by creating new restrictions on NGOs, tightening control over foreign assistance, and limiting media freedoms, transnational advocacy networks, and election monitors.<sup>39</sup> Putin explicitly stated that the laws restricting NGOs were “intended to protect against the intervention of foreign states in the internal political life of the Russian Federation.”<sup>40</sup> The increased control of society – and the promotion of nationalist parasocietal organizations and the strengthening of the nationalist line in propaganda – followed fairly quickly on the back of the color revolutions and are reasonably interpreted as a direct response.<sup>41</sup>

When the U.S. government openly praised the 2011 – 2012 protests in Russia, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stating in a speech in Lithuania that “the Russian people, like people everywhere, deserve the right to have their voices heard and their votes counted,”<sup>42</sup> the Russian government responded with the expulsion of USAID, a law demanding that entities receiving foreign funding must register as “foreign agents,” new restrictions on protest participation, and continued rhetoric about the influence of external actors on Russia’s internal affairs.<sup>43</sup> Prior to the crackdown, Putin noted that opposition leaders “heard the signal and with the support of the U.S. State Department began active work. . . . We are all grownups here. We all understand the organizers are acting according to a well-known scenario and in their own mercenary political interests.”<sup>44</sup> The perceived threat of the color revolutions – potentially with external sponsorship and encourage-

ment – effectively generated their antithesis in Russia: a set of authoritarian strategies, doctrines, and ideas. External support for democracy led to regime closure.

The internal closure of the regime and hostility between Russia and the United States spiraled downward precipitously with the crisis in Ukraine in 2014.<sup>45</sup> The extra-constitutional ouster of Viktor Yanukovich’s government and the seizure of power by a pro-U.S., pro-NATO, and anti-Russian coalition clearly marked a sharp increase in the perception of threat in Moscow, triggering a full triad of balancing efforts (military, internal, and ideological).<sup>46</sup> As a military response, Russia used its newly revamped special forces to quickly invade and annex Crimea and to sustain a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine. By May 2014, the Russian security doctrine identified color revolutions as a form of hybrid warfare used by the United States as the *primary* external threat.<sup>47</sup> New legislation further restricted the presence of foreign donors and limited foreign ownership of Russian media to 25 percent shares, which led to the sale and replacement of the editorial board of *Vedomosti*, one of the last moderately independent news sources. Opposition figures were targeted with propaganda and persecuted as “fifth columnists” of the West. The Duma passed legislation authorizing the FSB to fire on crowds.<sup>48</sup> And the Kremlin is creating a new National Guard that will be directly subordinate to the president.

Surely not all of Russia’s steps away from formal democracy should be linked to external factors. Boris Yeltsin shelled his own parliament and imposed a superpresidential constitution through a referendum in 1993, actions that have no evident link to international factors. The restrictions placed on political parties have no plausible international connection, since no political parties received foreign support. Moreover, some of the regime tightening – such



as the end of gubernatorial elections and the control of civic groups – corresponded to incidents of terror and secession that would clearly have heightened a sense of domestic threat. The Nord-Ost hostage crisis in October 2002 was followed by anti-terrorism laws restricting media coverage during emergency situations and the effective government takeover of NTV, the last independent television station. In the wake of the Beslan massacre in 2004 – and over a month prior to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine – the Russian Duma passed legislation ending the elections of regional governors. But the statements of the regime and the explicit efforts to close off avenues of foreign influence by tightening domestic controls suggest that even these domestic concerns were increasingly viewed through the lens of international threat and competition.

Not all countries would, or could, respond to U.S. power by balancing it or by introducing greater authoritarian controls. Germany and other NATO members responded by reducing their military spending and accepting diminished readiness to respond to external threats. They embraced American power and saw it as providing rather than undermining their own security. But Russia's Soviet past left it with a different set of priors, with which actions such as the NATO airstrikes on Yugoslavia resonated like a tuning fork. The Russian elite has a long history of perceiving internal opposition as agents of a foreign power. As George Kennan noted in his Long Telegram in 1947,

In 1924 Stalin specifically defended the retention of the “organs of suppression,” meaning, among others, the army and the secret police, on the ground that “as long as there is a capitalist encirclement there will be danger of intervention with all the consequences that flow from that danger.” In accordance with that theory, and from that time on, all internal

opposition forces in Russia have consistently been portrayed as the agents of foreign forces of reaction antagonistic to Soviet power.

The Russian reaction to U.S. power may not have been inevitable, but it certainly fit comfortably into Soviet Cold War narratives of enemy infiltration and threat.

To place the Russian reaction in broader context it is useful to recall historian and diplomat E. H. Carr, who pointed to the relations of power that underlay normative commitments in international affairs. Writing in the 1930s, but looking back at the ideologies of predominant states, Carr noted that internationalism and universalism were ideologies of states that aspired to world leadership – to hegemony. Universal values suit the powerful, Carr thought, for they justify universal intervention and interference in the internal affairs of other states, something only the powerful are capable of. “Pleas for international solidarity and world union,” Carr wrote, “come from those dominant nations which may hope to exercise control over a unified world.” Similarly, Carr noted that the ideological reaction of rising powers was a function of positions of relative weakness. “Countries which are struggling to force their way into the dominant group naturally tend to invoke nationalism against the internationalism of the controlling powers.”<sup>49</sup> Universalism, whether liberal or communist, is the ideology of the dominant. The aspiring or declining powers mobilize nationalism and particularism.

In the post-Cold War period, Russia developed in an international environment dominated by a United States that combined military power, a normative commitment to democratic regime change, and transnational activist networks for the promotion of democratic elections abroad. In the antiliberalism of great powers like Russia and China, we see the paradoxical effect

of the singularity of American power and dominance: a defensive inversion of dominant norms. For states strong enough to mount a challenge, and with a prior history of framing internal pluralism as a source of external threat, resistance to U.S. power will present as an antiliberalism that is likely to shape domestic institutions. It is depressing that the primary effect of a world dominated by liberal democratic states may not be the gradual extension of democracy and the normative assimilation of the world's nondemocratic emerging powers, but it should not come as a surprise. The primary effect of muscular liberalism may be to generate an opposing reaction.

This is precisely what we have seen in the Russian case, where the response to liberal democratic universalism and American power has been military buildup combined with domestic repression and a more conservative antidemocratic nationalism. In reacting to the perceived threat of U.S. power and potential interference in its domestic affairs, the Russian leadership consistently tightened its political control over the Russian state and society, further worsening relations with the United States. In this sense, the repressive regime in Russia is not entirely indigenous. It evolved in part as a response to the international environment of U.S. power and the international promotion of democracy. As liberal universalism has grown more muscular – more identifiably American in its networks of support and legal foundation – and penetrated closer to Russian borders through the expansion of NATO and the color revolutions, Russia has not grown more open domestically, but more closed. As the level of external threat has increased with confrontation with the West over Ukraine and the ensuing sanctions, Russia has simply grown more nationalist, more closed, and more repressive. Paradoxically – but perhaps predictably – the Russian reaction to U.S. power and democracy promotion was to shore up

both the doctrine and practice of nationalism, illiberalism, and nondemocratic rule. If Russia had a less threatening relationship with the United States, it is possible that we would have a very different, more democratic Russia. And, in turn, a more democratic Russia might have reinforced a better relationship with the United States.

This is not to suggest that the authoritarian turn in Russia or its conflictual relationship with the West is the “fault,” in any meaningful sense, of any particular U.S. government or leadership. Neither U.S. power nor its democratic institutions were plausibly subject to change in the postwar period. The simple fact of U.S. power combined with U.S. values might have been sufficient to make the U.S.-Russian relationship problematic. But beginning with Kosovo, the tightening of domestic controls in Russia following international crises with the West suggests that the marriage between power, particularly the use of military force, and liberal ideals was particularly pernicious in the Russian case.

And the Russian case is perhaps not unique, but rather begs some deeper questions about the relationship between power and ideas, and about U.S. power and the effective promotion of democracy. A muscular liberalism backed by the world's dominant power may lead to concerns that freedom will be exploited to interfere in the internal affairs of states. The enterprise of international democracy promotion – supporting media, civic organizations, and academics that are favorably inclined toward the values of the more powerful state – may paradoxically promote a repressive nationalist response, or at least undermine indigenous sources of democratization. Power, and especially military power, may undermine the capacity of a country to promote its ideas. Democracy's virtues may be the truth, but from the mouth of the most powerful state in human history, it can easily sound like a lie.

- <sup>1</sup> Keith A. Darden, *Economic Liberalism and Its Rivals: The Formation of International Institutions Among the Post-Soviet States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> In other works, Russia's regime dynamics are seen as unrelated to or immune from international influences. Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Lucan Way, "Resistance to Contagion: Sources of Authoritarian Stability in the Former Soviet Union," *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, ed. Valerie Bunce, Michael McFaul, and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York: Scribners, 1974), chap. 1; "X" [George F. Kennan], "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* (1947); and Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics," *Foreign Affairs* 95 (3) (2016).
- <sup>4</sup> Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).
- <sup>5</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, "Is Putin's Russia Fascist?" Atlantic Council, April 23, 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-putin-s-russia-fascist>.
- <sup>6</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93 (5) (September/October 2014).
- <sup>7</sup> Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jon C. Pevehouse, *Democracy from Above: Regional Organizations and Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Milada Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage and Integration after Communism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999); Michael McFaul, "The Missing Variable: The 'International System' as the Missing Link Between Third and Fourth Wave Models of Democratization," in *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, ed. Bunce, McFaul, and Stoner-Weiss; Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, "Comparing Oranges and Apples: The Internal and External Dimensions of Russia's Turn Away from Democracy," in *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, ed. Bunce, McFaul, and Stoner-Weiss; Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Daniel Brinks and Michael Coppedge, "Diffusion is No Illusion: Neighbor Emulation in the Third Wave of Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 39 (4) (May 2006): 463–489; and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward, "Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization," *International Organization* 60 (4) (2006): 911–933.
- <sup>9</sup> Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- <sup>10</sup> Otto Hintze, "The Formation of States and Constitutional Development: A Study in History and Politics," in *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze*, ed. Felix Gilbert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 159.
- <sup>11</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).
- <sup>12</sup> Harold D. Lasswell, "The Garrison State," *The American Journal of Sociology* 46 (4) (1941): 455–468.
- <sup>13</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, "War, Revolution, and the Growth of the Coercive State," *Comparative Political Studies* 21 (1) (April 1988): 45–65; William R. Thompson, "Democracy and Peace: Putting the Cart before the Horse?" *International Organization* 50 (1) (1996): 141–174; Dan Reiter, "Does Peace Nurture Democracy?" *The Journal of Politics* 63 (3) (2001): 935–948; Douglas M. Gibler, "Outside-In: The Effects of External Threat on State Centralization," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54 (4) (2010): 519–542; Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, "Borders, Rivalry, Democracy, and Conflict in the European Region, 1816–1994," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28 (3) (2011): 280–305; and Ronald R. Krebs, "In the Shadow of War: The Effects of Conflict on Liberal Democracy," *International Organization* 63 (1) (2009): 177–210. Given the large body of work on the central role of external threat and international competition in

- developing the state institutions and in shaping nationalism and policies toward minorities, the paucity of work on external threat and regime type is striking. On the state-building and nation-building literatures, see Keith Darden and Harris Mylonas, "Threats to Territorial Integrity, National Mass Schooling, and Linguistic Commonality," *Comparative Political Studies* 49 (11) (September 2016): 1446–1479.
- <sup>14</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2015 [in constant 2014 USD], <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.
- <sup>15</sup> As NATO expanded, the investment of its members in their military capability declined, but the addition of new members implied that the United States had greater capacity to extend its reach and influence eastward in Europe. (Mighty Montenegro will potentially be joining the alliance this year.)
- <sup>16</sup> See Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), 167.
- <sup>17</sup> "Second Inaugural Address of George W. Bush; January 20, 2005," The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/21st\\_century/gbush2.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/21st_century/gbush2.asp).
- <sup>18</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982).
- <sup>19</sup> These statements reflect the view that sovereignty of foreign governments is conditional (on democracy and human rights), and that U.S. power may legitimately be used to overthrow regimes that are illegitimate. When there is no international body that assesses legitimacy and states are judges in their own cause, this is threatening.
- <sup>20</sup> Fyodor Luk'yanov, "Perestroika 2014: The Reasons Behind Moscow's Firm Stance on Ukraine," Valdai Discussion Club, March 19, 2014, [http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/perestroika\\_2014\\_the\\_reasons\\_behind\\_moscow\\_s\\_firm\\_stance\\_on\\_ukraine/](http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/perestroika_2014_the_reasons_behind_moscow_s_firm_stance_on_ukraine/) (original Russian at <http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/column/lukyanov/5952017.shtml>); and Valdai Discussion Club, "Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 13th Annual Meeting," October 27, 2016, <http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-took-part-in-the-valdai-discussion-club-s-plenary-session/>.
- <sup>21</sup> William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24 (1) (Summer 1999).
- <sup>22</sup> McFaul, "Missing Variable"; Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* (Summer 1989).
- <sup>23</sup> McFaul, "Missing Variable."
- <sup>24</sup> On the perceived threat as a spur for the reforms see Alexander Belkin, "Civil-Military Relations in Russia after 9/11," *European Security* 12 (3–4) (2003): 1–19. On the content of the reforms, see Zoltan Barany, "The Politics of Russia's Elusive Defense Reform," *Political Science Quarterly* 121 (4) (2006): 597–627; Keir Giles, "Russian Operations in Georgia: Lessons Identified Versus Lessons Learned," in *The Russian Armed Forces in Transition: Economic, Geopolitical and Institutional Uncertainties*, ed. Roger N. McDermott, Bertil Nygren, and Carolina Vendil Pallin (London: Routledge, 2012); Dmitry Gorenburg, "The Russian Military under Sergei Shoigu: Will the Reform Continue?" PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 253 (Washington, D.C.: PONARS Eurasia, 2013); Marcel de Haas and Rebecca Solheim, *Russia's Military Reforms: Victory After Twenty Years of Failure?* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael,' 2011); Margarete Klein, "Towards a 'New Look' of the Russian Armed Forces? Organizational and Personnel Changes," in *The Russian Armed Forces in Transition: Economic, Geopolitical and Institutional Uncertainties*, ed. McDermott, Nygren, and Pallin; and Rod Thornton, "Military Organizations and Change: The 'Professionalization' of the 76th Airborne Division," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17 (3) (2010): 449–474.
- <sup>25</sup> SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2015, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.
- <sup>26</sup> There was a general awareness in Western policy circles that the expansion of NATO might negatively influence Russia's internal politics: Clinton had postponed an announcement re-

- garding the expansion of NATO until after the Russian elections in 1996. See William Zimmerman, *Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), 211.
- <sup>27</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, quoted in Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, 43.
- <sup>28</sup> Ted Hopf, “Crimea is Ours’: A Discursive History,” unpublished manuscript, January 2016, 4–5; Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, chap. 7; and Celeste A. Wallander, “Russian National Security Policy in 2000,” PONARS Policy Memo No. 102 (Washington, D.C.: PONARS Eurasia, 2000), [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/media/csis/pubs/pm\\_0102.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/pm_0102.pdf).
- <sup>29</sup> Wallander, “Russian National Security Policy in 2000.”
- <sup>30</sup> Archie Brown, “Vladimir Putin and the Reaffirmation of Central State Power,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 17 (1) (2001): 45–55; and Ol’ga Kryshchanovskaya and Stephen White, “The Sovietization of Russian Politics,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25 (4) (2009): 283–309.
- <sup>31</sup> Brian D. Taylor, *State Building in Putin’s Russia: Policing and Coercion after Communism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- <sup>32</sup> On the fluctuations in the U.S.-Russian relationship and the effect of these events, see Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*.
- <sup>33</sup> Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
- <sup>34</sup> McFaul, “Missing Link,” 219.
- <sup>35</sup> Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries*.
- <sup>36</sup> Robert Horvath, *Putin’s “Preventive Counter-Revolution”: Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2012), 93.
- <sup>37</sup> On the Russian elite’s threat perceptions and regime reactions, see Gail W. Lapidus, “Between Assertiveness and Insecurity: Russian Elite Attitudes and the Russia-Georgia Crisis,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 23 (2) (2007): 138–155; Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, new and expanded edition (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015), esp. 342–345; and Hopf, “Crimea is Ours’: A Discursive History.”
- <sup>38</sup> “Remarks on Russia’s Security Issues by Federal Security Service Chief Nikolai Patrushev at a State Duma Session,” Federal News Service, Official Kremlin International News Broadcast, May 12, 2005.
- <sup>39</sup> Graeme B. Robertson, “Managing Society: Protest, Civil Society, and Regime in Putin’s Russia,” *Slavic Review* 68 (3) (2009): 528–547.
- <sup>40</sup> “Zayavleniya dlya pressy i otvety na vorosy po itogam zasedaniya mezghosudarstvennogo sovetta evraziiskogo ekonomicheskogo soobshchestva,” January 25, 2006, [http://archive.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/01/25/2257\\_type63377type63380\\_100687.shtm](http://archive.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/01/25/2257_type63377type63380_100687.shtm).
- <sup>41</sup> Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak M. Brudny, “Russia and the Colour Revolutions,” *Democratization* 19 (1) (2012): 15–36.
- <sup>42</sup> Joby Warrick and Karen DeYoung, “From Reset to Pause: The Real Story Behind Hillary Clinton’s Feud with Vladimir Putin,” *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2016; and Miriam Elder, “Vladimir Putin Accuses Hillary Clinton of Encouraging Russian Protests,” *The Guardian*, December 8, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/08/vladimir-putin-hillary-clinton-russia>.
- <sup>43</sup> “Putin Warns Against Foreign ‘Interference’ at FSB Meeting,” *The Moscow Times*, February 14, 2013, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/putin-warns-against-foreign-interference-at-fsb-meeting/475594.html>.
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- <sup>45</sup> Samuel Charap and Keith Darden, "Commentary: Russia and Ukraine," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 56 (2) (2014). Keith A. Darden
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid; and Keith Darden, "How To Save Ukraine: Why Russia is Not the Real Problem," *Foreign Affairs* (April 14, 2014), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2014-04-14/how-save-ukraine>.
- <sup>47</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, "Countering Color Revolutions: Russia's New Security Strategy and its Implications for U.S. Policy," *Russian Military Reform*, September 15, 2014, <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2014/09/15/countering-color-revolutions-russias-new-security-strategy-and-its-implications-for-u-s-policy/>; and Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," *Military Review*, January/February 2016, 30–38.
- <sup>48</sup> "Russian Law Allows FSB Agents to Open Fire on Crowds," *The Moscow Times*, January 1, 2016, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russian-law-allows-fsb-agents-to-open-fire-on-crowds/554532.html>.
- <sup>49</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1946), 109.