



Chapter 16

Assessing Russian Statecraft and U.S. Policy Considerations

By Graeme P. Herd

Introduction

Russia's ways and means could be inter-enabling. Russia could demonstrate its strategic relevance by using its mediation and arbitration power to exercise a *de facto* veto on attempts at conflict resolution on terms that do not meet its interest. This would then allow Russia to shape and build a new status quo around alternative non-Western or even anti-western governance models and norms. Russia then provides security to uphold the new normal and can advance its economic interests. The consensus is that in practice, Russia "punches above its weight." Through the skillful deployment and coordination of its limited ways and means, Russia is said to "play a weak hand well." The sum of Russia's agile and skilled diplomatic corps' transactional and pragmatic approach to Great Power competition is considered to be more than its parts. However, when we survey the totality of Russian global activism, from regional and cross-regional thematic perspectives, what is our assessment of contemporary Russian statecraft? The answers to this core question provide a firmer foundation upon which to identify policy implications and considerations for possible U.S. policy responses.

Strategic Relevance?

Russia maintains its Great Power strategic relevance through the exercise of its veto power and spoiler role in global hotspots and through regional interventions. Such activities signal Russia's strategic relevance and Great Power status. However, with such activism, Russia faces the challenge of prioritizing and maintaining coherence, translating short-term tactical military successes into longer-term strategic engagements, while avoiding costly reputational-sapping entanglements. Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, Central African Republic (CAR), and Libya are test cases for these propositions. In Latin and South America, for example, Russian support for revisionist states such as Cuba and Venezuela boosts Russia's strategic relevance. At the same time, however, support for Cuba and Venezuela directly undermines the position of Brazil, a member of the far more strategically influential BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as well as Mexico and Argentina, core regional leaders within the G20 grouping. Support for Maduro in Venezuela alienates eleven of fourteen states in the Lima Group. In Syria, Russia needs to pacify Idlib (in northwestern Syria) to eliminate threats (drone and rocket attacks) to its base in Hmeimim and to prevent a domestic political crisis and, possibly, regime failure. At the same time, Russia's strategic goal is to maintain its transit through the straits of Bosphorus, which entails securing good relations with Turkey. Russia considers the Middle East a secondary priority and will have difficulties maintaining its influence.

Mediator Role?

Russia cultivates a role as a neutral mediator, an honest power broker, and constructive stabilizing presence. Russia finds it easier to support status quo incumbents than opposition leaders and groups proposing regime change, not least given official Russian narratives around which norms are appropriate (i.e. non-interference in domestic affairs). However, there are clear gaps between what Russia says and what it itself does. Putin's words are not reliable indicators of intent, as his own claims of withdrawal of Russian armed forces in Syria clash with the reality of a permanent presence. Russia's attitude to third parties in its "sphere of special interest" (in the former Soviet space) and how it projects power globally marks another gap, pointing to a "do as I say, not as I do" approach. We find other dichotomies in Russia's core narratives. For example, if "incumbents good; regime change bad" is a Russian foreign policy mantra, how can we account for the role of rebels in Russian foreign policy? How can we account for Russia's emphasis on state-based rights and rules and the reality of a political system built on connections, clientelism, and the subordination of law to power. Russia positions itself to lead an anti-imperial axis in the global context yet practices neo-imperial policies towards its near neighbors. It undertakes a war on democratic governance yet advocates the democratization of the international system.

From a Russian perspective, to make the international system more democratic is to make it more pluralist, that is, to reduce the role of U.S. leadership in the system. Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) activity and foreign investment in critical national infrastructure raises its profile in the former Soviet space, particularly Ukraine and through Central Asia in the last decade. Former Soviet states may look to China as a third party actor to balance Russia either through adopting Russia's mediation role or by bolstering their multi-vector and equidistance-based foreign policies. It is notable that Russia does not offer itself as a mediator between India and China, reflecting its desire to hedge.

Balancing Alternative?

Russia finds new geopolitical partners through its positioning as a predictable hedge and balancing alternative to the West, particularly the United States. Russia promotes its role as an alternative partner that states in regional confrontations can turn to as a hedge and balancing partner. In Northeast Asia, for example, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Mongolia look to Russia to balance China and as a hedge against the U.S. becoming isolationist, as under the previous administration. However, history, current strategic partnerships, public sentiment, and a new U.S. administration all combine to limit further alignment between Russia and states in the region, though Mongolia may prove an exception. In other regions, such as Latin America, states like Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia look to Russia and China to balance the United States.

However, Russia's regional approaches are weakly institutionalized and Russia lacks the capacity and economic influence to ensure that its political and diplomatic initiatives in Africa, Latin America, and Asia develop into more lasting influence. Moreover, Russia has to contend with a "rising China" factor, in which Russia is a situational and transactional partner for China, with different approaches to world order and different interests. China projects an image of being a defender of a reformed global economic system; Russia seeks to replace it. While Russia thinks in terms of G3, China is focused on a G2 world, with Russia, EU, Japan, and India having second tier status. Outside of the Asia-Pacific, China adopts an economic not military-first approach, which demands a stable operating environment, not disorder. China gives loans to build infrastructure that it then controls in lieu of debt repayment, whereas Russia sells weapons to both sides of a conflict, supporting destabilization then stabilization on Russian terms. China

acts as a strong constraint and moderating influence on Russian power-projection in Europe, the militarization of the Arctic being perhaps the best illustration. Russia's anti-Western foreign policy creates greater dependence on China; this results in a less diversified, comprehensive, rounded, and constructive Russian Asia-Pacific policy. Indeed, potential alternative Russian partners, such as ROK and Japan, are U.S. treaty allies. Russia also faces the danger of being instrumentalized by other states. Turkey's S-400 purchases signal to the West that it has alternatives and so increases its strategic value. Does China use Russia as a stalking horse against U.S. and European interests, while viewing Russia itself as a safe strategic rear and raw materials base? Does the Central African Republic (CAR) President Faustin-Archange Touadéra use Russian presence as leverage to increase concessions from France?

Sovereignty and Security Provider?

Russia posits itself as a sovereignty and security provider, as a reliable “bulwark against revolutions” and “champion of counter-revolution.” Russia articulates a narrow legal positivist approach to Syria and yet insists on red lines when engaging with Belarus and Ukraine, while in Libya it supports Haftar against the government. Security is provided by both direct Russian conventional military intervention and the deployment of proxy forces. Proxies exemplify a tension between control and deniability; the more deniable, the less Russia can exert a measure of control. It is also difficult to send strategic signals via proxies, inter-agency coordination is harder, and the monetization agendas of such autonomous actors may limit their utility. Russia provides security to unstable clients that have not first turned to either the U.S. or China, as Russia lacks the resources to outbid the other two given current power disparities. Russian proxies and active measure operations can be poorly coordinated, pursue contradictory goals and, when unmasked, can severely damage diplomatic relations and cause reputational damage. Russia's “strategic partnership” with China, highlighted by growing security cooperation since mid-2014, appears to be an embryonic undeclared military alliance. Russia's growing economic dependency on China, and closer conventional military cooperation, mean that for Russia to remain strategically autonomous, it must rely more heavily on the one dimension of power in which it has dominance: its strategic nuclear triad. However, short of offering to extend its nuclear umbrella, it is very difficult for Russia to accrue political dividends in terms of extending its authority and influence in the international system.

Advancing Economic Interests?

Russia's global reach seeks to promote Russian economic interests, or more precisely, those of Putin's inner circle that dominate state-owned enterprises where they can privatize profit and pass risk onto the state. One clear tension in Russia's foreign economic policy lies between the desire for geopolitical influence and economic rationality and profit principle that animates Russian state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Igor Sechin, the manager of *Rosneft*, backs Bolivarian regimes and *Rosneft* appears to advance Russian geopolitical interests at the expense of its shareholders. Russian debt forgiveness (\$20bn) in Africa clears a path for further economic cooperation and is officially characterized as a “pragmatic approach” to managing bilateral relations. Russia advances loans to states that purchase Russian arms, in so doing subsidizing production lines running in its defense industrial complex, replicating the failed Soviet model of relations with Cuba. By contrast, China gives loans to build infrastructure and takes control of infrastructure in lieu of repayment.

Russia embodies a “Sovereign Globalization” approach: it integrates into global markets, transport, logistics, information, and supply chains to survive economically but seeks to isolate its population culturally, psychologically, and politically within the walls of its besieged fortress, as inoculation against democratization processes. Tensions arise between President Putin’s rhetoric about global cooperation and global responsibility and the need for continuous military-patriotic mobilization against external enemies. Russia faces two economic vulnerabilities. First, Russia is economically over-dependent on China. China is Russia’s most significant trading partner. Since 2015, the largest consumer of Russian oil and China supplies Russia with essential technological goods. China has also become Ukraine’s largest investor, is the largest investor in the Balkans, as well as in Latin America and Africa (in trade), to take some examples. Second, Russia is unable to affect the price oil globally.

Core Current Characteristics, Trends, and Trajectories

When we view Russia’s global activism, we find that Russia pivots more to commodities-based economies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) through the application of hard conventional and proxy power than it has towards China and the Asia-Pacific wider region, through soft power, trade, and enhanced economic relations. However, the Asia-Pacific is central to global order/disorder. We find here the most potent geo-political rivalries, where global governance ideas and norms are contested and where innovation (AI, robotics, quantum computing) occur. Russia’s soft power deficit and China alignment are inadequate to meet this challenge. In reality, adopting or emulating the basic characteristics of Putinism entails embracing ineffective authoritarianism, economic stagnation, and overly Russian national-conservatism. To be resurgent Russia must be a constructive autonomous player with a positive agenda beyond “conservatism.”

Russia adopts ambitious goals designed to highlight its activism and global reach but implementation is under-resourced, poorly coordinated, and often at cross-purposes. After five years of low-cost expeditionary coalitional operations in Syria, Russia is the principal external actor, but without an exit strategy, Syria could become a costly reputation-sapping entanglement. Russia’s global activism is characterized by differentiated regional engagement. There is a clear focus of strategic effort in post-Soviet space and the Western Balkans. Elsewhere, Russian behavior is more opportunistic. Russian influence as a security provider is more positive in some states that are less developed and democratic, for example, Tajikistan. In some areas and in some conflicts, Russia refrains from “activism”; this can be seen from the South China Sea to Tibet, and from Yemen to Kyrgyzstan. Russia appears ready to share influence with China in Central Asia and in Iran, Vietnam, and Pakistan. Russia takes geostrategic gains when it has the opportunity, even at the expense of monetization opportunities (Venezuela) and in cases where there are no real prospects of geo-strategic influence, such as CAR, Russia takes what it can.

Are we reaching a “Cold War 2.0” inflection point, as relations between the US, its friends, and allies on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other, rapidly deteriorate? Within just one week (March 15-22, 2021), a U.S. Director of National Intelligence assessment noted with “high confidence” that President Putin authorized “influence operations” in support of Donald Trump’s bid for re-election in the 2020 presidential campaign. In the same week, President Biden stated that Russia will “pay a price” for such meddling and agreed that President Putin is a “killer.” The UK’s defense and foreign policy review announced a forty percent increase in the UK’s nuclear stockpile (raising the cap from 180 warheads to 260) “in recognition of the evolving security environment” and identified Russia as the “most acute threat” facing “Global Britain.” In Anchorage, Alaska, United States-China talks opened to an

undiplomatic spat between U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and China's most senior foreign policy official, Yang Jiechi, Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office and State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi. The EU, the United States, UK, and Canada imposed sanctions on Chinese officials over Uighur human rights abuses.

In response, Russia froze relations with the United States, having already done so with the EU, and China reacted to EU/U.S./UK/Canada sanctions with bans on institutes, individuals, and, remarkably, the Political and Security Committee of the European Union. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visits China for the first time since the pandemic began. Given the disruption caused by the visit (the entire Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after receiving the delegation, had to go into quarantine afterwards), the significance of the visit is obvious. Both delegations reported that high-level strategic cooperation counters the “hegemony pursued by some Western countries led by the United States.” It is clear that both Russia and China feel that they gain leverage over the United States by the threat of closer cooperation, given the widespread and natural assumption that a Russian-Chinese military alliance represents a force multiplier, creating a powerful axis of authoritarianism in which the sum of the combined threats are more than the parts.

The United States, Russia, and China appear to be locked into a pattern of escalation, unable to step back: President Biden must consider the domestic political context; Xi Jinping has to manage strongly nationalist public opinion; and, Russia’s *siloviki* need anti-western rhetoric to suppress internal opposition in wider civil society. However, national interest places limits on the inevitability of a slide into “Cold War 2.0.” The United States’ competitive advantage in Great Power competition is its network of friends and allies, who are prepared to support pushback against specific malign activity but not adopt a comprehensive neo-containment strategy. A Russian alliance with China would expose Moscow’s asymmetric dependencies on Beijing and render Russia a junior partner within a Sino-centric technology-trade bloc (*Pax Sinica*), with little or no strategic autonomy. China has not yet developed its military sufficiently, nor does it have technological independence, preconditions for thriving in a “Cold War 2.0” context. Thus, March 2021 represents a rhetorical shift, but this has yet to be matched by major policy changes.

In the 1990s, hardliners in Moscow argued that should NATO enlarge, Russia’s response would be to develop partnerships with anti-Western rogue states, such as Libya, Syria, Iran, and North Korea (DPRK); resort to military-patriotic mobilization of its population and modernize its military; adopt autarky; weaponize organized crime and corruption; and pivot to China. Since 2011-12, Russia has adopted each prediction, with the possible exception of closer relations with DPRK. In terms of a further deterioration with relations to the West, Russia’s only additional escalatory option may be to resort more openly to nuclear blackmail and accept greater tactical and strategic risk, leveraging this tolerance as competitive advantages.

Rather than “Cold War 2.0,” Russia’s stated preference, in keeping with its Great Power status and historical experience, is for the emergence of a global concert of powers, a contemporary expression of the 1815 Concert of Europe. Russia, alongside the United States, China, India, and Japan, who collectively represent 70 percent of global GDP, would exercise an influential leadership role on the world stage. Through transactional strategic dialogue and informal negotiation, Russia would direct and manage the global strategic agenda, while still able to take unilateral action in its sphere of privileged interest. However, in reality, Russia’s ideal operating environment would be a “G-Zero” world. In such a world, no group of states,

such as the G3, G7 or G20, exerts leadership and management of the global strategic agenda (e.g. over WMD proliferation, climate change, regional crisis, and terrorism). In such an ambiguous, unpredictable, contested, and transactional world, states with well-developed alliance systems are disadvantaged, while states without (e.g. Russia, China, and DPRK) are freer to maneuver.

By default or by design, it is a “G-Zero” world order that best secures and protects a Russia in relative power decline. Which other strategic context is acceptable, affordable, and appropriate for a status-seeking power that cannot achieve acknowledgement and recognition for the status claims it projects? Russia cannot achieve G3 status, and can hardly accept unipolarity or even bipolarity if it cannot be one of the poles. Even Russia’s order-producing and managerial role in its shared neighborhood is increasingly compromised by third parties, not least the EU and China. In a leaderless world, states that have a spoiler role ability and a higher tolerance for risk-taking thrive and flourish. A trajectory towards a “G-Zero” rather than a “Cold War 2.0” or “Global Concert” world order paradigm appears more to favor Russia’s strategic culture and President Putin’s operational code.

For at least twenty-one years, President Putin has been the core strategic decision-maker in Russia. If he continues in this role until 2036, the accumulation of stresses, vulnerabilities, and complexities that he currently faces will be exacerbated. Despite pockets of military innovation, inherent conservatism permeates Russian domestic policy, evidenced by a status quo elite that continues to defer modernization. Russia currently resembles what Mark Galeotti has termed an “ad hococracy” of competing, semi-autonomous actors, who are able to work toward the state’s broad objectives, generating their own plans to those ends. It is a hard truth but global reach and activism and foreign policy successes may reinforce domestic elite legitimacy but they cannot compensate for the lack of structural economic reform. At heart, the fundamental obstacle to reform and renewal is Russia’s status quo dynastic elite, particularly Putin’s inner circle that has most to lose and least to gain from change. These elites are driven by twin opposing fears: on the one hand, they fear that they will lose control of a failed reform process, as Gorbachev did, and this will result in the chaos of regime and then political system change; on the other, they fear reform will succeed, with the same end result, perhaps without the chaos.

The tragedy of Putinism is, then, that its management system cannot ultimately achieve genuine regime legitimacy (as measured by popularity and longevity), but can sustain itself for another ten years before collapse and reset. Macro-economic stability and 1.5-2.0 percent economic growth allows for a state of stable order in Russia, but limited resources means less ability to institutionalize foreign policy gains. “Late Putinism” will be characterized by increased factionalism and inter-institutional competition, a culture of overreach and overstretch, and a growing preparedness to accept tactical risk while avoiding strategic risk.

U.S. Policy Considerations

Given our cross-regional comparative assessment and the stated policy of the new Biden administration, what are the implications of this study for U.S. policy towards Russia and towards Russian global activism? This summary first identifies general considerations in terms of overall approach before examining specific regional considerations. This summary aims to provide opportunities for the United States, as well as its friends and allies, to engage with the Russia more effectively in each region and globally.

Global

- The Biden administration has not adopted a new reset with Russia, as since 2012 President Putin embarked on more revisionist and revanchist policies. Although President Putin accuses the Biden administration of having embraced a comprehensive neo-containment policy, this is not the case. Unlike the late 1940s, the world is globalized and increasingly multi-polar. In this context, containment is not possible. In addition, the U.S. realizes that even to attempt such an approach would break transatlantic unity and undercut Euro-Atlantic cooperation with Russian civil society and parts of its private sector. There is a transatlantic consensus for a targeted “pushback” against the Kremlin’s malign activity and influence, especially “active measures” and to build resilience in defense of shared core democratic values and practices. The U.S. and Europe can coordinate approaches to “impose real costs” to reduce Russian military and diplomatic efficacy through disruption. Disruption can cause friction, overextend and unbalance Russia and thereby control Russian escalation and deter further malign activity. The tools at the disposal of the U.S. and its friends and allies that facilitate the imposition of costs are varied and context specific. These tools include:
 - **Diplomatic:** These tools include “attribution diplomacy” (“name and shame”), diplomatic expulsions, and closing diplomatic properties. In public diplomacy terms, the West can restructure the narrative from Putin’s preferred besieged fortress Russia encircled by an aggressive, dysfunctional, and failed West to one about a Russian elite kleptocracy and oligarchy (“Kremlin blacklist”) versus Russian civil society.
 - **Economic:** The expansion of U.S. anti-money laundering regime beyond traditional banks as well as the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, which imposes visa bans and freezes the assets of individuals anywhere in the world who are responsible for committing human rights violations or acts of significant corruption, is complemented by the European Magnitsky Act, established in December 2020. The Global Fragility Act calls for all parts of the U.S. government to coordinate strategies to prevent violence and extremism and to focus foreign assistance on averting conflict in fragile countries.
 - **Cyber:** Cyber tools can be used to reveal or freeze Putin’s secret assets and expose corruption and a policy of “defend forward” or “hack back” can be used.
- The U.S. needs to demonstrate positive world leadership and substantively re-engage globally: redouble its efforts to support and strengthen its existing alliance system beyond military exercises, arms sales, and senior leader dialogues to encompass the diplomatic, economic, and, in some cases, development communities. Partnerships should agree on shared ends but be flexible to allow partners to adopt different ways and means to these ends, allowing a mix of compellence and diplomatic persuasion.
- The U.S. should support the international system it helped create through statements and actions, in both word and deed. Messaging is critical to the success of U.S. efforts to engage with Russia. Partners and allies are important to the success of U.S. national security interests but they may not be as willing to cooperate with the U.S. if they do not understand U.S. objectives. The U.S. needs to improve its external messaging so that it is consistent and unambiguous in order to both reassure partners and allies of U.S.

commitment; this helps build the consensus necessary to address large challenges and to provide very clear policy positions to adversaries, which can prevent misunderstandings from spiraling into conflict.

- The U.S. should look to potential cooperation with Russia in areas of mutual interest, including the prevention of further nuclear proliferation, counterterrorism and organized crime, cyber and outer space, and limiting China's influence, to give some examples. However, as the United States, its friends, and allies have little direct leverage over Russian strategic behavior, Russian cooperation will be conditional and transactional. Beyond START III, Russia views indications of cooperation as "concessions," that is, signs of weaknesses. While Russia backs Assad in Syria, military deconfliction is possible but not cooperation. In Ukraine, where the U.S. is not part of the multilateral framework and where the discord is antagonistic, cooperative potential is very limited.
- U.S. policy responses cannot avoid generating unintended consequences in Russia, such as a rally around the flag effect in Russia. Attribution diplomacy can be ineffective when *siloviki* in Russia have *de facto* immunity from prosecution. Adverse publicity can intimidate opponents, instruct, and educate society into submission and be worn as a badge of loyalty. Russia may well adapt by further fragmenting internally, accepting greater strategic (including potential nuclear) blackmail and not just tactical risk, as well as weaponizing corruption and monetizing its foreign policy, resulting in greater unpredictability and increasing destabilization of its internal order.
- Russian confrontation with the U.S. is the norm; relations with the EU have deteriorated to a record low and will continue to remain there; and offensive cyber operations as well as active measures are ongoing and unremitting. Offering concessions to Russia or compromising on human rights in the name of pragmatic and flexible cooperation will not alleviate Russia's narrative of western encroachment, encirclement, and containment. The West does not have to confirm Russia's claim to Great Power status as it defines it. Russia's placing of its own interests above the sovereignty of neighboring states is neither aligned with Western national interest nor its democratic norms and values.

Regional

Europe

- The U.S. should seek to strengthen ties with Europe and Germany in particular, as the Washington-Berlin relationship constitutes the operational center of gravity in the political West. Greater coordination of strategy through National Security Council-*Bundeskanzleramt* working groups can help shape shared NATO approaches and avoid strategic surprises in the relationship.

- Broader burden-sharing (“New Deal”) and an Eastern Partnership Security Compact suggest Germany seeks to offset its determination to complete Nord Stream 2. A U.S.-German action plan can mitigate the negative effects by extending the gas transit agreements to increase revenue for Ukraine, increase support for the Three Seas Initiative and work can be done to agree to the regulatory environment once the pipeline is operational.
- Thus, in order to effectively “push back” against Russian malign activity and influence, the U.S. needs to strengthen transatlantic relations. In practice, this entails managing better the differences it has with Europe and recognizing their nature. Differences arise in part from different structural and economic relationships with Russia. Europe in general is more broadly and deeply dependent on and integrated with the Russian economy than is the United States; this includes, for example, the UK (financial services and investments) or Germany (trade and energy). European business interests, subject to Russia’s “weaponized corruption,” lead to different levels of threat perception and political will.

Arctic

- The U.S. should expand confidence-building measures around common interests and encourage Russia’s desire to make a success of its chairmanship in the Arctic Council in order to discourage its military build-up in the High North and prevent further militarization of the Arctic.
- The United States, alongside its Arctic EU allies and with China, should work on dissuading Russia from asserting its sovereignty over the Northern Sea Route and enforcing restrictive regulations on the maritime traffic. For example, the U.S. could leverage China’s preference for economic and scientific activities in the Arctic.
- Limited U.S. freedom of navigation operations to the west of the Bering Strait might reinforce the common benefit that flows from denying Russia the exclusive control over this maritime route.
- In general, U.S. Arctic policy should neutralize Russian strengths and pressure its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. For example, Russia is unable to protect its strategic nuclear submarines on the Kamchatka Peninsula, as it cannot organize a “naval bastion” or uses an anti-access/area denial “bubble” in the Sea of Okhotsk.
- Greater U.S. cooperation with NATO partners and Finland and Sweden in the Barents regions allows for asymmetric and smart containment. The U.S. should collaboratively build monitoring and intelligence gathering capabilities that are deployable and train through exercises to signal strategic resolve without triggering an Arctic security dilemma.

Latin America

- Russia's post-Cold War reengagement with Latin America can leverage a long history of relations in this region, longer than most other U.S. competitors, including China, and it demonstrates it can be flexible and pragmatic.
- Russia's engagement in Latin America has a regionally specific function: Russia signals it can operate in the United States' backyard and fundamentally challenges the Monroe Doctrine. Russia also demonstrates that Great Powers can push back, provide an alternative to the United States, and support left-leaning regional groupings. In doing so, Russia imposes costs on the regional hegemon, dilutes its power, and undermines democratic values and practice.
- The U.S. has peaceful and productive relationships with the region and shared cultural capital rooted in democratic values, alliances, and partnerships. Recognizing the importance of these links and continuing to build on them through rhetoric and actions will be crucial in maintaining the U.S. position in the region.
- Although Russia is unconstrained by democratic norms as it engages the region, the U.S. should not abandon democratic principles, values, and norms in the name of Great Power competition. Greater engagement in the region will promote democracy and shut down the space for Russian gray zone activities.
- Geographical proximity to Latin America remains the greatest advantage the U.S. has in the region. However, this advantage is undermined if the United States does not capitalize on it by engaging with all instruments of power.
- While China is also strengthening relationships with Latin America, so far China and Russia have sought engagement in different spheres. Increased Russian ownership of energy assets and related companies, particularly in Venezuela, could however create new dynamics as China seeks to continue to acquire oil and gas from the region to fuel its own growth.

Northeast Asia

- The U.S. needs to build stronger relationships between its allies with the goal of a true multiparty alliance structure. Stronger relations between allies and partners will minimize Russia's and China's ability to sow dissension or pit one ally against another.
- The U.S. should work across elements of national power to strengthen its relationship with Japan. Particularly, the U.S. should re-enter the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, now retitled the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Japan leads.
- The U.S. should encourage Japan to table its desire to settle the Kuril Islands dispute in the near-term.

- Helping Mongolia to maximize its status as a free and independent partner in Northeast Asia can be enabled by the U.S. supporting the Third Neighbor Policy and Mongolian democracy.
- The U.S. needs to consider and be prepared for potential Russian support to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in various forms if the PRC should employ a more coercive approach toward Taiwan.

China

- Splitting the partnership between Russia and the PRC through U.S. actions may not be fully possible in the near term.
- Incentivize Russia to moderate its support of the PRC in the Indo-Pacific through greater economic integration between the Russian Far East and non-PRC partners in Asia. These additional economic considerations could complicate Russian decision-making in a dispute between the PRC and another Russian economic partner or regarding PRC actions that generally affect new Russian economic interests.
- The U.S. needs to effectively use and message the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a model for its engagement in region. This model champions each state's sovereignty, fair trade, and the role of regional institutions. While the strategy is not ostensibly against anything, it does seek to preserve the system that Russia and the PRC are seeking to alter.
- The U.S. should visibly engage partners and allies at all levels and expand engagement with countries beyond the military domain. Russia and the PRC engage where the United States does not—both geographically and in various sectors and domains—and the U.S. should not cede the competition in these areas due to inattention.

Middle East

- Since the “Arab Spring,” some Arab leaders have perceived the U.S. as an unreliable partner. This misperception is based on an incorrect understanding of the “Carter Doctrine.” The doctrine pledged U.S. support to defend Arab countries against foreign threats, not to keep ruling regimes in power against the will of their peoples. Given this misperception, Russia has an opportunity to present itself as a reliable partner.
- The U.S. needs to work closely with European allies to address socio-economic and political challenges in the Middle East. Russia and China will continue to be adversaries. Presenting Middle Eastern leaders with a united Western front against Moscow and Beijing will further strengthen U.S. influence and credibility.
- Iran is a major regional power. Since the 1979 revolution, U.S.-Iranian relations have been poor, leaving Iran with two options: Moscow and Beijing. Reaching an agreement on Iran's nuclear program and then gradually reducing tensions will reduce incentives for Iran to maintain its strategic partnerships with Russia and China.
- Civil wars in Syria and Libya provide Russia opportunities to intervene. The U.S. needs to work with our European allies to end these civil wars.

- Several Middle Eastern countries, particularly oil producers, are much more interested in economic than political reform. However, consistently low oil prices force producers to diversify their economies by introducing measures to encourage foreign investment and empower the private sector. The U.S. should encourage and support these economic reform efforts, particularly in the IT sector.
- The U.S. enjoys “soft power” advantages in the Middle East as members of the political and economic establishments speak English and American movies, TV, and sport are very popular. Washington should seek to expand this positive influence.
- Russia builds civil nuclear reactors in the region, but several states have expressed an interest in renewable energy. The U.S. can help Middle Eastern countries to “go green,” reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, and utilize the region’s solar and wind potential.

South Asia

- The Soviet Union was a key arms supplier to India, aided its embryonic nuclear power program, and used (and Russia continues to use) its UN veto power to block resolutions critical of India, for example on Kashmir. Although the shared ideological-emotional mindset (loosely “anti-colonialism”) has waned in the post-Cold War period, the Soviet legacy continues to provide substantial leverage for contemporary Russian activism in the region, even in the context of a rising China. Furthermore, in a very pragmatic sense, India today is still heavily dependent on Russia for maintenance of its large arsenal of Soviet-era weaponry, a situation that will remain a constant for many years to come.
- From the mid-2010s, Russia softened its antagonistic Cold War relationship with Pakistan to develop select areas of cooperation, such as Russian-Pakistan support for the Taliban in Afghanistan. Both Moscow and Islamabad see their limited collaboration as a means to reduce American influence in the region while expanding their own, but Pakistan, desperate for outside support, is especially keen to portray any interaction with Russia (even symbolic) as an advantage in its perennial rivalry with India. Russia aims more to depict itself as an alternative to the United States, therefore its growing connections to Pakistan pose challenges to its “traditional” ties with New Delhi.
- Russia resents India’s participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the “Quad”) as Russia understands India’s role as the United States’ “preeminent U.S. partner in the Indo-Pacific” as a dilution of India’s “strategic autonomy” and as shift away from Moscow towards Washington. Close cooperation between India and the U.S. thus represents a potential attack on Russia’s interests and influence. In fact, Indian moves to hedge against or balance China are in some respects a reprise of its role in the Sino-Soviet dynamic during the Cold War, a role that the USSR had endorsed.
- Russia prefers a Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral grouping as it could then hold the balance of power through mediation, promote multi-polarity, and advance non-western if not anti-western global governance norms, institutions, and practices. India, on the other hand, seeks to maintain its policy independence in what it sees as a permanently multipolar world, while finding an equilibrium between the U.S. and Russia that pushes

back against China. As part of its hedging against Beijing, New Delhi is thus likely to endeavor to reinforce its ties to Moscow while continuing to expand cooperation with the United States.

- In the current Sino-Indian border confrontation, Russia has pragmatically declined a mediation role due ultimately to its dependence on China, while retaining its position as a key arms supplier to India.
- In South Asia, the breadth and depth of U.S.-India linkages far exceed those of Indo-Russian relations in almost all areas. However, the Russia-India arms relationship will remain in place as a practical lynchpin for the foreseeable future. Moreover, many Indians retain a sentimental attachment to Russia as emblematic of their country's "strategic autonomy," while Russia looks to weaken U.S.-India collaboration. Washington will thus continue to face challenges in balancing improving its ties with New Delhi while contending with Russia as a competitor.

Africa

- The United States' security and economic interests in Africa are best advanced by long-term partnerships with stable, democratic governments. Despite a long history of engagement in Africa, there is a common perception that the United States has not been playing its traditional leadership role on the continent in recent years, creating a vacuum that Russia has tried to fill.
- A first priority is to articulate clearly the shared interests and vision that the United States holds with Africa. In so doing, the United States can underscore that U.S. policy in Africa encompasses far more than simply countering Russia (or China).
- Another priority is to weigh in on Russia's geo-strategic positioning on the continent, particularly in Libya, where the establishment of a Russian foothold poses a long-term threat to NATO. The U.S. should commit to working with EU and NATO partners to support United Nations-backed stabilization efforts while isolating the influence of rebel warlord, Khalifa Haftar.
- The United States can also enhance its interests by being more diplomatically active in conflict mitigation efforts. By working with host nations and regional bodies, U.S. diplomatic, technical, and financial support can serve as a stabilizing counterweight to Russian destabilization.
- Helping Africa fight Russian disinformation campaigns is another critical vehicle for advancing stability and democracy. These disinformation campaigns aim to foment political and ethnic polarization, distrust, and political instability—to Russia's advantage. Strengthening the capacity of African governmental and non-governmental fact-checking and digital detective firms to identify fake Russian-sponsored accounts, trolls, and disinformation campaigns can help mitigate these destructive effects.
- U.S. Treasury sanctions on Yevgeny Prigozhin for his destabilizing activities in Sudan and the Central African Republic are useful and should be expanded. The Global

Magnitsky Act and the European Magnitsky Act broaden the means to apply such penalties in a coordinated manner in defense of democracy and human rights. The Global Fragility Act includes provisions for punitive actions to be taken against political actors that drive instability. These tools, as well as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act, and laws pertaining to transnational criminal organizations provide the United States with a menu of legal means of increasing penalties on Russia for its destabilizing activity in Africa.

About The Author

Dr. Graeme P. Herd is Professor of Transnational Security Studies and Chair of the Research and Policy Analysis Department at the GCMC. Graeme directs a new monthly Russian Hybrid Seminar Series (RHSS), focusing on Russian risk calculus, red lines, and crisis behavior and the implications of this for policy responses. He has published nine books, written over seventy academic papers, and delivered over 100 academic and policy-related presentations in forty-six countries. He is currently writing a manuscript that examines the relationship between Russia's strategic culture and President Putin's operational code on decision-making in Russia today. He is also the editor of this volume.

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