



Syrian women wait for food near Damascus as the country is pushed deeper into poverty under Syrian President Bashar Assad, who is backed by Russia.

Global Order Paradigms

ASSESSING RUSSIA'S REGIONAL REACH

By **Dr. Graeme P. Herd**, Marshall Center professor | Photos by The Associated Press

On May 4, 2021, the foreign ministers of the Group of Seven (G-7) developed nations met in London to discuss critical geopolitical challenges, not least Russia and China. On May 9, Russian state-run Rossiya 1 and Gazprom-Media's NTV described NATO's ongoing Defender Europe exercise as not only the largest since the end of the Cold War and anti-Russian in nature, but also designed to practice taking Russian territory. At the same time, DarkSide, a Russian cybercrime gang, was deemed responsible for the Colonial Pipeline cyberattack that shut down strategic energy infrastructure in the United States — the pipeline provides nearly half the gasoline and fuels used on the U.S. East Coast.

A G-7 head of state summit took place June 11-13, followed by a summit with NATO and the European Union in Belgium. At the June 16 summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden in Geneva, Biden stated: "This is not about trust. This is about self-interest and

verification of self-interest." The following week, on June 23, Russia claimed that the United Kingdom Royal Navy destroyer HMS Defender violated Russian territorial waters off Crimea. Russia said the Russian Federal Security Service Border Guard fired warning shots at the destroyer and that a Russian Su-24 aircraft dropped bombs in the destroyer's path, forcing it to hastily leave "Russian" waters. The U.K. Ministry of Defence denied shots had been fired or bombs dropped or that HMS Defender deviated from its transit route. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov commented: "We can appeal to common sense, demand respect for international law, and if this does not help, we can bomb." On the same day, in remarks at the Moscow Conference on International Security, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu noted: "The world is rapidly descending into a new confrontation, a far more dangerous one than it used to be during the Cold War." He added, "Some European countries are interested in escalating the conflict with Russia."



A rocket carrying the Chang'e 5 lunar mission lifts off at the Wenchang Space Launch Center in China. Russia and China said they plan to build a lunar research station, marking the start of a new era in space cooperation between the two countries.

Cumulatively, the events of May and June 2021 and the publication of a new Russian National Security Strategy on July 2 all highlight a steady deterioration in Russia's relations with the West. Putin, Shoigu and other senior Russian officials coalesced around shared escalatory rhetoric, a threat assessment of unremitting Western encirclement, and endorsed Russian strategic responses as defensive and reactive. Points of friction steadily increased in intensity and rapidity, with the HMS Defender incident as a case in point.

How can we explain such Russian strategic behavior in general and in Russia's neighborhood in particular? This issue of *per Concordiam* is in two parts: first, a focus on three case studies examining Russia and Belarus, Nagorno-Karabakh and disinformation in the Balkans; and second, great power competition (GPC) between Russia and the U.S., implications for China and the use of proxies by Russia. To what extent do these articles reflect the drivers of Russian strategic behavior? What then for the likely evolution of GPC and what might be the implications for Russia's regional reach?

THEMATIC SURVEY

Russia perceives itself to be a great power controlling a geopolitical and civilizational bloc, with the historically legitimized duty to adopt an order-producing and managerial role in this space. Importantly, Russia reserves for itself the right to determine who is "friend" and who is "enemy," the nature of third-party activity and the strategic orientation of less-sovereign states within this sphere. The "Viewpoint" in this

issue identified five fundamental drivers of Russian strategic behavior toward neighbors in this era of GPC: regime continuity and great power status; threat perception; ingrained imperial attitudes; ability to effectively coerce as the ultimate means of legitimizing Putin's political authority; and a return to messianism in foreign policy.

In his case study of Belarus, U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. John Berger applies the context-specific seven-tenet framework of Russian coercive mediation, first identified in the work of David Lewis. He notes that Russian coercive mediation is underpinned by the proposition of "powerful actors with regional equities to achieve stability." There are factors, though, that are particular to Belarus, not least the perception by Russia that Belarus falls squarely within Russian civilizational space, the role of threat perception and fears of spillover, ingrained imperial attitudes and "Orthodox geopolitics." However, while Russia does not put much stock in the agency of Belarus, a ruthless pragmatist such as Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power for 27 years, is able to play a weak hand well when confronting Putin. The corruption conviction in July 2021 of Viktor Babariko, a Russian-backed alternative Belarusian president, demonstrates this contention well.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict case study indicates that when calculating risk, Putin and other senior Russian decision-makers are "likely to discount an event or action that they deem too risky ... base their decisions on assessments that potential benefits justify the taking of risks ... and ...

take into account the actions of third parties and consider whether they are too risky to ignore and thereby cross a threshold for Russian action.” In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, the wild card appears to have been Turkish support for Azerbaijan in the form of military materiel, the operationalization of institutional cooperation mechanisms and Ankara’s ability to leverage Turkish-Azerbaijani “cultural and linguistic ties and shared identity, buttressed by pan-Turkic sentiment.” Turkey emerged as a de facto third-party power broker, directly challenging the notion of Russia as regional hegemon and Azerbaijan as part of a Russian-controlled civilizational space. Russian Messianism, which might have suggested greater Russian support for Armenia, was absent from the equation. However, the Russian-brokered cease-fire and a new Russian peacekeeping operation in Nagorno-Karabakh did create a direct means of strategic dialogue with both Baku and Yerevan, which represents an expansion of Russian influence. At the same time, Russia’s ability to hermetically seal and police its so-called civilizational space was called into question. Turkey’s involvement and ongoing Russian-Turkey conflict negotiations in Syria and Libya place Nagorno-Karabakh in a larger geopolitical framework than just the former Soviet space.

The third case study is a joint analysis by a distinguished team of Marshall Center alumni scholars that seeks to raise awareness of Russian anti-Euro-Atlantic discourse, grievance narratives and other disinformation themes in Southeast Europe. As with the former Soviet space, Russia leverages historical, cultural and religious (“Slavic brotherhood”) ties to “destabilize the region to divert Western attention from Ukraine and other countries in its neighborhood, stop NATO and EU enlargement, and assert its status as an influential power.” Russia’s extensive range and use of soft-power tools seeks to exacerbate underlying tensions and propagate the

message that democracies are dysfunctional, the EU and NATO are near collapse, the West is conspiratorial and only Russia can defend Orthodox Slavs from (naturally!) Western attack. The country-based studies from Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, North Macedonia and Albania demonstrate Russian adaptability and ability to tailor its ways and means to local and national conditions to achieve its broader strategic ends.

When turning to focus more directly on evolving inter-great power relations, Dr. Nika Chitadze addresses the clear disparities in economic and conventional military power that characterize the U.S.-Russia relationship. Russia has increased military pressure in its neighborhood, particularly in the Black Sea region and Southern Military District, leveraging local escalation dominance. As noted in the disinformation article, coordinated Western responses are critical and should include and involve raising awareness, sharing knowledge and enhancing capacity.

U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Ryan B. Ley highlights an important complicating factor, but one on which there is little consensus, namely the import of the Russia-China axis and particularly Sino-Russian defense cooperation, noting fundamental limitations: “Historic mistrust, a lack of cultural consonance, intellectual property theft and the growing asymmetry between the two nations are the most apparent barriers to further cooperation.” Thus, rather than a traditional alliance, Russo-Chinese strategic relations resemble an entente that is flexible and reassuring between two strategically autonomous major powers who reject U.S. hegemony and promote a multipolar international order. It is more akin to a functional nonaggression pact that allows for strategic deconfliction and for both states to leverage complimentary capabilities and needs, leading to technological advancements. For Russia, alignment avoids the possibility of competing with China, and China’s rise frees Russia from being the primary U.S. focus, allowing Russia to complicate the U.S. presence in different global regions.

Dr. Paweł Bernat takes the preceding themes of deteriorating U.S.-Russia relations and growing Russian-Chinese ties into outer space, providing an analysis of Russia’s strategic shift in space policy away from the U.S. and toward China, potentially bringing to an end the era of U.S.-Russian space cooperation initiated in 1975. For Russia, corruption, obsolete technology and limited financial support are internal drivers of the shift, in addition to the limitations the U.S. itself places on cooperation and China’s willingness to partner with Russia, not least due to consequent technology transfer from Moscow to Beijing. The interesting consequence of this reorientation is Russia’s determination to leverage the last bit of its Soviet legacy before its sell-by date



Russian President Vladimir Putin, center, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, left, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan speak to the media in Moscow after Putin brokered a truce that ended six weeks of fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh.

has passed, and the obvious asymmetries between China and Russia. Russian civilizational space (the *Russkiy mir*/Russian World concept), its imperial past and messianism are entirely absent from this calculation. Can Russia and Chinese cooperation in space act as a force multiplier? What are the threats it poses to the U.S., friends and allies? Arguably, the extent of Sino-Russian cooperation in space becomes a barometer of Russia's strategic decline and China's ability to consolidate its near-peer status in the context of GPC.

Finally, Dr. Cyprian Aleksander Kożera highlights the relationship between Russia's use of proxy or surrogate forces of various kinds and GPC, as it plays out in the Central African Republic, Libya, Syria and Ukraine. Crimea aside, these proxies appear to be able to secure short-term strategic gains, allow Moscow to deny official involvement and paralyze or delay Western responses: Russia is able to pursue GPC below the threshold of war with "hybrid, diversionary, deceptive, new-generation, nonlinear or full-spectrum" means. While proxies reinforce Russian hegemony at the regional level, Russia uses them to champion the Westphalian ideal on the global stage, when it is in its interest to do so.

FUTURE GPC TRENDS: IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA'S REGIONAL REACH

Russia's preferred official future, in keeping with its great power status and historical experience, and the objective reality of an emerging multipolar and polycentric ("democratic multipolarity") world, is one within which a global concert of great powers dominates. But, rather than a global concert, confrontation is the norm, though national interests place limits on the inevitability of a slide into "Cold War 2.0." Although 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 multipolar. In this context, Cold War containment is not possible. In the context of GPC, short of war, the U.S. prioritizes countering China over Russia. From a U.S. perspective, countering China is enabled by the support of coalition partners, not least Japan, South Korea and Germany. Thus, attempting Cold-War-type containment of Russia would not just break trans-Atlantic unity, it would also undercut the Euro-Atlantic cooperation with Russian civil society and parts of its private sector necessary for restored relations in a post-Putin context. A trans-Atlantic consensus has emerged for a targeted pushback against the Kremlin's malign activity and influence and to build resilience in defense of shared, core democratic values and practices. This approach suggests targeted "Containment 2.0," in that it seeks to contain (or constrain) Russian aggressive and malign strategic behavior within stable and predictable lines.

The strategic context that best aligns with Putinism — the hybrid nature of the Russian state — is, in Putin's operational code, a G-Zero world order. It maintains that no group of states, such as the G-3, G-7, nascent G-11 or G-20, exerts leadership and management of the global strategic agenda — for example, overproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, regional crises or terrorism. A G-Zero world

order would favor states that thrive in ambiguity, unpredictability and contestation, where transactionalism is the order of the day. States with well-developed alliance systems are disadvantaged, while states without (not least, Russia, China and North Korea) are freer to maneuver. A G-Zero world order best secures and protects a Russia in power decline relative to China. Russia cannot achieve G-3 status and will not accept unipolarity or even bipolarity if it cannot be one of the poles. Russia's order-producing and managerial role in its shared neighborhood is increasingly compromised by third parties, not least the EU, Turkey and China. In a leaderless world, states that have a spoiler-role ability and a higher tolerance for risk-taking thrive and flourish. In short, Biden's conditional offer of "stable and predictable" relations, should Russia refrain from malign activity, is problematic for Russia: to be both stable and predictable is to be strategically irrelevant. In most policy areas, excepting perhaps the Arctic and decreasingly outer space, Russia seeks to be stable but unpredictable to maintain its strategic relevance.

If Russia fully aligns its grievance and resentment narratives, and its anti-Western discourses and spoiler capabilities, with its actual strategic behavior, then Russian elites can justify dysfunctionality and disintegrative processes as the symptoms of a well-crafted poison pill strategy. They will be able to rationalize an ungovernable Russia as the ultimate deterrent and guarantor against the supposed ever-present and pernicious threat of U.S. colonization and forced regime change. This G-Zero world order is the default and most likely outcome of the current confrontation and systemic rivalry between great powers. International instability stabilizes an anti-fragile Russia: It provides an external arena within which internal Russian institutional actors can pursue their competitive goals and buttresses the "besieged fortress" legitimizing narrative, and it explains the absence of a broad development and modernization agenda.

An inherently unpredictable G-Zero environment best aligns with the drivers of Russia's strategic behavior: a strategic culture rooted as it is in the pre-Westphalian past; the operational code of a decision-making elite comprised of former counterintelligence officers; and the realities of Russia as a hybrid state. The implications for Russia's regional reach are profound. As G-Zero is a default position — an extrapolation of present Russian strategic behavior into the future — this suggests that Russian policy toward the region will be the same as today, only more so. Current Russian strategic syndromes and neurosis will become greater and more acute, generating contradictions in policy that will become harder to bridge: the tensions between legality and legitimacy, for example, or between support for the status quo and the role of rebels and proxies in Russian foreign policy. Countering the spillover effects of such pathologies requires trust-building efforts, cooperation, alliances and the attendant predictability and stability that flows from these institutions. Paradoxically, Russian actions will be the key driver of such a process. Ultimately, Russia's main preoccupation will be with mitigating the unintended and self-defeating consequences of its own policies with regards to relations with its neighbors. □