

two

Two Worlds

Where there is no common Power, there is no Law: where no Law,
no Injustice. Force, and Fraud, are in warre the two Cardinall vertues.

THOMAS HOBBES, 1651

Few countries have a greater need than Russia to engage effectively with international society. It has the largest number of direct neighbors, including the world's fastest growing power in China. It is the leading global supplier of energy and natural resources, which remain key to its stability and prosperity. And its self-identification as a great power is predicated on the capacity to influence others and its external environment. At the same time, few countries possess such a tradition of introspection and suspicion toward foreigners. Lenin may have popularized the expression “besieged fortress,” but this phrase reflects much more atavistic instincts. When Peter the Great broke open Russia’s “window to the West,” he was overriding several centuries of isolationism and obscurantism.¹

The tension between the necessary and the instinctive continues to influence Russian attitudes in the early twenty-first century. The Kremlin speaks of Russia needing to adapt to a world in transition, one that is increasingly globalized and interdependent.² However, its instinctive response to the pressures Russia faces in a postmodern century is to fall back on what it knows—conservative political and social values at home and classical interpretations of great power diplomacy abroad.

The issue for Moscow is not whether to engage with the outside world, but how. The previous chapter discussed the various elements—actors, political culture, interests, and circumstances—that have favored an essentially defensive mindset. Yet Putin’s choice is much more than just an extension of domestic imperatives and priorities. It is also conditioned by his perceptions of contemporary international politics, and assessment of Russia’s prospects as a regional and global actor. As with the domestic context, long-term struc-

tural influences coexist here with the erratic impact of external events and “strategic shocks.”

Over the past decade, Putin has attempted to reconcile a traditional world-view (*mirovozzrenie*) with an interests-based approach to external relations. To this purpose, he has pursued the vision of a “global multipolar order,” articulated by Yevgeny Primakov in the second half of the 1990s. As noted in the Prologue, this is the world as Moscow would like it to be. There are many unknowns and risks, but also strategic opportunities. It is a world in which Russia may prosper—provided, of course, that it adheres to the principles and interests that have guided its foreign policy during periods of success. For the Putin elite, the uncertainties of the international environment provide added arguments for the consolidation of power and authority. The choice, in foreign as well as domestic policy, is not “adapt or stagnate,” but “preserve and stabilize.”

It is one thing, however, for the Kremlin to attempt to mold the world according to its preconceptions, quite another to respond effectively to realities that contradict these on an almost daily basis. The real world is characterized by radical and often unpredictable shifts, and by fluidity rather than structure (let alone “order”). As such it presents an altogether different set of challenges from those imagined by the regime. Its principal message is that only those states that embrace change will prosper. For Russia, this means moving on from a historical sense of entitlement to redefining itself as an international actor of stature on the basis of performance.

The World According to Moscow

It should be stated at the outset that there is no single Russian worldview. In a diverse, highly educated, and argumentative society, there are multiple views of the world, just as there are different understandings of the “national interest.” Given that the subject is Putin’s foreign policy, the focus here is on the assumptions, perceptions, and ambitions of the ruling elite. Although this elite is by no means monolithic, as already noted, there are nevertheless a number of commonalities and continuities that, together, constitute an identifiable worldview.

It is helpful to break this down into three parts. The first centers on strategic culture. Many years ago, the international relations theorist Jack Snyder defined this as “the body of attitudes and beliefs that guides and circumscribes thought on strategic questions, influences the way strategic issues are formulated, and sets the vocabulary and perceptual parameters of strategic debate.”³ Here strategic culture refers to the Kremlin’s take on what might be described as “the way of the world”—the nature, habits, and framework of

international behavior. The emphasis is less on formal regulation than on unwritten, but well understood, rules of the game: a world defined as much by competition as cooperation; the primacy of hard power; the centrality of the great powers; and the abiding importance of geopolitics.

The second part focuses more directly on the Russian elite's understanding of the international system, centered in the notion of a post-Western multipolar order or polycentric system. This aspect of Moscow's worldview is to some extent a recasting of the old Leninist question, *kto kogo*—"who will beat whom"—or, in today's context, who's up and who's down. It is shaped by perceptions of the decline of the West, the rise of the rest, and the shift of global power to the East. If strategic culture establishes the general philosophical bases for Russian foreign policy, then readings of the international system influence specific aspirations and policy responses.

Finally, any discussion of "the world according to Moscow" comes down to the question of where Russia fits in international society, today and in coming decades. The Kremlin continues to see Russia as a global power and regional hegemon. But how does it view the implications of such ideas, and to what extent is it able to reconcile these with the goals of "normality" and "international community"? How optimistic are Putin and other senior figures that Russia will indeed be one of the winners in a post-Western world order, or does their confident exterior mask mounting insecurities, most notably about the rise of China? What are their expectations about the possibilities and limits of Russian power?

A Neo-Hobbesian Vision

There is a certain irony in the worldview of a seventeenth-century English political philosopher capturing much of the spirit of Putin's foreign policy. Thomas Hobbes's ultra-realist interpretation of international politics reflected the turbulence of his times, which saw him experience at first hand the English Civil War and the overthrow of King Charles I, and, from afar, the Thirty Years' War that devastated the European continent. The "state of nature" or anarchical world he described seems utterly at odds with the highly globalized and institutionalized environment of the early twenty-first century.⁴

Yet if today's global context differs in fundamental respects from seventeenth-century Europe, Russian policymakers nevertheless proceed from several of the premises that informed Hobbes's thinking. The first, and most important, is that the world is an alien and often hostile place, in which the strong prosper and the weak get beaten. For all the talk about interdependency and "win-win" solutions, it has always been divided into winners and losers. Con-

sistent with this view, few Russians believe, for example, that the United States and China can both thrive in the emerging international system.

Closer to home, Moscow exulted in the victory over Georgia in August 2008, not just because President Mikheil Saakashvili had been crushed, but because Russia had enjoyed a rare triumph over the United States, which in turn had suffered a very public humiliation.⁵ This zero-sum mentality applies even when the outcome is negative-sum. At the height of the global financial crisis, there was considerable gloating at the troubles of the U.S. economy, despite its contagion effect on Russia.⁶

A second Hobbesian principle evident in Moscow's thinking is an abiding conviction in the primacy of hard power. While the waging of major wars is far less conceivable in a nuclear age, military strength remains central to Russian conceptions of great power-ness (*derzhavnost*).⁷ The continuing attachment to a large standing army in the face of growing demographic constraints; the retention of a huge nuclear arsenal and emphasis on "strategic parity"; and substantial spending increases on the buildup of conventional and nuclear forces—all these reflect a security culture steeped in classical understandings of power. In the eyes of Putin and much of the political elite, military strength represents the ultimate guarantee of the world's attention and respect.⁸

Conversely, the Kremlin's approach to soft power is more akin to "soft coercion."⁹ This is characterized by the surgical exploitation of weaknesses (for example, corruption) in the governance of neighboring states; the cultivation of inter-elite business networks;¹⁰ the funding of political parties sympathetic to Moscow;¹¹ and the dissemination of propaganda through mass media outlets. Such methods resemble more closely the "active measures" (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*) pursued during the Soviet era¹² than they do the Western liberal notion of influence through example.¹³ Most of all they arise out of the realist belief that true power comes from the ruthless deployment of political, economic, and strategic assets. Putin's handling of the Ukraine conflict exemplifies this thinking.¹⁴

A third feature of Moscow's worldview is the dominance of major powers in the international system. Although multilateral institutions play a vastly greater role than in seventeenth-century Europe (when they were nonexistent), Moscow sees contemporary politics in plutocratic terms, defined principally by the relations—sometimes cooperative, but frequently competitive—between sovereign actors. "Sovereign" in this context describes those few states that, in the Kremlin's view, are able to exercise genuinely independent choices—the United States, China, and Russia—plus other players with significant influence in selected areas, such as the leading Europeans (Germany, France), India, and Brazil.¹⁵

Smaller states and multilateral organizations are seen as objects or instruments of great power diplomacy, rather than as serious actors with proper agendas. When Moscow speaks about the “democratization of international relations,” it understands this in very narrow terms—as the devolution of power from the former hegemon, the United States, to a group or “Concert” of Great Powers, including Russia. Although small states may sometimes be involved in international decisionmaking, this is regarded as rare and unnatural. Such elitist attitudes are the main reason why Putin—and Yeltsin before him—has never understood the institutional and political culture of the EU. They also explain why Moscow refuses to believe that Saakashvili attacked South Ossetia in 2008 without Washington’s prior approval. The idea that a small state could embark on such a foolhardy venture of its own volition remains inconceivable.¹⁶

In keeping with a view of the world as an unforgiving place dominated by the major powers, there is little truck with the Western liberal claim that geopolitics is anachronistic.¹⁷ Seen from Moscow, American actions since the fall of the Soviet Union have demonstrated that old-fashioned power projection continues to matter very much, even if it is coated with a normative veneer. Russian policymakers routinely accuse Washington of exploiting notions such as “promoting stability,”¹⁸ democracy, and human rights, to hide ulterior geopolitical and commercial agendas. Thus in the 1990s it took advantage of Russian weakness to dominate the Euro-Atlantic security space through the enlargement of NATO. And over the past decade it has funded grassroots movements in Russia’s neighborhood and the Middle East. The Russian political elite believes that the United States—whether under a Democratic or Republican administration—remains wedded to expanding its influence wherever possible, and using all available means.¹⁹

None of this implies that states cannot cooperate with one another. They can, must, and do. But the effectiveness of such interaction is determined, ultimately, by national strength and weakness. A strong state is in a position to promote and defend its interests; a weak one is not. The conclusion of successive generations of leaders—from Peter the Great, through Stalin, to Putin—is that Russia must look to its own interests and capabilities in order to prosper. It cannot rely on the benign intentions of others, weak international institutions, or woolly notions of shared norms and values.

The Multipolar Order

In the Kremlin’s eyes the international system is defined by multipolarity. This is a commonly misunderstood and distorted concept, susceptible to

diverse interpretations. Curiously, the first Russian to use the term publicly was Yeltsin's liberal foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, who was widely pilloried as a stooge of the West.²⁰ He conceived of a multipolar world in cooperative terms—different powers working together to manage the post-cold war order. Today, however, the mainstream Russian interpretation is the one first promoted in the 1990s by Yevgeny Primakov, Kozyrev's successor as foreign minister. This vision is similar in that it imagines a world dominated by the interaction between different poles. But it could hardly be more different in spirit. As Primakov himself observed, the rationale behind a multipolar world order is to “counterbalance” the otherwise overweening influence of the sole superpower, the United States. It is a geopolitically motivated construct, centered in the principle of the balance of power. While it does not preclude cooperation with the United States, the main thread running through it is one of soft containment through a “consensus of the rest”—that is, the other poles in the international system.²¹

There are two other noteworthy aspects. For Moscow, multipolarity is less about establishing a new order than resurrecting the old. Its inspiration is the Concert of Europe, developed at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The cast of characters is very different, but the underlying principles are the same. The great powers determine the arrangements and rules of international politics, and, crucially, abide by them. No single power may be allowed to threaten the status quo or assume disproportionate power—for Napoleonic France in the nineteenth century, read the United States today, and China in the future. Smaller states know their place, and frame national policies with due regard for the interests of the major powers. The latter do not interfere in one another's domestic affairs. And security—or at least their security—is collective and indivisible.

Multipolarity is also normative. Under Putin it has acquired a civilizational aspect that contradicts Western ideas of moral universalism. Russian statements refer approvingly to Samuel Huntington's theory of the “clash of civilizations.”²² Just as there are several centers of global power, so there are various civilizational “poles.” The motivation here is to assert a cultural and moral relativism—and sovereignty—in the face of the pressure exerted by Western-led liberal values. The 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept thus juxtaposes “global competition . . . on a civilizational level,” with “an increased emphasis on civilizational identity.”²³ In proposing a “dialogue between civilizations,” Moscow is stating unequivocally to the West that “our values are just as good as yours”—different, but in no way inferior.

There is the question of how far the Putin regime believes its multipolar rhetoric, or whether this serves mainly instrumental purposes. The answer is

that it subscribes to the principle and feasibility of a multipolar order, but uses rhetoric to accelerate its emergence. It operates on the assumption that if enough major powers assert that the world is multipolar, the more quickly this will come to pass—an example of influencing perceptions to establish new realities. The development of the BRICS process plays a key role in this respect. Notwithstanding the lack of commonalities between its members, this group is the embodiment of the “multipolar world order” that Moscow desires.

Judging the sincerity of the Russian commitment to multipolarity also depends on how one defines the term. The Kremlin is not so naïve as to equate multipolar with equipolar; it still regards the United States as the leading power in the world. Moscow’s understanding of multipolarity is more nuanced. It recognizes the existence of multiple centers of power, which are unequal yet independent, and which exert significant influence in their own particular spheres of influence (or, to use a slightly less loaded term, spheres of interest). While the United States continues to lead the Western world, China is emerging as the major player in the Asia-Pacific region (and, eventually, in world affairs), South America is dominated by Brazil, and South Asia by India. In the case of Russia, its enduring influence in post-Soviet Eurasia substantiates its claim to be a truly independent center of global power.

The terminology of multipolarity has shifted lately toward an emphasis on “polycentrism.” The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept speaks of the transition to a “polycentric system of international relations” as a result of “profound changes in the geopolitical landscape.” It is not entirely clear what has prompted this linguistic adjustment, although there are several possible explanations. One is that “multipolar order” is a somewhat hackneyed term, wheeled out by Boris Yeltsin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 1997, and since then often associated with barren strategic competition. “Polycentrism” sounds fresher, and more readily encompasses the civilizational dimension mentioned above.²⁴ That said, the importance of the name change should not be exaggerated. Just as there is no practical difference between the original Chinese concept of “peaceful rise” and its subsequent incarnation “peaceful development,”²⁵ so the distinction in Russia between multipolarity and polycentrism is nominal. Tellingly, Putin continues to speak of the former both as a desirable goal and as modern-day reality.²⁶

The shift of global power to the East

The Kremlin has become much more confident about the prospects of a new multipolar order since the global financial crisis. It identifies two interlinked phenomena: the decline of the West and the rise of the rest. Together they

amount to what is routinely described as the shift of global power to the East. This position is summed up in the Foreign Policy Concept: “The ability of the West to dominate the world economy and politics continues to diminish. Global power and development potential is now more dispersed and is shifting to the East, primarily to the Asia-Pacific region.”²⁷ This shift is multidimensional, encompassing politics, economics, military power, and normative influence.

The decline of the West. In subscribing to the fashionable theory of Western decline, the Russian political elite means principally the erosion of American global leadership. Europe’s fall from grace has been more drastic, since the Second World War and following the financial crisis, but it is the fate of the United States that most interests policymakers. Although culturally and economically Moscow has always looked to Europe, its strategic and security focus—consistent with a neo-Hobbesian view of the international system—has long centered on the world’s sole superpower.

Russians see a besieged America that is struggling in the face of growing external challenges, a dysfunctional political system, and a heavily indebted economy. They believe that it is less able and willing to lead, and that the concept of a U.S.-led Western alliance has become tenuous following the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. They detect a loss of self-confidence, and mounting anxiety in the face of China’s rise.²⁸

At the same time, this America is raging against the dying of the light. Washington has moved to counter China’s growing presence in the Asia-Pacific region through its “pivot” or “rebalancing” to Asia—reinforcing alliances with Japan, South Korea, and a number of Southeast Asian states and strengthening its strategic relationship with India. Moscow anticipates that Sino-American rivalry will become more intense as the United States strives to maintain its leading position in the world. Crucially, in this struggle few Russians are prepared to write it off completely; they expect it will remain a superpower, if no longer *the* superpower.²⁹

Attitudes toward Europe are more dismissive. The global downturn and the eurozone crisis have confirmed the view that it is clapped out as a political force, crippled by liberal excess, and unable to respond effectively to the challenges of a dynamic global context.³⁰ There is a sense, more specifically, that the EU’s European project is in deep trouble—a view strengthened by the rise of anti-Brussels sentiment in a number of European countries.³¹ If there is to be a “Europe” in the future, Moscow believes, then it is likely to function on a very different basis. It will increasingly be dominated by a few key states, such as Germany and France, and characterized by widening divisions—between East and West, a well-run “north” (Germany and the

Nordic countries) and dysfunctional “south” (Greece, Spain, Portugal), and bigger and smaller states.³²

In Russian eyes Europe’s failures have undermined the very idea of “the West.” The global financial crisis has not only damaged the credibility of the Bretton Woods financial institutions (the International Monetary Fund and World Bank), and democratic capitalism more generally, but also the West’s *moral* authority. The conflation of Western and universal values that has held sway since the end of World War II is no longer tenable, and has given way to the reassertion of sovereign norms, and the “renationalization of world politics.”³³ Supranational concepts born of the Western liberal order, such as the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) and the universality of human rights, have become delegitimized and unenforceable.

Rise of the rest. Just as the decline of the West is understood principally as that of the United States, so Russian views about the rise of the East center on China. No other country better exemplifies for Moscow the transformation of the international system. It not only heralds a change in global leadership (even if this takes some decades to be consummated), but also a different way of viewing, and managing, the world—one based on the existence of multiple centers of power and influence.³⁴

The Kremlin sees China’s rise as instrumental in shifting the center of global gravity from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region. Beijing plays a pivotal role in efforts to develop more equitable international mechanisms, whereby the non-Western powers have enhanced roles.³⁵ China’s emergence has also resulted in a security environment that is more complex and demanding. This is a function both of the modernization of its military and of the strategic responses of others to its expanding footprint. Finally, China is at the vanguard of a global normative revolution, as Western-led conceptions of universal values give ground to competing models of development.³⁶

For Moscow the rise of the rest is more than simply an objective trend in international relations. It is an ideational project, driven by the assertion of national sovereignty against the political, economic, and normative hegemony of the West. The non-Western powers have a strong interest in working together to determine the rules of the international system—all the more so since the United States and Europe are no longer able to impose their vision of global governance on others.

The rise of the rest and decline of the West are mutually reinforcing elements in Putin’s neo-Hobbesian vision. It is striking that the zero-sum calculus long associated with Soviet leaders has scarcely been diluted by more than two decades of globalization. In place of the ideological divide between communism and capitalism, the Kremlin now sees a contest between

authoritarian traditionalism and democratic liberalism. Political engagement, economic interdependence, and human contacts between Russia and the West are immeasurably greater than during the cold war. But the competitive gene is as strong as ever. Indeed, against the backdrop of international relations that are “increasingly complex and unpredictable,”³⁷ globalization has had a multiplier effect. Competition these days is occurring on so many more fronts, involving a larger cast of players, and assuming ever more diverse forms.

A World of Opportunity

Over the past two decades, there has been much discussion in the West and Russia about the latter’s transition from superpower and empire into “normal” nation-state. The difficulty, however, is in establishing what is “normal.” Normal in Europe means political pluralism, functioning institutions, strong rule of law, a balanced economy, vibrant civil society, and free media. But the Putin regime interprets “normal” somewhat differently. While it would like some of the “normalcy” of the West, such as high living standards, it proceeds from the primary assumption that Russia’s natural condition is to be a great power; only on this basis can it (and its people) flourish.³⁸ This attitude is unsurprising. When one looks back at the sweep of Russian history, there have been very few periods since Peter the Great when it has not been a major power. In the past century one can point only to the years between the October 1917 revolution and Stalin’s mass industrialization in the early 1930s. Even during the troubled 1990s Russia continued to see itself as such.

Global actor and regional leader

It follows from this that the Kremlin cannot imagine Russia in any other terms than as one of the leading players in the world. Yet it also appreciates that a major power today differs in important respects from those of the past, including the Soviet Union. At the outset of his presidency Putin conceived of Russia as a “modern great power.” In the post–cold war world it was no longer sufficient just to have vast territory, thousands of nuclear weapons, and a huge standing army—essential though these were. A modern great power also had to be politically stable, economically prosperous, and technologically advanced.³⁹ It had to be able to employ different forms of power in flexible fashion.

In this connection Putin sees no contradiction in projecting Russia’s image as a geopolitical power while renovating its influence to the requirements of an international system where economic and other nonmilitary forms of

influence have grown in importance. Moscow talks up the usual trumps, such as territorial extent and P5 membership, while exercising military power where it deems this appropriate. But it also points to Russia's pivotal position as a major supplier of energy and other strategic resources, and its still considerable intellectual capital.⁴⁰

Another constant in Kremlin thinking is the insistence that Russia should be treated as a *permanent* great power, almost regardless of its domestic and international fortunes. A strong sense of entitlement has characterized its strategic culture for the past 300 years. Such attitudes extend across the political spectrum; it was the liberal Kozyrev, after all, who claimed that Russia was "doomed to be a great power."⁴¹ This sense of destiny translates into a demand for "respect" (*uvazhenie*) by others, meaning the respect due *by right* to one of the world's elite. Institutionally, such recognition is reflected in Russia's membership in various exclusive "clubs"—the P5, the BRICS, the Middle East Quartet (the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations), the Korean Six-Party process, and previously the G-8. But more often respect is a state of mind rather than something quantifiable. It is measured by the extent of Western acceptance of Russia's "special" interests in the post-Soviet space, of its privileged place in international decisionmaking, and of its right to manage its domestic affairs free from "interference."

One of the corollaries of being a global actor is to be the dominant player in one's neighborhood, what Leon Aron called the "regional superpower."⁴² As events in Ukraine have shown, this feeling remains very strong—unsurprising given that less than twenty-five years ago much of the neighborhood belonged, either directly or indirectly, to the Soviet empire. Although Russia is no longer in a position to exercise hegemonic power or demand "exclusive" rights of engagement, it still sees itself as the regional leader in a space extending from Ukraine in the west to the Central Asian republics in the east. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4, but it is worth emphasizing here that regional primacy is critical to the vision of Russia as a center of global power. Just as the United States leads the West, and China "heads" Asia, so Russia's credibility is seen to be contingent on dominating its part of the world.

A Russia independent and unique

For Putin Russia's persona as a major power is predicated on its "independence." This term has a number of meanings. It can denote self-reliance, as in reduced dependence on Western governments and organizations, which are consequently unable to exercise significant leverage on Moscow. It can mean nonalignment and the rejection of "bloc-based" politics. And it has become

closely associated with a “multi-vectored” foreign policy, and the pursuit of external relations on a “geographically balanced” basis, leaning neither East nor West.

Ultimately, though, independence is about preserving national sovereignty against those who would seek to deny or limit it. This goal has become synonymous with the regime’s ceaseless pursuit of domestic and international legitimization. In much the same way as Putin embodies the state, so the interests of the regime have become indistinguishable from those of Russia itself. Consistent with this logic, external criticism of Putin’s policies, particularly on domestic matters such as the rule of law, democratization, and human rights, is viewed as an assault on Russian sovereignty.⁴³

In an uncertain world the identification of Russia as an independent center of global power has become more vital than ever to the Kremlin. It serves defensive purposes—containing liberal influences at home and resisting Western intervention in conflicts such as Syria. It also propagates Russia’s “unique” persona as an autonomous international actor. There are various reasons why a post-Soviet Russia has not been integrated into Europe, the Euro-Atlantic community, or the Asia-Pacific region. But the most compelling is that it has not actually wanted integration, but rather cooperation and association. For real integration entails limitations on independence, the pooling of sovereignty, and the dilution of national “special-ness” (*spetsifika*). This makes sense for smaller and weaker states, but is extremely difficult to swallow for a country with the great power traditions of Russia.⁴⁴ The attitude of the political elite is that if Russia cannot lead (or co-lead), then neither will it follow.⁴⁵

The indispensable power

Since the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–96), Russia’s leaders have underlined its indispensable role in first European and later global affairs. In the mid-eighteenth century Russia intervened in the Seven Years’ War to support the Austrian Empire against Prussian expansionism. During the Napoleonic wars Tsar Alexander I’s victories turned the course of history and saved Europe for autocracy. And in World War II the Soviet Union was crucial to the defeat of Hitler. The theme of indispensability is also reflected in the mystical notion of Russia as a civilizational and physical barrier protecting Europe against the barbarian hordes of the East.

This iconography has remained largely intact. In the Kremlin’s eyes, a resurgent Russia is, by virtue of size, history, and potential, an indispensable player in global affairs. This self-belief takes various forms. In the first instance, it is enshrined in the conviction that there cannot be true security

without Russia. This applies not only to its neighborhood, but also in general. Following his successful intervention over Syria's chemical weapons in September 2013, Putin argued that throughout history Russian participation had been decisive in securing a lasting peace—as at the 1815 Congress of Vienna, and again at Yalta in 1945. Conversely, its nonparticipation had been a major reason for the failure of the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 and the subsequent march to World War II.⁴⁶ Most recently Putin has asserted that Western attempts to sidestep Russia over Ukraine have contributed hugely to that country's destabilization.⁴⁷

The premise of indispensability underpins Moscow's strong attachment to concepts such as strategic nuclear parity. Its chief preoccupation here is less existential—the fear of obliteration—than in preserving its influence in the international order. For its nuclear arsenal is the one area where Russia remains America's equal (and China's superior), and as such represents for many the most reliable guarantee of its continuing status as a global power.

It is important to differentiate here between the desire for recognition and a willingness to assume concrete responsibilities. The Kremlin understands implicitly that Russia is not a global player on the same level as the United States (or the Soviet Union), and that in any case it is hardly advantageous to become embroiled in areas where it has little or no stake. What it seeks is acknowledgment of a *right of interest* in any issue it chooses, and of the principle of Russian indispensability. Thus it is more important that Russia be a member of the Middle East Quartet than that it should seek to influence the peace process. It is a similar story with the Korean Six-Party talks, the G-20, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and other forums. In the end, the value of “indispensability” comes not from being expected to deliver results—indeed, this is an unwelcome burden—but from others accepting Russia's importance and greatness as incontestable truths.

Geopolitical balancer and bridge between civilizations

The Putin elite sees Russia as essential to the geopolitical equilibrium of the international order, the natural balancer between East and West, and, more specifically, between the United States and China. This self-appointed role derives from Russia's location in the Eurasian heartland, and from a history of strategic triangularism between Moscow, Beijing, and Washington.⁴⁸ Although such balancing appeared to become obsolete with the end of the cold war, the deterioration of relations with the United States during the 1990s encouraged a renewed push to position Russia as the global swing power.⁴⁹ Yeltsin's courting of the Chinese leadership, and the call for a “new multipolar order for the

twenty-first century” in opposition to American “unipolarity,”⁵⁰ was directed to this purpose.

Although the Sino-Russian relationship has since acquired more of an intrinsic rationale (see chapter 5), geopolitical balancing remains central to Putin’s foreign policy thinking. It has evolved from a philosophical abstraction into something more concrete, impelled by the “shift of global power to the East.” This is reflected, for instance, in the coordination of Russian and Chinese efforts to oppose the removal of Assad.⁵¹ Such balancing is intended both to resist specific actions seen as detrimental to Russia’s interests, and to enhance its international stature by constraining American power more broadly. It functions on the zero-sum premise that what is bad for Washington is, more often than not, good for Moscow.

Russia’s assumed identity as a balancer is not limited to grand calculus, but is geographically ubiquitous. In East Asia it is evident in efforts to promote itself as a counterweight vis-à-vis the United States,⁵² and in occasional balancing between Beijing and Tokyo. Across Asia it is implicit in the Moscow–Beijing–New Delhi trilateral framework. And globally it is embodied by the BRICS.

In a less overtly competitive vein, the old idea of Russia as a bridge between Europe and Asia has been revived in the context of China’s “New Silk Road.”⁵³ This represents a form of soft balancing, but with the important distinction that the main thrust is less to hedge against others than to promote a “dialogue between civilizations” in which Russia plays a pivotal role by virtue of its geographical location, historical antecedents, and close ties with Europe, Central Asia, and China.⁵⁴ Like geopolitical balancing, however, it serves the purpose of positioning Russia as the indispensable power.

The “lonely power”

There are obvious advantages to possessing several identities: a strong feeling of independence, a legitimate interest in many regional and global issues, and freedom of maneuver. But multiplicity also has its downsides. One such is that Russia’s self-identification is spread very thinly, which means that it finds it difficult to commit properly to engagement with Europe or Asia. The leading Sinologist Victor Larin has written of an “East-West dilemma,” in which consciousness of the need to engage more with Asia is counterbalanced by an enduring cultural and emotional attachment to Europe.⁵⁵ Other observers speak of “conflicted” identity, and of Russia being a “torn” country.⁵⁶

The consequence of this ambivalence is that it has struggled to be accepted by others. Putin has long described Russia as a European civilization, yet

many in Europe view it as an outsider, at best a peripheral presence on the continent. It is physically part of Asia, but is not regarded by local elites as Asian—culturally, politically, or economically.⁵⁷ And its ambitions to be a bridge between Asia and Europe are rarely taken seriously.

The tension inherent in the phenomenon of “semi-belonging,” or partial exclusion, continues to influence Russia’s self-perceptions and approach to international relations. At times it behaves as the “lonely power”⁵⁸—on the one hand, imbued with a powerful sense of exceptionalism and righteousness; on the other hand, anxious that others will fail to grant it the respect it deserves. This has been a leitmotif of its relations with the West throughout the post-cold war era. And notwithstanding the 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok, it is also the source of unease about its prospects in the Asia-Pacific region.⁵⁹ While the Putin elite rejects any suggestion that Russia is isolated, there is a tacit realization that it must work harder than most to position itself in the international system. Here Russia bears some resemblance to another high-profile “outsider,” Turkey, which is an active player in Europe and the Middle East, but which struggles to gain full acceptance in either.

A Russia on the up

It is often said that Moscow has a better idea of what it does not want than of what it does.⁶⁰ It opposes a unipolar world dominated by a hegemonic power; dislikes Western-led moral interventionism; and is hostile to the “encroachment” of the United States and Europe in the post-Soviet space. In fact, such objectives suggest that the Kremlin has a pretty good idea of what it wants. It seeks to facilitate an external environment that supports the legitimacy and stability of the Putin system.⁶¹ It aims to secure international “respect”—if not support, then at least acquiescence—for Russia’s interests in the post-Soviet neighborhood. And it is committed to promoting Russia as one of the world’s leading powers, while maintaining foreign policy independence and strategic flexibility.

Seen from Moscow, current international trends have improved its chances of achieving these aims. There is genuine belief that, together with China, India, and other non-Western powers, Russia stands to gain from the vacuum left by the decline of the West. It will become more influential over the longer term, and this will enable it to renegotiate the rules of engagement with the United States and Europe. There are risks, of course. One is the arrival of a potential new hegemon in the form of China. This could become all the more alarming, given the vulnerability of resource-rich but population-poor regions in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. Another unwelcome development would be

the emergence of a Sino-American world order that would relegate Russia to secondary status. Xi Jinping's idea of "a new pattern of great power relations" with the United States would, if realized, heighten such fears.⁶²

But the Kremlin appears to have banished such unpleasant thoughts for the time being. Concern about the asymmetry of the economic relationship with Beijing is outweighed by America's visible discomfiture with China's rise, satisfaction with Sino-Russian cooperation, and faith that China will need Russia for a long time to come—as a supplier of vital natural resources and as a good neighbor.⁶³ Indeed, their common opposition to grassroots democracy, American "unilateralism," and Western normative influence fosters hopes of a long-term strategic accommodation, and perhaps something more than that. As for a possible Sino-American order, this is a marginal preoccupation at best. The mainstream view is that the United States and China are set on a course of growing rivalry, enhancing Russia's opportunities to play the part of geopolitical balancer.⁶⁴

The ongoing Ukraine crisis appears to challenge such optimism, not only estranging the Putin regime from the West, but also making it more beholden than ever to Beijing. However, there is little sign that the Kremlin's confidence has been dented. On the contrary, it believes that the crisis has proved it right about the weakness of U.S. global leadership, European frailties, the rise of the non-Western world, and Russia's ability to look after itself.⁶⁵ Although Russia faces a hard struggle to maintain its position as one of the world's leading powers, this enterprise is regarded as both feasible and necessary. Moreover, success depends on staying the course—not being intimidated or seduced into change by the West, but remaining true to its own traditions and strengths.

Return of the New World Disorder

Putin's conduct of foreign policy is, however, coming under mounting pressure from regional and global trends. Far from there being a new multipolar order (or polycentric system) based on the dominance of a few major powers, the international environment is one of confusion and iconoclasm—in other words, a new world *disorder*. This disorder is characterized, among other things, by the changing nature of power, the demise of international leadership, the diminishing relevance of collusive great power arrangements, and the growing inclusiveness, but also fragmentation, of international politics. It is a world whose fluidity demands a radically different mindset from policymakers—adaptation and even reinvention, rather than containment and consolidation.

Defining the new world disorder

Over twenty years ago, the American political scientist Ken Jowitt wrote, in the wake of the collapse of communism, that the world was entering an era of unpredictability, a “new world disorder.” Jowitt’s thesis rebutted the triumphalist claim of Francis Fukuyama that history was “coming to an end” with the final victory of Western democratic liberalism.⁶⁶ He argued instead that the world was moving from a “Joshua period,” with its relative certainties and clear boundaries, to a “Genesis environment”—“increasingly unfamiliar, perplexing, and threatening; in which existing boundaries are attacked and changed.”⁶⁷

Today’s global landscape differs in many respects from the one Jowitt described. Yet some of the phenomena he identified remain pertinent. Politically, the world has become more chaotic, not more ordered. Traditional security threats have given way to myriad new challenges. Power and influence are elusive commodities. The number of active international players has increased exponentially, all with their particular interests that sometimes coincide, but often do not. There is growing uncertainty about the rules and norms governing international behavior. And the current globalized world is also one that is becoming ever more disaggregated.

A caveat should be added at this point. “Disorder” is a relative—and relatively peaceful—concept.⁶⁸ It stands in contrast to such overused terms as “order” and “international community.”⁶⁹ It does not herald a return to some primordial chaos or large-scale confrontation. Indeed, notwithstanding the sharp deterioration in relations between Russia and the West and the advent of “new wars,” the current period is arguably still one of the most peaceful in the modern (post-1500) era.⁷⁰

Jowitt also qualified his Genesis analogy by admitting to a little creative exaggeration—the post-communist environment was not completely “without form and void.”⁷¹ Equally, the contemporary international context is by no means formless. There are rules, structures, and processes, according to which most state actors function most of the time. To mention just one example, the rules relating to freedom of navigation, as set out in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), are on the whole well observed. Instances of rogue behavior by states are rare, and even most non-state actors adhere to what might be called “civilized” practice. (Terrorist organizations and criminal networks are exceptions, but they form only a tiny proportion of the total web of non-state and societal interactions.) The main reason why Moscow’s annexation of Crimea provoked such shock and dismay in Western capitals was that it marked such a radical departure from the post-World War II norm.

Nevertheless, despite its relative lack of conflict the world has become messier, and the conduct of international relations more challenging. Compared with the more static systems of the past—the Westphalian order of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century, the cold war bipolarity of the twentieth century, and the period of post-cold war dominance by the West—there is little by way of common understanding. Established hierarchies and “truths” are breaking down. The new world disorder is by its very nature in constant flux, and defies easy summation. Its leitmotif is contradiction—or rather multiple contradictions: the reassertion of Westphalian concepts of sovereignty in opposition to supranational ideas of global governance; the relative decline of the major powers, alongside the growing weakness of multilateral institutions; unprecedented interconnectedness, but also resurgent nationalism, protectionism, and introspection.

Russia and the new world disorder

The mainstream narrative in Moscow—and in many other parts of the world⁷²—is that a hitherto dominant West is the principal casualty of global transformation. Reality, however, is somewhat different. Although the United States and Europe face tremendous challenges, it is Russia that is especially vulnerable to the adverse effects of disorderly change. We should consider why this is so in general terms, before examining several specific dimensions of the new world disorder and its implications for Russia.

In the first place, the current international environment presents decision-makers in Moscow with unexpected challenges and counterintuitive choices. For more than three centuries, since Peter the Great (1682–1725) first dragged Russia into Europe, they have operated within a largely predictable and comprehensible framework. From the eighteenth century until the outbreak of World War I, the Tsarist Empire was an integral member of the European system of great powers. During the cold war, the Soviet Union represented one half of a bipolar world. And for much of the post-cold war period Russian foreign policy has functioned on the basis of a ready (if unpalatable) reference point in the shape of the United States’ global primacy. Today, however, what passes for the international system has never been more unclear, nor have the demands of decisionmaking been more complex.

Second, Russia’s domestic condition and foreign policy influence are based on a very narrow range of resources and capabilities. Its heavy dependence on energy and commodity exports makes it more vulnerable than most to strategic shocks, such as the U.S. (and now global) shale revolution, or large price fluctuations. In late 2014 the plummeting value of the ruble, record levels of

capital flight, and rising inflation were a direct consequence of external factors, above all the fall in global oil prices and the severely restricted access of Russian enterprises to Western credit finance.

Third, Putin's response to uncertainties at home and abroad is to seek refuge in tradition, rather than address the need for wide-ranging modernization. In domestic affairs, this means a conservatism that harks back to the authoritarian stasis of Tsar Nicholas I.⁷³ In foreign affairs the emphasis is on the retro constructs of Great Power ("Concert") diplomacy, geopolitical balancing, and spheres of influence. The Kremlin has no interest in strategic adaptation; it believes that the onus is on others to adjust to Russia.

Fourth, Russia is institutionally and politically more fragile than the great majority of Western countries. Much is made of the Russian people's historical tolerance for pain. However, in recent years their expectations (and impatience) have grown substantially—a fact that the authorities understand only too well. The harshness of Putin's reaction to the protests of 2011–12 testifies to the extent of his anxiety on this point. This in turn raises questions about the extent of elite and public resilience to the potentially seismic effects of major shifts in the international system—if not today, then certainly in the longer term.

Fifth, Putin's Russia is more isolated than any Western country. It may be more "independent" than most, but it has very few regional or international support mechanisms. Even in the most optimistic incarnation of a Eurasian Union, it could not expect significant assistance from the other ex-Soviet republics in times of trouble. There is growing cooperation with China. But as chapter 5 shows, theirs remains a relationship driven by concrete interests rather than a broader likemindedness. As such it is susceptible to changing priorities and loyalties.

None of this is to suggest that Russia will implode soon or is doomed to terminal decline. The point, however, is that its margin for error—or bad luck—is smaller than most. To prosper, Russia needs many things to go right, and little to go wrong. As the commentator Sergei Karaganov wrote in 2011, "Hopefully, the luck will not fail this country before society and its ruling class wake up and start conducting a sensible policy to revive the nation and the country . . . we Russians know perfectly well that we are not always lucky."⁷⁴

The changing nature of power

There are many dimensions of power in the postmodern world: military might, economic strength, technological advancement, cultural influence, and normative power.⁷⁵ There is also the well-known distinction between hard and soft power—between influence through coercion and pressure, and

influence through persuasion and attraction—although the boundaries are often blurred.⁷⁶ Power may be of a long-term character, or the product of a temporary concatenation of circumstances. The influence of energy- and resource-exporting countries such as Russia varies according to fluctuations in global commodity prices. Another important distinction is between active and preventative power. All countries, including the United States, struggle to prosecute an active agenda. But most countries retain some capacity to obstruct the objectives of others. Russia is an excellent illustration of this. It is unable to dominate the post-Soviet space as it once did, yet it retains considerable capacity to destabilize sovereign states and make life difficult for other external actors.

Amid the confusion of different dimensions of power, one can nevertheless discern some critical shifts. One is the diminishing value of *military might*. Such a statement may seem implausible given developments in Ukraine. But paradoxically Russian “successes” have exposed the shortcomings of the use of force, and of hard power in general. The takeover of Crimea in February 2014 was a stunning operation that achieved all its immediate objectives. Yet the strategic consequences of the Kremlin’s actions have been almost uniformly negative for Russian interests. The administration in Kyiv will be hostile for the next few years at least, while popular support for Ukraine’s pro-European (and pro-EU) orientation has been significantly strengthened.⁷⁷ Kazakhstan and Belarus have become more protective about their national sovereignty, which will constrain the development of Putin’s Eurasian Union. The Americans and Europeans are taking a much closer interest in Ukrainian affairs. NATO has rediscovered a sense of purpose, and is reinforcing its military presence in front-line members such as Poland and the Baltic states.⁷⁸ And Russian strategic dependence on China is at a historical high. Russia’s actions also have aggravated its macroeconomic situation, led to a dramatic increase in capital flight, discouraged foreign and domestic investment, and severely restricted the access of its major companies to credit finance. Putin himself faces a major conundrum. Having staked so much on victory, he could yet be forced either to climb down or to escalate to a more direct confrontation with the West. In either event the outcomes would be more uncontrollable and dangerous than he ever anticipated.

Putin appears to tacitly recognize some of these realities, in particular that military power alone can achieve little. The use of proxies and the resort to covert, deniable operations in southeast Ukraine—so-called “hybrid warfare”—point to a reluctance to deploy Russia’s armed forces in significant numbers. Putin knows that such intervention would be colossally expensive, sucking up vast resources at a time of recession in Russia,

and counterproductive in realizing his vision of “a Russian-Ukrainian world.”⁷⁹ The difficulty, however, lies in extricating himself from this imbroglio without suffering a potentially catastrophic loss of face.

During the cold war, military might was sometimes (although not always) effective because it was the dominant form of power and recognized as such. In today’s world, however, occasions such as the 2008 Russia-Georgia war are at best partial exceptions to the rule that military means are ineffectual or counterproductive in projecting long-term influence. Even where protagonists appear completely mismatched, the stronger side faces huge problems in converting seemingly irresistible power into desired outcomes. There are also unintended consequences. The U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated that the use of force can have a severely self-harming effect. And just as the United States saw its international standing plummet during the 2000s, so Russia’s influence in Ukraine (and Europe) is at its lowest ebb in over two decades.

Economic strength, by contrast, has become all-important. Without it countries are unable to assert lasting influence, while leaving themselves vulnerable to domestic instability and outside exploitation. This has been one of the striking lessons of Russia’s experience in the post-cold war era. But economic power, too, is patchy and fragile, a reality underlined by the global financial crisis. The United States is an economic superpower, yet finds itself in hock to the Chinese and its own excesses.⁸⁰ China has enjoyed an average of 9 percent GDP growth since the late 1980s, but remains a middle-level economy—technologically backward in most sectors, environmentally exposed, and with 250 million people living on less than two dollars a day.⁸¹ Russia has the third-largest gold and currency reserves in the world, but has become an international anti-model—a byword for non-modernization (and even de-modernization), uncompetitiveness, and chronic corruption.

Economic means are considerably more effective than military might in projecting power. But their utility in this respect is constrained by significant caveats. The United States has found that its enormous financial power is insufficient to arrest the relative decline of its influence in many parts of the world. China is an economic behemoth, but is discovering that money can buy only so much; all countries, it seems, wish to expand commercial ties with Beijing, but many of them are wary of too close an engagement—and dependence. For Russia a preponderant economic strength in post-Soviet Eurasia is by no means an unmitigated blessing. Such power encourages its neighbors to diversify their external relations at the same time as maintaining parasitic ties with Moscow.

We are living at a time of permanent and accelerating *technological revolution*, in which those who live on past achievements and glories are doomed to fall behind. This is not merely about accessing the technology needed to develop individual industries, or putting the country's best and brightest through swish business schools. It involves an attitudinal transformation across the whole of society. For what matters most is not a country's present level—whether it is a major power, advanced economy, or developing country—but the hunger and capacity to better itself. This was the basis of America's emergence as a global power in the early twentieth century, and it is the foundation of Chinese success today. However, nothing threatens the standing of the United States and Europe so much as a failure to adapt to changing conditions and requirements. This too is Russia's great challenge.

Economic strength and technological capacity underpin the growing *ascendancy of soft power*. The most influential powers in today's world are those whose strengths lie principally in this area. The United States remains the sole superpower because it has the largest economy, the most advanced technology, and the most persuasive cultural and normative influence. Its military might arises squarely out of its economic and technological advantages, and in some respects represents a source of vulnerability. Thus overstretch in Iraq and Afghanistan has exacerbated America's economic difficulties, in particular by creating a massive public debt.⁸² Equally, China's rise to global prominence is almost entirely a function of its economic transformation, not its military power.⁸³ Like Moscow and Washington, Beijing has discovered that the use of hard power has significant drawbacks. In the South China Sea, the activities of the PLA (People's Liberation Army) Navy have led ASEAN member-states to make common cause against Chinese interests, while the escalation of tensions with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands has given impetus to U.S. "rebalancing" toward Asia.⁸⁴

One reason for caution in assuming the long-term decline of the United States is that its vast wealth, high living standards, and substantial political and social freedoms continue to be seen as attractive by much of the developing as well as developed world. The so-called Washington consensus may have been badly tarnished, but there is a long way to go before other countries supersede America's soft power. Even when China becomes the world's largest economy by GDP in the next few years, its per capita income will still be five times lower than that of the United States, and its material quality of life correspondingly inferior.

At the same time, soft power has become more uneven in its impact—or perhaps its limitations are now better understood. As Joshua Cooper Ramo

has pointed out, you can wear American brand clothing (but made in China!), watch Hollywood blockbusters, send your children to American and European universities, and yet still strive to undermine U.S. political, security, and economic interests.⁸⁵ China has shown that embracing Western consumerism does not mean subscribing to liberal democratic values; sometimes, the opposite is true. In a disorderly world, most countries have developed a certain skepticism and resistance toward even the most seductive of blandishments. Not only will they not be told, they will often not be persuaded.

This applies, too, in relation to Russia. Its popular culture—movies, TV shows, music—retains enormous appeal in the ex-Soviet republics. But this does not mean that their peoples wish to join the Russian Federation or to be an appendage of a “Russian world” as envisaged by the Kremlin. The case of southeastern Ukraine—as Russian-speaking and Russian-aculturated as they come—has highlighted that the most receptive of audiences still puts a high price on independence and freedom of action.⁸⁶

The end of leadership and the decline of the great powers

Ever since Oswald Spengler predicted the end of Western civilization in the aftermath of World War I, one of the principal narratives of international politics has been the West’s struggle to maintain its primacy.⁸⁷ Over the past century this debate has waxed and waned according to the level of Western confidence. Little more than a decade ago the story was one of Western ascendancy. Fukuyama’s theories about the “end of history” and the triumph of liberal democracy were reflected not only in the claim that the West had won the cold war, but also through the dissemination of neoliberal economic prescriptions (aka the “Washington consensus”), the success of the U.S.-led coalition in the Gulf War, and the enlargement of NATO and the EU. Even the devastating blow of 9/11 did not appear to disrupt the mood of triumphalism. At the beginning of 2002 few predicted an impending crisis of the West.

The question then is whether the Kremlin is right to claim that the world is witnessing the long-term decline of the West and the end of U.S. global leadership. The answer depends on what benchmarks are used. If one compares the situation today with the 1990s, the case for decline seems incontestable. The United States faces greater challenges to its authority than at any time since the end of the cold war. It self-evidently struggles to manage conflicts (Iraq, Afghanistan) where the enemy comes in unconventional forms—insurgencies, terrorist groups, and transnational criminal networks. It has shown no demonstrable ability to effect a solution to the Syrian conflict. The financial crisis has exposed the weaknesses of the leading Western economies. And the promotion of Western political values has suffered sev-

eral high-profile setbacks. A growing number of countries are resisting the pressure to democratize, and when there has been democratization, the outcomes have often been unpalatable to Western governments—as in Iraq with the growth of Iranian influence, in Gaza where the openly anti-Israeli Hamas enjoys considerable popular support, and in Egypt where the country's first free elections in more than six decades resulted in the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, if we think back to the 1970s the challenges to U.S. authority and Western values were more numerous and formidable than they are today. Not only was there an entire rival system in the form of the Soviet Union and its satellite and client states, there was also a myriad of nonaligned but unfriendly actors: a truculent China; a defiant India; and an Arab world buoyed by the oil price spikes of 1973 and 1979. The American economy accounted for a greater share of global GDP then, but as the oil crises showed, Washington's capacity to dictate to others was strictly limited. U.S. President Richard Nixon, a ferocious anti-communist, was so concerned about the decline of American influence that he initiated and sustained a strategic rapprochement with "Red" China from 1971.⁸⁸

Many Russian observers home in on the all too obvious weaknesses and blank spots in U.S. power, while underestimating how dominant and multi-dimensional this continues to be. By any serious criterion, the United States is much the most powerful country on the planet. Its military capabilities are superior to those of the rest of the world combined. Despite the financial crisis, it continues to dominate the global economy;⁸⁹ it remains the supreme technological power,⁹⁰ and its cultural and normative influence is unparalleled. Tellingly, young people from all over the world look to live, study, and work in America, rather than in China, India, or Russia.⁹¹

It is also lazy to view international politics as a zero-sum game, in which the decline of certain powers, empires, and civilizations is inevitably matched by the rise of others. For one thing, this overlooks the capacity of incumbent powers to adapt and prosper. Suffice here to recall the example of the Roman Empire, which appeared to be in terminal decline at the end of the fourth century, only to reinvent itself as the Eastern Roman and then Byzantine Empire, and flourish for another thousand years. And there are many other examples in history.

More important, the Kremlin's tendency to view the decline of the West and rise of the rest as interlinked phenomena oversimplifies the highly complex character of international relations. In fact, one of the notable features of recent times has been the decline, relatively speaking, of virtually *all* the major powers. It is not only the United States and the leading European

nations that wield nothing like the same influence as they did a decade ago. Russia too has seen the steady erosion of its once hegemonic position in post-Soviet Eurasia.

The one major power not in relative decline has also found the road to global status and influence hard going. Despite Beijing's attempts to portray the rise of China in benign terms—"peaceful development," "harmonious world," "win-win" solutions—many countries view its expanding footprint in a negative light. Resistance is not confined to the United States and Japan, but is evident elsewhere—witness the hardening of ASEAN positions on South China Sea territoriality, the Burmese junta's decision to reach out to the West, and the disquiet being voiced by prominent figures in Africa and Latin America.⁹² As a result, the Chinese have shown an understandable reluctance to supplant the United States as the "go to" power. They know that international leadership is politically and financially debilitating, and a magnet for the envy, suspicions, and anxieties of others.⁹³ When challenged to play a more active role in global governance, Beijing's standard response has been that China can best contribute to the international community by ensuring stability and prosperity within its own borders.⁹⁴ Although there are signs of greater ambition under Xi Jinping, this is focused on China's "core interests" in Asia. Xi's idea of a "new pattern of great power relations" with Washington should not be misread as implying a wish for China to be as globally active and committed as the United States. Rather, it is an attempt to regulate their *bilateral* interaction on terms more favorable and less intrusive to Beijing.

The issue therefore is not the decline of American leadership, as many in Russia would have it, but the demise of international leadership *in general*. The elusive nature of modern power presents serious difficulties to those countries that aspire to exert influence over others. Newton's third law of motion is apposite here: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. The global preeminence of the United States provokes others to find ways of mitigating its power, while the rise of China has stimulated similar counterbalancing responses in the Asia-Pacific region. Russia too has found that attempts to reestablish something of its former influence in Eurasia have come up against the determined, and frequently successful, efforts of the ex-Soviet republics to consolidate their sovereignty. In the new world disorder, countries are much more disposed and able to resist leadership, from wherever it comes and whatever form it takes—unilateral, consultative, collective, or even "from behind."⁹⁵ Indeed, so strong is this resistance that it may be more accurate to say that the world is not witnessing the end of leadership so much as the end of "followership."⁹⁶

Although Moscow has welcomed the swing back to the primacy of national interests and prerogatives in world politics, this has actually complicated Russian policymaking. There has been a “democratization of international relations,” but not in the way the Kremlin understands it—that is, the closing of the gap between the sole superpower and the other major powers. Instead, a more comprehensive process has been at work, whereby smaller states and regional actors are no longer passive objects of great power diplomacy, but increasingly sovereign actors. Even the very weakest of them have a much wider range of options than could have been imagined a few years ago. They have not only become more adept at balancing between external powers in their individual foreign policies, but have also made skillful use of regional structures to maximize their collective weight. In August 2008, the Central Asian states exploited the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to withstand Russian pressure to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. And more recently an acutely dysfunctional Ukraine has managed to gain substantial financial assistance from a divided Europe, a usually hard-nosed IMF, and a reluctant White House.

The major powers have for the most part been forced to recognize their diminished capacity to influence the behavior of smaller states. The Obama administration’s consultative style in foreign policy, for example, is not born of some warm and fuzzy liberalism; it is a pragmatic response that acknowledges the need for accommodation in the absence of viable alternatives. Even when the disparities of power are huge, it is necessary to observe the proprieties of “equality” and “mutual benefit” in diplomatic dealings. Accordingly, the Kremlin has sometimes adjusted its tactical approach in post-Soviet Eurasia. Its efforts to package the Eurasian Economic Union as an equal, collective, and positive-sum enterprise acknowledge, in effect, the value of more indirect methods of projecting Russian influence. It is another matter, of course, to square such rationality with historical habits of entitlement and notions about the natural order of things—as the Ukraine crisis has highlighted.

The de-universalization of norms and values

One of the defining features of the new world disorder is the erosion of universalism. Western-led norms and values, as enshrined in documents such as the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 1975 Helsinki Accords, are under serious attack. Western leaders continue to admonish (some) authoritarian regimes for human rights violations, undemocratic behavior, and the flouting of the rule of law. But both their right to criticize and their enthusiasm for the task have become decidedly tenuous.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have inflicted severe damage on the West's normative reputation, which has become submerged by charges of hypocrisy and double standards. These failures have been compounded by the global financial crisis, which has opened up new opportunities for those who would challenge Western-made rules. More generally, the growing assertiveness of individual state actors and the weakness of multilateral institutions have contributed to the steady dismantling of universalist prescriptions.

All that said, the Kremlin's claims regarding a normative and civilizational multipolarity in the world are at best dubious. No coherent set of principles has emerged to challenge the Western-led consensus established after World War II. For all the publicity surrounding a putative China model, there is no "Beijing consensus."⁹⁷ The Chinese themselves regard this as a Western fiction, and, in practice, are among the biggest supporters of American-style capitalism, with its emphasis on profit, social mobility, individual aspiration, and respect for wealth. It is likewise debatable whether one can speak of a new "Putin consensus" based on traditional Russian conservatism. Although the president's personal ratings have soared following the annexation of Crimea, opinion polls have shown substantial support for "Western" notions, such as the rule of law, an independent judiciary, fair elections, and uncensored media.⁹⁸ With the crisis in Russia-West relations, there has been revived talk of an "authoritarian international" or axis between Moscow and Beijing.⁹⁹ Yet this is a hoary myth, aimed at frightening Western policymakers into being more "understanding" of (that is, compliant toward) Russian interests.

Nancy Birdsall and Francis Fukuyama have written about a "post-American consensus,"¹⁰⁰ but the only real consensus that exists today is a commitment to do one's own thing—a Sinatra doctrine ("my way").¹⁰¹ Appealing in the name of national values and "civilization" is a legitimating device used by governments the world over to justify self-interested policies, and to stay in power. But it does not equate to the emergence of a civilizational "new world order," as suggested by the Kremlin. Instead, there is a normative fracturing, in which the erosion of Western-led norms and values has resulted in a growing ideational vacuum in international society.

This would appear to be of most concern to the United States and Europe, which have long pursued value-oriented goals in their foreign relations. However, it is no less relevant to Russia. Putin's Eurasian Union project is founded as much on civilizational bonds between the ex-USSR republics as it is on economic cooperation. But the overall trend of de-universalization in norms and values is helping to loosen these ties. Just as the West is no longer able to dominate the rest, so Moscow is discovering that its moral leadership in Eurasia is becoming more brittle. Its main partners in the Eurasian Economic

Union, Kazakhstan and Belarus, play along with the Kremlin's integrationist rhetoric. But it is clear that their attraction to the EEU is economic, not civilizational. They are strongly committed to preserving their national sovereignty, and, in the case of Kazakhstan, their cultural distinctiveness as well.¹⁰²

Inclusiveness and fragmentation

International relations have never been more inclusive, giving unprecedented opportunities to an expanding number of state and non-state actors. Although some countries are more globalized and powerful than others, there is no country that is completely isolated, or whose actions do not affect its neighbors. Isolation has become a relative concept; even North Korea, the eponymous "hermit kingdom," has partners. Conversely, in a globalized world no state—including the United States—is fully independent and sovereign.

In this environment countries must deal with a growing number of issues. The smallest of states has a stake in areas which once appeared to engage only the major powers. Global trade and financial flows, climate change, human development, regional conflicts, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, transnational crime, and energy security concern more or less everyone.

The broadening of the international agenda and its cast of players is a mixed blessing. On the plus side, many important issues that were long neglected, such as climate change, global pandemics, and water security, are belatedly receiving attention. However, the proliferation of issues and interested parties means that negotiations have become more complicated, and solutions harder to find. More countries' interests and sensitivities have to be managed, requiring more trade-offs—witness the difficulties in concluding the Doha trade round and salvaging recent climate change summits. Inevitably, too, countries disagree on what is important and what is less so. Thus Moscow and Washington differ on the gravity of the Iranian nuclear threat, and such differences of perception are replicated across many countries and issues around the world.

An inclusive and disputatious world is the polar opposite of the Kremlin's sought-after multipolar order. Small nations matter, and the major powers find it difficult to implement their agendas.¹⁰³ Although Russian policymakers are right to challenge blithe assumptions about the end of geopolitics, they underestimate the sheer ubiquity of competitive politics. It is not just the big players, such as Russia, which aim to constrain and counterbalance; the same is true of smaller states as well. This is most apparent in the latter's pursuit of "multivector" foreign policies, whereby they exploit the competitive elements of major power relations to maximize their own independence.

Central Asian states, such as Kazakhstan, offer prime examples of such behavior, as did Ukraine under Yanukovych.¹⁰⁴

There is another critical element. It is no longer appropriate to speak of globalization and regionalization as unitary phenomena. The recent rise of protectionist sentiment—in the developed as well as developing world—indicates that many countries view such trends in zero-sum terms, with clear winners and losers. Just as the Kremlin frets about the impact of globalization on Russia's manufacturing, agriculture, and information space, so elites in the ex-Soviet republics worry that a Moscow-led process of regionalization will undermine their own, much more vulnerable economies and polities. As chapter 4 explains, this has become one of the principal obstacles to post-Soviet integration. The fact that these republics are unable to compete on a level playing field has made them all the more inclined to mitigate Russian influence—not only in the economy, but also in the political, security, and cultural spheres.

Two Worlds—and the Dysfunctionality of Russian Foreign Policy

For over a decade the Putin regime's view of the world, and Russia's place in it, has been heavily influenced by generalities, such as "the multipolar world order," "the democratization of international relations," "Europe without dividing lines," and "the primacy of the UN." More recently, there have been further additions to the lexicon, in particular "the decline of the West" and "the shift of global power to the East." The reiteration of such constructs reflects a desire to make sense of the world by establishing a conceptual framework that facilitates and legitimates a prominent role for Russia. In this, the Kremlin is hardly doing anything unusual. Regimes of all types, democratic as well as authoritarian, indulge in selective perceptions, national myths, and wishful thinking. Their foreign policies are shaped as much by their own preconceptions as by any facts on the ground.

The art, of course, is to establish an effective balance between the desire to influence the international system in one's own image and responding to the world as it actually is. This is not easy to achieve even in relatively stable and predictable times. It is all the more difficult in today's volatile international context. A world in flux presents extraordinary challenges to governments everywhere, especially to those that aspire to play a major role in global affairs. Whatever their pretensions to "strategic vision," most of the time they are confronted by trends and events that are beyond their control and often comprehension. At best they adapt after the fact—recognizing the nature and

scope of change, the implications for national interests, and the opportunities that exist to maximize their countries' possibilities.

This too is Russia's task. There are few signs, however, that the Putin regime has come to terms with the "inconvenient truths" of the new world disorder. It continues to frame the landscape of contemporary politics within an artificial multipolar (polycentric) paradigm. It overestimates Russia's capacity to establish itself as a regional and global player on its own narrow terms. And it believes that the future lies not in adapting to fast-changing international realities, but in hunkering down—reaffirming time-honored principles of Russian foreign policy, such as the primacy of great power diplomacy and military strength.

The outcome of these errors of perception and commission is a dysfunctional foreign policy. In place of serious strategic thinking (let alone imagination), the Kremlin has allowed itself to be distracted by tactical "triumphs" and a large measure of self-delusion. Despite its emphasis on the "pragmatic" pursuit of national interests, its approach to international relations is skewed by a virtual world that promises much, but delivers little. In part II of the book, we examine in detail how the growing disconnect between aspiration and (non-)performance is undermining Russia's interests in key areas of its interaction with the world: global governance, the post-Soviet space, Asia, and relations with the West.