Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition

Jeffrey Mankoff

To cite this article: Jeffrey Mankoff (2021) Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition, The Washington Quarterly, 44:3, 107-125, DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970905

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970905

Published online: 22 Sep 2021.
Russia has come to occupy an anomalous position in Western strategic thought. While former US president Barack Obama dismissed Russia as a “regional power” following its 2014 occupation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine, both the Trump and Biden administrations have identified Russia as one of the United States’ principal rivals in an era defined by strategic competition among great powers. To a significant degree, though, the United States continues to think about Russia as more of a disruptor than a true great power rival. Though widespread, that view misreads both the nature and the durability of Russian power and underestimates the extent to which Russia remains a potent competitor whose preferences Western leaders will have to take into account.

Even as Russia has invaded its neighbors, deployed forces to Syria, positioned itself as a key partner for regimes worldwide concerned about Western-backed democracy promotion, and shaken political systems throughout the West itself, the perception of Russia as little more than a nuisance, a terminally declining state that should dispense with its great power ambitions and allow the United States to focus on the "pacing threat" of China, persists. This distinction is captured by the Biden administration’s Interim National Security Guidance, which differentiates between “an increasingly assertive China and [a] destabilizing Russia” that “remains determined to … play a disruptive role on the world stage.” The US National Intelligence Council’s 2021 Global Trends report likewise notes that, while Russia is “likely to remain a disruptive
power,” it also “may struggle to project and maintain influence globally.” President Biden also gave voice to this view, noting in July 2021 that Russian President Vladimir Putin “has a real problem—he is—he’s sitting on top of an economy that has nuclear weapons and oil wells and nothing else. … he knows he’s in real trouble, which makes him even more dangerous.”

What such portrayals miss is the extent to which Russia has repeatedly succeeded, at least since its 2008 war with Georgia, at mobilizing the instruments of national power to achieve its political objectives, many of them counter to those of the United States. Russia’s power projection toolkit—which encompasses both an increasingly modern and capable military as well as a range of disruptive capabilities from bots to hackers to mercenaries—has proven cost-effective and is likely to be sustainable for the foreseeable future, notwithstanding Russia’s real demographic, economic, and political challenges.

Nor is Russia merely a disruptor. Rather, the Kremlin has a relatively clear vision of what it seeks to promote. Its objectives include deterring US power projection and NATO expansion while maintaining a sphere of “privileged interests” in its Eurasian neighborhood, sustaining regimes congenial to Russian interests across the world, and consolidating influence within Western states. Moscow today takes the existence of a hostile West as a given and emphasizes strengthening ties with non-Western states, including China, to push for a more “democratic” (i.e., non-US-led) world order. This order is one based on great-power international trusteeship—a concert of Europe-model globalized for a 21st century in which instability is increasing as Western hegemony is waning.

Central to this vision is the idea that the great powers should be responsible for their own security and have the right to determine their own political system—with democracy holding no special claims. Moscow contrasts the “rules-based” order championed by the Biden administration with one centered on “laws” rooted in the centrality of the UN Security Council (where Russia, like China, maintains a veto)—a very limited view of international law, but one that finds support in states, from Turkey to India, opposed to US unilateralism.

Where Russia Struggles

The perception of Russia as a declining power, of course, has a grain of truth to it. Russia faces real challenges, though their impact on Moscow’s ability to act as a great power are often exaggerated by Western analysts. In order of increasing
severity, three in particular stand out: a declining population, stagnant economy, and an increasingly moribund political system. All impose genuine constraints on Russia’s power potential. However, they are not necessarily as serious as sometimes made out to be and, more importantly, are not of a magnitude as to force Moscow to moderate its geostrategic ambitions in a way that would make it more accommodating of Western interests.

**Population**

Many Western analysts point to Russia’s aging, shrinking population as a harbinger of its terminal decline as a great power. While Russia’s population will indeed decline over the coming decades, the salience of this decline should not be overstated. It is more a product of the upheaval surrounding the Soviet collapse rather than a reflection of chronic weakness today. Moreover, in a world in which technology and information, rather than large numbers of unskilled workers, are the main drivers of economic growth and military power, it is not at all clear that a smaller population will impact Russia’s ability to challenge the United States. As analyst Michael Kofman notes, “having more people does not readily translate into greater power. If it did, then Nigeria, Indonesia, or Bangladesh would be among the world’s strongest nations.”

A shrinking population could be more problematic with regard to China, especially if the progressive emptying of Siberia and the Far East encourages Chinese ambitions; keeping such ambitions at bay is an important driver of the entente with Beijing that Soviet/Russian leaders have pursued since the 1980s and a reason Moscow is unlikely to contemplate a fundamental break from Beijing anytime soon.

Russia’s demographic problems are real, but they need to be kept in perspective. The UN estimates the median age of a Russian citizen in 2019 as 39.6 years, compared to 38.3 years in the United States and 38.4 in China. Russia’s population has shrunk each year since 2018. According to the State Statistics Service (Rosstat), total population declined by around 40,000 in 2020 to 146.74 million, and by 2035 it is projected to fall to 135.2 million. Life expectancy in Russia also remains lower than in most developed countries, especially among men (68 years).

While these figures are striking, it is important to keep in mind that they more reflect past trauma than future capabilities. Russia’s population decline is inextricably linked to the upheaval surrounding the USSR’s collapse. Fertility rates plummeted in the final decade of the Soviet Union and the early years of the Russian Federation. They have since recovered somewhat, such that the average Russian woman will give birth to 1.8 children, below the replacement rate of 2.1 but higher than in most European countries and comparable to the
United States. Because of the huge drop-off in births in the 1980s and 1990s though, today’s cohort of women of childbearing age is markedly smaller. Meanwhile, post-2014 economic stagnation appears to be depressing fertility further. Low birth rates are a challenge for almost every industrialized country, and in that sense, Russia has much in common with its great power rivals and neighbors.

The decline in life expectancy is similarly correlated with the effects of the Soviet collapse: a crumbling health care system coupled with high rates of alcoholism, accidents, and “deaths of despair,” including suicides. Similarly, though, the worst effects are seemingly in the past. Life expectancy in Russia has increased every year since 2003 (though COVID-19 may cause a downturn in 2020–21).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, meanwhile, Russia also enjoyed a demographic advantage rarely remarked on in the West: significant immigration. In most years, Russia receives the second largest—after the United States—number of immigrants of any country worldwide. The State Statistics Service recorded more than 3 million migrants coming to Russia in 2018 and almost 2.5 million in 2020 despite the pandemic (figures that are likely understated). Though not enough to fully offset the effects of natural decline, Russia’s openness to immigration and attraction as a destination for migrants from across the former USSR contrasts sharply with the situation in many European countries (and China) that face a similar demographic challenge but remain resistant to immigration. It is also a resource that a Kremlin with more enlightened leadership could use to moderate natural population decline and strengthen ties with neighboring states that supply most of these migrants.

**Economy**

In the long run, the biggest constraint on Russia’s geopolitical ambitions stems from the weakness of its economy relative not just to that of the United States, but to those of major European countries and China. At current exchange rates, Russia’s GDP is only about 7 percent of the United States’ and its military spending around 9 percent. Even before the United States and European Union imposed sanctions over the occupation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s economy was slow-growing; since 2014, it has slowed further, with the IMF estimating growth of 3.8 percent in 2021—well behind the United States and other advanced industrial economies emerging from the worst of the
pandemic (not to mention China).\textsuperscript{19} Russia’s only globally competitive industries, and the sources of most export revenue, are natural resources and weapons. Oil and gas sales account for over 40 percent of Russia’s federal budget, which is down from more than half in the mid-2010s.\textsuperscript{20} Efforts to reduce dependence are hampered by the influence of large energy companies. As advanced economies move toward a lower carbon future, Russia’s dependence on oil and gas extraction is going to become a growing liability.

Russia’s economy faces other headwinds as well, many linked to its authoritarian political model. Due to a combination of sanctions, low growth, a weak currency, and general corruption, capital flight remains a serious problem; more than US$53 billion in capital fled the country in 2019, while cumulative capital flight since the collapse of the Soviet Union may exceed US$1 trillion.\textsuperscript{21} This outflow of capital acts as a brake on investment, creating a vicious cycle that prevents Russian industries from improving their competitiveness. As the economist Vladislav Inozemtsev notes, “the Russian economy can generate money, but it lacks the industrial sector that can consume it: up to 90% of office equipment, telecommunication devices and mobile phones, as well as medicines and healthcare devices, are imported.”\textsuperscript{22} Instead, a large share of corporate revenue is returned to shareholders as dividends—often subsequently invested outside the country. This lack of competitiveness in civilian industries represents a check on long-term growth and innovation; while it does not threaten Russia’s immediate geopolitical capabilities, if not addressed it can over time leave Russia further behind and more dependent upon its great power rivals.

**Political System**

An arguably bigger problem is that, after more than two decades in power, Putin’s authoritarian system is showing its age (as is Putin himself), struggling to articulate a new social contract that appeals to younger, better educated Russians and fearful of upsetting the carefully balanced factions of oligarchs and siloviki (members of the security services) that comprise the political elite. Corruption is rampant, despite Putin’s repeated, seemingly hollow calls for increased transparency. Russia’s most prominent anti-corruption campaigner, Aleksey Navalny, now sits in prison, while his Foundation Against Corruption has been banned as an extremist group.

Even without a credible alternative, trust in and support for Putin is declining. After reaching almost 95 percent following the annexation of Crimea, the Levada Center’s closely watched index of trust in Putin fell to around 66 percent in mid-2021 amid a sluggish economy and the steady erosion of personal freedoms; support for the ruling United Russia Party was significantly lower (29 percent).\textsuperscript{23} Even with Navalny in jail, the Kremlin has failed to offer a
compelling vision of the future. Instead, it continues falling back on appeals to a stability that, to more and more Russians, looks like the stagnation of the Brezhnev era instead.

This erosion of trust has made it more difficult for the Kremlin to cope with the accumulation of problems Russia faces. Take COVID-19. While Moscow’s Gamaleya Institute produced what appears to be a highly effective COVID-19 vaccine (Sputnik-V), the coronavirus pandemic hit Russia hard, with over 135,000 confirmed deaths as of July 2021 (the true number is likely much higher), while the Kremlin downplayed the situation and oversaw a politicized rollout that left many Russians skeptical that Sputnik V was safe. Frustration with the government is also contributing to an increasingly serious brain drain among younger, better educated Russians. Somewhere around two million Russians have left the country since the start of Putin’s presidency, accelerating since Putin’s 2012 return to the Kremlin and dashed hopes for a democratic breakthrough. Apart from the impact on the overall population, this loss of some of Russia’s best minds will complicate the country’s efforts to move away from its resource-dependent economic model.

Building a more responsive state that can better harness Russia’s natural and human resources will be among the biggest challenges facing the next generation of leadership—whenever it takes over (thanks to constitutional changes pushed through in 2019, Putin now has the option of staying in power until 2036).

What Russia Does Well

While these well-known weaknesses mean that Russia’s economy and conventional military capabilities will remain far short of matching those of the United States or China, fixating on Russia’s GDP, the size of its population, or even the number of its ships and planes is an imperfect way to measure its capabilities. What matters is the extent to which Moscow can give substance to its preferences in the face of US (or other) opposition.

By this measure, Russia has proven itself since the war with Georgia to be a remarkably capable and resilient actor—what political scientist Kathryn Stoner has called a “good enough” power and then some. Although US and allied officials are reluctant to admit as much, Russia has on multiple occasions been able to deter the United States and mold Washington’s strategic
calculus in line with its own interests. In recent years, it has also become quite effective at shaping the domestic politics of not only neighboring states, but US allies in Europe and, at least since 2016, the United States itself.

The burden this approach to power projection imposes on Russia is, moreover, quite sustainable despite the country’s economic, technological, and social problems. Russia’s projection of military, quasi-military “grey zone,” and political power also rests on a widespread consensus among the Russian elite that the world is shifting from unipolarity to multipolarity, that Russia is and should remain an independent pole in this system, and that a hostile West has no right to impose its own values or political system on others. Dating back to the early post-Soviet years, that great-power mentality is deeply rooted among Russia’s elite, especially the security services—Russia’s “new nobility” that have attained a dominant role in politics under Putin and will likely remain the driving force behind Russian foreign policy during (and after) Putin’s time in the Kremlin.27

Though strategic nuclear weapons—in which Russia maintains parity with the United States under the New START agreement—remain central to Russian power, they are far from Russia’s only tool for influencing US behavior. Russia’s conventional military capabilities are modest compared to those of the United States but are significant and sufficient for Moscow to maintain a dominant position in its immediate neighborhood, which is most vital for Russia’s security. While the Soviet Union employed a conscription-based mass mobilization military, reforms underway in Russia since the mid-2000s have built a smaller, more professional, and more deployable military. At around 4 percent of GDP, Russia’s defense spending is—in contrast to that of the USSR—far from excessive. And since the vast majority of weapons and equipment is domestically produced (and therefore priced in rubles), Russia’s effective military expenditure (or “bang for the ruble”) may be several times higher than widely quoted figures suggest.28 While overall military spending has stagnated or declined in recent years, an increasing share (roughly two-thirds in 2021) is targeted at procurement and modernization of equipment, increasing Russia’s ability to fight (and win) regional wars.29 Moscow is also developing a suite of cutting-edge weapons systems designed to preserve mutually assured destruction, overcome US missile defense, and compel Washington to negotiate new arms control agreements.30 Other tools, such as Russia’s well-publicized ability to hack into critical infrastructure and protect cybercriminals, cost even less.

The effects of Russian power have been most visible in Europe and Eurasia where—despite greater activity on the part of the United States, the EU, China, Turkey, and other powers—Russia has been quite successful in protecting its core interests and setting the terms with which outside powers engage with the
region.\textsuperscript{31} To the extent that it has prioritized excluding Western influence from the former Soviet Union, Russia has had more successes than failures. Even in its weakened post-Soviet state, 1990s-era Russia was able to manipulate “frozen conflicts” on the territory of Moldova and Georgia as well as between Armenia and Azerbaijan and maintain a significant security presence in Central Asia.

Since 2008, Russia has employed hard power in response to the perceived threat of NATO expansion near its borders. Despite high political and economic costs, including sanctions imposed over its annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine that the IMF estimates have shaved about US$15 billion per year off Russian GDP, Moscow has eroded its neighbors’ sovereignty and territorial integrity while frustrating their ambitions to secure NATO membership.\textsuperscript{32} More than 13 years since NATO’s 2008 Bucharest Summit declared that both Georgia and Ukraine “will become members of NATO,” both countries have been occupied by Russian forces and lost territory.\textsuperscript{33} While NATO has developed robust partnerships with both Tbilisi and Kyiv and continues invoking the Bucharest formula, in practice, the two countries’ path to membership appears more uncertain today than it did in 2008.\textsuperscript{34} Meanwhile, the pro-Western consensus that prevailed in both Georgia and Ukraine at the time of their respective “color revolutions” is visibly fraying.\textsuperscript{35}

Russia has checked US influence in its neighborhood in other ways as well, including pressing for the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to expel the US forces stationed on their territory in the early stages of the war in Afghanistan—Moscow likely had a hand in the 2010 coup that ousted then-Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev after he had gone back on what Moscow understood to be a promise to evict US forces from the Manas airbase outside Bishkek. Since the renewal of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2016, Russia has progressively sidelined its fellow co-chairs of the OSCE’s Minsk Group (the United States and France) and, following the 2020 war, positioned itself as the principal mediator while deploying its peacekeepers to police the ceasefire. In Belarus, Russia has helped President Aleksandr Lukashenko hang onto power in the face of sustained protests, tightening its grip on Belarus’ economic, security, and information apparatus in the process. These interventions suggest Moscow’s continuing, largely successful commitment to securing its “privileged interests” within the core regions of the former Soviet Union by limiting and channeling outside powers’ influence.
Russia is, for now, the only state apart from the United States itself with something like an independent global power projection capability. By US/NATO standards, Russia’s foreign interventions are relatively small but, at least in comparison with US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, have been reasonably effective at producing desired political outcomes at an acceptable cost. In areas of active combat, including Ukraine, Syria, and Libya, Russian troops are employed primarily in support roles as force multipliers for local or regional proxies, while Moscow also leans heavily on private military corporations, hackers (some recruited from the criminal underworld), and other comparatively low-cost tools. The strategic alignment between Moscow and Beijing, moreover, means that the two countries can to some degree compensate for one another’s shortcomings and coordinate their activities.36

Backing Lukashenko aligns with Moscow’s increasingly global support for rulers sympathetic, or at least tractable, to Russian interests. Most such figures are authoritarian leaders seen as anathema in the West. In propping them up, Russia’s main objective is securing economic and geopolitical advantages for itself at a time of mounting confrontation with the West. At the same time, Russian support rests on an assumption that authoritarian stability is preferable to the messiness of democracy—a contemporary analogue to Russia’s mid-19th century role as the “gendarme of Europe.” That idea is enormously appealing to imperiled authoritarians—ranging from Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro to Myanmar’s Min Aung Hlaing—who see Russia as a partner in their efforts to remain in power. Democratically elected strongmen like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have also turned to Moscow for support despite their country’s membership in NATO.

Syria is the most visible and ambitious example of Russia’s increasingly globalized campaign on behalf of authoritarian stability. Moscow deliberately contrasts its enduring support for Bashar al-Assad to the alacrity with which the United States called for Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak to step down at the apogee of the Arab Spring, portraying itself in the process as a more reliable partner for embattled strongmen. In contrast to the wars in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia has few regular troops on the ground in Syria (thereby avoiding the blowback that would accompany significant casualties in a war far from home). Instead, Moscow relies on airpower and a limited number of special forces engaged in training, targeting, and other specialized missions—along with private military contractors from outfits like the Wagner Corporation, which are encouraged to fund their operations by taking control of oil fields and other revenue sources.37 In exchange for this relatively low-risk support, Russia has consolidated its influence in Damascus and secured an expanded military footprint in Syria at
the Tartus naval facility and the Hmeimim airbase. These facilities not only ensure Russia a voice in setting Syria’s future course; they also give it a potential outlet for projecting power into the eastern Mediterranean, which is emerging as an important fault line with NATO.³⁸

For the time being, Syria is Russia’s only major “out of area” campaign, but Moscow has been able to draw on elements of the Syrian template to conduct other low-cost, opportunistic interventions intended to secure resources and check Western influence. In Libya, Wagner forces were instrumental from at least 2018 in the warlord Khalifa Haftar’s effort to displace the UN-backed Government of National Accord; after Turkish intervention turned the tide against Haftar, Russia agreed to support an interim Government of National Unity (GNU) until elections scheduled for the fall of 2021. As in Syria, Russia seeks the establishment of a strong state, capable of checking the spread of jihadism, and economic concessions—but also a possible military outpost on the Mediterranean coast.³⁹ Russia simultaneously maintains low-profile interventions in other countries including Venezuela, Central African Republic, Madagascar (where Wagner forces and hackers helped swing an election), Mozambique, and Bosnia-Herzegovina (where Moscow backs Serb-majority Republika Srpska’s efforts to obstruct the Dayton Accord).⁴⁰ Across these theaters, Russia is risking comparatively little to prop up sympathetic regimes, while securing access to resources and toeholds in strategic regions.

The efficacy of these interventions is mixed. Moscow’s support for the Libyan GNU was a fallback option after Haftar’s defeat. Meanwhile, Wagner forces in Mozambique alienated their hosts through their ineptitude at jungle fighting.⁴¹ Despite this checkered history, the combination of low cost, Kremlin backing, and indifference to humanitarian considerations has made Russian private military contractors and other proxies an increasingly attractive tool for authoritarian leaders who seek outside support and are wary of the West’s emphasis, however inconsistent, on respecting human rights.

Even in countries where the United States and its allies maintain strong political ties, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Russia has been able to position itself as an alternative patron that local officials can turn to for weapons and diplomatic support, which allows them to hedge their reliance on the United States and its allies.⁴² Moscow’s aim is not to displace the United States as these states’ partner of choice, but to position itself as an alternative source of weapons, financing, and political support that enhances various governments’ ability to say “no” to Washington. The most prominent example of this dynamic may be Russia’s agreement to sell its advanced S-400 air defense system to NATO member Turkey, which led in April 2021 to Turkey’s expulsion from the US-led consortium building the next generation F-35 fighter and could
Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition

leave it subject to sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CATSAA).

It is this support for states and governments seeking to hedge their reliance on the United States that leads many US-based observers to dismiss Russia as a nuisance or “rogue” rather than a true great power rival.\textsuperscript{43} What these observers miss is both Russia’s global reach and its espousal of what amounts to an alternative to the US-led project of globalizing the “liberal international order.” Rather, Moscow promotes an alternative vision that is skeptical of liberal institutions, agnostic about regime type, and centered on the amoral interactions of the major powers—something like a great power concert.

**Russia’s Influence in the West and the Illusion of Ideology**

In addition to ensuring its predominant influence in post-Soviet Eurasia and supporting embattled authoritarians like Lukashenko and Assad, Russia has made extensive efforts to secure influence within Western states as well. In an era characterized by great power competition, when the risks of escalation make direct confrontation unlikely, Russia’s employment of “sharp power” and ability to put a finger on the scale of political debates within rival states are significant assets.\textsuperscript{44} To a greater extent than China, Iran, or other rival powers, Russia’s employment of subversion and other dark arts rests on a sophisticated understanding of democratic politics, including the salience of ethnocultural cleavages and the lure of money and corruption.

Russia, it is important to note, is not an ideological rival to Western democracies in the same way the Soviet Union was; Moscow does not adhere to any rigid orthodoxy and is not leading an international revolutionary movement. Even its preference for authoritarian strongmen like Assad is instrumental—what matters is whether a given regime—authoritarian, democratic, or otherwise—will give Moscow what it wants. Increasingly autocratic at home, Russia maintains a kind of political agnosticism outside its borders that allows it to work with actors from across the political spectrum in other states. To the extent Russia has an ideological outlook, it espouses not an alternative political and social model so much as the idea that politics is at root cynical and amoral, with ideology itself merely part of the superstructure of international politics.

Moscow consequently adjusts its message to appeal to actors from across the political spectrum. Within both the United States and other NATO allies,
meanwhile, influential actors continue to see Russia as a partner in their own domestic battles. The chameleon-like nature of Russia’s ideological commitments allows Western interlocutors to project their own preferences onto Russia, making it harder to forge the kind of cross-party or cross-national consensus in favor of containment that existed during the Cold War and that is currently crystallizing against China.

Of course, Putin’s Russia is often associated with a brand of militant conservatism emphasizing what Russia’s own 2021 National Security Concept describes as "traditional Russian moral-spiritual values, culture, and historical memory."

This appeal to so-called traditional values, though, is less a genuine commitment than a deliberate branding exercise, deployed to cultivate support both at home and abroad among groups disconcerted by rapid socioeconomic and cultural change. It has made Russia into a nerve center and inspiration for anti-LGBTQ movements throughout the world and facilitated outreach to right-wing and populist groups ranging from the National Rifle Association in the United States to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Yet even as Russia promotes the idea of what the journalist Mike Lofgren calls a “transnational alt-right ‘comintern,’” its agents maintain ties to groups at other points on the political spectrum.

Indeed, Russia also makes a significant, if less visible, effort to appeal to left-wing movements and activists who, like their ideological rivals, can serve to enhance Russian political influence abroad. Thus, while Russia’s RT network hammers home messages about Western decadence and moral decay that have become staples of right-wing discourse in the United States and Europe, the state-run Redfish media collective puts out stories supporting environmental justice and critical of American empire; abroad, Russia supports actors as eclectic as the anti-LGBTQ World Congress of Families and Wikileaks founder Julian Assange.

Coupled with a robust apparatus for amplifying existing social, economic, racial, and other cleavages online, Russia has thus positioned itself at the center of the ongoing debates about history and identity roiling Western politics. Far from taking a side in these debates, Moscow merely uses them to generate political leverage. As former Kremlin advisor Vladislav Surkov mischievously put it, “Foreign politicians blame Russia for interference in elections and referenda around the world. In fact, it is more serious than that—Russia is interfering with their minds, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness.”

While Russia is certainly not the cause of the West’s democratic backsliding, its deliberate cultivation of alternative political voices means that it is uniquely placed to benefit from democratic breakdown or the rise of non-mainstream political leaders on the left or the right.
As disruptive as Russian backing for extremist groups of the right and left is, the point is not disruption for its own sake so much as shaping decision-making in rival states to line up with Russian interests. Indeed, the Kremlin is equally willing and able to appeal to non-fringe groups in places where mainstream democratic politicians remain willing to work with Russia and its corrupt, state-dominated businesses. This dynamic may be most visible in Germany where, despite a growing backlash against Russian activities, all the major parties have what are known as Russlandversteher (Russia-understanders) or, less charitably, Putinversteher. Germany’s most prominent Russlandversteher remains former Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, today chairman of both Russia’s state-owned Rosneft oil company and the consortium building the controversial Nord Stream-2 gas pipeline. Thanks to similar webs of mutual interest, several influential figures in Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (and, even more, its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union) are equally supportive of good relations with Moscow. They include Armin Laschet, Merkel’s successor as head of the CDU and plausibly Germany’s next chancellor. This cross-party support is a major reason Merkel has refused to cancel the Nord Stream-2 project despite criticism from the United States and many smaller European states.

While these ties exist in the open, Russia also employs less transparent (and often less legal) ties to Western political figures as well, relying on what journalist Brian Whitmore terms “a tangled web of opaque front corporations, murky energy deals, and complex money-laundering schemes to ensnare foreign elites and form ready-made Kremlin lobbies.” Such ties represent a form of lobbying, but at the same time, the entanglement of Western politicians in corrupt activities where they are vulnerable to exposure and prosecution is itself a form of leverage. They have proven extraordinarily difficult for Western governments to unravel, in part because so many influential players in the West, from bankers to politicians’ family members are implicated. The Biden administration has recognized transnational corruption as a national security threat, but it remains to be seen whether it will be able to address its baleful effects not just in the United States, but across the democratic West. Until or unless it does, Russia will maintain its influence deep within Western states’ political and economic systems.
Beware of Bears: Not All Threats Come from Missiles

Whatever its domestic challenges, Russia remains a significant power with the ability to impose serious costs on the United States and its allies. Russia’s power projection capabilities will continue to exist irrespective of its economic, demographic, and other weaknesses. To be sure, those weaknesses are real, and Russia will face mounting challenges in many fields in years to come. Some of these weaknesses—such as high levels of inequality, mounting spending on social services, and mistrust of institutions—Russia shares with many other countries, including the United States. Some are legacies of the Soviet era, while others are the result of pathologies inherent in its present political model. The scale of these weaknesses should not be exaggerated, though. None of them is likely to result in a serious reconceptualization of Russia’s foreign policy goals nor, contrary to much wishful thinking in Western capitals, in the replacement of Putin (or his eventually anointed successor) by a more pro-Western regime.

For many Western critics, Putin has become a kind of bogeyman, a Machiavellian evil genius or cartoon ogre seeking to restore Russia’s empire, fracture the West, and murder his opponents in a baroquely villainous fashion. Lost in this Putin obsession is the reality that the challenge Russia presents to the West rests on deeper historical, geographic, and political foundations. Even as its economy stagnates, Russia has overhauled its military and quasi-military tools, allowing it to sustain a long-term strategic competition with the West. Part of this overhaul entails identifying vulnerabilities within Western political systems that it can exploit. This asymmetric competition does not require trillion-dollar defense budgets, particularly because Russia is unencumbered by ideological constraints and does not maintain an extensive network of alliances and deployments abroad.

Of course, the comparatively modest scale of its overseas commitments means Russia falls far short of the United States in terms of not just its military power, but also its political influence. But for achieving its objectives, Russian power is more than sufficient. Unlike its Soviet predecessor, Russia today has managed to deter Western intervention in its neighborhood, project power globally, and insert itself into the domestic politics of leading Western states without breaking the bank.
Despite his audacity in grabbing Crimea or poisoning defectors on foreign soil, as a steward of the Russian state, Putin has been cautious—perhaps exceedingly so. During his second stint in the Kremlin (since 2012), he has shown an inability or unwillingness to push through the kind of reforms that would challenge the interests of entrenched political and economic elites, but that are necessary if Russia is to take full advantage of its capabilities. The longer-needed reforms are put off, the greater the cost to Russia and its international influence.

Of course, Putin will not be in charge forever. It is possible that the end of his current term in 2024 could prove an inflection point, which is more likely to entail some kind of managed transition than a shift toward democratic rule. A post-Putin leader, especially a younger one lacking Putin’s Soviet baggage, could well be more inclined to shake up the system in ways that would allow Russia to develop a more dynamic economy—without materially affecting either Russia’s geostrategic role or the consensus underlying its pursuit of power and influence on the global stage.

One way or another, Russia is likely to be ruled for the foreseeable future by elites committed to maintaining the country’s great power status, dominating its neighborhood, and demanding a seat at the table on major international issues. Whether or not Putin is running the country after 2024, Russia will remain a powerful, ambitious state with power projection capabilities the West will be grappling with for years to come.

Notes


45. “Strategiya natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation],” The Kremlin, July 2, 2021, http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/QZw6hSk5e9gWq0plD1ZmR5cER0g5rZC.pdf.


