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Russia and the West

The Geopolitical Nihilist

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Putin's Russia may be able to wreck the geopolitical status quo, but it doesn't have the power to replace it.

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Russia's bold moves into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine give one the impression that a calculating strategist sits in the Kremlin. Putin's own public pronouncements tell us that his apparent aim is to restore Muscovite power and influence over territories deemed by him to be historically Russian. Putin is thus feared to be a shrewd competitor willing to use all forms of Russian power—from nuclear innuendo to a superiority in conventional forces to relentless information warfare—in order to build methodically a new regional order. In other words, he may be a geopolitical master.

But there is another possibility. It's plausible that he has no such well thought out vision of geopolitical reconstruction, and little or no planning for how to establish and maintain whatever new rules Moscow might impose. Even if Putin did have a new regional order in mind, he may be incapable of translating it into reality. By choice and by necessity, Putin may simply be eager to wreck the status quo with nary a thought given to what comes after. In other words, he may be a geopolitical nihilist.

Consider, for instance, that it is unclear what Putin's desired "international order" would look like. His own statements on this subject are increasingly more detached from reality, rants fueled by his own propaganda. (He suggests, for instance, that Ukraine is oppressing Russians, or that the U.S. and the West more broadly have been aggressors against Russia for the better part of two decades.) Whether he believes this nonsense or not will never be known, but there is little in such harangues to suggest that he has a positive vision of an alternative political order. We know—and he knows—what he viscerally hates, but the destruction of what he hates does not imply a replacement.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, even if Putin has a long-term vision of the order he wants to establish, he may be unable to implement it. Weak and declining revisionist powers, such as today's Russia, do not have the capacity to establish a stable regional order. They lack

the strength necessary to maintain it, even though they may have a deep desire to demolish the existing one. The best they can do is to increase uncertainty about their behavior, flailing here and there, expanding their influence and control in weakly defended adjacent regions, and more broadly, increasing the perception of risk in the mind of their opponents. The result is a volatile and unpredictable situation—costly to all, but seen by the declining revisionist as perhaps more costly to its rivals (and thus in the selfish logic of relative gains, beneficial!). A declining revisionist power is a wrecker of order.

The inability to formulate and implement a cogent and viable alternative does not mean, however, that Putin's Russia is not a serious menace to the security of Europe and the interests of the United States. Geopolitical nihilism is not the same as geopolitical passivity. Russia presents perhaps a greater problem than a strong revisionist state with clear and implementable plans for how to reorganize the international or regional order. Russia has neither the power nor the authority to maintain an order, but it has plenty of force and abundant desire to destroy the existing one. Russia has neither the power nor the authority to maintain an order, but it has plenty of force and abundant desire to destroy the existing one.

Russia is in fact still a formidable military power. It has a massive nuclear arsenal that is presented to the world as superior to the American one and as a symbol, if not a symptom, of great resilience and strength. As many analysts have observed, Russian conventional forces have undergone a dramatic, though still limited, improvement since the 2008 war in Georgia (and in any case, they are superior in size, firepower, and sophistication to those of Russia's European and Central Asian neighbors). Yet the economy is in shambles, producing little of value and drawing wealth mostly from the extraction of natural resources. Moreover, Russia's authoritarian political system is fragile, based on the so far unchallenged rule of Putin and his clan, a large propaganda apparatus fanning nationalist hysteria and resentment toward the West, and a good dose of violence targeted at political opponents and potential claimants to power. Russia is a ramshackle gas station run by a small group of well-armed, delusional gangsters.

This political, social, and economic fragility means that Russia cannot replace the existing order on Europe's eastern frontier—an order that is based on exactly those pillars fraying or outright missing in Russia. But she can destroy it because of her military might. Russia cannot compete as an economic potentate or as a politically attractive entity, but can and does employ its military force to destabilize the region. It is not surprising therefore that Ukraine can be Western and European by the Ukrainians' free choice but may still fall under Russian vassalage by the sheer brutality of Muscovite firepower. This is 21st century competition meeting 19th century extortion.

Extortion—brute force—creates an order that lasts as long as the fear it generates lasts. Were Russia a rising power, that fear and the resulting order might have some staying power. But today's Russia is not China; neither is she the post-World War II superpower that could roll over a large swath of the Eurasian landmass and impose a bloody Soviet order. Whatever Moscow

may establish in its immediate region through its armor, artillery, and nuclear threats will be backed by a flimsy state, seeking its own justification through invented myths of Western frauds, perversions, and belligerence.

The fact that Russia is unable to replace the existing order with her own stable and durable one does not mean therefore that the threat is nonexistent. On the contrary, the threat is more pronounced because the risks presented by Russia are higher. If Moscow had a clear idea of what it wanted to achieve—how far it wants to extend its influence, and what new rules of international behavior and domestic comportment it will enforce—the uncertainty would be smaller. We may, as we should, still deeply dislike and oppose the proposed order, but at a minimum the boundaries of the conflict would be well defined.

In this case, however, the vision seems to be nihilistic in the long term. Hence the on-and-off Russian interventions in Ukraine, the constant provocations in the Baltic regions, the boasts about nuclear capabilities and the willingness to use them, the Russian aerial forays from Alaska to the Gulf of Mexico, and so on. These are all attempts to shake the existing order. These actions have varied intensity and outcomes: While Ukraine is being broken apart by Russian artillery and armor, Alaska and Diego Garcia are safe from the occasional Tu-95s sputtering near their airspace. But the principle unifying all these actions is a negative one: to destabilize by introducing elements of greater risk.

Putin as the geopolitical nihilist is therefore different than the various tsars that he wants to emulate. In mostly unpleasant and violent ways, the past tsars built and rebuilt the Russian empire by expanding into adjacent lands while seeking some diplomatic arrangement with the more distant great powers. Putin expands into Russia's southern and western neighborhood but with the aspiration to destroy the stability of the post-Cold War era. He seeks no grand diplomatic bargain that could underpin a new settlement.

What such a view of Russia entails is worrisome. Geopolitical nihilism indicates that a whole spectrum of actions, deemed unlikely because of the dangers they carry, is on the table. We now know, for instance, that Putin is willing to invade —not once, but twice (Georgia in 2008 preceded Ukraine). He is likely to continue that pattern and push farther westward irrespective of the costs. He has also engaged in nuclear saber-rattling for several years (for example, the Zapad 2009 military exercises ended with a simulated use of a nuclear weapon), and he is lowering the nuclear threshold. Nihilism is not order-building; it revels in destroying it. The spectrum of actions that establish an order is limited by their effectiveness at implementing the rules, whatever they may be, of behavior: their purposefulness is constraining. The spectrum of actions that destroy order, on the other hand, is much more open-ended.

The Western strategy of waiting Russia out through a 21st-century version of containment—a mix of economic sanctions, ostracism in global fora, and very modest, mostly rhetorical, shoring up of deterrence—will not suffice. Russia cannot be let to dwell on its internal decline and

realize sooner or later its international ineptitude. Verbal rebukes and restatements of NATO's Article 5 will not turn a geopolitical nihilist into a constructive partner or even into a rival with whom we can reach a negotiated settlement. Nothing in Putin's statements and behavior suggests that Russia can be persuaded to accept the existing international rules and norms of behavior and to cease the belligerent posture it has adopted. On the contrary, this is a threat that is impossible to mitigate without a resolute and forceful policy that will physically stop and reverse the advance of Russian forces in Ukraine and be ready to do so in the future elsewhere. This can only be achieved now by arming Ukraine. The geopolitical nihilism of today's Russia will not be persuaded or negotiated away or simply waited out. It has to be defeated.

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