



Expert Comment

Beyond the impasse

Richard Sakwa (2018)

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Beyond the impasse

Richard Sakwa

The European security system and international relations as a whole are at a deep impasse.¹ The clash of world orders has provoked a clash of narratives. On one side, organic intellectuals, in the proliferating mass of think tanks and quasi-academic institutions, lament the threat to the 'US-led liberal international order'. As Russia's resistance intensifies, so does these intellectuals' hostility towards Putin and Russia in general, despite insisting that such hostility is towards Putin and not a manifestation of 'Russophobia' (Ostrovsky, 2017). Leading American politicians and commentators have labelled Russia 'a greater threat than [ISIL, the Islamic State]'. All this confirms the structural impasse at which the post-Cold War European security system finds itself and the concomitant dead end in which Russia is potentially trapped. The solutions of an earlier era have become the problems of today. The 'transformation' of European international relations represented by Mikhail Gorbachev's plans for a 'common European home' (described as Greater Europe today) encountered the entrenched logic of the growing Atlantic system based on the ideology of 'a Europe whole and free'. Both models aspire to be normatively benign and progressive, but they assume darker hues in confrontation with each other. The attempt to change Russia through enlargement rather than through transformation has failed, setting up the field for confrontation. This impasse could be managed through either negotiation (some sort of

¹ This paper draws from Richard Sakwa (2017), *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), especially Chapter 2. An earlier version of this paper was published as Sakwa's "The International System and the Clash of New World Orders", appearing in Peter W. Schulze (Ed.), *Multipolarity: The Promise of Disharmony* (pp. 27–51), Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2018.

grand bargain), by continued muddling through along with the ever-present danger of either deliberate or accidental escalation, or by force. This paper examines the reasons for the dead-end relations between Russia and its Western neighbours and examines some possible ways to overcome the crisis.

Into the impasse

The bipolar system based on the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences of 1945 recognised the existing balance of power and hence created a system with recognised spheres of influence in the core area in Europe, thereby spurring various 'proxy wars' across the world. This was accompanied in due course by a set of 'rules of the game' that provided a certain type of peace in Europe for over a generation. The Yalta system reintroduced a hierarchy of sovereignty into the European state system and was inadequate to that degree. This deficit was acknowledged in the Helsinki Final Act of August 1975, and its 'Third Basket' provisions on human rights began the process of transcending the Yalta system. This in turn was formulated in the Paris Charter of November 1990, which, while stressing a 'Europe whole and free', bent the stick too far the other way. While reasserting equal sovereignty of all European states, the Charter made no provision for the realities of great power politics. Europe remained in this theoretical, and harshly practical, no-man's land in the years of the 'cold peace' between the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the onset of what some have called the 'new Cold War' in 2014. The expansion of the Atlantic security system provoked a classic security dilemma wherein any attempt to increase the security of one state provoked another to assume defensive responses, initiating a cycle of escalation that has proven hard to break.²

² For the classic statement, see Robert Jervis's (1976) *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

The expansion of NATO is a spectacular case of ‘over-balancing’, in which the perceived threat from a potentially resurgent Russia prompted a set of pre-emptive measures that ultimately created a potential threat the initial balancing was designed to counter. In turn, Russia perceived itself to be under threat, so it responded with measures that exacerbated the threat perceptions of its neighbours and ultimately of the Atlantic alliance as a whole (Krickovic, 2016). From a realist point of view, this new confrontation was unnecessary. For the first two post-communist decades, Russia did not challenge American primacy or even the Atlantic security system and instead tried to find a way in which mutual security interests could be combined. In the end, no adequate formula was identified. Russia objected to the way that hegemonic power was exercised, including various neo-containment measures that eventually forced the country into a strategic dead end. This outcome prompted the creation of an anti-hegemonic alignment with China and some other countries based on a pluralist view of the international system and rejection of a mono-order international system.

This does not mean that Russia or China are ‘revisionist’ powers, even though various US national security documents from late 2017 described them as such. Already the US’s *National Security Strategy 2015* had warned that the US “[would] continue to impose significant costs on Russia through sanctions” and would “deter Russian aggression” (The White House, 2015, p. 25). President Donald J. Trump’s proclaimed intentions to improve relations with Russia provoked a storm of hostility in which Republican neo-conservatives and Democrat liberal internationalists united to stymie moves in that direction. The US *National Security Strategy* of 18 December 2017 represented a return to elements of the ‘Bush doctrine’ of American primacy, including a wider role for nuclear weapons against ‘non-nuclear strategic attacks’. The document warned against the “revisionist powers of China and Russia”, ranked alongside the “rogue powers of Iran and North Korea” and “transnational threat organisations, particularly jihadist groups” (The White House, 2017, p.

25). The previous edition issued under President Barack Obama had listed Russia as a threat alongside the Ebola virus and ISIS. Russia's subsequent elevation to join the company of 'rogue states' recognised that the issue was a realist one of great power conflict rather than the emotional normativism of the US-led liberal international order. The new *Strategy* reflected the reassertion of the influence of the traditional Republican national security establishment over the hegemonic messianism of the neo-conservatives and the globalism of the liberal interventionists. The new strategy had nothing to say about promoting democracy, a key theme of the Bush and Obama presidencies, and instead reflected Trump's anti-globalist 'America first' concerns.

These themes were accentuated in the new *National Defense Strategy*, an 11-page unclassified version of which was issued on 19 January 2018. The document argued that the US was emerging from a period of 'strategic atrophy' and needed to face 'increased global disorder' in which "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security" (Department of Defense, 2018, p. 1). At the top of the list of challengers was China, characterised as "a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbours while militarizing features in the South China Sea" (Department of Defense, 2018, p. 1). As for Russia, "it has violated the borders of nearby nations and pursues veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbours" (Department of Defense, 2018, p. 1). The two states were labelled 'revisionist powers' in the *National Security Strategy*. The list of charges against Russia was far-reaching: "Russia seeks veto authority over nations on its periphery in terms of their governmental, economic, and diplomatic decisions, to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favour. The use of emerging technologies to discredit and subvert democratic processes in Georgia, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine is concern enough, but when coupled with its expanding and modernising nuclear arsenal the challenge is clear" (Department of Defense,

2018, p. 2). The document noted the “resilient, but weakening, post WWII international order” and warned that competition with China and Russia threatened America’s global predominance and eroded its military advantage (Department of Defense, 2018, p. 2). The document made no bones about its concern over the loss of American military superiority, which used to be total and unquestionable: “We could generally deploy our forces when we wanted, assemble them where we wanted, and operate how we wanted. Today, every domain is contested – air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace” (Department of Defense, 2018, p. 3). Such days would not return, and Russia was indeed one of the main challengers.

The *Nuclear Posture Review* of 27 January 2018 once again lamented that in some way the US had “continued to reduce the number and salience of nuclear weapons” while others, “including Russia and China, have moved in the opposite direction” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 1). The document asserted that “The United States does not wish to regard either Russia or China as an adversary and seeks stable relations with both” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 2) but went on to outline an ambitious programme for the modernisation of US nuclear forces (previously initiated by Obama) that could not but ramp up nuclear confrontation. In particular, the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons was reduced by increasing the flexibility of US nuclear options by including low-yield options in its sea-launched ballistic missile warheads while developing its nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile. This strategic thinking, redolent of the worst periods of the Cold War, argued that “These supplements will enhance deterrence by denying potential adversaries any mistaken confidence that limited nuclear deployment can provide a useful advantage over the United States and its allies” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 7).

Out of the impasse: Theoretical considerations

Several points can be made in examining a way out of this impasse. The key point is that the escape from the dead end in all probability lies not in the West but in Asia. As the classical Eurasians of the 1920s argued, the 'exit' lies to the East – although this does not mean adopting their overall stance of an unbridgeable gulf between Russia and Europe.

The international system

There can be no feasible route out of the impasse without an understanding of the international system in which inter-state and multilateral relations are conducted. Drawing on English School thinking, the international system can be envisaged as a two-level construct. At the top, there are the developing apparatuses and processes of global governance (termed the 'secondary institutions of international society' by the English School), with the UN at the apex and complemented by an increasingly ramified network of international law and normative expectations. The English School distinguishes between the primary institutions of international society, comprising sovereignty, territoriality, balance of power, war, international law, diplomacy and nationalism, and these European-generated elements that have been expanded to the rest of the world (Bull & Watson, 1984). The so-called secondary institutions include the UN and other bodies that seek to generalise solidarist practices in a plural international system (Buzan, 2014). They cover the institutions of international financial governance, derived initially from the Bretton Woods system comprising the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and the system of global economic governance, notably the World Trade Organisation. Here also are the international legal and environmental covenants as well as those covering the rules of war and international humanitarian practices. These secondary institutions are universal by definition, whereas primary institutions generate practices of exclusion with the Western

core imposing its own 'standards of civilisation' and acting as the gatekeeper, notably in the context of colonialism (Gong, 1984).

Although initially most secondary institutions were of Western origin, their development has been governed from the outset less by expansion than by mutual constitution.³ For example, the establishment of the UN drew on various Western traditions as well as Soviet, Islamic, and other ideas. As the secondary institutions strengthen and become more genuinely universal, they threaten established patterns of Western hegemony while providing the sinews for order after the waning of this hegemony. English School thinking suggests that the international state system evolved out of institutions like the state, territoriality, the balance of power, diplomacy, and sovereignty, which formed in Europe before expanding first through colonialism and then revolutionary nationalists across the world to become truly universal. By contrast, many institutions of international society were created by allies during the war, reflected Western values, and were at first relatively exclusive. Without challenging this genealogy, it should be noted that from the first system, a universalist dynamic was embedded in the primary institutions of international society as well as in top-level secondary institutions, which have since become generalised as institutions of 'global governance'. They have also become more delineated and gained authority.

Hedley Bull's (1995) classic study, *The Anarchical Society*, stresses the elements of cooperation and regulation in state relations, highlighting how transnational ideas generate norms and interests that are institutionalised in the form of international organisations and rules.⁴ He explicitly did not "place major emphasis upon international organisations such as the United Nations" and instead found "the basic causes of such order as exists in world

³ This is explored by the various authors in Tim Dunne and Christian Reut-Smith (Eds.), *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴ For a recent analysis, see Buzan's (2014), *An Introduction to the English School of International Relations* (Cambridge: Polity).

politics” in the “institutions of international society that arose before these international organisations were established” (Bull, 1995, pp. xvii–xviii). Bull’s approach retained much of the traditional thinking about a state-centric world but was tempered by his view that states have common interests that can be best advanced through the cooperative institutions of international society.⁵ These are the structures of universalism and inter-state cooperation that became increasingly ramified after the Second World War.⁶ It is in this sense that I use the term ‘international society’, a broad conceptualisation of the institutions of global governance. After the end of the Cold War, these institutions were anticipated to gain greater autonomy and substance; instead, as Cold War bipolarity gave way to unipolarity, they continued to be eclipsed by great power politics.

This is where we move to the second level. Beneath the solidarity of international society, we have a number of competing world orders. First among them is the liberal international order, which was born in the early years of the 20th century and then formulated by Woodrow Wilson in terms of a commitment to an Atlantic-based system of universal order. After the Second World War, this became developed as the US-led liberal international order. During the Cold War years, this was countered by a Soviet-led alternative model of world order based on claims of the socialist transcendence of capitalist militarism and colonialism. There were also other putative world orders, including that defined by Maoist China as the Third World. The pre-eminent project for world order is the Atlantic community and the broader but increasingly anachronistic appellation of ‘the West’. In the original English School formulation, the international society of states devised in Europe expanded in successive waves to encompass the whole world. This truly was an

⁵ For the articulation of a less statist ontology of international society than Hedley Bull’s, see Adam Watson (1992), *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative International Analysis*, reissued with a new introduction by Barry Buzan and Richard Little (London: Routledge).

⁶ Anne-Marie Slaughter’s (2017), *A New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) identifies a dense network of ‘government networks’ that increasingly coordinate cross-border cooperation.

‘expansion’, enlarging a system into which Russia, with its characteristic ambivalence, was soon incorporated (Neumann, 2011). The original expansion model is based on a single-level system; however, with the development of ‘secondary institutions’ and their associated sharing of sovereignty on functional issues (e.g., the environment), the single-planed model has become inadequate.

The Historical West and the Greater West: Transformation vs. enlargement

The collapse of the state socialist alternative model of modernity represented by the Soviet system was not followed by Russia’s anticipated seamless return to what Gorbachev-era intellectuals called ‘the main highway of history’.⁷ It turned out that history has many highways and byways. At the end of the Cold War, Russia aspired to join the Historical West but believed that the very act of joining would change the country’s character such that it would be transformed into a Greater West. Russia asserted it was a senior constitutive member of international society, a founding member of the UN, and a permanent member of its Security Council, all of which it sought to leverage to transform the Historical Western order. In the Gorbachevian variation, Moscow argued it had done more than anyone to bring an end to what it increasingly perceived as a futile Cold War and therefore deserved some sort of special status in a reconstituted Greater West. The self-willed disintegration of the Soviet bloc represented a pledge of Moscow’s bona fides as a member of the expanded Western order. This also applied in the regional context, where the idea of a common European home (today called Greater Europe) would have established a cooperative pan-European community. Instead, Moscow was offered guest membership in the existing enterprises, namely the Historical West and the smaller Europe represented by the European Union. For historical, status, geographical, and security reasons, this type of

⁷ For a classic discussion, see Yurii N. Afanas’ev (Ed.), *Inogo ne dano* (Moscow: Progress, 1988).

membership was unacceptable; Moscow would not enter into some sort of neo-colonial apprenticeship to enter the Historical West. From this foundational difference all the rest flows.

It is to some extent understandable why the Historical West refused to transform itself with Russian membership. There were fears about norm dilution, especially concerning human rights; institutional incoherence if Russia joined or became affiliated with bodies such as NATO; and concern about the loss of US leadership, especially in crisis situations (as in the various conflicts in the former Yugoslavia). These concerns were enhanced by the strong showing of various nationalist and populist movements in the December 1993 Russian parliamentary election and by the substantial return of the Communists in the December 1995 election. At the theoretical level, the key point is that the US-led liberal international order effectively claimed to be synonymous with international society. In this conception, world order emerges not out of cooperative (solidarist) inter-state practices regulated by international society but rather out of American leadership of the liberal international order. The institutions of international society and the liberal international order are effectively fused.⁸ This does not mean that the US-led coalition gets its way all the time – in fact, the UN, as a product of the Yalta order, remains a recalcitrant body because of the veto powers wielded by Russia and China as well as their allies in the global South. Hence, there is the potential for divergence between multilateral processes and the Western hegemonic formation. Relations between the US and the UN have been far from easy, prompting complaints by US legislators about the disproportionate burden. The US contributes 22% of the main UN budget and nearly 29% of peacekeeping costs (Quinn, 2017). There have been various attempts to bypass the UN's authority through various 'coalitions of the willing', as

⁸ For a critique of how Western powers (especially the US) used the UN to advance their own influence, see Shirley Hazzard (1973), *Defeat of an Ideal: Self-Destruction of the United Nations* (London: Macmillan).

in Iraq in 2003. The idea of a 'League of Democracies' was also intended to achieve similar autonomy from international society in the normative sphere.

Anti-hegemonic alignment

The US-led liberal international order is to be found at this second level. Its main alternative today is the anti-hegemonic alignment of Russia, China, and some allied countries. The essence of this alternative alignment is not that it repudiates the rules and norms of the top-level international society, but it denies that this top level in any way 'belongs' to the US-led order. The anti-hegemonic alignment is no less rule-based than the US-led system, and in some ways more so since it so far does not have America's power to impose exceptions to its own rules. Three points are crucial in understanding this alternative model of world order. First, it is more than a reversion to crude Westphalian internationalism because of its enduring commitment to the rules generated by the institutions of international society. Second, it is anti-hegemonic rather than 'counter'-hegemonic in that it opposes the very idea of a single state or constellation of states (described as an 'order') being able to impose its particular values and power structures as universal. In other words, it is not simply a movement established in opposition to the international order known traditionally as 'the West'; instead, it seeks to transcend the idea of contesting orders to create a more cooperative order. Third, it is an 'alignment' rather than a bloc or any other more substantive organisational form, although it does contain bodies that have achieved a substantial degree of organisational coherence, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. This approach also sheds light on the liberal international order itself, which is a combination of a power and normative system. These norms are fundamentally important, although some US presidents have emphasised certain aspects over others. For example, Barack Obama was less concerned about the maintenance of American 'primacy' (a term that is susceptible to contradictory

definitions) than the advancement of women's rights, gay rights, and democracy, a stance that represented an important redefinition of the terms of American predominance.

A multi-order world

The implicit claim of co-terminality between the US-led liberal international order and order itself was challenged by Russia from the first level, supported by other re-emerging or rising powers. The fundamental Russian argument is the traditional state-centric one: that the international system is made up of a plurality of states with their own interests and that the post-Cold War inversion, which claimed a certain universality for the liberal international order (often described under the guise of globalisation), was unacceptable. The ideological framework in which Russia asserted the pluralist model functions through the idea of multipolarity. On the second level, there are nation states and their various regional combinations, creating what some have called a 'multi-order world' (Flockhart, 2016). As Amitav Acharya stressed, the US-led liberal international order was never genuinely global, with the Soviet bloc, China, India, and large parts of the 'third world' outside; rather, "it should be seen as a limited international order, rather than an inclusive global order" (Acharya, 2017, p. 271). He argued that the foundations of the liberal order have been eroding for some time, including the loss of some important domestic constituencies, and that Trump's election was a consequence rather than the cause of this erosion. He further contended that a 'multiplex world' is emerging in which "elements of the liberal order survive, but are subsumed in a complex of multiple, crosscutting international orders" (Acharya, 2017, p. 272).

Multipolarity suggests different poles in the framework of a single-level international system. In the binary model presented here, the various suborders and states interact horizontally in the sphere of international relations but relate vertically with international society in what could be called the 'sphere of norms'. Neither is exclusive, and norms play

an important part in international relations; yet in the normative relationship between states and institutions of international society (e.g., the UN), power and other considerations of international relations play no small part. This model of the international system is multipolar at the level of horizontal state interactions, but polycentrism is tempered by vertical interactions between the order of states and the order represented by international society. The universalist normative aspirations of international society are challenged by the particularistic features of competing states and blocs. Sovereignty is shared in the vertical order but contested and defended in relations between states at the horizontal level.

Flockhart noted that a complex network of 'inter-order' relationships will determine the character of the coming 'multi-order world', but for her the world orders operate at the single-state level (Flockhart, 2016, p. 5). This sophisticated analysis also applies a two-level model but differs in suggesting several 'orders' or international societies nested within an overall international system. Although I draw on Flockhart's insights, my model is rather different. Inter-state interactions in my model are tempered by the vertical relationship with international society, and a different sort of pluralism operates in the international system as a whole. Fu Ying, a former deputy foreign minister and then chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress, alluded to this in her speech at the Munich Security Conference on 13 February 2016, when she stressed that China supports the current international order. It is important to note that the word she used was 'international order'; the Chinese seldom talk about 'world order'. What China refers to is the UN-based system including international institutions and norms. Chinese officialdom avoids the term 'world order' because of the power assumptions inherent within it. Fu Ying (2016) clarified that China had reservations about the practices of the US-led world order but rejected the idea that China was creating a parallel order, stating, "of course not, we are part of the international order".

Monism and pluralism

Russia's traditional Westphalian statism is tempered by a commitment to international society, of which it claims (as does China) to have been a founding member. There is a profound historical dimension to this, given the extensive body of literature describing global order before European hegemony (Abu-Lughod, 1991). Today, the putative autonomy of international society constrains the freedom of manoeuvre of dominant powers, provoking a hostile reaction among universalists in Washington (whether under a neo-conservative or liberal internationalist guise). On the other side, international society remains for non-Western powers too deeply rooted in the structure of Western hegemony. Their goal is thus to universalise universalism – that is, to make international society work genuinely independently as the highest instance of the common aspiration of humanity and the nations of which it is comprised.⁹ More prosaically, there is now a growing demand for the institutions of global financial, legal, and political governance to work autonomously, resisting the tutelary claims of the liberal hegemony and the latter's predominance in the Bretton Woods international financial institutions.¹⁰

Critics of liberal internationalist hegemony have gone further to question whether this order was ever pluralist. This line of thinking has been advanced in a large body of literature that describes the moment of American unipolar dominance in terms of 'empire'. In other words, the Wilsonian form of liberal internationalism represented a distinctive form of monist thinking that, after the asymmetrical end of the Cold War and in the absence of a substantive alternative, was radicalised to become axiological in its interactions with those outside the

⁹ For discussion of the issues, see Acharya (2014), "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies", *International Studies Quarterly*, 58(4), pp. 647–59; see also Acharya's (2016) 'Advancing Global IR: Challenges, Contentions, and Contributions', *International Studies Review*, 18(1), pp. 4–15.

¹⁰ For a detailed interrogation of English School thinking on international society and how it works in practice, see Andrew Hurrell (2007), *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), including a discussion of regional pluralism (Chapter 10) and 'empire reborn' (Chapter 11).

hegemonic order. The result was ruinous engagement in futile military expeditions that destabilised entire regions and eventually blew back into Europe in the form of waves of refugees, adding to the swelling tide of economic migrants. This was accompanied by an important change in Western perceptions of China. Until around 2010, China was expected to join the Western-led liberal international order as a 'responsible stakeholder', and in many ways this was achieved; but the Chinese definition of responsibility entailed (as it did in Russia) a commitment to the impartial rules of international society on the vertical axis along with resistance to hegemonic practices at the horizontal level. Up until then, China was considered as open to being pushed in the right direction but was subsequently viewed as moving in entirely the wrong direction. It was at this point that neo-containment strategies were devised, including the US 'pivot' to Asia. Then, in various national security documents issued by the Trump administration, China as well as Russia was described as a 'revisionist' power. There is now the potential for counter-radicalisation of the anti-hegemonic alignment, which will only deepen the emerging global fault line between the Historical West and anti-hegemonic powers.

Russian and Chinese neo-revisionism

In the early years, Russian thinking tended to mirror the Historical West's own conflation of the liberal international order with international society writ large. Russia viewed itself a founding member of substantial elements of post-war international society, hence it was automatically a constitutive member of the liberal international order. The failure to transform the Historical West into the Greater West in the end reinforced the never-ending domestic debate around Russia's place in the world. When Yevgeny Primakov served as foreign minister between January 1996 and September 1998 and then prime minister until May 1999, he adopted a foreign policy stance of competitive coexistence, drawing on Nikita Khrushchev's earlier idea of peaceful coexistence. Between 2000 and 2012, Putin believed

that the relationship could be better than mere 'coexistence' and thus advanced a 'new realist' agenda of engagement with the West. Even under the liberal guise of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, this attempt failed in Moscow's eyes. From 2012, in his third term, Putin then adopted a politics of resistance within a neo-revisionist framework, including developing institutions of Eurasian integration and alignment with powers critical of Western hegemony. This move was accompanied by longing glances towards the West that may have been and the Europe that it may one day become. Putin's work was also complemented by an evolution in conceptual understanding, to the point that today Russia defends the autonomy of international society against the hegemony of the Historical West. Although reflecting a shift in emphasis during the post-communist era, Russia's defence of the normative order of international law (described as part of the broader order of international society above) represents a resumption of Tsarist and Soviet traditions (Mälksoo, 2015).

This renewed appreciation for the multi-layered quality of the international system is reflected in Russia's neo-revisionism: horizontally, critiquing the hegemonic ambitions and double standards of the liberal international order; and vertically, defending the autonomy of international society. Article 15.4 of the Russian Constitution proclaims the supremacy of international law over domestic legislation, and although a law of December 2015 allows the Constitutional Court to adjudicate the application of the principle, the Constitution has not been amended. The traditional advocacy of multipolarity has now become a more sophisticated defence of multilevel pluralism as well as the pluralism of state-centric international relations. Russia's neo-revisionism does not seek to isolate Russia from international society but rather challenges the Historical West's right to define its norms (Browning, 2008). Russia has reverted to its traditional self-representation as the guardian of international law. As Fu Ying intimated for China, this does not mean the creation of a counter-hegemonic 'world order' or bloc in opposition to the Historical West and reflects

instead a more profound anti-hegemonic politics. There is no attempt to destroy the framework of international society, but the objection is to the hegemonic practices of a liberal order that claims to be universal.

The tensions and contradictions of the cold peace and Moscow's frustrations generated an anti-hegemonic alignment of states resistant to the hegemonic practices of the Historical West while still defending the autonomy and universalism of international society. The leading power in this alternative constellation is, of course, China. Russia's relations with China are better than they have ever been, yet points of tension exist in the bilateral relationship and the various institutions and networks in which the relationship is embedded. Nevertheless, this alternative alignment is underpinned by a common aspiration to share in the management of global affairs and working together to render the structures of global governance more independent. Russia's so-called 'turn to Asia' can be seen in classically realist terms as part of its long-term attempt to balance against American hegemony; more substantively, however, it asserts the normative ambition to create a more plural international system. Pragmatic factors are also at work, including the developmental needs of the Russian Far East and Russia's insertion into the dynamically developing East Asian region (Korolev, 2016). This shift represents a partial recasting of Russian self-representation away from the West towards a more Eurasian – if not Asian – identity. This does not entail the repudiation of Russia's long-term ambition to become part of a transformed Greater West or Greater Europe, although there are voices in Moscow calling for precisely that, accompanied by a mobilisation model of economic development.

The multilateralism of international society in this model is decoupled from the hegemonic order. This entails the restoration of pluralism to the international system, whose normativity is based on pluralism itself. In other words, cultural diversity, different paths of development, and pluralist polity construction repudiate the idea that the historical experience of one set of states can act as a universal model for all others. This model also

achieves Russia's long-term goal of an international security system that transcends military blocs.¹¹ This is a pluralism founded on the belief that each state must resolve its own challenges and that historical experience cannot be transplanted from one context to another (the conceit of much post-communist democracy promotion). This does not mean that comparative lessons cannot be learned, but it rejects programmatic attempts to transfer models. This is the conceptual basis for the rejection of norm transfer as an appropriate framework for inter-state relations. It does not simply refer to the restoration of spheres of influence and the defence of state sovereignty of the Westphalian sort, as resistance to Western hegemony is accompanied by attempts to strengthen the universalism represented by international society. Hegel and Kant are each rejected, but this does not equate to a reversion to a purely Hobbesian view of the world.

Out of the impasse: Practical measures

The strategic impasse at which Russia found itself after the Cold War is reflected in the broader impasse in relations between Russia and the West. As Walter Russell Mead put it, "Russia cannot be transformed into a democracy or won over as a genuine friend by any steps that the West can take. We must think about a Russia that is a neighbour to Europe but quite possibly for many years to come does not share the values, hopes and political system of its neighbours" (Mead, 2016, p. 46). On 17 March 2016, the US defence secretary Ashton Carter listed five factors posing major global strategic challenges, placing Russia in first place followed by China, North Korea, Iran, and terrorism. Russia and China were the most 'stressing competitors', with Carter asserting that his policy was based on a 'strong and balanced approach to deter Russian aggression' in Eastern Europe (Ferdinando, 2016).

¹¹ Expressed, for example, by Putin in his Victory Day speech, *New York Times*, 9 May 2016.

All of this reflects fundamental tensions in global affairs. After a quarter-century, the dead end of the cold peace in 2014 gave way to something new. This is not simply a 'new Cold War' but a period in which Russia looks to achieve a strategic breakthrough away from the perceived impasse of the cold peace years. In the Russian view, it has a number of allies in this process. For the first time since the fall of communism, the idea of a 'new world order', a term used by Mikhail Gorbachev in his landmark speech at the UN on 7 December 1988, is once again on the horizon. Old-style Western-focused globalisation is receding, and a range of regional blocs are beginning to exert their influence to create a more plural world system.

Can the insecurities generated by the stalemate be overcome? The condition for this would be for one side or the other – or both – to change. Concerning Russia, this would mean taking the path adopted by Britain and France, namely absorption into the US-led Atlantic system. In practical terms, this would involve abandoning objections to NATO enlargement, renouncing attempts to build some sort of post-Soviet Eurasian economic community, giving up on close alignment with China and other partners in the SCO and BRICS, and accepting the tutelage of the EU. In exchange, Russia would be 'normalised' as a member of the Atlantic system. Liberals would argue that this would also entail a domestic transformation towards greater institutionalised political pluralism, genuinely competitive and free elections, regular leadership turnover, and possibly constitutional reform to reduce the powers of the presidency along with guarantees for a genuinely free legal system and independent Constitutional Court. Realists, however, argue that domestic and international politics are independent of each other and that changes in foreign policy would not necessarily require domestic change. This may well be the case, but the Atlantic system is an alliance avowedly based on a system of values, and any change in Russia's foreign policy orientations would not be considered credible without domestic changes. Either way, Russia would remain a great power but a diminished one like the former

European imperial powers. It would become, in the language of globalists, a 'responsible stakeholder' in the existing power system.

As for the other side, there are two paths towards the grand bargain. The first is one in which the Atlantic system begins to rethink its contribution to the breakdown of the European security order and thus opens itself up to new ideas outside the enlargement paradigm. The fear that a Greater Europe is simply another way of driving a 'wedge' between the two wings of the Atlantic system would give way to acceptance that European security can be genuinely plural and indivisible and that Moscow's voice could legitimately be integrated with veto powers. This would of course mean that the Atlantic system is genuinely transformed into a Euro-Atlantic security system, which would open the door to transaction and pragmatic relations. It would not require renouncing the normative values on which the Atlantic security system is based, but it would necessitate recognition that when these values become embedded in an exclusive power system that enlarges – irrespective of the views of a major actor in the area in which the alliance is enlarging – these values become instrumental and are subverted. An intellectual revolution of this sort is unlikely and would certainly be rejected by those who begin from the premise that enlargement is simply a matter for those who are the subject of enlargement based on 'free choice' (regardless of how much this free choice is manufactured or what effect it may have on the security of others).

The second route to a grand bargain is change from the top, which could take two forms. The first would be US defection from its traditional interpretation of primacy as 'leadership' and a shift towards Trumpian 'greatness' and a modification of primacy itself. The bipartisan liberal global and neo-conservative policy of enlargement endured all the way from Bill Clinton to Obama and Hillary Clinton but was challenged by Trump as he renounced democracy promotion and the idea of the West as a community of values. Trump did not renounce US primacy but sought to exercise it through a policy of 'greatness' rather than

through traditional forms of 'leadership'. Leadership entails the maintenance of the US-centred alliance network, working through multilateral bodies that reinforce American primacy and ensure open markets in recent years through regional free trade and service organisations. The policy of greatness is more unilateralist, open to protectionism, and discounts the value of the alliance network. The radical nature of Trump's challenge to the post-Cold War bipartisan consensus was enough to prompt a concerted attempt by liberal globalists and his Republican opponents to destroy his presidency. It was not accidental that Russia was the stick with which they beat him, because a change in relations with Russia would have represented a shift away from the old globalism.

The US defects from the liberal international order

One of the few consistent principles defended by Trump was improved relations with Russia. His commitment to this stance provoked suspicion that Russia had some sort of hold over him, that Trump willingly colluded with Moscow to advance his goals (such as the defeat of Clinton in the November 2016 presidential election), or that more venal interests were at work and Trump hoped to profit through business with Russia. None of these interpretations make much sense, which leaves only the most obvious one: Trump realised that confrontation with the other major nuclear superpower was dangerous and unwise and that Russia ultimately would not threaten American primacy if Moscow's interests were considered. These interests converge with those of America through traditional forms of 'leadership': the common fight against terrorism; nuclear non-proliferation (notably in Iran and North Korea); the establishment of a stable and legitimate government in Syria; overcoming the dreadful legacy of the wars in Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya; common economic interests in exploiting Arctic and complex energy resources through cooperation between leading American and Russian companies; and some cultural convergence on a conservative platform of family values, blue-collar populism, and opposition to liberal

messianism. There were also substantial points of disagreement: whereas Russia is ready to acknowledge American primacy and even ‘greatness’, it is not willing to accept American ‘leadership’ as exercised from Clinton to Obama; Russia would defend its foreign policy autonomy in the framework of multipolarity; Russia’s alignment with China was non-negotiable, and any American attempt to drive a ‘wedge’ between the two would fail; Russia was aligned with Iran, and despite points of tension in the relationship, as long as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action held, the relationship would be stable; and Russia would resist any American attempts to shape its domestic politics.

The EU exercises strategic autonomy

The Ukraine crisis reinforced Euro-Atlantic solidarity while a plethora of challenges revealed the EU’s vulnerability. The Syrian crisis showed that NATO was unable to guarantee European security on such issues as terrorism and refugees, The EU’s lack of adequate security instruments was also exposed, encouraging member states to take matters into their own hands and thereby undermining the EU’s institutions and policies. The EU’s Global Strategy, adopted by the European Council on 28 June 2016, indicates moves towards greater security coordination within Europe. The document stressed that “peace and stability are no longer a given. Russia’s violation of international law and the destabilisation of Ukraine, on top of protracted conflicts in the wider Black Sea region, have challenged the European security order at its core. The EU will stand united in upholding international law, democracy, human rights, cooperation and each country’s right to choose its future freely” (European Council, 2016, p. 33). The wave of terrorist attacks in France and Germany in 2015 and 2016 highlighted the need for greater coordination of intelligence and border services. The NATO Warsaw summit on 8–9 July saw steps towards greater cooperation between NATO and the EU on naval patrols and other issues, but these advancements occurred concurrently with the EU developing independent capacities. It is too early to

predict the consequences of the Brexit vote of 23 June, when 52% voted for the UK to leave the EU. It could well accelerate moves towards greater integration, certainly within the Eurozone and in defence matters. There is not much popular support for 'more Europe', but Brexit is unlikely to lead to greater fragmentation.

Change in the EU could open the door to some new 'grand bargain' or even substantive dialogue. Germany would have to take the lead on this with French support, and there were already indications of a shift when Angela Merkel in January 2017 responded to Trump's criticism of her open-door migration policy by stressing that "Europe's fate is in our hands" and in May noted that "The times in which we could rely fully on others – they are somewhat over" (Smale & Erlanger, 2017, para. 3). Europe would henceforth need to rely more on itself, opening the door to the long-term Russian ambition for the EU to advance a genuinely European – rather than Atlanticist – agenda. A new pan-European continentalism would render the old Atlantic power system redundant.

Russia has long sought a new European security treaty, and the possibility of this as part of a grand bargain would entail the creation of some sort of European Security Council, representing the EU, the European Economic Union, NATO, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and the great powers. Such an arrangement would respect the sovereignty of states but would also provide a forum for the resolution of long-standing 'frozen conflicts' by entrenching respect for divergent state interests.¹² However, even the vague prospect of such a deal provoked a virulent reaction in Kiev and Warsaw, fearing that their fates would once again be resolved without their participation. These concerns are genuine but remain locked in the 'old thinking' based on the 'Europe whole and free' monistic ideology. It is difficult to see how an inclusive European order could in any way be detrimental to their

¹² For an analysis of the 'commitment problems' in a grand bargain of this sort, see Krickovic and Weber's (2017) article "Commitment issues: The Syrian and Ukraine crises as bargaining failures of the post-Cold War international order" in *Problems of Post-Communism* (pp. 1–12).

interests. More broadly, this approach is in keeping with the logic of responses identified by Robert Jervis. He distinguished between deterrence model remedies, seeking to contain or confront a potential aggressor, or spiral remedy models, which try to reassure the potential disruptor by accommodating some of its demands (Jervis, 1978). In the case of Russia, the deterrence model has been applied since the end of the Cold War, creating an impasse in relations, whereas the spiral model has never been attempted in earnest.

Escape comes from the East

The Russian and Chinese anti-hegemonic alignment in defence of the normative commitment to international society and pluralistic international relations challenges realist arguments. John Mearsheimer contended that the 21st century would be shaped by US–China relations and not US–Russia relations. He further asserted that China’s increasing strength provokes ‘intense security competition with the US’. In his view, there are three possible options: first, Russia aligns with China; second, Russia aligns with the US; and third, Russia remains neutral. Facing US pressure, Russia was aligning with China: the US and its elites “failed to appreciate Russia’s legitimate security concerns by pushing NATO’s eastward expansion” (Khlebnikov, 2016, para. 8).¹³ Some Chinese scholars have endorsed this view, arguing that while relations with Russia will remain stable, the Sino-American relationship will become increasingly turbulent. American leaders are unlikely to renounce their hegemonic ambitions, so the Russo-Chinese partnership will serve as a healthy check on Washington’s “unipolar folly” (Xiang, 2016, para. 13). However, neither realist nor liberal internationalist views adequately capture the dynamics of the contemporary international system. In the two-level model, international society centred on the UN, the institutions of global economic and political governance, and the structures of international law temper the

¹³ Refer also to an interview, accessible from http://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/video/john-mearsheimer-we-are-moving-to-a-multipolar-world-with-three-great-powers/?sphrase_id=42994.

sovereignty of states (the liberal view); but at the level of international relations, states retain their autonomy and engage in class power plays. International politics in the binary international system is constituted by the constant interplay of sub-systems. International society in this reading is a common endeavour devised by states in the post-war era to temper militarised anarchy and short-sighted economic nationalism. But at the level of inter-state international relations, hegemonic and anti-hegemonic struggles continue.

The fundamental goal of Russia's anti-hegemonic strategy is unclear; is it simply to enhance its bargaining power to lever its way into a Greater West? Certainly, some of its associates in the East believe this to be the case. They assume that Russia's foundational identity as European will ultimately win out, rendering its alignment with Eastern powers and engagement in anti-hegemonic strategies instrumental and contingent. The Kremlin leaders are rational enough to understand the dangerous futility of any attempt to defeat, destroy, or in any way militarily challenge the power of the Atlantic system. Certainly, the aim is to modify the behaviour of the Historical West, hence ensuring Russia's greater military and political security accompanied by a continued transformative impulse. In the absence of a mode of reconciliation as well as a basic common language, this neo-revisionist modification strategy has assumed the character of remilitarised confrontation, undermining the security of all.

Conclusion

The anti-hegemonic alignment is shaped by perceptions of national interest, but there remains a normative commitment to the transformation of the international system that harkens back to the idealism of the late perestroika years. This generates contradictions in Russia's neo-revisionism but gains adherents to Russian policy from global sympathisers of what is perceived to be an anti-hegemonic agenda. While Russia may well be against the rest in realist terms, with few genuine allies among even its closest neighbours, Russia is

admired in this normative framework by an eclectic mix of traditional sovereigntists, peaceniks, anti-imperialists, globalisation critics, condemners of hegemonic blundering in international affairs, and variegated populists of left and right. The great power alignment with China, India, and some other countries has an anti-hegemonic edge, and to that degree it possesses features of a balancing coalition predicted by realist theory. However, such an interpretation misses the more profound dynamic at work, namely the anti-hegemonic impetus that seeks to ensure that international society genuinely regulates horizontal relations between the great powers. The escape from European security and international relations likely does not lie in Europe itself.

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