Expert Comment

The ‘war of position’ for hegemony in Eurasia

Adrian Pabst (2018)
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Liberal interregnum

The global revolt against liberalism bears the hallmarks of what Antonio Gramsci called ‘interregnum’. First of all, Brexit, Donald Trump, and the support for far-left and far-right parties across the West highlight the collapse of the authority of the political class and the common sense that underpinned political domination. In Gramsci’s words, “If the ruling class has lost consensus, that is, if it no longer ‘leads’ but only ‘rules’ – it possesses sheer coercive power – this actually means that the great masses have become detached from traditional ideologies” (Gramsci, 1930, p. 32). Second, the crisis of authority points to a wider, conjunctural crisis: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass” (Gramsci, 1930, pp. 32–33). These morbid phenomena are not limited to liberalism but include political extremes and indeed the ruling ideologies in countries of the illiberal non-West.

Third, the anti-liberal insurgency has put liberals on the back foot and, in some cases, even dislodged them from power; however, it has not and likely will not defeat liberalism altogether. The reason for Gramsci is that there are deeper, organic trends – historical forces – that shape the conjuncture, the interregnum, and the new settlement that will eventually emerge:

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1 This section and the next draw on my 2018 essay “‘War of Position’: Liberal Interregnum and the Emergent Ideologies”.
A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and that despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. (Gramsci, 1930, p. 177)

But in a deliberate inversion of Gramsci’s argument, it is in reality the new that is dead and the old that has yet to be revitalised. The failure of liberalism means we are witnessing the death throes of liberal humanitarianism and neo-conservatism and their shared commitment to unfettered economic globalisation, mass immigration, and democracy promotion by military means. The death of the new marks the end of the liberal ‘hegemony’, the defining Gramscian idea that conceptualises political domination beyond the state and the market into the realm of culture and society – the norms and values underpinning the liberal world order. As Gramsci argued, the interregnum is a time when politics must shift from a ‘war of movement’ to a ‘war of position’ that marks a battle over ideas, organisation, and leadership. The international system is in just such an interregnum.

The liberalism that informs the international system is not about to disappear, and the main institutional pillars of the liberal world order will likely endure. But as a philosophy and a governing ideology, liberalism cannot escape its own inner contradiction between market anarchy and the technocratic state – hence fueling the flames of anger to which one response is nationalism – as long as it fails to recognise the nature of the current crisis. It is neither merely cyclical because it is not just a periodic setback in an otherwise linear history of progress. Neither are we facing the terminal crisis of an entire system that is about to implode. Marx’s prophecy of capitalism’s collapse has not and likely will not come to pass; rather, we are witnessing a new kind of crisis because liberalism goes against the grain of humanity and erodes the cultural foundations on which it rests (Milbank & Pabst, 2016).
Liberalism turns out to be contradictory, self-defeating, and parasitic on the legacy of Antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages, which it distorts and hollows out. The triumph of liberalism today increasingly brings about the ‘war of all against all’ (Hobbes) and the idea of man as self-owning animal (Locke) that were its presuppositions. But this does not thereby prove those presuppositions because, as French philosopher Jean-Claude Michéa has shown, it is only ‘really existing’ liberalism that has produced in practice the circumstances that it originally assumed in theory (Michéa, 2009). In this manner, liberalism marks the unnecessary victory of vice over virtue – of selfishness, greed, suspicion, and coercive control over common benefit, generosity, a measure of trust, and persuasive power. Just as liberal thought redefines human nature as fundamentally individual and abstracted from social embeddedness, so too liberal practice replaces the quest for reciprocal recognition and mutual flourishing with the pursuit of wealth, power, and pleasure, thereby contributing to economic insecurity, cultural disorder, ecological devastation, and international anarchy.

Liberalism is no longer hegemonic, but it remains the default position of (former) mainstream politics, which no longer commands majority support because the adoption of social-cultural and economic liberalism has undone post-war coalitions between working-class and middle-class people. In North America and Europe, the two main parties have converged around a liberal economics of free trade, low corporation tax, the primacy of shareholder interest, winner-takes-all compensation, financial liberalisation, rationalised welfare, and restrictions on organised labour. This has led to a process of financialisation, de-industrialisation, and corporate globalisation that reinforces an economy of low wages, low productivity, low innovation, industrial decline, job-exporting trade deals, and bailouts for banks ‘too big to fail’ without transforming banking or looking after those who lost their homes and struggled with debt.
The ruling elites have lost or are on the back foot because, to economic liberals, the non-metropolitan areas are uncompetitive, inefficient, and in need of ‘market correction’, while social liberals see working-class cultures as clinging to a past long gone and to backward values that will be swept away by a bright new cosmopolitan future. Neither on the ground of economic interest nor of social identity could left and right liberals find any reason to defend working-class communities. The popular revolt against the hitherto dominant Davos dogma at the heart of the liberal world order opens up a space in which a ‘war of position’ is fought between the ideology of hyper-liberalism that is ruling but no longer leading and its rivals, especially the nationalist traditionalism that shapes much of the illiberal non-West.

**On the ideology of the ‘Populist International’**

Across Western countries and beyond, a new movement of nationalist traditionalism is challenging right-wing liberalism whose origins go back to the New Right of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and their joint mentor Friedrich von Hayek. Part of the contemporary conjuncture is a popular revolt against the New Right’s global market fundamentalism and a surge in support for right-wing insurgency. Tory arch-Brexiteers, Trump, Europe’s radical right, and strongmen from Vladimir Putin via Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Narendra Modi, and Shinzo Abe to Xi Jinping are the political expression of nationalist traditionalism, and figures such as Steve Bannon and Aleksandr Dugin its theorists.

It is commonplace to dismiss this movement as spearheaded by authoritarian populists at home and abroad who are apparently intent on subverting open societies, democratic government, and Western ways of life. The assertion is that a new Populist International from Moscow via Munich to Malmö thinks of itself as a revolutionary vanguard that hates the liberal West and seeks to undermine democratic institutions in the name of defending Western civilisation against the new existential threat of supposed ‘Islamisation’.
(Applebaum, 2016). However, this movement is both more complex and more dangerous than such conventional characterisations. It combines economic nationalism (‘America First’) with an appeal to traditionalist values, which is diametrically opposed to the New Right’s fusion of economic globalism with (a nominal defence of) social conservatism. But neither is conservative because both rest on certain libertarian ideas and deploy revolutionary means to achieve their ambition of hegemony. The New Right’s embrace of the unfettered global free market as the main mode of social organisation has undermined community cohesion and the family it professed to uphold. Nationalist traditionalism’s capture of the state to smash the establishment has strengthened the ‘big government’ it promised to abolish. Neither is conservative because both have entrenched the power of corporate money in politics and consolidated the oligarchic hold over democracy.

Nationalist traditionalism is a more accurate characterisation of the right-wing insurgency than ‘authoritarianism’ or ‘populism’ because the latter two denote a set of methods and tactics deployed just as much by movements on the hard left as the radical right, including Syriza, Podemos, the militant group Momentum around UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, and Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. Nationalism is not limited to the right either, but the difference with the revolutionary left is the radical right’s intellectual debt to the Traditionalist Movement (Sedgwick, 2009). Its main pioneer was René Guénon (1886–1951), a French philosopher who was raised a Roman Catholic, joined the Freemasons, and in later life converted to Sufi Islam. His legacy has influenced both Bannon and Dugin, especially the idea that certain ancient faiths (e.g., medieval Catholicism, eastern Orthodoxy, Sufism, and the Hindu Vedanta) are repositories of shared spiritual truths, revealed to humankind at the dawn of civilisation, which are being destroyed by the secular modern West (Guénon, 2001). For Guénon, the path to liberation passes through the conversion of small elite groups who act as the vanguard of a spiritual revolution that is necessary for the success of a political revolt against liberal modernity.
Guénon’s followers include Julius Evola, an Italian intellectual whose racial theories influenced interwar fascism and who was cited by Bannon in a much-commented-on talk at a conference hosted by the Human Dignity Institute in the Vatican in 2014. Like Guénon, Evola (1995) denounced the spiritual emptiness of liberal modernity, but unlike Guénon who emphasised the importance of proper spiritual conversion, Evola promoted a form of religious racism aimed at inciting popular uprisings wherever possible. While distancing himself from the white supremacism of Richard Spencer and other figures of the ‘alt-right’ who were inspired by Evola, Bannon nonetheless shares Evola’s belief in political change without waiting for a wider spiritual transformation. This outlook underpins Bannon’s praise for what he called in the aforementioned 2014 talk “a global tea-party movement […] a center-right populist movement of the middle class, the working men and women in the world who are just tired of being dictated to by what we [Breitbart] call the party of Davos” (Feder, 2016). Once again, the liberal world order is directly targeted as the repository of a global oligarchy.

Before and since being sacked by Trump and then Breitbart, Bannon has been dismissed as an apologist of nationalism, nativism, and even atavistic ethnocentrism. Derided as a self-styled kingmaker who claims to have single-handedly injected the ‘alt-right’ into the American political mainstream, Bannon is blamed for using Trump, whom he viewed as a ‘blunt instrument’, to inflame cultural and racial tensions – as in the case of the President’s defence of far-right counter-protesters against what he called the ‘alt-left’ attack on Confederate statues in Charlottesville and Trump’s endorsement of anti-liberal Alabama Senate candidate Roy Moore. But while Bannon advocates a politics that is unashamedly anti-globalist and nationalist, the intellectual foundations of his version of traditionalism go much further to include a critique of secularisation, of Islamic fascism, and of capitalism. Binding them together is Bannon’s argument that the West has abandoned and even
destroyed its “underlying spiritual and moral foundations of Christianity and, really, Judeo-Christian belief” (Feder, 2016).

What is striking is that, for the first time since the Republicans’ embrace of the global free market under Reagan and then Clinton, capitalism is seen by the US president and his (now former) chief counsel as a threat to prosperity. Whatever his intellectual deficiencies and flawed character, Trump grasped a truth that the American and the wider Western political class had ignored for so long: a broken economy that produces America’s ‘forgotten men and women’. Whatever his apocalyptic outlook, Bannon’s critique is grounded in a coherent argument that contemporary capitalism is a force of dispossession. He rejects not just the crony capitalism of statist systems such as China or Russia where the ruling elite enriches itself in kleptocratic ways but also what he terms “the Ayn Rand or the Objectivist School of libertarian capitalism. … that form of capitalism is quite different to what I call the ‘enlightened capitalism’ of the Judeo-Christian West. It is a capitalism that really looks to make people commodities, and to objectify people …” (Feder, 2016).

If nationalist traditionalism has struck a chord with voters, it is because the liberal mainstream has failed to recognise the fundamental grievances shared by both working-class and lower-middle-class voters: liberal-cosmopolitan globalisation; the loss of manufacturing and industry; corrupt and incompetent elites; the rising inequality of wealth, power, and social status; uncontrolled mass immigration; and the erosion of national sovereignty. Besides Bernie Sanders, Trump understood that the last thing many Americans wanted was a continuation of the liberal status quo at home or abroad.

But instead of offering the leadership required to usher in a new hegemonic settlement, the Trump Administration has so far been an exercise in confused ambiguity. It promised the biggest infrastructure investment since the New Deal and an end to job-exporting trade deals, but in reality enacts protectionist measures to have more ‘neoliberalism in one country’ that serves the interests of the financial oligarchy on Wall
Street and the billionaires in Silicon Valley and Hollywood. It professed to help ‘America’s
forgotten men and women’, but in truth has pitted the white working-class against fellow
workers in the public sector and service as well as against socially conservative immigrants
of colour.

Holding together a divided and chaotic White House is the one constant in Trump’s
(very New Left) ‘personal politics’: a penchant for plutocratic power. The dismissal of Bannon
from the White House and then Breitbart News was at the instigation of the Mercer family
which co-owns Breitbart and belongs to the US oligarchy. It has been the main beneficiary
of the tax cuts and controls Trump’s economic policy. Both his Treasury Secretary Steven
Mnuchin and his chief economic adviser Gary Cohn are ex-Goldman Sachs who never
stopped working for investment banks and put a swift end to Bannon’s economic
nationalism, preventing a trade war with China that would have hurt business more than
workers. Under President Trump, America’s oligarchical democracy looks set to continue on
an increasingly anti-liberal trajectory – fusing economic libertarianism that dismantles social
and environmental protections with militarism and manipulative propaganda that purports to
reflect the ‘will of the many’ while handing the levers to the plutocratic few. This evolution is
perhaps the single most corrosive of the liberal world order.

‘Great power’ resurgence

How to conceptualise ‘great powers’ and imperial politics in an age when the liberal world
order is in crisis? A useful starting point is the early work of the English School, particularly
the writings of Martin Wight who makes the general point that the shape of international
relations is not like a timeless law of nature but rather influenced by particular cultural
traditions. More specifically, different cultures shape the principles and practices that make
up geopolitics and the exercise of power. One corollary is that sovereign equality is an
abstract ideal, which fails to capture the various degrees of sovereignty that characterise
individual states and different international systems, including suzerain state-systems (Wight, 1966, 1977).

Adam Watson has developed this line of thinking by expanding the spectrum of possibilities ranging from independence at one end via hegemony and suzerainty to dominion and absolute empire at the other. As the extremes at both ends are usually unstable, most international systems tend towards the middle, namely variants of suzerain power with concentric circles: direct authority over a core with a periphery of locally autonomous rulers who recognise overlordship and pay tribute, along with units that are domestically independent but constrained in terms of their foreign policy and those recognised as independent but not equal because the suzerain is of a different, ‘great power’ or even globally hegemonic order (Watson, 1992).

Such a conceptual picture can capture several features characterising the US, China, Russia, and the EU and relations with the countries in their respective spheres of influence. For example, the Monroe Doctrine allowed Washington to take military action against a regime in its backyard that is deemed to be hostile to the US and to pose a threat to US domination. Similarly, Moscow and Beijing behave like suzerain powers vis-à-vis several neighbouring countries with which they entertain asymmetric relations analogous to lords and vassals – security in exchange for political loyalty and market access.

As Ole Wæver (1997) has argued, such suzerain systems are radial in nature and have gradated forms of imperial power where the notion of ‘imperial’ or ‘empire’ is used metaphorically to denote a centre that not only has more power than the periphery but also projects influence through cultural attraction. In this sense, ‘empires’ involve a measure of universalism and hierarchy, though not necessarily to the point of declaring peripheral units as wholly unequal, ‘other’, and uncivilised, which only applies to complete, universalist

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2 For a comprehensive overview of spheres of influence and the English School, see Hast (2014), *Spheres of Influence in International Relations: History, Theory and Politics*, particularly pp. 1–75.
‘meta-empires’ such as Rome and China in Antiquity or European colonial powers and the Soviet Union in the modern era (Scheidel, 2009).

‘Great powers’ (conceptualised as suzerains) and ‘imperial politics’ (conceptualised as a mix of geopolitical, geoeconomic, and ‘geocultural’ influences) differ from categories such as Reich and Grossraum in the work of Carl Schmitt who, as Ola Tunander (2009) noted, generalised the legal norms of the US Monroe Doctrine to suggest that formally independent nations can only survive by being subordinate to an empire that operates based on the friend–foe logic. According to Schmitt, a ‘greater space’ (Grossraum) denotes a cluster of states with a high degree of economic interdependence and with a central imperial power (Reich) that secures order by preventing external military intervention. Some form of dialogue with the foe – the Other – is possible precisely because the friend–foe logic recognises difference whereas, for Schmitt (1941), the universalism of liberal and Marxist ideology reduces the foe to a ‘learner’ who must abide by the standards of civilisation before he can be admitted to the club of the elect. But in contrast with Schmitt’s focus on the natural condition of anarchy and the logic of inevitable conflict in geopolitics, the above conception of ‘great powers’ and ‘imperial politics’ suggests there is a pre-established order and that suzerains with gradated forms of power can coexist precisely because they often have spheres of influence with partially overlapping cultures. Today, for instance, the EU, Turkey, and Russia and their partly shared neighbourhood have certain European cultural traditions in common even if the nature of these ties is debated and the claim by Ankara and Moscow to be European is contested (including by domestic political forces).

Thus, it can be argued that the English School in the tradition of Wight and Watson (rather than Bull) develops in a more culturalist direction notions of ‘great power’ and ‘imperial politics’ that are central to the writings on geopolitics by Halford Mackinder and Rudolf Kjellén at the beginning of the 20th century (Kjellén, 1916; Mackinder, 1904, 1919). Common to both is the idea of cultural divides, which is far less prominent in the work of
Schmitt or Karl Haushofer who understood culture in terms of nature as a struggle between biological units (i.e., individuals and nations) that follow the logic of Social Darwinism (Haushofer, 1928, 1939). Mackinder and Kjellén, on the contrary, view cultural divides as constitutive of geopolitics: the former distinguished sea-based Atlantic powers from land-based continental powers, combining geographic and spatial notions such as a ‘pivot zone’ and ‘heartland’ with cultural traditions, whereas the latter opposed Russian and English universalism to German–Slavic multicultural cosmopolitanism. Whether or not the details of these ideas are correct, what matters for our purposes is the focus on ‘great cultural divides’ that continues to shape geopolitics: first, the divide between Russia and the (Atlantic) West; second, the divide between Orthodox Christians and Muslim Turkic populations (and its implications for the relations between the two ‘great powers’ of Russia and Turkey); and third, the divide between Germanic Europe and Latin Europe (and its consequences for the Eurozone and the unity of the EU as a ‘great power’).

As Wight would say, ‘great powers’ can be conceptualised as “the Great Responsibilities” (Wight, 1995, pp. 43–44). They are seldom loved and often feared, as Machiavelli might put it, and they override the interest of smaller states in their quest for domination. But by the same token, they can provide stability and a measure of order through common interest. For both Wight and Butterfield, common interests are historically and culturally contingent and therefore subject to a great deal of change. At the same time, however, there is a certain permanence that has to do with cultural ties, which often cross borders. Against the Hobbesian fear of a violent state of nature and the ‘war of all against all’ and against Rousseau’s bleak choice between ‘a state of war’ and a ‘troubled peace’, Wight and Butterfield emphasise the social nature of mankind and the idea that human cooperation precedes the contractual arrangements both within and across nations. Just as national societies are bound together by much more than contracts, so too the international
society of states is governed by a set of customs and traditions more fundamental than either formal rights or commercial exchange.

Precisely in the absence of a single sovereign who wields coercive power, the glue that most of all holds together societies both nationally and internationally is “an antecedent common culture”, which is more primary than the rights of individual citizens or sovereign states (Butterfield as cited in Watson, 1995, p. x). Culture so configured rests on a shared “cosmic, moral constitution” that is metaphysical in nature because it links immanent values to their transcendent origin and outlook (Wight, 1991, pp. 13–14). In this manner, the early writings of the English School shift the focus away from unilateral practices centred on self-interest and individual entitlements towards more reciprocal arrangements that rest on the balance between rights and responsibilities – what Wight called the link between ‘common interest’ and ‘common obligation’ (Wight, 1995). This argument develops Wight’s recognition that in modernity, “[s]overeignty had indeed passed to different states, by social contracts, but the original unity of the human race survived” (Wight, 1992, p. 38). Thus, international society embodies the common interests and values, as well as the common rules and institutions, that bind states together and qualify notions of state sovereignty. But one question arising from this is whether the English School views international society in more statist or more cultural terms. This, in turn, raises a further question about culture and civilisation in the liberal order.

The rise of civilisational states

It is equally common to assume that China and Russia are national states, as they can be defined in terms of a circumscribed territory with a dominant nation and the institutions of modern statehood. However, in both countries the nation-state model is associated with the West and its promotion of supposedly universal values, which are seen as Western liberal values that do not reflect the distinct character of Chinese and Russian civilisations. Russia
and China can be described as civilisational states in the sense that they embody, defend, and promote a certain civilisation with a focus on ethnic, cultural, and ideological identity and cohesion. One reason for characterising them in these terms is because this is part of their own self-understanding and captures the way their political leadership — past and present — sees their own country and the differences with the West (Campbell, 2015; Light, 2015; Linde, 2016). For example, China expert Martin Jacques (2011) reflects this when comparing the nation-state model with the civilisational-state model:

The most fundamental defining features of China today, and which give the Chinese their sense of identity, emanate not from the last century when China has called itself a nation-state but from the previous two millennia when it can be best described as a civilization-state: the relationship between the state and society, a very distinctive notion of the family, ancestral worship, Confucian values, the network of personal relationships that we call *guanxi*, Chinese food and the traditions that surround it, and, of course, the Chinese language with its unusual relationship between the written and spoken form (pp. 11–13).

This is not to suggest that the idea of civilisational states is objectively true or more legitimate than the nation-state model. In fact, both are characterised by internal tensions and contradictions. The nation-state oscillates between protecting national sovereignty and projecting power and influence over the sovereign affairs of other countries, hence the relevance of the concept of spheres of influence in analysing the actions of nation-states such as the US. Similarly, the civilisational state is based on culture, ethnic, and familial relationships, which are meant to encompass communities both at home and abroad (diaspora) but which may not have the wider appeal that the term ‘civilisation’ often implies. This inspires questions about whether Chinese or Russian civilisation can attract many non-Chinese and non-Russian people.

These questions also arise from the way in which China’s and Russia’s current political leadership use the concept of civilisation to strengthen their own legitimacy and their
state at home and abroad. Xi Jinping links the historical legacy of Chinese civilisation with a certain story about Chinese identity today, what he calls the ‘Chinese dream’. In a speech to UNESCO in the early years of his presidency, Xi (2014) explained,

The Chinese people are striving to fulfil the Chinese dream [which] is about prosperity of the country, rejuvenation of the nation, and happiness of the people. It reflects both the ideal of the Chinese people today and our time-honored tradition to seek constant progress. [...] In the Chinese civilisation, people’s cultural pursuit has always been part of their life and social ideals. So the realization of the Chinese dream is a process of both material and cultural development. As China continues to make economic and social progress, the Chinese civilisation will keep pace with the times and acquire greater vitality.

In other words, the Chinese dream is nothing new. It flows, so the argument goes, from a millennia-old history that each generation inherited from the previous one and transmitted to the next. The core meaning of this history is what Xi (2014) described in the same speech as the yearning “for a world of great harmony in which people are free from want and following a high moral standard”. Therefore, he argued that China will only attain the promise of the Chinese Dream if it puts in place a model of balanced development – the ‘Beijing Consensus’ of state capitalism as opposed to the ‘Washington Consensus’ of market capitalism – and combines material with cultural progress.

If this can be achieved, then China will be able to take its rightful place among world civilisations, which Xi (2014) envisioned as follows:

As we pursue the Chinese dream, the Chinese people will encourage creative shifts and innovative development of the Chinese civilization in keeping with the progress of the times. We need to inject new vitality into the Chinese civilization by energizing all cultural elements that transcend time, space and national borders and that possess both perpetual appeal and current value [italics added] … In this way, the
Chinese civilization, together with the rich and colourful civilizations created by the people of other countries, will provide mankind with the right cultural guidance and strong motivation.

Here are the roots of Xi’s conception of China’s sphere of influence – a civilisational state whose culture transcends “national borders” and is of both “perpetual appeal and current value”. This vision underpins China’s soft power policy of establishing over 700 Confucius Institutes that are embedded in many universities across the globe, national editions of the official newspaper *The China Daily*, the news agency Xin Hua, and China Central Television with its multilingual programmes.

Put differently, China is engaged not simply in geopolitics and geoeconomics but also in geoculture. Like Western countries, it pursues a civilising mission, which it calls ‘global harmony’. This Confucian ideal does not just bind domestic politics and international relations together; it also expresses a certain Chinese exceptionalism that gives rise to an idea of international order and influence beyond national borders (i.e., the possibility of becoming a hegemon with a sphere of influence) (Zhang, 2011). Unlike Western colonialism, China’s leadership will embody the ‘Way of Humane Authority’ that reflects the country’s peaceful rise and its long history of opposing ‘foreign barbaric foes’ (Callahan, 2012; Curtis, 2016).

So, the form taken by the Chinese geocultural sphere of influence is that of a supposedly ‘harmonious world order’ in which Beijing aims to play a pre-eminent role. In his speech at the opening ceremony of the 19th Communist Party Congress of China in October 2017, Xi said, “It will be an era that sees China moving closer to centre stage and making greater contributions to mankind … The development of China is no threat to any other country. No matter how much China has developed, it will never seek hegemony or expansion”. Thus, the Chinese civilisational state preserves China’s unique model based on
cultural characteristics without striving for some unipolar domination over the rest of the world.

For its part, Moscow also appeals to the idea of a civilisational state as a source of legitimacy and a greater Russian role in the international order. In his annual State of the Union address in 2012, Vladimir Putin declared that “for centuries, Russia developed as a multi-ethnic nation …, a civilisation-state bonded by the Russian people, Russian language and Russian culture …, uniting us and preventing us from dissolving in this diverse world”.

In remarks to an audience of Russian and foreign experts in 2013, he defined Russia as a ‘state-civilisation’ in the following terms:

Russia – as philosopher Konstantin Leontyev vividly put it – has always evolved in “blossoming complexity” as a state-civilisation, reinforced by the Russian people, Russian language, Russian culture, Russian Orthodox Church and the country’s other traditional religions. It is precisely the state-civilisation model that has shaped our state polity. It has always sought to flexibly accommodate the ethnic and religious specificity of particular territories, ensuring diversity in unity.

Taken in isolation, these words appear to be mere statements about Russian history and culture. However, President Putin has linked this reading of the Russian state to the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), his flagship foreign policy project since returning to the presidency in 2012, which is an expression of Russia’s sphere of influence. Indeed, in the same remarks to the group of experts, he described the EEU as a project that combines unity with diversity – almost like an extension of Russia:

The Eurasian Union is a project for maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space in a new century and in a new world. Eurasian integration is a chance for the entire post-Soviet space to become an independent centre for global development, rather than remaining on the outskirts of Europe and Asia. I want to
stress that Eurasian integration will also be built on the principle of *diversity* [italics added]. This is a *union* where everyone maintains their identity, their distinctive character and their political independence… We expect that it will become our common input into maintaining diversity and stable global development.

Like Xi, Putin believes that the liberal values associated with the West are not universal and do not capture the civilisational identity of Russia and neighbouring countries in the post-Soviet space. Russia’s self-definition as a civilisational state provides the Kremlin with justification to intervene in the affairs of the ‘near abroad’ on grounds of a shared civilisation (Tsygankov, 2016). This is based not just on historical grounds but also the continued presence of so-called ‘co-patriots’, people of Russian descent who have ties of affinity with Russia and have been left outside Russian borders since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Linde, 2016).

These are not new themes in Russian geopolitical thinking. Already in 2008, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke of the ‘civilisational unity’ of all the lands that used to constitute the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire before that (Lavrov, 2008a, 2008b). In the same year, the then President Dmitry Medvedev (2008) laid claim to a ‘sphere of privileged interest’, which for him translates into an obligation on the part of the Russian state to defend Russian people abroad.

There are some subtle yet significant differences between these two statements of Russian foreign policy. Medvedev emphasised ‘zones of interests’ rather than ‘spheres of influence’. Lavrov, in contrast, espoused a position much closer to Putin’s accentuation of civilisational ties that underpin Russia’s role in the ‘near abroad’ – a sphere of influence in all but name. Far from being merely semantic, the former concerns Russia’s more specific and identifiable interests that are non-exclusive with other countries’ interests (Trenin, 2009), such as the mutual benefits from trade or good neighbourly relations. Meanwhile, the latter is both all-inclusive and exclusive. First of all, it is coterminous with an idea of international
order in which Russia is a ‘great power’ alongside the US and China. Second, within this order Russia exercises influence over countries in the post-Soviet space that encompasses geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geocultural aspects and excludes other powers (notably the US and the EU) from strategic areas such as Eurasia, which is moving once again to the fore of international relations in ways that challenge the liberal world order.

The Eurasian crucible

Eurasia is once more moving to the fore as a crucible of geopolitics (Sengupta, 2009). In a long tradition dating back to the earliest Western geopolitical thinkers Halford Mackinder and Rudolf Kjellén, the Eurasian space can be seen as the heartland of global geopolitics where the fates of empires old and new are determined. This focus on land power rather than sea power led Mackinder (1904) to formulate the dictum for which he is best remembered: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island [Eurasia]. Who rules the World-Island commands the World” (p. 132). In one sense, Eurasia can be considered the chessboard of the world where a new ‘great power’ game is in full swing and rival spheres of influence collide. But in another sense, Eurasia can also be considered a bridge between East and West – a continental connector from China via Russia and the Middle East to Europe and the Atlantic West, including North America (Bedeski and Swanstrom, 2012; Brzezinski, 1997; Diamond, 1997).

In either case, there are not only geopolitical and geoeconomic drivers but also and perhaps increasingly geocultural forces at work, which are not captured by the ‘end of history’ thesis of a global convergence towards Western liberal democracy or by the ‘clash of civilisations’ between the West and ‘the rest’. Rather, the contemporary contest over power in Eurasia highlights the cultural dimensions of the rival spheres of influence, above
all China’s Neo-Confucian ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative and Russia’s creation of the EEU as a concrete expression of the ‘Russian world’ (Russkiy mir). In both cases, the current political leadership of China and Russia view their civilisational-state model not just in instrumental terms as a means to greater political power and economic wealth but also as an alternative to the US nation-state model and the European cultural commonwealth, which are associated with liberal values that are seen as sources of instability and thought to be in decline.

China’s ‘One Road, One Belt’ project aims to bring about profound economic and political changes in Eurasia and Africa based on certain ideas about Chinese culture, civilisation, and world history along the Silk Road. It rests on a broad framework of what Beijing describes as cooperation and connectivity, encompassing the coordination of policy, the pooling of investments, and people-to-people bonds. Far from simply enhancing economic prosperity and political power, China deploys heritage diplomacy to help rebuild a rich cultural legacy that is supposed to connect present Chinese society to its past and also draw other peoples into China’s wider orbit, including 34 UNESCO World Heritage sites. This is part of fostering a Chinese civilisational identity at home and abroad, which reflects Beijing’s strategy of using culture as a source of international influence. For instance, the Silk Road programme as an attempt to achieve top rank in the global table of UNESCO World Heritage properties by preserving over 500 sites and thereby overtaking Italy; therefore, culture is a reason in its own right and serves the purpose of further extending China’s sphere of influence. This sphere is rooted in, and deepens, a long history of cultural interactions between China and other countries in Eurasia, and it operates as a bridge between heritage sites that align directly with trade and foreign policy ambitions.

From Beijing’s point of view, the Silk Road programme offers key neighbouring countries a place in an expanding Sino-centric network of power, wealth, and status: one cultural corridor linking China with Mongolia and Russia; another Eurasian land corridor all
the way from Beijing to Brussels; and yet another corridor consolidating ties between China and Pakistan with its strategically important port of Gwadar close to the Persian Gulf. Based on the Neo-Confucian idea of harmony, Chinese leadership wants other countries to find points of cultural connection through the rebuilding of shared heritage sites led by China, which is a way to pursue regional influence and forge loyalty ties. Both by land and sea, the ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative, with its focus on Silk Road heritage diplomacy, is a multiannual project of fostering institutional and interpersonal bonds that tie other cultures to Chinese civilisation.

The stated ambition of the Chinese leadership is not simply to project geoeconomic power and military might but also to create what Xi Jinping has called a ‘community of common destiny’ that is non-hegemonic precisely because it rests on new international structures (e.g., the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) that are not dominated by Western powers. As China demands a role commensurate to the size of its military and economy in shaping this region, one way to conceptualise this growing assertiveness is in terms of a civilisational state at its centre and an expanding sphere of influence that focuses on non-Western culture as a pole of attraction to other Eurasian countries, including Russia, Mongolia, the five Central Asian republics, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Thus, geoculture complements geopolitics and geoeconomics by aiming to bring about a more permanent realignment away from the US and Europe towards China.

To a point, Russia under President Putin is pursuing a similarly anti-Western path insofar as Moscow no longer (as in the 1990s and early 2000s) seeks integration with the West. Instead, the Kremlin lays claim to a role on par with that of the US in a multipolar world and is engaged in consolidating links with countries independently of Western institutions. Key to this project is the idea of a ‘Russian world’ (Russkiy mir) that consists of all Russian-speaking peoples inside and outside of Russia’s borders. The word ‘world’ is used in the
sense of a civilisational space (Greek or Byzantine ‘world’) with a dominant civilisation at the
centre and a concentric circle of peripheries with varying degrees of political loyalty and
economic integration (Laruelle, 2015). Russkiy mir is a geocultural notion that underpins a
geopolitical imagination of Russia’s global standing on par with other ‘great powers’ as a
distinct civilisation with which different regions of the world have diverse links.

Like China’s invocation of Neo-Confucian ‘harmony’, Russkiy mir is both an end in
itself (Russia’s self-understanding and projection of a specific Russian voice in geopolitics)
and a means to a greater projection of power (a legitimisation for maintaining and fostering a
sphere of influence in the ‘near abroad’ and beyond). As a result, Russkiy mir reconnects
the country with its pre-Soviet and Soviet past and suggests an unbroken continuity in
Russian history of which the civilisational state is the ultimate guarantor. The creation of the
Russkiy Mir Foundation in 2007 and its cultural centres abroad is a concrete expression of
this vision and of the Kremlin’s efforts to promote Russian language and culture across the
globe, as is the establishment in 2008 of Rossotrudnichestvo: the Federal Agency for the
Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International
Humanitarian Cooperation. Both were responses to the so-called ‘colour revolutions’ in
Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004–05) and elsewhere – defeats for the Kremlin that prompted
a geopolitical rethink in the form of military modernisation and public diplomacy around a
reinvigorated sphere of influence (Saari, 2014).

Thus, one function of Russia’s diplomacy and cultural policy is reconciliation with the
worldwide Russian diaspora, starting with the people in former Soviet states. This is why
Moscow speaks of the post-Soviet space as her ‘sphere of privileged interests’. Even in the
formulation of the former president and current Prime Minister Medvedev, this sphere, while
potentially open to other countries, is historically and culturally Russo-centric:
there are regions in which Russia has privileged interests. These regions are home to countries with which we share special historical relations and are bound together as friends and good neighbours … It is not even a matter of belonging to this or that organisation, this or that bloc, but rather the common history and genetic connectedness of our economies and the very close kinship of our souls (Medvedev, 2008).

Whether in Medvedev’s more open or Putin’s more exclusive vision, the point is that Moscow sees itself in the role of balancer between East and West precisely because Russia is a separate civilisation that is neither Eastern nor Western but rather both at once and therefore exceptional – a blend of European with Eurasian values that is at the global centre of gravity and can mediate between the different world civilisations of China and the Atlantic West.

This blurriness is not limited to *Russkiy mir* but also applies to the EEU, Putin’s flagship foreign policy since returning to the Kremlin in 2012 after serving for four years as prime minister. The EEU rests on the idea that Russia’s sphere of influence is a projection of the country as the leader and pivot-point of Eurasia (in ways that somewhat mirror Mackinder’s argument). After the failure of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the fragmentation of ties with countries that do not wish to belong to the Russian world (the Baltic States, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova), Moscow realised that it can only secure its global status as a major power if it is the dominant transregional power on the Eurasian continent. Such a position cannot be purely based on historical grounds but requires a fusion of geocultural and geoeconomic influence to leverage geopolitical power. Hence the idea, which underpins the creation of the EEU, of reinforcing synergies with neighbouring economies in terms of transit, agriculture, and energy. From the Kremlin’s point of view, this is the most promising way to counter growing Chinese influence in Eurasia and interventions by the US and the EU while being open to working with any of them in ways that make Russian an indispensable ‘partner’.
This view shapes the Kremlin’s strategy of dealing primarily with other ‘great powers’ beyond its ‘sphere of privileged interest’, which acts as a buffer zone against unwanted foreign meddling in wider Russian affairs. First of all, the US when it comes to the Iranian nuclear deal; second, Iran (and more recently Turkey) in relation to the civil war in Syria; and third, Germany, France, and to a lesser extent Italy concerning the conflict in Ukraine (not least because they belong to a certain continental European tradition that is much more Russophile than Anglo-Saxon Europe with its allies in Poland and the Baltic States).

Finally, and most importantly, the EEU is a way for Russia to strengthen ties with China on a shared agenda of countering what the leadership of the two countries view as US unipolarity. Both oppose the liberal world order and US (and to a lesser extent EU) interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states through a policy of sanctions and regime change. Moscow and Beijing also want to weaken and ultimately overthrow Western domination of international organisations by advocating new rules that reflect the interests and values of non-Western countries. Their respective spheres of influence serve as a buffer zone against Western meddling and a forward position from which to project more power based on conservative cultural visions, which are markedly different from the West’s liberal agenda in terms of traditional values of family, patriotism, respect for authority of the older generation and the state, and indigenous religion.

However, there are also tensions between Russia’s and China’s spheres of influence. One source is power in the Eurasian heartland of the Central Asian republics where Moscow views the growing Chinese presence with some suspicion while Beijing defends what it sees as legitimate political and economic interests precisely because of historical cultural ties. That is why China has opened Confucius Institutes in Russia, Ukraine, Central Asian countries, and the South Caucasus. So far Russia retains its pre-eminent position, but Moscow fears that demographic decline and China’s long-term plan will limit and even push back the Russian sphere of influence. The other source of tension concerns the international
order. While Moscow has engaged in a more confrontational course against Western economic sanctions and military interventions, Beijing continues to prefer a more gradualist approach.

So far the Sino–Russian cooperation is based on mutual interests and a broadly shared anti-liberal agenda, but over time the shift in the global balance of power in favour of China could trigger a Russian response – or even a pivot back from the currently more Eastern to a previously more Western outlook. The point is that Russian’s self-identification as a European-Eurasian civilisational state and Chinese’s self-understanding as a Neo-Confucian civilisational state encompass spheres of influence that collide not just with those of the US and (to a lesser extent) the EU but also with each other. Eurasia may not be Mackinder’s ‘World-Island’ from which to rule the globe, but it is once again coming to the fore of global geopolitics.

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References


