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## Putin's Russia in the transition of the world's order

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The Russia that entered the new millennium under the leadership of Vladimir Putin has been judged mainly from the perspective of liberal neo-idealism. The illiberal democracy Russia has exhibited during these two decades has been questioned. As a result, its behavior in foreign policy has been evaluated in terms of an artful neo-imperialism, both within its region of influence and outside, coherent with the aggressiveness of the former USSR. Cyber-espionage allows Russia to intervene in Western elections in a covert manner, increasing the threat of populist or *anti-establishment* candidates. This interpretation coincides with an international order decisively oriented towards a new Cold War or at a minimum, a “hot *pax*”, where Russia is one of the powers attempting to recreate the conditions prior to 1991.

This *paper* aims to analyze a few alternative hypotheses. First of all, we will examine how Putin's Russia has accepted the rules of the liberal international order and managed to take advantage of them, enduring the long and difficult post-Soviet transition, in peace and with its integrated territory. At the same time, there is not necessarily a translation of its democratic political regime in transition after centuries of despotic culture and history towards its foreign policy, which far from being aggressive, only seeks to prioritize the defense of its national interests, acting in the majority of cases in a reactive or defensive way.

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Recent phenomena such as Brexit (2016), Trump's rise to power in the United States, and China's "commercial" threat have fueled debates about the conditions, processes, and results which arise from the gradual demise of the old international order and the origin of a new one. Scholars such as Stuenkel, Bremmer and Ikenberry, among others, have devoted themselves to writing essays which emphasize such a complex transition. It is so because it triggers several simultaneous changes, whose nature will have to be analyzed to determine if they are structural changes or not. Among them, a growing global disaster caused by the collapse of the international institutions created after World War II, whose most eloquent impact is the commercial war between China and the United States; a permanent military tension, caused by the collision of geopolitical interests in Ukraine, passing through Syria and reaching Venezuela, between Russia and, –once again–, the North American hegemon. This would translate into a new "Cold War" or "hot *pax*"; a gradual stabilization in a new bipolar or multipolar world; the preservation or the decadence of American domination, though under modalities different from the traditional ones (Tsygankov, 2019: 53) (Bremmer, 2018) (Stuenkel, 2016) (Ikenberry, 2014).

The post-Washington world's transition must be analyzed in the context of similar theoretical studies, focused on old transitions such as the stage prior to the post-Vienna period (first decade of the 19th century), the post-Paris period (last two decades of the 19th century), the post-Versailles (late 1918) and post-Yalta (1945) periods, as well as their respective historical experiences<sup>1</sup>.

Another previous conclusion is the palpable verification that the post-Washington transition is irreversible, though it may take longer than previous ones, even extending beyond 2050. In this sense, it is logical to assume that each State must re-evaluate its own strategy of struggle for survival and development. China, India and other rising powers will have to be more active in building an alternative economic, political, and military order to the one collapsing today, one that is beyond American economic reach. Among all, they must learn to coexist, avoiding mutual conflicts while competing for new opportunities on a global scale.

A world order implies the adherence and legitimacy of a determined balance of power, from a realistic or neo-realistic perspective, which emphasizes on whom and what for they exercise those material capacities, as well

as from a constructivist angle which appeals to the recognition of ideas or beliefs that support the previous factor. Every transition begins when consensus falls apart after powers start to feel uncomfortable, limited, and even insecure, because of an imposed or agreed *corset*. Obviously, the reaction of the “statu quo-like” powers will always be the same one of self-confidence: difficulties are transitory and fears of new ones are exaggerated. Nor can the revisionist powers have the adequate perceptions: either they overestimate or they underestimate their material capacities. In this instance, old parameters are not applicable (Tsygankov, 2019: 55).

At some point, the wars that had served the great powers or the Hegemon to solve their powers began to be perceived as more costly than valuable or profitable. Fewer countries give in to the hegemonic military efforts.

The process of destruction and violence is no longer as attractive as before, not even for the Hegemon’s public opinion. Since the war in Vietnam, and afterwards, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have been witnessing the decomposition and insufficiency of American military power, despite its remarkable technological progress. What they consider as a “victory” in the Cold War, was in fact a non-

bloody claudication of the former USSR.

The global transition we are experiencing presents interrelated creative and destructive tendencies. Beginning in the mid-2000s, it has gained relevance after a series of “color revolutions” in Eurasia and the Middle East, irreparable errors of the liberal “West” and the growth of nationalist politicians and feelings in the world. Though the United States remains a military superpower, we are witnessing a change in military and economic power, as well as a serious weakening of the political and ideological authority of America and the “West” in the world today.

Clearly, the United States can no longer maintain, (or) let alone impose on other countries the rules of the world order created after the Cold War. Today, China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey, among others, are no longer oriented towards the American political model; they increasingly pursue active policies aimed at protecting their spheres of international influence. New institutional associations and regional negotiation platforms are actively created without the participation of Washington. The old allies and partners of the United States in Asia, the Middle East, and Eurasia now position themselves as independent actors, prioritizing

their regional stability and establishing autonomous relations with countries viewed by the United States as threats to their national security and the world's peace (Tsygankov, 2019: 62).

America's overwhelmingly strong military, economic, information and technological capacities are a driving force for countries such as China or Russia, among others not to seek a large-scale war as a mechanism to complete the global transition. Instead, they have been pressuring the "West" to revise Washington's world order, incorporating new rules without the need to initiate a new war.

This process is more complicated when it comes to verifying the influence of different state actors' perceptions regarding the dynamics and effects of this global transition. Many people in China and Russia, among other emerging countries, tend to think we are approaching a new world because the United States is in a relative decline while Europe has stopped playing the role of a sovereign international player. These feelings can lead to "wait and see" attitudes, preventing the establishment of alternative international institutions or the implementation of essential domestic reforms (Tsygankov, 2019: 63).

On the other hand, Europe and America

continue to rely on the power of technology, sanctions, and other economic instruments in their efforts to portray Russia and Iran, among others, as breakers of global rules of conduct, a priority for the "West".

Meanwhile, as critics of the "West" demonstrate, its asymmetric capacities, which favor its successive crises, lead to the gradual development of new spheres of influence and economic dynamism beyond US control. Thus, there could emerge new rules of international conduct which could be able to compete with "the West", though this will require universalization and global recognition, and the process will be long.

Evidently, the post-Washington transition will last longer than the previous ones, including the post-Paris transition, and it could extend beyond 2050. This duration is influenced by, firstly, the impossibility of a main war forged by mutual nuclear annihilation and secondly, by the continuous asymmetry of the world, where it is increasingly difficult to compete with the United States than in conditions of a real multipolarity (Tsygankov, 2019: 63).

Even so, the only way to survive this transition is by adapting the external and internal conditions to the needs of each Nation-State in order to be able to exercise a

relevant influence on the balance of power and on the rules of a future world order. Withdrawal to isolation, even temporary, is not possible today due to the “turbulence” of the global world and its relative openness.

The present situation requires strategies which could combine a firmness to defend sovereignty with a flexibility to create something new and desirable in the political, military, economic, and informational spheres. The implementation of such strategies will require strong creative states with focused objectives. They must be prepared to go beyond macroeconomic regulation, investing in optimal international projects and supporting the industrial sectors which are most promising for achieving this objective.

European countries interested in preserving the old liberal order would have the freedom to expand the horizons of thought and change internally, especially since the European Union project is no longer the guarantor of internal prosperity or an attractive model to follow. It is difficult to estimate how long it may last, but its success in the future, after 2050, is far from guaranteed. It is evident that the European Union will have to turn to Asia and Eurasia, but before that occurs, European elites will have to assume this reality and prepare for it.

This is partially true for the United States, but

only if Donald Trump conceives it as an aberration and the leadership of the Democratic Party demonstrates a will for political and economic integration (Tsygankov, 2019: 64).

The opposite is more likely; the continuation, in one way or another, is the launching of the nationalist project of a “Great Power”, still supported by a good part of the American public and the elites. The project is aimed at reducing Washington’s international obligations, retaining its superpower status, especially in the military-industrial, energy, and technological spheres.

To achieve this objective, America must introduce internal transformations as well as a new foreign policy limited to measures of political and military pressure and economic sanctions, the main pillars of Trump’s policy. Such measures have already been used against North Korea, China, Iran, Europe, Russia and Latin America. Beyond Washington’s confidence on the effectiveness of the assertive “diktat” policy, these measures will mean a huge cost in the future.

The strategy of supposedly revisionist powers should combine measures of asymmetric resistance to carry out their most relevant interests in the world, with active efforts to

build an alternative world order and to implement appropriate domestic reforms.

Today, the asymmetry in defending basic national interests is not only necessary but also quite possible. As Otto Von Bismarck once stated, “there are times when the strong are weak because of their scruples and the weak grow strong because of their audacity”. Today, weakness is a distinguishing factor not only in some countries but also in some international organizations of the ever united “West”, opening up opportunities for China, Russia and all those reluctant to return to the position of secondary powers. The objective of asymmetric counter-reaction is attainable, not as a victory over the adversary, but as a sign of inability to move on to the offensive. As Brantly Womack, a theoretician of asymmetric international relations, wrote about these links, the weaker side cannot threaten the position of the stronger side, but the stronger side cannot impose its will on the weaker side at a low cost (Tsygankov, 2019: 65).

The formulation and implementation of such a strategy will involve many difficulties, including the risk of confronting the most developed economies, the choice of internal development areas, the identification of promising international projects, and the strengthening of

the State’s administration. The protection of basic interests should be measured through the optic of creative long-term objectives which look beyond 2050.

The ongoing global transition is difficult for those who have not taken a position vis-a-vis the new world order. The practice of non-aligned countries during the Cold War years demonstrates the challenges of “playing at two ends”. This is already partially happening. Countries that used to belong to the US global sphere of influence are building their own relations with China, Russia, and other revisionist powers. For instance, they sign contractual agreements in the area of defense, without taking into account Washington’s protests. Even so, the strategy poses considerable difficulties. Its implementation requires not only a strong political will, but also a certain balance of power in the world and the consent of global powers. Today, both factors are missing. The world is witnessing a reconfiguration of global markets, regional systems, and political-military alliances, which complicates the choice for many countries.

Each country faces a dilemma. The global transition has begun and it cannot be reversed. A new world order is looming on the

horizon but the real struggle lies ahead. New issues on the agenda are already proposed initiatives, but it will all depend on the effective willingness and ability to make strategic decisions. The alternatives to it are chaos and the loss of *status* as a major player in world politics.

Researchers of the global transition are already trying to answer relevant theoretical questions, which are partially discussed in this article. They refer to the balance of power and to the perception on the part of leading international players; the nature and degree of antagonism between ideologies and values; the role of domestic politics; and the use of new methods of governance and influence in the arena of international rivalry (Tsygankov, 2019: 66).

The answers to these questions should help reassess the traditional frameworks and limits of the theory of international relations which opposes realists, idealists, and constructivists.

It seems that understanding the present and future processes of global transition will require a general reassessment of the asymmetric resources available to international actors, the ideas and perceptions of the great powers' leaders, and the nature of the internal political processes. For example, researchers in power resources and the international political system

will have to re-evaluate categories such as geopolitics, economic sanctions, propaganda and cyber-technologies, among others.

International confrontation is increasingly changing those areas, and States are actively developing new capacities in the struggle for power and influence. Under conditions of strategic uncertainty, the understanding of the new world order's processes from the position of polarity and the structure of the international system, typical of structural realism, is not sufficient and should be complemented with the understanding of the new capabilities of the Modern States.

Another important factor to consider is a new understanding of the role played by the leaders of global and regional powers, and their ideas of an improved and fairer world order. For years now, the idea of a global competition between the United States and the other liberal, with open societies, Western countries on one side, and other non-Western countries adherent to a Westphalian world order on the other has become obsolete. It should be replaced by a more flexible and realistic understanding of the complex ideological and political cooperation and rivalry in a world where global alliances by nationalists, liberals, left and right populists

and representatives of other political groups, all united against a unique coalition from Western and non-Western leaders, can exist (Tsygankov, 2019: 67).

A new analysis of leaders' beliefs and characters is also necessary by virtue of their process of decision making from a "rational" position and their choice of international behavioral strategies that have been proven false. Furthermore, researchers of the global transition should seriously analyze the subjectivity and "voluntarism" of the leaders who could give us surprises –both pleasant and unpleasant–.

Finally, as never before in recent decades, it is critical to underline the significance of domestic politics in international policy processes. The world is experiencing profound national and international transformations, accompanied by an ideological resignification of the usual or traditional understanding of liberalism, nationalism and other "isms" that have a decisive influence on the character of leaders and their choices of international behavioral strategies. The nature and degree of internal political stability of societies, and their ability to survive, to contain external pressure, and to mobilize in order to resolve important strategic issues, is not of minor importance.

### The role of Russia in this transition

The world creaks, but it began to do so long before –for example, Russia tried to impose its conditions in its so-called region of influence (Georgia, August 2008 and Ukraine, March 2014)<sup>2</sup>.

At the same time, the search for Russian identity is far from over. Its success will depend on the combination of asymmetric resistance sustained by the country's vital interests in the world, active efforts to build a new world order and the domestic reforms required for such purposes.

Already in the 1990s, long before the start of this global transition, with a great vision, the "Russian Kissinger" –the Russian Federation's Minister of Foreign Affairs Yevgeny Primakov – referred to these opportunities. In America, on the other hand, many people saw and continue to see an internally weak Russia as a purely regional power, notwithstanding that it has already demonstrated by far, its considerable military and political capabilities not only in Eurasia but also in the Middle East.

The Russian position on Washington's world order differs from that of Germany, both in the Versailles system and the Yalta system.



Nobody imposed, or could impose, on Moscow, reparations or unilateral disarmament, much less a territorial division. Even to discuss it would have been impossible. Russia was not defeated in the Cold War: it ended it along with “the West”, by mutual agreement, on the basis of a transitory unity of interests.

However, the rules of Yalta, which Moscow hoped would be respected, were violated in many ways by Washington, which had been the most revisionist country of them all at that time. Many officials in the Clinton Administration viewed Russia as a defeated power and consequently they expected to submit it to the dictates and priorities of American foreign policy. This seemed contradictory, for instance, to the postulate by Zbigniew Brzeziński (Polish of Jewish origin), who –being a “hawk” of the Carter Administration (1976-1980)– recommended containing Russia, as well as the Congress of Vienna did to France, without humiliating it (Brzezinski, 1992).

In fact, few people in the United States genuinely believed the end of the Cold War had been a victory for both sides. Washington, as the sole superpower, emphasized its global propaganda on the principle of liberal democracy, the only one the American establishment regarded as acceptable in terms of

legitimacy, rather than opting to reach new agreements in the delimitation of areas of responsibility and common rules of conduct. The withdrawal of the Warsaw Pact troops from Germany and Eastern Europe including German reunification was negotiated orally, but NATO was surprisingly maintained, and then even expanded. Gorbachev acted naively in front of Bush (father), Baker and Kohl, the other guarantors of the agreement, which, I insist, was not in writing. There was therefore no “Roadmap” for the subsequent world order (Itzcovich Shifrinson, 2014).

Russia was treated as if it had been defeated, in the style of the Crimean War: the victors deprived it of much of its spheres of influence and internal sovereignty. On the contrary, the “West” extended its influence to Western Europe, the Balkans, and many of the former Soviet Republics. It also contributed to internal reforms in Russia, through IMF loans, under the framework of the Washington Consensus, oblivious to the Russian economic idiosyncrasy (Tsygankov, 2019 :59).

Given that the former USSR and the Western powers jointly negotiated in Yalta their respective spheres of influence, many Russians viewed the US’s decision to expand NATO towards the post-Soviet East as an

attempt to take advantage of Russia's weakness and fill the security void in Europe after the Cold War.

Washington was reluctant to agree with Moscow and introduced new "ad hoc" global rules without a previous formal agreement. As a "defeated" power, Russia was unable to defy the American priorities, but it could accept its military interventions (Persian Gulf, Haiti, Somalia, and former Yugoslavia), in addition to the liberal narrative of "universal" values. Many of the American leaders, similar to the Europeans, strongly criticized their Russian colleagues for their human rights violations and their "iron fist" in internal politics such as those practiced in Chechnya.

A similar argument, typical of moral imperialism, was a veiled attempt to restrict Russian sovereignty in internal affairs, meaning the institutional ways Russian leaders considered appropriate at that moment, to avoid the dissolution of the country.<sup>3</sup>

Even so, it is clear Russia will have to make a considerable societal effort to further adapt to globalization, implementing the necessary structural reforms in the hope to preserve the international role it has achieved in the last two decades, a strong source of national pride and self-esteem.

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(1) The post-Vienna transition began in the mid-1840s with the weakening of the principles established at the Vienna Conference of 1815, when its members began to take advantage of the weakening of the Ottoman Empire. Russia did not seek to change the rules of the system, trying only to protect the rights of orthodox believers in the Turkish-Ottoman territory, preserving itself as a European State and maintaining its fleet in the Black Sea. England, which had never fully accepted Russian leadership and integration in the Viennese concert, became the first revisionist power, from which it increased its appetite for the Middle East. France and Austria, without being equally challenging, also sought the Russian weakening. The Crimean War resolved these bids and the Paris Congress in 1856 created a new order. The post-Paris transition, after 1871, the longest of all transitions (40 years) with a Russia that rebalanced its losses, a weak France, a once again conservative England, and a Germany in phenomenal rise, would last until the end of the new break –the First World War–. The post-Versailles transition was made possible

by a new German rise with Hitler as Chancellor in 1933. Both the withdrawal of the League of Nations; the Germanic remilitarization; the annexations of Austria and Czechoslovakia – both violating Versailles–; the agreements with France, England and the USSR, prevented the realization of a new system of collective security (as proposed by Moscow), but did not prevent World War II. The Yalta Conference would end up legitimizing a bipolar order with the two victorious superpowers in the war (such as the US and the USSR), but it led to a long transition like the Cold War, especially from the mid-1970s to 1989, where there were numerous crises (Poland, Iran, Afghanistan) although nuclear deterrence acted as a powerful disincentive to an atomic and global war. All this would lead to the order of Washington, where the United States and Europe would dictate the new rules from 1992.

(2) There are two very clear and contrasting positions regarding this crunch of the world order: the “alarmists” and the “stabilizers.” For the former, there is an accelerated tendency towards the destruction or decay of international institutions and their subsystems. the Valdai Report of 2018 and intellectuals like Sergei Karaganov see the world with the aggravation of a new Cold War between the United States and

Russia, with unforeseeable effects, whereas for the latter, enlisted in liberal cadres, the previous prophecies are exaggerated. The North American CFR for example, the old order brought enormous prosperity and stability.

Even Ikenberry, recognizing that it suffers a certain decline, exhibits it in its implementation form, not in adhering to its basic principles. Even the Russian RIAC sees this order as irreplaceable, in terms of rationality, normativity and openness. The Russian liberals recognize the fall of “the West” but that does not mean that the old order must be transformed, but rather, perfected. In this, keep confidence in the European role, rebalancing the relationship with the United States. Actually, both positions could be wrong. The “alarmists” underestimate the importance of the destructive and constructive processes in the world, from which the future global order can be built. They do not even visualize the United States’ own role in regenerating it, although perhaps on the basis of other principles. The “stabilizers” are skeptical about the ability of non-Western states to reduce the technological gap and create a more stable and effective institutions (Tsygankov, 2019:

60-61-62).

(3) So it can not be surprising that Russia did not become a major revisionist country under the Washington order. Scholars have made it clear that the recognition of power by the great powers reduces their assertiveness and revisionism where the underestimation or under-recognition stimulates revisionist conduct.

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