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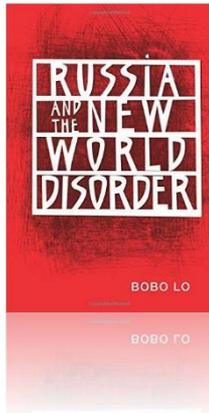
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# Russia and the New World Disorder



Lo, Bobo (2015), *Brookings Institution Press/Chatham House, Baltimore/London*.

*“In place of serious strategic thinking (let alone imagination), the Kremlin has allowed itself to be distracted by tactical “triumphs” and a large measure of self-delusion. Despite its emphasis on the “pragmatic” pursuit of national interests, its approach to international relations is skewed by a virtual world that promises much, but delivers little.”*

## Summary

Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 was a revolutionary and aggressive act. It was revolutionary, because for the first time in more than half a century, one European state invaded the territory of another by means of force. This action on the part of Moscow shook the foundations of the international system of 1945 and signalled the end of the post-Cold War policy of accommodation with the West. A “new” system was emerging, even if no one quite knew what its rules were or how it would turn out. At the same time, the Kremlin's actions were a throwback to an era that many had thought was over.

Bobo Lo, author of *Russia and the New World Disorder*, considers that the narrative in Russia today has changed. Globalisation, or at least Western-led globalisation, is out, while geopolitics has returned as the principal element of Putin's foreign policy. Russia has reverted to the traditional, the familiar and the indigenous. Within its borders, the country is pursuing the “national idea” based on conservative political and social values, free of the influence of Western liberalism. Internationally, the country is leading a resurgent nationalism that openly defies US leadership and the legitimacy of many global norms and institutions. In Bobo Lo's opinion, the feelings of inferiority that once characterised Russian elite attitudes have given way to a new militancy and, in public at least, aggressive self-confidence.

In the course of this work, the author will make an analysis of Russia (one that is by no means indulgent) and he will seek to show readers Russia's perception, strategy and role in the new world disorder. Bobo Lo believes that there is much at stake. If Russia is able to redefine itself as a modern power, it will be a key player in the history of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the ability to exert a critical influence in international politics, economics and society. Conversely, an unreconstructed Russia could end up as one of the principal

casualties of global transformation – backward at home, marginalised from decision-making, and increasingly vulnerable to the ambitions of other countries.

## The author

**Bobo Lo** is an associate fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House (UK), and an associate research fellow with the Russia and New Independent States Center at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI). He was previously director of the China and Russia programs at the Centre for European Reform, London; head of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House; and deputy head of mission at the Australian Embassy in Moscow. He is the author of *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Brookings/Chatham House, 2008).

## Key ideas and opinion

*Russia and the New World Disorder* is divided into three parts: the first examines the context of Russia and its foreign policy, that is to say, the domestic factors that influence the decision-making process. The second part looks at the Putin regime's response to the four major challenges presented by the new world disorder: 1) to redefine Russia as a global actor and contributor to global public goods; 2) to recalibrate its influence in post-Soviet Eurasia; 3) to engage more productively in the Asia-Pacific region; and 4) to stabilise relations with the West. The last part of the book looks ahead and evaluates possible future scenarios for Russia.

### The context of Russia and its foreign policy

In recent years, it has become fashionable to emphasise the fusion of domestic politics and foreign policy. The latter is essentially regarded as an extension of the former. There is also the conventional Western view that a country's political system and values determine its attitude to the outside world. Thus democracies are said to be more committed to positive-sum cooperation than authoritarian regimes, which tend to adopt more self-interested, assertive and even aggressive positions. In Bobo Lo's opinion, however, these are simplifications that underestimate **the complexity of the domestic/foreign policy nexus**. In the case of Russia, this nexus assumes various forms. **The linkage is apparent at the most basic level in the political culture and *modus operandi* of the Putin elite**. Although this elite is not monolithic, there are considerable commonalities within it, especially with respect to foreign policy. As Bobo Lo emphasises, this elite does not usually challenge core foreign policy assumptions. Differences arise due to conflicts of interests, rather than of ideas. **Compared with the bitter disagreements over economic reform, foreign policy has largely been free of serious controversy**. Russia's destiny as a great power and unique civilisational identity are accepted as self-evident truths, while there is resentment towards Western policies

E and actions. Nor does the Russian elite contradict the central reality of Russian politics, which is that most important decisions must go through Putin. One of the big errors of the Obama administration was believing, during the reset (the Obama administration's strategy to reset relations between the US and Russia), that there were two policy camps in Moscow: a progressive wing favourable to the West, led by Medvedev, and a reactionary, conservative establishment under Putin. However, without Putin's approval there would have been no positive response to the reset.

**Other structural factors also influence the relationship between domestic and foreign policy in Russia.** Its **geographical position** has reinforced its belief that it has a direct stake in developments from Europe to North-East Asia and the Pacific, and from the Arctic to the Middle East, and it has nourished a foreign policy outlook dominated by security and threat perceptions. The **extent of its territory**, which covers more than 10% of the Earth's surface, has also contributed to reinforcing its identity as an "empire". Along with physical size comes **self-identification**. The Russian federation comprises more than a hundred distinct nationalities, some of the world's major religions, and multiple civilisational traditions. This has enabled it to adapt its discourse and emphasise its European civilisation when it engages with the EU, its Eurasian identity when it talks about the shift of global power to the East, and its large Muslim community when seeking to project influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. This multiplicity of identities reinforces the idea of Russia as "special". **Historical memory** also plays a crucial role in Russian foreign policy, as the source of fears and humiliation, as the basis for national pride and assertiveness, and as an instrument of legitimation. **The most existential fear, Bobo Lo stresses, is that of losing sovereignty and territorial integrity.** The break-up of the Soviet Union was traumatic not only because of its dismembering effect, but because the transformation from a global superpower into an powerless country of little interest was truly a disaster.

**Although other factors, such as social forces, matter, in the author's opinion their impact remains on a national level.** While Putin has steered the country towards greater authoritarianism, Russian society has become more diverse and demanding. **The clichéd portrayal of an anaesthetised society is out of date, and society's unconditional support of Putin cannot be taken for granted.** The change in social dynamics became very clear during the anti-Putin protests of 2011-12. However, in the author's opinion, the protests were staged more in response to discontent about the government's failure to combat corruption and provide decent public services, and for the moment **they have had little impact on the formulation of foreign policy.** A similar situation may be observed with respect to religion. Although Putin and other important figures are often seen in the company of religious leaders, **according to Bobo Lo, religion has little influence on the formulation of foreign policy.** The church is an instrument for legitimising foreign policy, rather than a driving force *per se*.

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The second facet of Russia's foreign policy is external. Preconceived ideas about the inherent nature of international politics, as well as more recent judgements about the rise and decline of major powers, form the intellectual basis of Putin's foreign policy. **A Hobbesian perspective is imposed, in which the world is hostile, the strong prosper and the weak get beaten, and in which Russia is one of the winning countries in the transition to a new multipolar order.** Yet for Russia, the decline of the West and the rise of the rest is more than just an objective trend in international relations. **It is an ideological project, driven by the desire to reclaim national sovereignty against the political, economic and normative hegemony of the West,** above all, because the US and Europe are no longer able to impose their vision of global governance on others. **The ideological division between communism and capitalism has been replaced by a contest between traditional authoritarianism and democratic liberalism.** This outlook goes straight to the heart of perceptions of Russia as an independent global actor and regional leader. And above all, Bobo Lo points out, it reinforces the conviction that success depends on strengthening the fundamentals that have sustained Russia in better times, such as a **clear sense of national purpose, an aggressive attitude towards the world, and creating the capabilities to back all this up.**

At the same time, the Kremlin faces **a constant struggle in reconciling its vision of Russia in the world and meeting the challenges posed by the new world disorder.** Bobo Lo explains how regional and global circumstances intrude on foreign policy. The new world disorder, far from being a new multipolar order dominated by a few major powers, is characterised by an atmosphere of confusion and rejection of norms and models. It is a world in which the fluidity of power **demand a completely different mindset from political leaders: one of adaptation and even reinvention, rather than containment and consolidation.** In the author's opinion, the preference for this latter mindset is creating a dysfunctional foreign policy in Russia. **In spite of the Kremlin's emphasis on the "pragmatic" pursuit of national interests, its approach to international relations is distorted by a virtual world that promises much, but delivers little.** By way of example, Bobo cites the events in **Ukraine.** Although it may seem implausible, the value of military might is diminishing, and the "success" of Russia in Ukraine has exposed the shortcomings of the use of force, and of hard power in general. **The takeover of Crimea was an impressive operation that allowed the Kremlin to achieve its immediate objectives.** But its effects have been negative for Russian interests. The administration in Kiev will be hostile to Russia for the next few years at least, while popular support for Ukraine's pro-European orientation has increased considerably.

### **Russia and the new world disorder**

**The area of global governance, more than any other, highlights the tension between perception and reality in Russian decision-making. On the one hand, the author stresses, the Kremlin takes pride in defending the correct implementation of UN resolutions.** It has played a key role in establishing new multilateral structures, such as

the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union. Furthermore, it acts as if it were an indispensable player – whether over Ukraine, Syria or matters of global energy security. **So why has Russia acquired such a negative image with respect to global governance?** When Russia resists the will of the “international community”, it is condemned. And if it cooperates, its compliance is considered the only rational and moral choice, unworthy of comment, let alone praise. Russia's concerns about conflict management, terrorism and nuclear proliferation should offer a wide range of opportunities for cooperation. However, it is accused of manipulating its relations with neighbouring countries, its contribution in Afghanistan is played down, and its presence in Syria is generally viewed as obstructive.

**In Bobo Lo's opinion, far from being a Western conspiracy, this negative image stems from the gulf between its formal allegiance to the “primacy of international law” and the territorial integrity of nation states, and a highly selective approach towards implementing such principles.** Thus, just after criticising American unilateralism and exceptionalism over Syria in the autumn of 2013, the Kremlin revealed a “do as I say, not as I do” attitude on Ukraine. In the process, it confirmed that the Russian national interest clearly trumps the standards of acceptable international behaviour. Russia's willingness and capacity to play a significant role in global governance matter, because it has global interests. But the key question, in the author's opinion, is “what kind of global player does it want to be?” **Over the past 200 years, the Russian ruling elite has come to regard the status of global power as a historical right, irrespective of Russia's circumstances. However, in today's new world disorder, a “divine right of great powers” is no longer tenable.**

**On top of this, Bobo Lo points out, Russia has minimal influence on most of the key issues on the contemporary global agenda.** By way of example, Bobo Lo explains how the 2008 economic crisis highlighted the need to reform the financial architecture and reduce dependence on the dollar. However, **a reform of the IMF and the World Bank favours China and India, not Russia.** In fact, its influence in these institutions could be diminished, since it is forecast that its share of the global economy (3.3% in 2014) is going to decline. On the other hand, it is not clear that a general shift away from the US dollar would lead to the inclusion of the rouble in the currency basket. Another example of Russia's scant influence on the world economy cited by the author is the fact that it joined the World Trade Organisation in 2012, the last major economy to do so.

**Perhaps the most difficult of Russia's foreign policy challenges is recalibrating its influence in the post-Soviet space from that of imperial master to post-imperial power.** All empires struggle to adjust to decline, and in Bobo Lo's opinion, Russia is no exception. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a shocking experience in every sense. **Although Moscow knows that the Soviet Union cannot be put back together, it believes it has a legitimate right of influence in the former Soviet republics, and it remains allergic to the possibility that they may align themselves with other powers**

against Russia. This was shown very clearly in **2008**, when the (remote) prospect of NATO membership for **Georgia** and Ukraine was used as an excuse for the escalation of tensions with Tbilisi. It was also visible in Russia's efforts to derail **Ukraine's Association Agreement negotiations with the EU**, as well as in its military response to the Maidan Revolution. Nevertheless, Bobo Lo notes, set against these imperial aspirations there are realities that the country cannot ignore. The former Soviet republics have been independent for more than two decades now, and they have become increasingly jealous about preserving their sovereignty. **Russia therefore faces a difficult choice: it can reconsider its approach and tolerate the presence of third parties, or it can continue insisting on its "rights" and run the risk of damaging the influence and the relationships to which it attaches so much importance.** The outcome of the Ukraine crisis illustrates how badly things can go wrong when this delicate balance is disrupted.

One recent development that has been given much publicity is **Russia's turn to the East**. The author refers here not just to expanding ties with China, but treating the Asia-Pacific region as a major stage of economic engagement and security. Once again, the disconnection between impressions and reality is huge. While Moscow states that Russia has re-emerged as a "Euro-Pacific" power, a geopolitical counterweight between China and the US and an economic and *civilisational* bridge in Eurasia, the truth is, the author notes, that the country has found it difficult to make such grand ambitions a reality. **With the exception of some energy agreements, Russia's imprint on the Asian continent has been fairly insignificant, and few consider that its contribution can go much further than resources and arms.** Moscow continues to focus almost exclusively on China, and its interest in economic integration and regional security-building is fairly limited. The author stresses, furthermore, that the backwardness of Russia's eastern regions undermines its quest for acceptance and influence in an increasingly contested and competitive part of the world.

**With respect to its relationship with the West**, Bobo Lo observes that the global financial crisis and the crisis of the Eurozone have led Russia to overestimate the West's loss of influence and power. Nevertheless, the country should pursue a more consistent strategy based on a balanced appreciation of today's realities and Russia's long-term interests. According to the author, **a practical approach would proceed from the understanding that the main threats to Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not come from US missile defence or the European Union's Eastern Partnership, but from instability in neighbouring countries, nuclear proliferation and transnational crime.** Such an approach implies breaking with the zero-sum mentality that has dominated the relationship with the US for so long, as well as developing a more sophisticated understanding of European dynamics.

### Future perspectives for Russia

**Many analysts rule out the possibility that Russia's attitude will change, above all while Putin continues to dominate Russian politics. According to this negative analysis,**



the sense of “great power-ness” (*derzhavnost*) and empire has always been in the DNA of Russia's rulers. Although the Kremlin has sometimes been accommodating on an operational level, its strategic outlook has remained conservative and reactionary. Indeed, it is difficult to be optimistic in the light of recent events. **Nevertheless, Bobo Lo stresses that circumstances can and do alter strategies.** A geopolitically driven foreign policy may become unattractive, even for a highly educated elite brought up in a culture of military power, national greatness and *realpolitik*. Furthermore, growing social and economic pressures, fissures among the elite and unfavourable external factors (such as a collapse in the price of raw materials or China in an increasingly assertive position) may turn what is improbable today into what is possible, and even necessary, tomorrow. Without wishing to predict the future, ***Russia and the New World Disorder concludes with four scenarios for 2030:***

### 1. "Soft" or semi-authoritarian stagnation

In this scenario, the political system would be headed by an absolutist personality. The economy would be similar to the economy under the Putin-Medvedev tandem. Attempts at modernisation would be limited, and energy and natural resources would continue to be the main sources of wealth and power projection. In foreign policy, there would be an entrenchment of Russian identity, norms and values. In this scenario, it is difficult to envisage anything other than the decline of Russia's international position.

### 2. Hard authoritarianism

This scenario would only be possible if the circumstances were to be similar to Germany in 1930: economic collapse and hyperinflation, political fracturing, social discontent and foreign policy humiliations. There would be a general hankering for the restoration of stability and hopes would be pinned on a "strong leader". Despite efforts to present a confident façade, an authoritarian Russia would feel extremely insecure. Sensitive to its own frailties, it would opt for an inward-looking, almost minimalist foreign policy. The greatest threat to this regime would come from its inability to adapt to, or contain, external and internal influences. The paradigm would be the same as in the previous scenario: the impossibility of insulating Russia from the world around it.

### 3. Regime fracturing

Although it may not be a practicable scenario today, this situation could come about due to the combination of several factors, such as a sustained slump in commodity prices, the disappearance or incapacitation of Putin, an internal war within the elite and crippling socio-economic problems. The result would be a "Weimarisation" of Russia, with genuine pluralism, civic activism, economic and cultural liberalisation,



coexisting with weak institutions, macroeconomic instability and ultranationalism. Another possibility would be the territorial disintegration of the country.

#### 4. "Second-wave" liberalism

This scenario is based on the premise that Russia will eventually undergo a process of modernisation to combat its continuing regression and loss of power. There would be real progress with respect to reforms, political pluralism, (albeit imperfect) rule of law, functioning institutions, a competitive economy and a developing civil society. The resulting foreign policy would be internationalist, reconceptualising notions of greatness and power.

Many of these assumptions may not materialise. However, **Bobo Lo believes the only thing that is certain is that tremendously difficult times lie ahead for Russia. How its political leaders respond to the national and international challenges will be crucial to its future in an ever more disorderly century.**