Suggested Reference


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While an economic and political union between Russia and Europe is unlikely, it could serve the interests of both sides in an increasingly hostile world.

In March 2015, one thing is clear: a new rift between the transatlantic West and Russia is developing – one which could usher in a new period of animosity. As the crisis in Ukraine continues, there is still scant optimism for rapprochement. Many commentators have evoked analogies of the Cold War, casting the emerging struggle as a rekindling of presumed deeply rooted ideological differences between the two allegedly coherent and opposing forces: the West and Russia.

For public opinion on both sides, two things appear to be axiomatic: the West and Russia have opposing key geopolitical interests, and that Europe and America belong to a single camp in firm opposition to Russia. In this view, the conflict in Ukraine is merely a symbol of the return of a far greater and inevitable clash of two blocs with dramatically opposed interests and ideologies. We do not subscribe to this pervasive pessimistic view and would argue that, despite conflicting passions, there are no fundamental geopolitical, economic or even ideological reasons why closer cooperation or even some degree of integration between Europe and Russia should be impossible. In reality, the United States is likely the only global player whose influence could be diminished by such a rapprochement.

There is nothing either natural, obvious or inevitable about the conflict between Russia and Europe.

**The 'new Cold War'**

The vision of a 'new Cold War' is certainly alarming. However, this vision is partly based on a mixture of dubious or blatantly wrong assumptions, which fail to account for the interests and geopolitical forces underpinning the Europe-Russia relationship. In reality, when you factor in the various links between the two 'sides' (particularly economic and trade links), the relationship is actually far from being inherently acrimonious.
There is nothing either natural, obvious or inevitable about the conflict between Russia and Europe. Indeed, neither Europe nor Russia can actually ‘win’ in Ukraine. A victory for Europe would cause resentment and radicalisation in Russia while a victory for Russia would result in the proliferation and entrenchment of frozen conflicts in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Furthermore, Ukraine would find it difficult to survive without cordial relations with representatives of east and west – the cornerstone of its long held ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy strategy. Arguably, the only party that could actually benefit from a renewed continental divide in Eurasia is the United States.

The notion that the United States could benefit from Europe’s division with Russia may come across as part hyperbole and part conspiracy theory. It seems counter-intuitive: how could the world’s reigning power, an outspoken advocate for free economic exchange, among other norms, reap any benefits from allowing Eurasia to descend into a dangerous game of geopolitics and competition?

Indeed, the implications of the deteriorating situation in Eurasia, such as tangible threats to American allies and broader repercussions for international trade, seem to run strongly against American interests. However, one should not conflate America’s interests with that of her allies or the desire for a stable world as a whole.

**Hegemony, military and economic**

Isolating America’s deeply-rooted strategic and economic interests from the tangled web of rhetoric, partnerships, policies, and action, points to the basic driver of its foreign policy: the maintenance of its global military, political, and economic dominance.

After two world wars and the Cold War, the United States stood alone internationally as the unquestionable superpower. Consequently, hegemony has not only endowed the United States with the capability to project and utilise power across the globe, allowing it to influence and shape key geopolitical disputes, but also the ability to dictate the terms of global economic exchanges.

While the United States may no longer be the largest economy in the world, partially due to its geopolitical standing, it certainly is still the most privileged and influential one. The United States designed and remains in control of the key global financial and economic institutions, natural resources, and shipping routes. It is also home to the world’s most important corporations, and exercises a high degree of control over the key technologies and communication infrastructure. What is more, it benefits tremendously from the unchallenged status of the US dollar as the world’s reserve currency.

Increasingly over the last decade, many scholars and commentators have posited an end to America’s international primacy in the near to mid-term future. The fascination with the emergence of China as a challenger to American hegemony is understandable. It has demonstrated incredible economic growth and, more recently, military advancement. However, China’s ascension to international dominance is far from guaranteed.

While China’s economic growth continues to impress, its growth rates are probably unsustainable in the long-term, particularly due to looming demographic and environmental challenges. More importantly, China faces a number of obstacles to gaining global politico-economic dominance, which include the legitimacy and stability of its political system, and increasing problems with its economic model.

From an ideational perspective, China has yet to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the global public. China’s cultural capital is lightyears behind that of America when it comes to global influence. As Bill Durodié observed during the 2011 Singapore Global Dialogue: 'It’s worth recalling that the United States of America rose to world supremacy with a population of just 90m. What truly makes a world power isn’t merely economic clout, but the new values, philosophies and ideas that they bring to the market.’ It remains to be seen what kind of new, attractive ideas China will have to offer to the rest of the world.
China’s economic rise has been impressive, but its position as a global leader is by no means secure in the long term.

Lastly, from a geopolitical standpoint, China’s rise to being an international challenger to America is heavily constrained by geography. China is surrounded by an array of medium and large powers, which are either wary or hostile to its rise; in every direction China faces geopolitical challenges, the likes of which the United States has never had to face.

China’s growth is impressive and rightfully causes people to question the longevity of America’s international preponderance. But it is unlikely that China will challenge the United States’ international primacy in the next 50 years at least.

However, there is another hypothetical challenger to American hegemony. One which is rarely mentioned but could, under the right circumstances, be a more potent challenger than China: a united, or at least more closely associated, Eurasia.

**Eurasia resurgent**

The relationship between Europe and Russia has undoubtedly cooled significantly over the last decade. Consequently, suggesting that actually there are some strong common interests and scope for win-win outcomes through closer Eurasian cooperation may seem questionable. However, the truth is that political and economic rapprochement between Europe and Russia would be of tangible benefit to both sides, and could potentially detract from America’s global standing.

Arguably, the threat of a unified Eurasia has long been a source of great anxiety for the United States, which may explain – at least partially – the rationale for their involvement in both world wars and the Cold War, where there was a risk of a single strong power emerging on the European continent.

The idea of a super-state emerging in Eurasia, incorporating the member states of the EU and Russia, along with neighbourhood countries such as Ukraine and Belarus, is currently ludicrous. The EU experience vividly shows the limitations of integration and the resilience of the nation-state. However, if you allow yourself to indulge the idea of an economically, and loosely political, union of states from ‘Lisbon to Vladivostok’, then it quickly becomes clear why it would, on the one hand benefit the countries of Eurasia and, on the other, challenge America’s international primacy.

A united Eurasia would create the world’s largest territorial free trade zone.

**Untold benefits**
Firstly, a united Eurasia would create the world’s largest territorial free trade zone, spanning the shores of the Atlantic all the way to the shores of the Pacific. Additionally, such a zone would trail only China and India in terms of population, with incomparably higher per capita incomes, and the world’s largest GDP.

A Eurasian Union stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok would have an incomparable GDP and pairing of industry with resources.

Secondly, a united Eurasia would have a practically inexhaustible resource base, especially in terms of key energy resources. It would represent the perfect merger of the West’s technological and innovative clout with Russia’s massive resources, creating a win-win situation for both sides. The close (and previously unthinkable) Franco-German co-operation since 1945 shows how economic cooperation between two complementary entities can drive integration (in the case of the EU) and mutually beneficial policies despite an otherwise ambivalent legacy of historical animosity.

From a geopolitical perspective, a united Eurasia would be only second to the US in protection from outside aggression.

Thirdly, from a geopolitical perspective, a united Eurasia would be only second to the United States when it comes to natural protection from outside aggression. It would be protected by oceans to the east, west, and north. Though China to the south would be of geopolitical concern, the potential for lucrative trade relations and lack of border disputes could mitigate this.

Fourthly, a united Eurasia would render America’s military presence on the ground in Europe pointless. Without the purported threat of Russia, most – if not all – of the European countries would see little benefit in maintaining the often asymmetrical transatlantic alliance. Furthermore, the Cold War relic that is NATO would likely cease to exist: with a cooperative Russia, there would be no problem a united Eurasia could not solve by itself.

Lastly, and perhaps most crucially in the context of the United States, an economically united Eurasia could pose a serious challenge to America’s primacy in the areas of global finance and trade. While transatlantic trade and economic cooperation would still most probably prove mutually beneficial, it could be based on more balanced foundations. A united Eurasia could itself become more prosperous and attractive than America due to the sheer size of its market, resource base, and as a result of political stability. It could offer institutional alternatives to such elements of US hegemony as the privilege of being able to print the world’s reserve currency.

Therefore, when compiling what a hypothetical union between Europe and Russia could bring to international affairs, it is clear that such a development would be hugely detrimental to America’s current hegemonic position. Critics are right to point out that differences in history, ideology, political systems, and economies are an obvious stumbling block to potential unity between Europe and Russia. But one cannot deny that common interests exist for pursuing such a project.

It is doubtful that dividing Europe represents an explicit foreign policy objective in Washington. But, nevertheless,

the current division between Europe and Russia undoubtedly bolsters the United States’ global
dominance.

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