

# 1 Introduction

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“The student of politics who looks only at patterns of behavior but leaves out the meaning that actors give to their own and to each other’s conduct turns into a specialist of shadows.”

Robert Legvold<sup>1</sup>

## **The Question of Russia’s International Motives**

From a weak and inward-looking nation in the 1990s, Russia has emerged into a power that is increasingly capable of defending its international prestige using available economic and military means. Throughout the 2000s, it has exploited its energy clout to expand Russian business relations abroad and has cemented its military presence in the strategic area of the Caucasus by defeating Georgia’s attack on South Ossetia. In a world that is increasingly post-American and post-Western,<sup>2</sup> Russia is likely to remain an influential power in the critically important Eurasian region. Even the unprecedented rise of China does not change the fact that Russia possesses a large arsenal of nuclear weapons, abundant supplies of natural resources, and the longest geographic border in the world. With a seat on the United Nations Security Council and membership in international organizations such as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia will continue to play a prominent role in world affairs. Even though the global financial meltdown in 2008 revealed Russia’s economic vulnerability, it did not undermine its capability to export energy to both Europe and Asia.

In recognition of Russia’s importance, the United States has attempted to “reset” relations with the Kremlin after years of estrangement under the George W. Bush administration. The European Union is also keenly interested in developing deeper economic and political ties with Moscow. Serious attempts made by the West to improve relations with Russia address a variety of issues, including the stabilization of Afghanistan and the Middle East, nuclear nonproliferation, NATO expansion, missile

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defense systems, the exploitation of energy reserves in the region, and the future of the former Soviet states.

However, the motives underlying Russia's international behavior remain puzzling to scholars and policy makers alike. Historically, Russia watchers have been divided between those who view its behavior as accommodationist and nonthreatening to the West<sup>3</sup> and those who perceive Russia as a state that is expansionist and does not abide by acceptable international rules.<sup>4</sup> The motives guiding Russia's foreign relations should determine which policy the Western nations advance toward the Eastern power. If Russia's interests and ambitions do not undermine existing international rules, the West is better off trying to engage Russia as an equal contributor in shaping the global system. If, however, Moscow harbors revisionist plans, it may represent a threat to Western interests and must be either contained or fundamentally transformed.

**Overview of the Argument**

In its systematic exploration of Russia's international behavior, this book takes a long-range perspective, studying the country's relations with Western nations since the early nineteenth century. During the last two centuries, Russia's relations with the West have followed three distinct patterns, which have endured social upheavals and rapidly changing historical circumstances.

*The Three Patterns of Russia's Relations with the West*

The first pattern – cooperation with Western nations – has its roots in Prince Vladimir's decision to accept Christianity in 988. Having survived two centuries of Mongol domination, Russia sought to strengthen its Christian roots by developing ties with the Holy Roman Empire and, later, joining the Holy League against the Ottoman Empire. Peter the Great tried to improve relations with Europe by sending ambassadors to important Western states and borrowing and adapting their technological achievements. Catherine the Great proclaimed Russia “a European power” and validated that status by continuing to restrain influences of the Ottoman Empire on the European continent. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Russia established the Holy Alliance and joined autocratic Europe in suppressing revolutionary activities on the continent. In the second half of the century, Russia participated in the Three Emperors League with Germany and Austro-Hungary, but then switched allegiances to the coalition of France and Britain – partly to preserve its connection to this increasingly influential part of the West.

The tradition of cooperating with the West continued even during the Soviet era. The Bolsheviks sought recognition by the Western states by championing ideas of peaceful coexistence and then collective security to deter Hitler's Germany. In the 1970s, the Soviet Union signed the Helsinki agreement of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Mikhail Gorbachev then built on the agreement to promote human rights and "common human values" in his foreign policy of a "common European home." The dissolution of the Soviet state created conditions for an even stronger engagement with the West, with Russia seeking to capitalize on its similarity with the Western nations in terms of institutions and common threats. The most recent expression of such attempts was Dmitri Medvedev's policy of building "modernization alliances" with Western nations.

In addition to alliances and institution-building, Russia fought multiple wars alongside the West – most prominently, the First Northern War against Sweden (1655–60), the Seven Years War against Prussia (1756–63), the war against Napoleonic France, World Wars I and II, and, more recently, the global war on terror.

The second pattern of Russia's foreign policy is that of defensive reaction to the Western world. When Russian rulers were not successful in achieving their international objectives and did not receive sufficient support for their efforts from the West, they occasionally retreated into periods of relative isolation to gather domestic strength. In the early seventeenth century, after Moscow was defeated by Poland, it did not resume military engagements for another twenty years, when in 1654 Russia annexed Ukraine. In the eighteenth century, Russia used twenty years of neutrality from the war with Sweden to recover from financial and demographic losses. After being defeated in the Crimean War, Russia again pursued the policy of domestic reforms and flexible alliances to recover its lost position in Europe and the Black Sea. The Bolshevik slogan of "peaceful coexistence" contained elements of both cooperation and defensiveness, whereas Stalin's "socialism in one country" was a Soviet version of defensive foreign policy, engaged in to enable recovery from domestic weaknesses brought about by revolution and civil war. That Stalin later sided with Hitler in part reflected the Soviet leader's desire to shield the country against international disturbances and buy more time for internal reforms. After the end of the Cold War, Russia sought to recuperate from the Soviet collapse by maneuvering between the Western nations and China and India.

Finally, Russia is historically known for pursuing policies of assertiveness vis-à-vis the West. Acting from a position of perceived strength, Russia has asserted its interests unilaterally even after Western nations

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failed to support them. In the seventeenth century, Russia fought many wars with Poland and the Ottoman Empire, seeking control over national borders and to protect Balkan Slavs. In the early eighteenth century Peter the Great defeated Sweden, turning Russia into a great European power. Wars with Turkey continued up to the Crimean War, in which Russia fought against major European states. After recovering domestically, Russia returned to the Balkans and defeated the Turks in 1870s. During the Soviet era, the Bolsheviks initiated the doctrine of “world revolution,” thereby challenging the very foundations of the system of states. They acted on this doctrine by launching an assault on Poland in 1920, which the Bolsheviks hoped would undermine European “capitalist” states. During the Cold War, Russia sought to establish its geopolitical presence in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and northern Iran, acting in direct opposition to the Western nations. The Soviet Union also acted assertively during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and when it sent troops to Afghanistan in 1979. More recently, Russia intervened in the Georgia–South Ossetia military conflict despite the United States’ and the European Union’s warnings against the Kremlin’s “bullish” and “revisionist” behavior.

*Honor and the Formation of Russia’s Foreign Policy*

These patterns of international behavior can be understood in terms of Russia’s established sense of honor, which can operate both on the individual and societal level. On the individual level, honor is associated with the readiness of the self to preserve its dignity and to fulfill its assumed moral commitments to its relevant social community.<sup>5</sup> Although scholars frequently view human actions as if they were designed to meet rationally determined objectives, beliefs and emotions may define the meaning of an action.<sup>6</sup> Honor constitutes a powerful emotional belief, and historians and theoreticians frequently credit it as important, even decisive, in determining the cause of human interactions.<sup>7</sup> On the societal level, honor may define a country’s stake in the international system and its standards of appropriate behavior. Honor defines what is a “good” and “virtuous” course of action in the international society vis-à-vis the relevant other.

Russia’s deep cultural connection to the West began when it became a student of Byzantium’s faith in 988. Ever since that time Europe has played the role of Russia’s “significant other,” figuring prominently in domestic debates and creating the context in which Russia’s rulers defended their core values.<sup>8</sup> Even when the tsarist system collapsed in the early twentieth century, the supposedly atheist Soviet state

preserved – albeit in a sharply disfigured form – the desire to be recognized by the West.<sup>9</sup> Thus Russia's honor has been defined as the honor of being a part of the Western world and defending its core values.

At the same time, Russia's cultural lenses were, and are, different from those of Western nations – formed by distinct historical memory, ties with historic allies, and contemporary challenges.<sup>10</sup> Although Russia is culturally dependent on the West, its emotional and moral well-being has historically depended on relations with its own cultural communities, which are defined as Orthodox Christians, Slavs, ethnic Russians, or those who gravitate to Russia's institutions and share some of Russia's core values. Since the Schism of 1054 and the fall of Byzantium, Russia's rulers have positioned their country as one with its own special interests and cultural characteristics. Located in the middle of Eurasia, Russia has few natural boundaries and has been frequently attacked by outsiders from the Mongols to Napoleon and Hitler. A vast overland empire that follows the Eastern version of Christianity and has constant concerns over border security, Russia has always felt different from the rest of Europe. The fact that Europe's recognition of Russia as one of its own has always been problematic<sup>11</sup> has served to reinforce this identity of “difference” from the West.

The two essential dimensions of Russia's honor – European and local – help explain its relations with the Western nations. The two are dependent on each other, and the dialectics of their relationship is such that Russia may only act on its Europeanness when the West does not principally challenge the distinctive aspects of Russia's honor. Russian rulers have historically sought to be like the West and win its recognition by joining Western alliances or by trying to beat Western nations at their own power game. If the Western nations are great powers, Russia too aspires to such status. If the West demonstrates accomplishments in institution building, economic prosperity, and human rights protection, Russian rulers too are drawn to these accomplishments and attempt to replicate them at home. As long as it feels sufficient recognition and reciprocation from Western capitals, Moscow is prepared to act in concert with its significant other.

However, when the West challenges Russia's distinctiveness and internal sense of honor, Russia tends to adopt either defensive or assertive policy postures. For example, Russia could not act as a confident Western power when its actions were disruptive of its traditionally strong ties with Slavic and Orthodox allies. In the absence of external recognition of its international claims, Russia's pro-Western elites have historically run into opposition from advocates of a more independent foreign policy. Russia's internal confidence reflects both its material power and the perception of power by the ruling elite<sup>12</sup>; it is the degree of that internal

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confidence in its ability to pursue an independent foreign policy that determines whether Russia chooses a defensive or assertive direction.

If cooperation with Western nations has reflected Russia's sense of honor as loyalty to the West, then defensiveness and assertiveness have frequently been products of the nation's commitments to its historic allies and domestic subjects. Russian rulers have tried hard to pursue policies that would integrate both Western and local commitments. However, that integration has not always been possible, partly because the West has not always been supportive of Russia's aspirations to defend its cultural allies. For example, Nicholas I's assertiveness with regard to the Balkans and Crimea found little support among Western powers and resulted in the Crimean War.

*Ethical Implications of the Argument*

To argue that honor shapes foreign policy is not to characterize an international behavior as honorable. Rather, it is to draw scholarly attention to the moral and ethical implications a state action entails and to raise the question of responsibility for episodes of misunderstanding and failed cooperation in Russia–West relations.

Examples of such failures abound, and both sides bear responsibility for the clash in perceptions. What Moscow views as successful advancements of its honorable objectives – which have included security, welfare, and independence – Western nations occasionally perceive as unilateralist and revisionist behavior. In the Crimean War, for example, Nicholas I's aim was to force the Sultan to recognize the rights of the Orthodox Christians in Jerusalem and Palestine; however, the European powers interpreted Russia's ambitions as seeking to undermine the Ottoman Empire and, ultimately, to conquer Constantinople. Similarly, whereas the Kremlin assessed the outcome of the war with Georgia in August 2008 as a largely successful defense of ethnic Russians, South Ossetian civilians, and Russia's security objectives in the Caucasus, Western governments overwhelmingly condemned the war as an act of aggression against an independent state. Conversely, what the West sometimes viewed as honorable Russian policy, Moscow not infrequently considered something that compromised its national priorities. From the Holy Alliance to the New Thinking, Russians often have felt they made too many concessions for the purpose of gaining recognition by the Western powers.

It takes both sides to make the Russia–West relationship work. Acting on their perception of honor, Russia's leaders have often failed fully to consider the reaction from the West, as well as Russia's own capacity to

initiate and implement a policy. As a result, some Russian policies have been successful and defensible, whereas others have not. The recipe for success in sustaining both Russia's internal and European honor claims is for Moscow to present its values and strategic vision in a way that does not principally contradict those of Western nations. The Western states too have historically demonstrated their dependence on unrealistic expectations and cultural stereotypes with regard to their Eastern neighbor. Their ability to engage Moscow will only be successful when they acknowledge Russia's distinctive values, interests, and right to develop in accordance with its internal perception of honor. To succeed, neither side should define its objectives in terms of superiority over the other.

### **Alternative Explanations**

Theories of international relations based on the structure of the international system often discount the argument that honor serves as a motive of state behavior. Realists have been especially influential in advocating the notion of national interest and rationally defined action as defining factors in world politics. Realism draws our attention to considerations of state power, security, and prestige. Its basic insight that no policy can materialize without due consideration for the existing structure of the international system remains valid and impossible to ignore in understanding Russia's foreign policy. The problem with realism is not that it focuses on state power, security, and prestige, but that in so doing it underestimates the role of culture and ideas in international interactions. This book does not neglect realist theories, but argues for combining both realism and constructivism.

Admittedly, my way of combining realist and constructivist insights lies within the framework of social constructivism,<sup>13</sup> because a mutually satisfactory synthesis of the two theoretical schools would be impossible. I take factors of power and security seriously, but do not view their influence as decisive in determining foreign policy. For instance, the possession of extensive material resources may have the dangerous effect of reinforcing an assertive policy mood, but it does not have an independent causal effect. Rather, what determines Russia's foreign policy is the national ideal of honorable behavior augmented by its available material capabilities.

As a nation with a long-established sense of honor, Russia is a good case to demonstrate the limitations of international-system-based theories. Its honor myths reach back to Russia's premodern foundations – Orthodox Christianity and its Slavic cultural inheritance – which predate the very system of nation-states on which realists base their analysis. Russia's own

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cultural lenses are therefore at least as important in understanding its actions as the incentives coming from the international system. Even when Russia's actions seem similar to the behavior of other members of the system, they originate from a culturally distinct source and can have a different meaning. Moreover, Russia's traditional concept of honor has mutated in response to domestic and external developments, thereby gaining diverse and complex meanings.

The question then becomes whether an understanding of Russia's cultural foundations is necessary to analyze and predict its international policy. Whereas realists prefer to focus on behavioral patterns as driven by the structure of the international system, more socially sensitive accounts argue for the importance of understanding Russia's indigenous system of perception. As a leading scholar of Russia's foreign policy, Robert Legvold, wrote twenty years ago, "The student of politics who looks only at patterns of behavior but leaves out the meaning that actors give to their own and to each other's conduct turns into a specialist of shadows."<sup>14</sup>

Ignoring such internally shaped meanings comes at the price of misunderstanding Russia. For example, by assuming that states are risk averse, defensive realists<sup>15</sup> underestimate the cultural basis of Russia's assertive international behavior, such as that exemplified by the Soviet Union after World War II. In contrast, offensive and neoclassical realists<sup>16</sup> tend to overestimate Russia's propensity to engage in risky behavior for the purpose of maximizing international power and prestige. Presenting Russia as a potentially revisionist power without considering domestic ideas that guide its foreign policy may lead to a failure to understand the nation's innovations, such as Mikhail Gorbachev's New Thinking, or to anticipate Russia's attempts and gestures toward accommodation with Western nations. Ignoring domestic visions of honor may lead to misunderstandings about the sources and direction of Russia's foreign policy.

### Case Selection and Organization

This book seeks to demonstrate change and continuity in Russia's foreign policy as shaped by considerations of state honor. To accomplish that aim, I select cases across historical eras and patterns of Russia's relations with the West. Cases of cooperation with the West include the Holy Alliance (1815–53) that was established soon after the defeat of Napoleon and lasted until the Crimean War; the Triple Entente (1907–17), the alliance of Russia with France and Britain against the rising threat of Germany; collective security (1933–39), Soviet efforts to respond to Hitler's growing international ambitions; and the war on terror (2001–5) that brought Russia and the West closer to each other in the post-9/11 world. Cases of defensiveness include the post-Crimean concentration

or the *recueillement* (1856–71); Soviet peaceful coexistence (1921–39), the international corollary of Bolshevik efforts to “normalize” postrevolutionary politics; and the containment of NATO expansion after the Cold War (1995–2000). Finally, cases of assertiveness are the Crimean War (1853–6), the early Cold War (1946–9), and the Russia–Georgia War in August 2008.

These cases are sufficiently diverse to highlight both enduring components and dramatic changes within Russia’s vision of honor and to provide a comprehensive and historically sensitive interpretation of Russia’s relations with Western nations. They also serve as a basis for challenging realist accounts of state behavior and for formulating an alternative theory of foreign policy formation that incorporates insights from both realism and social constructivism. A good foreign policy theory should not only formulate a *cause–effect relationship* by identifying the most prominent social forces or variables that drive an international decision but also establish a *meaningful context* in which state leaders act and seek to achieve their objectives. Because I aim to develop a context-sensitive theory, I discuss realist explanations of Russia’s international behavior as pertinent to individual state strategies in chapters relating to each of these cases.

The book is organized into four parts. Part I, Theory, accomplishes three aims. First, it reviews diverse interpretations of honor in international relations theory, from classical realism to social constructivism, and their application to foreign policy. Second, it reconstructs and analyzes Russia’s complex notion of honor in both historical and contemporary settings. Third, it establishes the three patterns of Russia’s relations with the West and proposes a framework for explaining and evaluating their change and continuity.

Parts II–IV analyze the cooperative, defensive, and assertive patterns in Russia–West relations, respectively. Beginning with the study of the Holy Alliance, each chapter reviews the record of Russia’s foreign policy performance, proposes its interpretation from the honor perspective, considers contributions made by realist theories, and assesses the effectiveness of individual international strategies. The concluding chapter summarizes the main findings of the book. It also suggests some ways of employing the theory of honor-based constructivism for understanding the behavior of twenty-first-century powers outside Russia.

## Notes

- 1 As quoted in Snyder, “Science and Sovietology: Bridging the Methods Gap in Soviet Foreign Policy Studies,” 173.
- 2 Zakaria, *The Post-American World*; Barma, Ratner, and Weber, “The World without West”; Tsygankov, “Russia in the Post-Western World.”

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- 3 See, for example, Bowker, *Russia, America and the Islamic World*; Trenin, *Getting Russia Right*; Trenin, *Post-Imperium*; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*; Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*; Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers."
- 4 See, for example, Pipes, "Is Russia Still an Enemy?"; Ambrosio, *Challenging America's Global Preeminence*; Bugajski, *Expanding Russia*; Lucas, *The New Cold War*; Kanet, ed., *A Resurgent Russia and the West*.
- 5 Bowman, *Honor*, p. 4.
- 6 For scholarship on beliefs and emotions in international politics, see Klein, "The Humiliation Dynamic: An Overview"; Steinberg, "Shame and Humiliation in the Cuban Missile Crisis"; Crawford, "The Passion of World Politics"; Harkavy, "Defeat, National Humiliation, and the Revenge Motif in International Politics"; Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics*; Saurette, "You Dissin Me?"; Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*; Löwenheim and Heimann, "Revenge in International Politics"; Fattah and Fierke, "A Clash of Emotions"; and Mercer, "Emotional Beliefs."
- 7 Offer, "Going to War in 1914"; Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*; Wohlforth, "Honor as Interest in Russian Decisions for War, 1600–1995"; Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*; Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, p. 8; Donelan, *Honor in Foreign Policy*; Markey, "Prestige and the Origins of War"; Markey, "The Prestige Motive in International Relations"; Joshi, *Honor in International Relations*, pp. 2–3; Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist, "Duelling Honors."
- 8 Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe*.
- 9 English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*; Ringmar, "The Recognition Game."
- 10 The point about the significance of both international and domestic developments in the construction of Russia's system of perception is well made in Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*.
- 11 Neumann, *Uses of the Other*; Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes*.
- 12 For details of elites' calculations of Russia's power, see Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power" and Neumann, "Russia's Standing as a Great Power, 1494–1815."
- 13 International relations scholars have proposed to compensate for shortcomings of systemic rationalist theories by developing an approach that combines insights from realism with those of constructivism. The approach was formulated in debating the article by Samuel Barkin "Realist Constructivism," in which he proposed a new conceptualization of the relationship between power and ideas, referring to it as "constructivist realism." For additional efforts to bridge material and nonmaterial factors, see Jackson and Nelson, eds. "Constructivist Realism or Realist Constructivism? A Forum"; Jackson and Nelson, "Paradigmatic Faults in International Relations Theory"; Sorensen, "The Case for Combining Material Forces and Ideas in the Study of IR."
- 14 Snyder, "Science and Sovietology."
- 15 Jervis, "Cooperation under Security Dilemma"; Van Evera, *Causes of War*.
- 16 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War."