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David Oualaalou

The Dynamics of Russia's Geopolitics

Remaking the Global Order

 Springer

Frontiers in International Relations

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Praise for *The Dynamics of Russia's Geopolitics*

“For anyone wishing to understand Russia’s long-term strategy and trajectory, the book you hold in your hand is an essential guide. David Oualaalou, an international geopolitical consultant and intellectual who has written numerous analyses on geopolitics, global affairs, international business, and energy issues; and whose books constitute a bedrock of penetrating exposition and analysis on the current global state of affairs... strips away much of the cant that pervades public discourse these days on global order and gets to a fundamental reality: Where Russia is headed as US leadership falters.”

—The Honorable, Lyndon L. Olson, Jr., *Former US Ambassador to Sweden*

“This book is a comprehensive, thought provoking understanding of how and why a once collapsed USSR returned as the Russian Federation and today is a major challenger for global and regional dominance, especially over the USA and Western Europe. You may not agree with all the assessments and predictions, but you will find that Dr. Oualaalou’s frank and bold writing style comes with personal integrity, first-hand military experience, and solid geopolitical knowledge.”

—William A. Mitchell, *Colonel USAF, Ret. and Professor Emeritus, Baylor University. Author of Baylor in Northern Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2016*

“Dr. Oualaalou provides a compelling look at a frequently underestimated player on the world stage, from the unique perspective of an insider who is both a scholar and has served as the ‘boots on the ground’ in many conflict zones.”

—David Schleicher, *Attorney for U.S. government employees around the world in job-related disputes*

*In memory of those who were unjustly
executed during the Katyn forest massacre*

Preface

Writing *The Dynamics of Russia's Geopolitics: Remaking the Global Order* became imperative to me after completing *Volatile State: Iran in the Nuclear Age* and observing the ever-changing American political landscape after the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA. Similarly, Russia's increased military and diplomatic footprints in the Middle East and other regions convinced me of the need to place Russia's engagements within the context of the greater geopolitical chess game Moscow is now playing. For instance, one should not be surprised by the outcome of the Syrian civil war, where Russia emerged as the deciding force, openly exposing the decline of American leadership in the region. Russia's position regarding the ongoing dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran is unpredictable. Will it act as a broker, or will it let the tiff play out to see what might shake out? Analysis points to Russia being one of two key global players—the second is China—in the emerging new global order.

My qualifications and preparation for assessing Russia's global strategy in a dynamic world with contemporary geopolitical shifts are founded on over 15 years of experience as an international security analyst and consultant in Washington D.C. My theoretical and real-world knowledge of how geopolitics, global security, energy issues, and domestic and international business intersect is founded on my doctoral focus in international security, and as a military veteran abroad in the field with elite military forces in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Bolivia, and the Ivory Coast, to name but a few while carrying out operations at the behest of the US policymakers. I also understand and appreciate the depth of Russia's social, geopolitical, and cultural interactions, from both abstract and practical perspectives, and understand how Russia's domestic and foreign policies work. In my opinion, this first-hand interactive experience is necessary to offer the most salient analysis of how Russia interacts, responds, and manages its role within the current regional and global geopolitical system.¹

¹Regarding my personal experience, please bear in mind that, though this work discusses unclassified and declassified information, it does not and *cannot* offer factual evidence from classified sources.

That said, I draw on my experiences to help the reader understand the larger picture of Russia's political realities and to share insights on how to understand and solve the problems affecting Russian–US relations and the world. Some of my writings have contributed to an understanding of these important concerns. For examples, see my op-ed pieces on global affairs for the Slovak Atlantic Council, an affiliate of the European Atlantic Council; the *Huffpost*; the *Waco Tribune-Herald*; the *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong); and the World Affairs Council. Some of my publications have been translated into Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, German, Russian, Turkish, and Spanish, among other languages. Those articles address a wide range of topics, including global energy markets, international security, global affairs, American foreign policy, international business, and more. Occasionally, I assess how the geopolitical landscape, with Russia at its center, might look in the next decade or so and how certain countries, including the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), Ukraine, Poland, Georgia, and Middle East, might act or react given the seismic shifts shaping the political landscape, regionally and globally. Further understanding of my work is expressed in *Beneath the Veil: Fall of the House of Saud* (2018); *Volatile State: Iran in the Nuclear Age* (2018); and *The Ambiguous Foreign Policy of the United States* (2016).

Russia's aggressive foreign policy poses serious challenges to subsequent American administrations as pundits, scholars, and foreign-affairs experts wonder what will become of the Russian–US relations. The lack of debate about Russia within the Washington establishment alarms me. Similarly, since the end of the Cold War, the US government has suffered from a precipitous decline in expertise, prestige, and talent. Gone are the Yeltsin era reforms that transformed Russia into an authoritarian system under Putin. The vision of building a brave new democratic order in Russia after 1991 has proved illusory.

Those who were thinking that post-Cold War era Russia would turn into a functioning democracy thought neither long enough nor understood well the history of Russia. I remain convinced that if the West—and Washington, for that matter—wants to build a cooperative partnership with Russia, the first step is to diagnose the cause of the ailing relationship, then prescribe a cure. My recent conversations in Europe with eastern European citizens underscore serious concerns about Russia's aggressive foreign policy. Similarly, Scandinavian countries have responded anxiously to Russia's allocation of its naval assets to the Arctic. Russia has long sought economic and military dominance in its northern shores, a region that holds as much as \$35 trillion worth of untapped oil and natural gas (Reid 2018). Even China—a nation with no territorial claim to the Arctic—has begun funding Arctic development projects. It underscores the region's growing global importance and influence. And with the climate change impacting the area and the world over, we should expect fierce competition in the near future.

In this book, I address three primary questions relevant to the current global context:

Will current geopolitical shifts greatly benefit Russia's long-term global objectives? What foreign policy will Russia pursue in the Middle East and the Baltic regions to guarantee the security of its strategic interests? And will major powers confront one another over resources that could trigger military conflict, or will they choose appeasement to maintain peace and stability in this new era?

This book pays special attention to how Russia's aggressive foreign policy is playing out in different regions of the world, particularly the Middle East, Latin America, Europe, and the Baltics. Estonia, for instance, is closely watching Russia's foreign-policy initiatives. Similarly, the possibility of a Russia-China alliance could provide both countries the right platform on which to further their cooperation on all fronts, including the military. There is no certainty about what the global geopolitical landscape might look like in the next decade or so. With certainty, however, one can conclude that the Russia-China alliance will further contribute to a precipitous shift in the global order and further decline of the US share of global power. Alas, the shift in the global balance of power is already underway.

My text is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 reviews the economic and political scholarship on the domestic challenges that Russia continues to face since the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. On the domestic political front, Russia encountered major challenges in 1993 as opposition emerged from the legislative and executive branches to Russia's political direction. Those challenges prompted then President Boris Yeltsin to deploy the military to dissolve the parliament and call for new legislative elections. A decade or so later, Russia embarked on a new strategy under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. This strategy, global in scope, well-resourced and coordinated, aimed to expand Russia's global outreach and influence and promote Russia's commercial, military, and energy interests. It came on the heels of America's and the West's political discord and waning leadership.

Chapter 2 addresses the history of the Soviet Union and its emergence on the global stage. I provide a snapshot about Russia under Mikhail Romanov, who, in 1613, became the first Romanov czar of Russia. The chapter transitions to the demise of the Romanov dynasty and subsequent takeover by the Bolsheviks. I argue that Russia's aggressive foreign policy reflects its desperate need to reclaim the glorious days of the Russian empire or even the Soviet Union era. In this context, even if only briefly, one must consider the historical events that shaped Russia in to what it is today. Today, under Putin, Russia deploys tactics backed by military force to achieve its global strategy. Russia's presence is practically all over the map, be it in the ongoing conflicts in the Baltics region and the Middle East, or the thus-far-limited military intervention in Venezuela and possible cooperation with China.

Although its foreign actions are often opportunistic, Russia increasingly aims to create a multipolar world in which it plays a more prominent role. Similarly, with its new status in the Middle East, Russia is already redrawing the region's geopolitical map militarily, politically, and economically.

I move from addressing the historical setting under which the Soviet Union was established to the political events that facilitated the emergence of modern-day Russia. I focus on a timeline that begins with the end of World War II in 1945 and the beginning of the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union that dragged on nearly a half century. I conclude this chapter with a discussion over the emergence of the Russian Federation and the economic, social, and political challenges through the reign of Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, Demetri Medvedev, and the current president, Vladimir Putin.

Chapter 3 examines Russia's military and energy sources of power. Both sources contribute to the foundation on which Russia has built its power. If it were not for its nuclear capabilities, we would not be discussing Russia much. However, Russia's abundant oil and natural gas allow Moscow to use its economic resources as a political tool to further its agenda.

Throughout world history, the geopolitics of energy has been about not only supply and demand, but also who controls access to energy sources. Controlling energy access has been one of Russia's driving forces in the global energy market. That fact explains how the discovery of liquefied natural gas (LNG) in Egypt and Cypress is already exacerbating geopolitical tensions among interested countries, including Russia.

Russia's short- and long-term strategy has been to use its military apparatus to advance its agenda. In the aftermath of both Russia and the USA suspending the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (hereinafter referred to as the INF Treaty), Moscow will develop the new generation of medium-range nuclear missiles. It is a matter of time before Russia deploys those missiles near the Baltic region and the borders of eastern European countries.

This chapter concludes with observations on whether Russia will reshape the world order as it increases its presence in the Middle East and threatens peace and stability in the Baltic region. Given this reality, one concludes that Putin's understanding of security issues is fundamental to his ability to navigate through volatile storms as Russia sails through geopolitical waters.

Chapter 4 examines the US foreign policy toward Russia before and after the 1991 fall of the USSR that saw the demise of communism. Historically, Russian-US relations go back some 200 years when the two countries shared multifaceted diplomatic relations. As global dynamics changed, Russia and the USA started competing for political, economic, and ideological influence, along with dominance. They also cooperated when facing challenges that represented a threat to their national interests. Fast-forward to the early twentieth century: the USA provided humanitarian assistance to Russia during the 1921–1923 famine. Russia and USA interests converged when they joined forces against a common enemy during WWII. However, when the USA decided to provide allies with supplies, this decision marked the start of the Cold War, which saw both countries [Russia and the USA] propping up their worldwide military alliances. This standoff was prevalent through two military alliances centered in Europe: NATO (the USA and its allies) and the Warsaw Pact (the Soviet Union and its allies).

I devote a section in this chapter to address the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, seen as the end of the Cold War—or so we thought! While many in the Washington establishment think the Cold War ended and the USA won, current reality suggests otherwise. Russian–US relations embarked on new dimensions, both bilaterally and multilaterally.

I conclude that, without a direct dialogue between Moscow and Washington, there would be no cooperation. It will be interesting to learn to what degree Russia will meddle in the upcoming 2020 US presidential election to maintain the current status quo.

Chapter 5 focuses on how the Russian–US rivalry did not stop even after the fall of the USSR in 1991. Currently, the world witnesses an aggressive Russia backed by military support and economic incentives. For several underlying reasons, this rivalry will only intensify in the coming years. Russia’s launch of its campaign to impact elections in the USA and Europe not only testifies to its long-term strategy of undermining democratic institutions in the West, but also highlights its commitment to defend what Russia claims as its “sphere of privileged interests” around its borders and beyond.

Chapter 6 begins with an introduction of my core argument about how Russia stands to benefit from impacting global order using different means: cyber, economic, intelligence, and military instruments. Then, I investigate in Chap. 6 how the US “leading from behind” approach contributes to a chaotic global order, creates a vacuum that Russia and China are filling, and paves the way for the reemergence of a multipolar world in which Russia plays a prominent role.

I also elaborate on how Russia capitalizes on the US political gaffes and missteps, including its 2003 Iraq invasion and the ongoing Afghanistan war. In doing so, Russia furthers its political aspirations to reinstate itself as a global power that wields influence and expands its global footprint to recapture its lost glory.

In Chap. 7, the theme is to integrate my perspective on how Russia and China intend to play their political cards at the international gaming table. I assess the new geopolitical landscape moving forward with Russia at the heart of this analysis. Further, I specifically detail how Russia’s relations with other major powers may develop given a shift in the global balance of power. The chapter also addresses whether the USA has a new strategy in place for dealing with Russia as the latter has found a way to further undermine credibility and trust in the American’s democratic system—and the global order, for that matter.

It is shortsighted, in my opinion, to limit the dialogue about what plagues the current Russian–US relations to differences about key strategic interests. What lies ahead concerns me greatly because Russian–US relations are sitting on the edge of outright conflict, especially in the aftermath of the death of the INF Treaty.

I see no reason why Russia will change course regarding what lies ahead. The West, including the USA, needs to stop pretending that it knows what Russia was—or is—up to. Lack of debates about Russia prevent analysts and foreign-policy establishments from fully understanding that the strategy, scale, and scope of activities Russia embarks on, especially after 2014, go beyond its periphery both geographically and operationally.

My concern is that, absent USA international wisdom, the Western world may be on the last leg of its hegemonic journey. In that case, look for China to fill the vacuum and for Russia to start rebuilding its lost empire. Pretending otherwise at this late stage of the game is unrealistic.

More specific, the book addresses whether Russia will reshape the global order. It also addresses Russia's economic struggle as it faces an ongoing decrease in oil prices on the global market and renewed US economic sanctions following Russia's annexation of Crimea. Will Russia refrain from joining, or taking part in, China's "One Road One Belt" initiative? I do not see any logical reason why it would. Time will tell.

This work also tries to address Russia's overall strategy in the Middle East by engaging three important topics:

- (1) As the geopolitical storm in the Middle East intensifies, Russia is taking advantage of the ongoing chaos, compelling regional countries to reassess the impact of the new geopolitical order on their future political and economic outlooks;
- (2) How might the discovery of new LNG on the coastlines of Egypt and Cypress impact Russia's energy policy toward Europe? Since Russia is the main LNG supplier to Europe, the recent energy discoveries in Egypt and Cypress will eventually change the economic prospects for many countries in the region; and
- (3) Is Russia's annexation of Crimea a prelude for more aggression toward the Baltic States? A debate is growing among international security analysts and academia that Moscow knows exactly which political buttons to push. When it comes to global affairs, Russia still wants to have a say and not have its input and propositions overlooked. Yet, Russia is pressing forward with its global strategies, be they located in the Middle East (intervention in a Syrian civil war that goes even beyond the border of Syria) or Latin America (the building of a spy base in Nicaragua in a startling Cold War-like military and intelligence presence).

And so, the stage is set. The meteoric rise of China, the decline in the US share of global power, the dissolution of a global order, and the possibility of joint military ties between Russia and China suggest that the shift in the global balance of power is already underway. We should not dismiss the warning signs of the return of Russia as a player that is, after all, a nuclear superpower, or certainly second to none with respect to destructive capabilities. If Russia's engagements in Syria and Ukraine are any indication, its military is willing and ready to fight at the behest of Putin and the Kremlin. I write this book with the absolute conviction that Russia is embarking on a strategy that will foment chaos in the Baltic States, further create divisions between the USA and its allies, and seize the opportunity granted to it through a geopolitical shift, to join forces with China to counter a common enemy:

the USA. Will Russia succeed in these endeavors given the shifting geopolitical balance of power? *The Dynamics of Russia's Geopolitics: Remaking the Global Order* addresses these and other relevant questions.

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About This Book

Russia faces monumental uncertainties from increased military and diplomatic challenges as its footprints in the Middle East region and other countries expand into a complicated and unpredictable geopolitical chess game with high stakes and losses. Western adversaries who thought that post-Cold War era Russia would become a functioning democracy have profoundly misjudged. My recent conversations with eastern European citizens underscore serious concerns about Russia's aggressive foreign policy. At the same time, Scandinavian countries have responded anxiously to Russia's assignment and deployment of naval assets to the Arctic region. Moscow is very adaptive and her objectives change quickly to match evolving circumstances. The West seldom knows why or understands Moscow's geopolitical and strategic maneuvering. Lack of vigorous and honest political debates, with incorrect assumptions about Russia, prevent fully understanding their strategy, scale, and scope of activities and intentions. This is particularly true for current Russian objectives and activities that extend far beyond its borders, both geographically and operationally.

Russia finds itself grappling in many directions as the global order transforms. This book offers a vision of Russia's future, as Moscow tries to influence the outcome in its favor.