In many respects Russia appears to be the very best of global citizens. It extols the United Nations as the supreme decisionmaking body in world politics. It calls for the “democratization” of international relations and the need to ensure “the rule of law in the international arena.” It prides itself as a stickler for correct procedure and the precise implementation of UN resolutions. It has played a leading role in establishing new multilateral structures, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union. And it is involved in discussions on all the big issues from economic rebalancing to conflict management to counterterrorism.

Why then, given this seemingly active engagement, has Russia acquired such a poor reputation for global governance? It is tempting to blame Western politicians and media for this. The organizations founded after World War II reflect Western interpretations of “universal” norms—a dominance accentuated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war. So when Moscow resists the will of the “international community,” as defined by the West, it is inevitably pilloried. And when it does cooperate, its compliance is considered the only rational and moral choice, scarcely worthy of comment, let alone praise.

But Russia’s negative image is much more than the product of some Western conspiracy. For one thing, there is the stark disconnect between its formal...
allegiance to the “primacy of international law” and the territorial integrity of nation-states, and a highly selective approach toward implementing such principles. Fresh from criticizing American unilateralism and exceptionalism over Syria in the fall of 2013, the Kremlin revealed a “do as I say, not as I do” attitude on Ukraine only a few months later. In the process it confirmed the obvious point that the Russian national interest far outweighs quasi-theoretical standards of acceptable international behavior.

The issue is not only about hypocrisy and double standards. After all, it is difficult to imagine a more striking disregard of the United Nations and global public opinion than the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. There is also the problem of effectiveness—or rather the lack of it. Few countries see Russia as a serious contributor to international public goods. They are not so much concerned about the morality of Moscow’s actions as dismissive of its ability to make a positive difference.²

This is unfortunate, not least for Russia. Its willingness and capacity to play a significant role in global governance matter because it has global interests—in the management of the world economy, trade, resource supply, nuclear and conventional security, and the development of international norms. Notwithstanding the inclination of some in the West to belittle its importance,³ it does not have the luxury to be a mere regional actor. In this respect, the Kremlin’s conviction that Russia should be a global player is entirely appropriate.

The question is “what kind of global player?” This is where the tension between the two worlds—the perceptual and the actual—described in the previous chapter is most pronounced. Over the past 200 years, the Russian ruling elite has come to regard the status of global power as an inalienable historical right, irrespective of Russia’s circumstances. In today’s new world disorder, however, a “divine right of great powers” is no longer tenable. As already noted, the authority of the major powers is much weaker than before; the criteria of influence have changed; and there is the constant pressure to deliver outcomes. Simply demanding respect and talking up “indispensability” do not come close to demonstrating relevance.

This chapter analyzes the Putin regime’s response to the task of reinventing or, perhaps more accurately, adapting Russia to the demands of global governance in a disorderly world. It considers the question in two parts. The first centers on matters of process, and looks at Moscow’s approach to multilateral institutions. It also examines attempts to create an alternative multilateralism through other avenues, such as the BRICS and the Eurasian Economic Union. The second part of the chapter focuses on the substance of policy—how the Putin regime is addressing contemporary issues in international finance, trade, security, and normative regimes. One of the principal
themes to emerge here is the Kremlin’s reluctance to graduate from its preoccupation with traditional security and geopolitical priorities to tackling a new global agenda.

**Qualified Multilateralism**

For much of the post-Soviet era, Russia—like the USSR before it—has observed the letter of multilateralism while often ignoring its spirit. Policy-makers have adopted a formalistic approach to global governance, exploiting the cumbersome bureaucratic processes of the UN, in particular, to control rather than facilitate problem solving. They have taken particular care to ensure that any multilateral actions that are approved or tolerated do not impinge on Russia’s sovereign prerogatives.

In prioritizing national interests over a larger international good, Russia behaves much like any other major power or, for that matter, the smallest UN member-state. What distinguishes it from most other countries, however, is the degree to which it uses multilateral mechanisms to project influence, status, and moral legitimacy. Moscow supports “the central coordinating role of the UN as the principal organization regulating international relations” precisely because this ensures “collective decisionmaking”—that is, decision-making by the major powers on the basis of “equality.” The UN, and specifically the Security Council, has mitigated the consequences of Russia’s post–cold war decline by providing a significant check on American “hegemonic” power. This does not always work, as proved by Washington’s decision to invade Iraq. But such exceptions do not obviate the main point, which is that the Kremlin values these institutions principally as equalizers of power and influence vis-à-vis the United States.

In a similar vein, Russia attaches greater importance to the role of multilateral institutions in reinforcing its international status than it does to their efficacy. Whereas it may—or may not—be desirable for a particular multilateral process to achieve results, participation (no matter how formalistic) is invariably essential. Influence and status are intertwined with legitimacy. International institutions are vehicles for promoting an image of Russia as a good citizen of the world. More important still, they enable Moscow to counter Western humanitarian arguments with its own reading of a higher morality. It is one thing to use its veto powers in the UN Security Council to block sanctions against the Assad regime. But it is a bonus to be able to rationalize such actions by appealing in the name of “international law.”

Moscow has, however, encountered real problems with the functioning of multilateralism. One issue, raised in the previous chapter, stems from having to
deal with an expanding cast of players, many of whom do not regard their modest stature as a bar to active participation in regional and global affairs. Another, more fundamental concern is that multilateral organizations challenge the sovereign prerogatives of nation-states by subjecting them to external scrutiny, criticism, and occasionally intervention. Just as Moscow exploits such mechanisms to constrain the United States, so other states call Russia to account for its support of unpleasant regimes and the failure to abide by its commitments under various normative documents, such as the Helsinki Accords. This oversight is thoroughly irksome to the Kremlin, which rejects external accountability by stressing the “inviolability” of Russian sovereignty.

The tensions are exemplified by Russia’s relations with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). During the 1990s the Yeltsin administration promoted the OSCE as the centerpiece of a Europe “without dividing lines,” a more inclusive and equitable alternative to NATO. After 2000, however, Moscow became increasingly resentful of the organization’s election monitoring activities in Russia and the post-Soviet space through the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). It reacted by obstructing ODIHR missions; accused the OSCE of losing sight of its primary security functions; and at one stage suspended budgetary contributions. To Putin the OSCE came to embody the worst shortcomings of multilateralism: lack of controllability, interference in Russia’s domestic affairs, and the facilitation of Western subversion.5

Strangely, relations with the OSCE have improved since the annexation of Crimea and the escalating violence in eastern Ukraine.6 The Kremlin continues to eye the organization with suspicion, and remains uncomfortable with the critical scrutiny that a substantial OSCE presence on the ground would bring. On the other hand, it seeks its imprimatur—as the representative of the wider Euro-Atlantic security community—for new power-sharing (“federalization”) arrangements, and for the de facto redistribution of territory.7 This translates into a twin-track approach: Moscow engages with Vienna at the level of high policy, while making life as difficult as possible for OSCE observer missions—either denying them entry (Crimea) or colluding in their harassment and detention by separatist groups (southeast Ukraine). The underlying message is that the OSCE is useful to Moscow only insofar as it can be exploited to serve specific national goals.

The UN P5

For Putin the best kind of multilateralism is encapsulated by the UN Security Council, and especially proceedings involving the Permanent Five (P5) members. Along with the institutionalization of strategic parity in nuclear weapons,
the P5 is the most visible symbol of Russia’s formal equality with the United States and, by extension, its “permanent” status as a global power. In appearance it is a multilateral institution, but its spirit is thoroughly multipolar.

The significance of the P5 lies not in its decisionmaking capacity, which is limited, but in other factors. To the Kremlin, it represents the most effective means of limiting or counterbalancing American power, now that nuclear weapons have lost much of their utility as tools of geopolitical influence. It converts a largely abstract proposition—the multipolar order—into a substantive reality, albeit in a very particular and narrow dimension.

In this enterprise the veto plays a crucial role. Exercising the veto, or, better still, the implicit threat of its use, is seen as a key guarantee of Russia’s continuing centrality in global affairs. On Syria, for example, the power of the veto has not only given Moscow a prominent voice, but also contributed to the paralysis of Western policymaking, and strengthened the position of the Assad regime. For Putin this amounts to an almost perfect set of outcomes—the West is weakened, Russia is strengthened, and the Concert of Great Powers is preserved. Compared with these dividends, the reputational damage incurred by supporting an egregious regime barely registers.

The P5 is important, too, in relation to bilateral objectives. In the lead-up to the Iraq war Moscow attempted (unsuccessfully) to parlay non-use of the veto in exchange for guarantees of the interests of Russian energy companies, such as Lukoil’s concession in the west Qurna oil field. The extent to which bilateral substance shapes multilateral process was also evident during the Libyan conflict. In March 2011, Russia abstained on UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973 endorsing a NATO no-fly zone mainly because it prioritized the reset with Washington and good relations with Paris over preservation of the Gaddafi regime. But with Syria, Putin opposed sanctions because he found no compelling bilateral reasons to act differently. Here the causal relationship worked in reverse: an uncompromising approach in the P5 was seen as a way of forcing the United States to take Russia seriously.

The importance of the UN Security Council as an instrument of Russian foreign policy means that Moscow is loath to entertain significant reforms to its structure and operation. In particular, it opposes the extension of veto powers beyond the P5. The reasons for its stance are logical—and entirely self-interested. Moves to make the UNSC more representative of contemporary international society would undercut Russia’s special status and the influence it derives from this. Such a concern is all the more pertinent when its substantive weight in other areas of international politics is in question. In the hypothetical event of a reformed Council, Russia would find it very difficult to pretend that it was the global equal of the United States and China.
The comparisons would instead be with India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan—unthinkable for a country that was one of only two superpowers a little over two decades ago.

That said, Moscow has adopted a judiciously ambiguous attitude in public toward UN reform. For there is an uncomfortable contradiction between adherence to a status quo that reflects the outcomes of a conflict that ended seventy years ago and its professed commitment to a new and more democratic world order. It is aware also of the need to massage the sensitivities of aspiring permanent members—and fellow BRICS countries—such as India and Brazil. It has attempted to finesse these tensions by calling for the Security Council to become “more representative,” while “ensuring due efficiency of its processes” and preserving the status of the existing members of the P5.9

But such doublespeak scarcely masks the fact that Moscow, like Washington and Beijing, has no interest at all in change.10 Its position that “any decisions on the expansion of the Security Council should be based on a general consensus of the UN member-states” confirms as much; it knows that such a consensus is improbable.

**Multilateralism for the great and the good**

The P5 is only the most conspicuous manifestation of what might be described as multilateralism for the great and the good. Moscow’s ideal framework is one strong enough to restrain American power, but that limits decisionmaking to a small coterie of major powers. It is symptomatic that the Russian government’s efforts in the UN have focused overwhelmingly on the Security Council. The proceedings of the General Assembly are of fleeting interest, and only when the issue is directly relevant to Russia—as with non-binding Resolution 68/262 of March 27, 2014, on “the territorial integrity of Ukraine.”11

It has become evident that Moscow’s commitment is not to multilateralism, at least as it is commonly understood, but to multipolarity. Although the two are frequently conflated,12 they are very different phenomena. Whereas multilateralism is inclusive, multipolarity is defined by exclusiveness. As Dmitri Trenin has observed, it is based on a “global oligarchy,” whereby a few great powers collectively manage world affairs, with smaller states playing only bit parts.13 One reason for this exclusivist bias, as articulated by a senior Russian policymaker, is the belief that the major powers speak a “common language”—only they truly understand the way things are done in the world (even while they disagree on the substance of policy).14

The Kremlin favors selective “multilateralism” also because in smaller forums Russia can more plausibly present itself as a significant and in some
ways unique presence. Before its suspension in March 2014, it was the only non-Western member of the G-8, while in the P5 it has occasionally acted as the intermediary and balancer between East (China) and West (United States, United Kingdom, France). Russia’s distinct identity within such forums encourages it to claim a standing that exceeds its actual influence—as in the negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program.\(^\text{15}\)

More inclusive frameworks such as the G-20 tend to undermine such mythologies. It is difficult to promote Russian “specialness” in conditions where there is little demand for it. The G-20, for example, focuses principally on areas where Russia is a secondary player. As one of the less advanced economies in the group, its capacity to contribute usefully to a new financial architecture or to rectify global imbalances is limited. Its chairmanship of the group in 2013 did not alter this fact. (After all, Mexico—the fourteenth ranking economy in the world—held the chairmanship in 2012.)

It is logical then that Moscow should seek to broaden the G-20’s agenda to encompass political and security issues where it is a more considerable player. However, even with the potential expansion of the G-20 order of business, and retention of the Security Council in its present form, Russia’s multilateral standing is weaker than it was. This is partly a function of the rise of China, India, and other emerging powers such as Brazil. But it is also a product of the more general diffusion of power across the globe and the proliferation of regional actors. In such an environment, no amount of subterfuge can mask Moscow’s shrinking footprint. Russia’s policymakers have therefore resorted to other methods to bolster its international position.

*The new elitism—the BRICS*

The most important of these is a sustained campaign to build up the BRICS as an international body on a par with the G-8 and other Western-dominated institutions. This grouping brings together Brazil, Russia, India, China, and now South Africa on the basis of their supposed commonality as the world’s leading emerging powers. Over the past few years, the Kremlin has led efforts to translate this artificial construct into something approaching a proper institutional framework, with its own organizing norms and structures. BRICS summits have become a regular feature in the calendar; in March 2013 Putin signed off on a “Concept of Participation of the Russian Federation in the BRICS”;\(^\text{16}\) and a BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) was established at the 2014 summit in Fortaleza, Brazil.\(^\text{17}\)

Moscow’s motives for promoting the BRICS, and related ideas such as the Russia-China-India foreign ministers’ trilateral meeting, are fairly transparent. They boil down to the belief that “if you can’t join them, beat them.”
Russia is outnumbered and outweighed by the leading Western countries in the G-20 (and previously the G-8), not to mention the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). In other organizations, such as the WTO, East Asia Summit (EAS), and even APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), which it hosted in 2012, it has negligible influence. Outside the UN Security Council there is no large international body where Russia plays a significant role. Indeed, many regional actors have more impact.

The BRICS format is an attempt to address this shortfall. It offers both exclusivity and a central role for Russia, regardless of the issues being discussed or the quality of its contributions. Ostensibly, it conforms to what Moscow calls “non-institutionalized mechanisms of global governance” and “network-based diplomacy.” In fact, these terms are misleading, since Putin himself has indicated that he would like to transform the BRICS from a dialogue forum into a “fully-fledged [that is, institutionalized] mechanism of strategic cooperation.” What is most important to the Kremlin, however, is the imagery of BRICS summity. The public displays of bonhomie are important in reaffirming—to the leadership, the Russian public, and a wider international audience—that Russia naturally belongs to the global elite. Standing with China (in particular), India, and Brazil confers a success by association, conveying the message that Russia is part of the dynamic group of ascendant powers, in contrast to a decaying and discredited West.

In a couple of respects the BRICS is an improvement on, although not a substitute for, the P5. Unlike the latter, it purports to mirror contemporary realities, above all the trend toward the “formation of a polycentric system,” aka the multipolar order. It has become a symbol and an instrument for challenging the dominance of the West, replacing this with an alternative legitimacy—a new model of global relations.” There are calls to reform an “obsolete international financial and economic architecture” that has failed to factor in the increased economic power of the BRICS countries. There is the reaffirmation of “generally recognized principles and norms of international law,” and rejection of “power politics and politics infringing on the sovereignty of other states”—in other words, Western-led moral interventionism. Despite protestations about its “non-bloc character and non-aggressive nature with regard to third parties,” the BRICS for Moscow is all about countering the West in its various dimensions.

This leads to its second advantage over the P5—the absence of any Western representation. There is no risk that Russia will be overshadowed by the multidimensional power of the United States or the economic and normative influence of the Europeans. True, China has become the world’s second-largest economy. But Moscow takes comfort in Sino-Russian likemindedness
and Beijing’s reticence in assuming international leadership. It consequently feels better able to manage proceedings. In the P5 it operates within very tight parameters. In the G-8 it was the odd one out in political and security deliberations, and excluded altogether from financial discussions. And in the G-20 it has little say in framing or implementing the agenda. But within the BRICS Russia can persuade itself that it really is a major player—setting the agenda, deciding the rules of the game, and controlling the outcomes.

The practical results of the BRICS process have, however, been unimpressive. Partly, this is because its artificiality is ill-suited to the untidy realities of international affairs. But it is also because it is a sideshow for Beijing, New Delhi, and Brasilia—a lot of pomp and circumstance, but with little substance. Crucially, they do not subscribe to Moscow’s principal rationale for the BRICS, namely, a consensus of the rest to counterbalance the United States. At best they see the group as a supplement to existing structures. One of the few things the four original BRICS have in common is that the United States lies at the epicenter of their respective foreign policies. But while Moscow views interaction with Washington in zero-sum terms, it is a different story for the others. In the case of the Chinese, Xi Jinping’s emphasis on a “new pattern of great power relations” reveals an understanding that open strategic rivalry with the United States would be self-defeating, for no country has benefited more than China from U.S. leadership of the international system over the past two decades. As for India, the notion that it might make common cause with China against the United States is absurd. Whereas New Delhi’s rapprochement with Washington is its most important strategic move of recent years, political and security relations with Beijing remain tense, notwithstanding their expanding economic ties.

Moscow’s dogged advocacy of the BRICS process highlights the disjunction between the two worlds, the perceptual and the actual, that frame its foreign policy. On the one hand, emphasizing the BRICS is consistent with the vision of a multipolar order in which the West is greatly weakened and the initiative has passed to the non-Western powers as a result of the “shift of global power to the East.” On the other hand, the Kremlin’s BRICS dream is stymied by all sorts of awkward realities: the disorderliness of international affairs; the lack of serious interest among other BRICS members; their reluctance to confront the United States; the thinness of political and normative likemindedness; and different (and often competing) priorities. Putin’s commitment to the institutional development of the BRICS is also open to question. While he would like to see a more cohesive approach vis-à-vis the United States, it is doubtful whether he would ever accept the codified rules,
responsibilities, and constraints that govern bodies such as the EU. As a result of these tensions and contradictions, the story of Russia and the BRICS so far is one of aspiration over realism.

The virtues and vices of regionalism

Where the Kremlin has shown greater pragmatism is in recognizing the importance of more effective pan-regional policies. Accordingly, it has invested considerable political and financial resources in developing the Customs Union, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while also maintaining a strong presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Such activism points to a heightened appreciation of the impact of regionalism and regional actors on Russian interests, as well as the sense that “global initiatives . . . no longer work in the modern world.”

At the same time, Moscow’s approach bears the mark of Soviet pseudo-multilateralism. During the cold war, this was represented militarily by the Warsaw Pact, in trade and economic affairs by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA, or Comecon), and in political matters by the charade of “independent” Soviet republics acting as sovereign states in the United Nations. In similar spirit the Kremlin views the Customs Union, the EEU, and the CSTO less as vehicles for solving regional problems than as instruments for promoting Russia’s interests in the post-Soviet space. The Eurasian Union serves as an opposite pole of attraction to the economic and normative power of the EU and, increasingly, China, while the CSTO performs much the same function vis-à-vis NATO. With both, the overarching goal is to reassert Russia’s leading role in Eurasia.

Although Russia does not always get its way, it dominates these organizations. Formally, decisions are reached on the basis of consensus, but in practice the consensus that matters is the one in Moscow. It is telling, for example, that in 2013 Russia sought to entice Ukraine to join the Customs Union by offering lower gas prices and other bilateral incentives to Kyiv. The CSTO Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) is a Russian-led and -equipped detachment, whose deployment is decided by Moscow with only minor input from other CSTO members. And when the now defunct Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) offered Minsk a US$3 billion package to rescue the bankrupt Belarusian economy in the summer of 2011, this was a soft loan entirely “made in Moscow.” The Russian government set the conditions of the loan, and reaped the benefits by forcing President Alexander Lukashenko to sell the remaining half of Belarus’ national energy provider, Beltransgaz, to
Gazprom. The line between the bilateral and the multilateral effectively disappeared.

Putin’s approach toward regional multilateralism differs little in intention from that of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The differences are of degree and capacity. Moscow’s pseudo-multilateralism is more subtle than in Soviet times, while its capacity to secure compliance from regional partners is also considerably reduced. Even under the relatively pro-Moscow regime of Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine resisted joining the Customs Union, while weak states such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have exploited regional mechanisms to achieve a freedom of maneuver unimaginable when they were part of the USSR. Such outcomes, however, are the product of circumstances on the ground, not of Moscow’s conversion to multilateral ideals. On the contrary, Putin appears more committed than ever to effecting regional “integration” under Russian leadership.

Consistent with this attitude, Moscow is somewhat ambivalent toward the SCO, the one truly multilateral organization in Eurasia. At various times Putin has looked to it as a counterweight to the American and NATO presence in Central Asia. This was the case at the SCO Astana summit in June 2005, when he was able to unite the other member-states in calling for a time limit on the U.S. base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan. But more often than not he has been frustrated in his attempts to establish a geopolitical consensus on Russian terms.

Indeed, the current is running in the opposite direction. Whereas a decade ago the SCO was dominated by a Sino-Russian tandem, today China is clearly the leading player within that organization. This reality is tacitly recognized by Moscow. It has sought to dilute Chinese influence by initiating the expansion of SCO membership to India and Pakistan, and by blocking Beijing’s attempts to establish an SCO Free Trade Zone. More significant, it has shifted its primary focus to the Eurasian Union (in particular) and the CSTO—in other words, to organizations that are more pliant, and of which China is not a member.

Russia and the Global Agenda

The Putin regime’s approach to international institutions shapes its handling of substantive issues of regional and global governance. Under this broad rubric, there are five main areas: a new financial architecture; global trade; resource diplomacy; multilateral cooperative security; and international norms.
A new financial architecture

The global economic downturn of 2008–12 pushed the discussion of a new financial architecture to the top of the international agenda. Although Moscow’s initial reaction to the financial meltdown was that it was a Western crisis, such complacency soon gave way to the realization that Russia was more vulnerable than most to its effects. By early 2009, the leadership had started to beat the drum of financial reform, joining in calls to overhaul the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF, World Bank) and reduce dependence on the U.S. dollar as the base currency for international transactions.

Moscow’s approach to global financial governance is, however, more instrumentalist than reformist. In fact, many of the changes being mooted are not necessarily to Russia’s advantage—at least not in the short to medium term. For example, a general shift away from the U.S. dollar toward a basket of major currencies would devalue its still considerable holdings of U.S. treasury securities (US$86 billion in December 2014). It is also questionable whether the ruble would be included in a basket of currencies if one were to be introduced. Likewise, a substantial increase in voting shares for emerging economies in the IMF and World Bank would favor China and India, not Russia. Indeed, its weight within these organizations could be diminished by institutional reform because its share of the global economy (3.3 percent in 2014) is set to decline. Moscow knows, too, that Russia’s fortunes depend less on financial reforms than on continuing demand for its oil, gas, and other natural resources. Like China, it has benefited greatly from international economic imbalances over the past decade. These have helped push commodity prices to record highs, vital to an economy that has become ever more reliant on resource exports.

If Russia has an economic interest in financial architecture, then it lies in restoring stability and predictability to the current system, not in encouraging radical change over which it would have little influence. In the global economy, Russia is predominantly a taker rather than setter of trends, and this would be especially so in a reformed system. It can pretend to be a significant player in the G-20 and in international financial institutions, but its impact in such forums is slight—and widely viewed as such.

Consequently the principal drivers of Moscow’s interest in “change” are geopolitical and normative: to challenge the West’s post–cold war dominance of the international system and to renegotiate the terms of its engagement with the United States and Europe. Until relatively recently (2012–13), the difficulties suffered by the leading Western countries appeared to facilitate at least a partial realization of these aims. Putin lost few opportunities to con-
trast Russia’s generally sound macroeconomic indices from 2009 with the lingering agony of the eurozone, and to draw a larger parable about Western irresponsibility and the flaws of democratic liberalism. 44

But the pretense implicit in selling Russia as a twenty-first-century economic player has become unsustainable given the lack of structural reforms, an increasingly ugly business climate, and the onset of recession. The main themes today are import substitution and economic autarky, not Russia’s transformation into a knowledge economy, or Moscow becoming an international financial center on a par with New York, London, Paris, and Hong Kong. 45 Russia’s economic reputation has hit a new low, not only in the West, but also among emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil. Few believe that it can make a worthwhile contribution to a new financial architecture and global rebalancing when its efforts at domestic modernization have been so unsuccessful.

**International trade**

Nearly twenty years after first submitting its application, Russia finally entered the WTO in August 2012, the last major economy to do so. There were many reasons for the protracted delay, and Moscow was by no means entirely to blame. More than with any other applicant, Russia’s path was strewn with non-trade obstacles. On several occasions, it seemed on the verge of completing negotiations when a security or political crisis would crop up to scupper the process. 46 It is also true that, as a large economy, Russia was held to higher standards than most. 47

Nevertheless, the Russian government was primarily responsible for the slowness of the accession process. Some of its actions, such as Putin’s decision in June 2009 that Russia would submit a joint Customs Union bid with Kazakhstan and Belarus instead of continuing with its individual application, were particularly unhelpful. 48 More problematic still was an equivocal attitude toward accession itself, which became a lightning rod for all sorts of anxieties about globalization, modernization, and the intrusiveness of supranational, rules-based regimes. (Unlike the P5, where it could exercise the veto, or the BRICS framework, which imposes no concrete obligations, the WTO makes rulings that its members must follow.) It did not help, either, that the Kremlin appeared to regard membership as a right rather than a privilege, and to believe that the organization needed Russia more than the other way round. 49

Russian reservations about the WTO have only strengthened following accession. For Putin the obligations that come with membership are more than just an economic challenge. Over the past decade, he has built up his popular legitimacy by presiding over rising incomes and improved social
stability in exchange for the allegiance or at least acquiescence of the population—the post-Soviet “social contract” referred to in chapter 1. Opening up the economy presents a conundrum. To achieve true competitiveness requires radical increases in labor productivity and may involve substantial layoffs in certain sectors. This risks alienating core constituencies, such as blue-collar industrial workers. For many in the ruling elite, the likely political-social costs outweigh any modernizing dividend from WTO membership. This is especially so given the speculative nature of World Bank estimates that membership could boost Russia’s GDP by 3.3 percent over the medium term (seven to ten years).

Putin, it seems, seeks the best of all worlds: dynamism without risk, growth along with social guarantees, and globalization mitigated by tight controls on competition—in other words, an economic analog of the “managed democracy” that has defined much of his presidency. But in the new world disorder, such hopes are illusory. It is evident that WTO membership on its own will not bring about tangible benefits. As Clifford Gaddy has noted, the question is “whether Russia really will change in order to conform to the WTO rules, or whether it will bend or evade the rules.”

Almost immediately after WTO accession, the government introduced protectionist measures in a number of vulnerable sectors, including automobiles, textiles, and paper manufacturing. The 2012 decision to impose levies for recycling imported foreign cars aroused particular concern abroad for what it said about Russia’s (lack of) commitment to meeting its WTO obligations. More important, there is no sign of the major reforms—in corporate governance, the regulatory environment, and the rule of law—that membership is supposed to encourage. On the contrary, the Ukraine crisis has strengthened autarkic tendencies. Moscow has responded to Western sanctions by suspending food imports from the EU, the United States, Australia, Canada, and Norway. While it hopes to make up some of the shortfall with imports from non-Western countries, this move also fits in with a larger intention to favor local production through import substitution policies.

In lieu of an integrated approach to the WTO (and economic modernization), Moscow is pursuing a grab-bag of policies. At the rhetorical level it talks up Russia’s credentials as a leading player in the international trading system. Tactically it uses the WTO as a mechanism for challenging the legality of hostile political actions, such as Western sanctions against Russian banks and energy companies. And it has left the door ajar for commercial partnerships with the West in order to facilitate the transfer of advanced technology and know-how. The Kremlin hopes that if and when sanctions are
relaxed or lifted, joint ventures with German, French, Japanese, and even American companies will soon pick up again.

But the most distinctive part of the Kremlin’s approach to international trade is its quest to develop a distinct post-Soviet space in which Russia remains incontestably the dominant player. This amounts to an insurance policy. Should Russia’s global terms of trade remain unfavorable (as a result, say, of a continuing slump in commodity prices), or its WTO obligations too onerous, it may always find refuge in its own, dedicated economic area. The Eurasian Economic Union serves this purpose. In addition to its geopolitical and normative rationale, it is a means of managing Russia’s trade with post-Soviet neighbors—and achieving a level of influence and protection unattainable in larger forums, such as the WTO and APEC, where there are multiple (and stronger) actors. 59

Resource diplomacy

The tension between the demands of good international citizenship and the pull of national interests is nowhere more evident than in Russia’s resource diplomacy. On the one hand, it is attempting to position itself as a pivotal player in regional and global energy security, 60 as well as a primary supplier of other essential resources, such as timber, non-ferrous metals, and water. This is important both for obvious economic reasons, and because the reliable supply of such commodities is the most concrete and accessible way of showcasing Russia as a major contributor to the global community. Natural resource security is, after all, a truly universal preoccupation.

On the other hand, Moscow does not want to loosen its grip on its chief instrument of influence on the Eurasian continent (and beyond). It is therefore unwilling to accept multilateral, rules-based constraints, which is the main reason why it has withdrawn from the Energy Charter Treaty. 61 For Putin Russia’s vast reserves of oil and gas, and control of pipeline infrastructure, are strategic assets of the utmost importance. 62 Such advantages cannot be negotiated away or otherwise limited.

This is all the more so given the Russian economy’s increasing reliance on natural resource exports. Today energy alone accounts for more than two-thirds of export revenue, half of federal budget revenue, and a quarter of GDP. Natural resources combined contribute nearly 80 percent of the value of Russian exports, a figure that rises further with Russia’s two main trading partners, the EU (82 percent) and China (over 90 percent). 63 Russia’s natural resources also have a crucial knock-on effect. Resource rents have become instrumental in bankrolling other, less fortunate sectors of the economy, such as manufacturing, not to mention the personal fortunes of the elite. 64
There is a critical psychological dimension as well. As noted in chapter 1, much of the bullishness in Putin’s foreign policy is the result of the boom in global oil and commodity prices from the early 2000s. The other side of the coin, however, is that this confidence is fragile—as became clear in the first year of the global financial crisis, when the price of Urals crude fell by two-thirds between July and December 2008. More recently, a further slump during the second half of 2014 has emerged as the most serious threat to the Putin regime, far more damaging than any Western sanctions. It is no surprise, then, that Moscow should view energy security through a predominantly national and competitive prism, rather than from an internationalist, global governance perspective.

This is especially apparent in Russia’s gas relationships with Europe. Since the late 1960s Moscow has operated on the basis of long-term (fifteen- to twenty-year) agreements with European state energy companies on a take-or-pay basis. These bilateral agreements have several important advantages for Russia: they are relatively simple to negotiate and to extend; they ensure predictability of demand; and they provide guaranteed revenue. In an uncertain world, such arrangements are more attractive than ever. Yet they are also becoming difficult to enforce. The U.S. shale revolution has created a ubiquitous market in LNG (liquefied natural gas), leading to downward pressure on global gas prices. Regional gas hubs are developing, and over time a global spot market in gas may well emerge. And the Europeans have shown signs of greater unity and purpose. The EU’s Third Energy Package, with its rules on the “unbundling” (separation) of gas production and distribution, has strengthened both its negotiating position and its confidence in dealings with Moscow.

Putin feels threatened by such developments. The EU’s new-found solidarity is unnerving, since it is by far Russia’s largest gas market and will probably remain so for the next two decades, even if the Sino-Russian gas agreement of May 2014 (see chapter 5) is fully implemented. A united European front not only weakens Russia’s bargaining position on individual supply contracts, but also its capacity to use energy as an instrument of geopolitical influence. Such considerations have become highly pertinent in light of the Ukraine crisis and the deterioration in Russia-EU relations.

To protect its geopolitical and commercial interests, Moscow has adopted various countermeasures. From time to time it has cut supply to selected post-Soviet countries, for example Ukraine and Moldova. It has actively undermined pipeline projects that seek to bypass its territory, such as the ill-starred Nabucco venture. It has waged a determined campaign against the Third Energy Package, and opposed moves to achieve greater interconnectivity
among EU member-states. It has tried to coopt major European customers, Germany foremost, by giving them direct access to gas through the Nordstream pipeline,69 and by being more flexible in renegotiating take-or-pay agreements.70 And it has taken steps to protect “strategic companies” from external investigations, such as the European Commission’s anti-trust suit against Gazprom.71 Most of all it has resurrected the specter of diverting Russian gas from Europe to Asia, encouraged by apparent breakthroughs in cooperation with China.

Such methods reveal that the Kremlin’s resource diplomacy is overladen by multiple strategic, security, political, and psychological layers. Witness its reaction to the shale revolution. From the outset the Russian government has been in denial, responding with two mutually contradictory arguments. The first is that shale gas development is a speculative venture that will either not be a practical proposition for decades or is “a bubble about to burst.”72 The second argument, by contrast, emphasizes the environmental risks—the dangers posed by fracking, such as groundwater contamination and seismic disturbances.73

These claims have little to do with concern about global energy or environmental security, but are prompted by geopolitical and existential considerations. The shale revolution has implications not just for Russia’s international influence, but also for the stability of the Putin regime. With diminishing gas and oil revenue, it would find it increasingly problematic to fund essential programs—pensions, public sector wages, housing, health, and education—and to retain the allegiance of a rent-seeking elite. It is therefore understandable that Putin should talk down the impact of shale gas on global markets, while describing it as a “very barbaric way of extracting mineral resources.”74

Looking ahead, developments in the Arctic may suggest a possible way to reconcile Moscow’s often conflicting objectives of international respectability, commercial profit, and geopolitical (and geoeconomic) advantage. Belying initial concerns, Russia has worked quite effectively with fellow Arctic countries, such as Norway. The 2010 Russian-Norwegian agreement delimiting the Barents Sea was a model of bilateral cooperation. It demonstrated that Russian policymakers are able to make pragmatic decisions that simultaneously serve national interests and abide by supranational rule-based regimes, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

But such happy outcomes are rare. The Barents Sea agreement benefited from unusually favorable conditions. Although Norway is a committed member of NATO, there were relatively few ulterior agendas or historical insecurities to exacerbate normal policy differences. (Even then, the Barents Sea agreement took more than forty years to negotiate, and has since been heavily criticized in Moscow.)75 The situation could hardly be more different from
Russia's relations with central and eastern Europe, the United States, or the ex-Soviet republics. In these cases it has been virtually impossible to ignore the geopolitical baggage and to embrace an internationalist, positive-sum mindset—all the more so given events in Ukraine.

**Multilateral cooperative security**

Much of Moscow’s management of international security issues, such as strategic disarmament, missile defense, and NATO enlargement, is bound up with its relations with the United States, and will be discussed in chapter 6. Here the focus is on Russian perceptions of multilateral cooperative security as they relate to conflict management, counterterrorism, and WMD nonproliferation.

The Kremlin recognizes in principle that the global security agenda is evolving to take in new threats and challenges. But this consciousness is nascent, and has had minimal impact on policymaking. Russia’s history and strategic culture predispose it to think of security as overwhelmingly “hard” security. This bias is evident in good times and bad. At the height of the U.S.-Russia reset in 2009–10, the chief items of cooperative security were strategic disarmament, WMD nonproliferation and Iran, and the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. Similarly, in the Sino-Russian partnership the main topics are strategic interaction vis-à-vis the United States, conflict management in the Middle East, instability in Central Asia, and the threat of Islamist extremism in general. In stark contrast, human security issues such as poverty in Africa, climate change, and food and water scarcities barely feature in Russian elite (or public) discourse. There is little sense that they merit the expenditure of precious time and resources, especially when there are more pressing concerns at home and abroad.

There is a prejudice too against accepting that some of the new security issues, for example human-induced climate change, are real. The Putin elite tends to regard this as a Western liberal invention, at best unproven, at worst a conspiracy to undermine growth in Russia and other emerging economies. Insofar as there is an interest, it is economic, not ecological or humanitarian. During the 1990s Russia benefited greatly from emissions trading as a result of the implosion of its industry from the late 1980s. Today Moscow regards global warming in a generally positive light. Leaving aside Putin’s flippant comment a few years ago that Russia could do with being a few degrees warmer, the government sees the melting of the Arctic ice pack and Siberian permafrost as opening up fresh possibilities for exploiting natural resources and developing alternative sea-lanes, such as the Northern Sea Route. There is little feeling of a downside. Even the increasing frequency of drought conditions in Russia, which in the summer of 2010 led to some of the worst
fires in living memory, was considered more a quirk of nature than the result of global warming. There was public anger, but this was directed at the authorities’ inadequate response to a national emergency.

That said, Moscow is wary of being out of step with any international consensus that might emerge. It participates regularly in UN climate change conferences. It has made some of the right noises, such as a commitment to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 25 percent by 2020 (from 1990 levels). It has adopted a generally low profile to avoid possible collateral damage in quarrels between Washington and Beijing, and between developed and developing economies. It also promotes natural gas as the most practical clean energy option—far less polluting than coal, much easier to supply on a large scale than renewables, and where Russia possesses significant comparative advantages.

*The security issues that matter*

While Moscow regards climate change and global poverty as nonsecurity matters of secondary importance, there are security priorities where it identifies both the need and the opportunity to cooperate with others. The common denominator is that they are all areas where Russia can advance its national interests while contributing—and being seen to contribute—to international public goods.

**Conflict management.** This is a central preoccupation of Russian policymakers for several reasons. It is high-profile, typically involving the major powers: the United States, leading Europeans, and, increasingly, non-Western countries such as China. As such, it is seen as helpful in projecting Russia’s great power identity—for example, in the Middle East through the P5+1 negotiations on Iran’s nuclear program and in Northeast Asia through the currently suspended Korean Six-Party talks.

Russia’s leaders understand security in the first instance as the absence, or at least management, of conflict. At the most basic level, security means defending against foreign invasion and preserving the country’s territorial integrity. This priority has regained prime importance following events in Ukraine and the crisis in relations between Russia and the West. Although Moscow does not yet identify the United States or NATO as direct military threats, they are viewed as dangers in the broader sense—against Russia’s sovereignty, its geopolitical position, and the stability of the Putin system itself.

Conflict management is also a top priority because it is intimately linked to developments in the post-Soviet space—the so-called “frozen conflicts” in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria. In these cases, the combination of geographical proximity, historical antecedents, and acute geopolitical sensitivities provides an immediacy that compels the
constant attention of decisionmakers. They encourage Moscow to claim a right of intervention in the affairs of its neighbors, both to protect Russian national interests and to promote itself as a responsible regional actor. Its participation in the Minsk process to mediate the conflict in Ukraine is only the latest example of its efforts to cloak self-interest with the wider legitimacy of good international citizenship.

**Combating terrorism.** Countering terrorism is important to the Kremlin, although it conceives of this somewhat differently than Western governments. During the Bush years, Moscow never subscribed to Washington's "global war on terror," whereby other players, such as Russia, performed essentially supportive and subordinate roles to U.S. policy. Its perspective on terrorism was—and remains—essentially local and regional, centering on the North Caucasus and the threat posed by the Taliban to Central Asian security. It fears that the secular authoritarian regimes of the region could be destabilized, leading in turn to the radicalization of Muslims in the Russian Federation itself. Consistent with this view, it is critical of American attempts to reach an accommodation with more moderate elements of the Taliban. It believes that no such moderates exist, and that a negotiated settlement based on this premise would be disastrous.

The Russian government is also inclined to view the problem of terrorism instrumentally. Whenever terrorist incidents have occurred in the West, for example at the 2013 Boston Marathon, it has seized the opportunity to legitimate the harsh handling of its own insurgency in the North Caucasus. By internationalizing what is essentially an indigenous problem with a few foreign elements (such as "Wahhabi" fighters), Putin seeks Western endorsement not just of his position on terrorism, but also of his overall approach to governing Russia. In a similarly opportunistic spirit, prominent voices in Moscow used the January 2015 attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* office in Paris to inveigh against Western permissiveness, and to vindicate the conduct of Russian foreign policy.

**WMD nonproliferation.** This matters to Moscow mainly because of its connection to other priorities, such as conflict management and countering missile defense. This is not to say that it cares nothing about North Korea's nuclear weapons program, or the potential for Iran to become a nuclear weapons state. But such worries are secondary to fears about American missile defense deployment in Europe, a possible Israeli strike against Tehran, and escalating tensions in Northeast Asia. The Kremlin does not view the threat of WMD proliferation as urgent, notwithstanding claims from time to time that a nuclear-weapons Iran would find it easier to hit Russian rather than American (or European) targets. Moscow sees U.S. missile defense plans, by contrast, as a tangible and immediate menace, threatening to under-
mine one of the pillars of Russian national security: the principle of strategic parity. The cure in this case is seen as definitely worse than the disease. (It was symptomatic that Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov should react to the reining in of Iranian nuclear activities in late 2013 by arguing that this had removed the rationale for missile defense deployment.)

The thrust of Russian policy has, therefore, been to find ways of containing international tensions arising out of WMD proliferation, and to extract geopolitical capital where possible, rather than tackling the problem of proliferation itself. Putin showed little concern about a sarin attack against the Damascus suburb of Ghouta in August 2013 until it became clear that the United States and key European allies (France, the United Kingdom) might use this to justify military intervention against the Assad regime. The subsequent elimination of chemical weapons stockpiles was a desirable outcome, but it was hardly the main game. Likewise, if Tehran could be persuaded to abandon its nuclear weapons ambitions, Moscow would be relieved—but not because this would eliminate the hypothetical possibility of an Iranian missile attack on Russia. The more important point is that it would lower the security temperature in the Middle East, while enabling Russia to demonstrate (and leverage) its credentials as an indispensable player in the region.

**Opposites don’t attract**

Moscow’s concerns about conflict management, terrorism, and WMD proliferation should in theory offer plenty of scope for active cooperation between Russia and the West. But in reality this cooperation has been disappointing even in relatively good times. Western critics accuse Russia of manipulating conflicts in its neighborhood, downplay its contribution in Afghanistan, and view it as a generally obstructive presence in relation to Syria. When Russian assistance is forthcoming, it is seen as narrowly self-interested, time-limited, and conditional.

Much of this failure is a by-product of the chronic mistrust between Russia and the United States. But there are other causes as well, the most important being a lack of agreement over objectives, methods, and outcomes. Moscow and Western capitals speak of common threats and challenges, but beneath the surface of such platitudes they have very different things in mind. This is true not only in counterterrorism and counterproliferation, but also in their divergent readings of the sources of security (and insecurity). Most obviously, the United States and the European Union believe that democratization is the key to long-term stability in Eurasia. The Kremlin, however, looks to local authoritarian regimes as bulwarks against radical Islamism and Western liberal influences, which it regards as equally subversive.
Moscow also identifies an interest in sometimes manipulating conflicts. For example, far from wishing to reconcile the Abkhaz and South Ossetians with Tbilisi—admittedly, a near-impossible task—it seeks the opposite. It knows that as long as Georgia is dogged by such unresolved conflicts, it stands little chance of NATO membership, and will always be susceptible to Russian leverage. More recently, the Ukraine crisis has shown that when faced with the choice of influence or security, the Kremlin will opt for the former. Indeed, it sees this as a false choice, since it cannot conceive of true security in the neighborhood separate from a dominant Russian influence.

The cases of Georgia and Ukraine highlight a larger problem in balancing geopolitical and security interests. This is apparent even where there has been meaningful cooperation between Russia and the West, as in Central Asia. Moscow knows that the United States is the only force capable of restraining the Taliban from expanding its influence throughout the region. However, a strong American presence runs counter to every geopolitical instinct of the Russian elite. The result of this contradiction is policy confusion. Russia supports the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), but pressured Kyrgyzstan into terminating the American lease on the Manas base. It has talked up cooperation with NATO in Afghanistan, and criticized the imposition of “artificial” deadlines for the withdrawal of alliance forces. But almost in the same breath it claims that NATO has outstayed its welcome. It blames the Americans for the boom in heroin trafficking, yet blocks Washington’s efforts to boost the counternarcotic capabilities of the Central Asian republics. And in January 2013 it terminated its own counternarcotics agreement with the United States, as part of a package of retaliatory measures against the passing of the Magnitsky Act.

In short, there is no consistent or coherent Russian approach toward cooperative security, but a series of unconnected actions, driven largely by instinct and opportunism. Unsurprisingly, the outcomes have been poor, not only for international security but for Russia as well. Putin aspires to position it as a leading player in setting and managing a new global security agenda. And he has shown considerable aptitude in seizing on Western policy shortcomings over Syria and Ukraine. Yet Russia’s real contribution to problem solving in international security remains very modest. Moreover, there is little sign of positive change. Ensnosed in its perceptual world, the Kremlin believes that Russia can have it all—enhanced security, geopolitical influence, and global standing—without the need for any serious rethinking of its approach.
International normative regimes

One criterion of Russia’s commitment to global governance is the extent to which it accepts the legitimacy of supranational or universal norms. Formally there is no quarrel with the principle of universality, as various government statements make clear. In practice it is a different story. Although Russia is a signatory to multiple international agreements and conventions, including the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Helsinki Accords, it has consistently resisted attempts to enforce the norms enshrined in these documents. Its approach to international normative regimes rests instead on four broad “principles”: (1) opposing moral interventionism; (2) the “primacy of international law”; (3) limited sovereignty; and (4) changing the rules of global governance.

Opposing moral interventionism. Moscow’s resistance to implementing universal norms is most apparent in this area. Importantly, its negative attitude rests on a solid consensus within the ruling elite, one that dates back to the early Yeltsin years. In 1995 the Russian government condemned the U.S. military action that prevented further massacres of the Bosnian Muslims; in 1999 it was even more vigorous in attacking the legitimacy of the NATO operation over Kosovo; and in 2003 it joined with France and Germany in opposing Washington’s decision to invade Iraq. Over the same period it has emasculated various multilateral sanctions regimes—against Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran.

It should be acknowledged that Russia has sometimes had good cause to act in this way. Along with many other countries, it was right to question the motivations, legality, and wisdom of the Iraq war. Likewise, it is hard to disagree that the application of international norms is at best uneven, and reeks of double standards. And it is true that sanctions often do not achieve their intended purposes and can cause considerable collateral damage to the innocent.

But these objections—sometimes well-founded, sometimes less so—are secondary to Moscow’s main point, which is that it is up to individual governments to decide how they rule their peoples and interpret international norms within their own countries. It is not for outsiders, least of all a discredited West, to determine what is and is not moral. This standpoint originates in a long Westphalian tradition, but has been reinforced by Russia’s post-Soviet experience. Conservatives and liberals alike blame Western involvement for the economic difficulties and foreign policy setbacks of the 1990s. In the eyes of many, these were not merely the unfortunate outcomes
of bad advice, but were part of a larger scheme to take advantage of Russian weakness after the demise of the Soviet Union. Consequently they reject the notion that outsiders may lecture Russia about good governance—and they extend this view to embrace the doctrine of noninterference in general.

Moscow has demonstrated tactical flexibility from time to time. Notwithstanding its dislike of the “responsibility to protect” (R2P), it formally accepted its doctrinal legitimacy, and even tolerated its limited application. On Libya it did not veto UN Security Council Resolution 1973, while President Medvedev voiced unusually harsh criticism of the Gaddafi regime. It was able to finesse this compliance because the main thrust for intervention came from the Arab League, France, and the United Kingdom, rather than the United States. The earlier decision by the Arab League to support a no-fly zone conferred a wider legitimacy that had been absent in relation to Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq. Arab League involvement allowed Russia to portray itself as a responsible international power on terms other than those dictated by the West—a vital face-saving consideration. By abstaining it was able simultaneously to appear cooperative, signal its reservations about military action, reinforce a distinct but constructive Russian identity in the Middle East, distance itself from a deeply unpopular regime, and sustain the reset with Washington.

Yet contrary to the hopes of some Western politicians, this flexibility did not mark a philosophical shift. The opposite has turned out to be true. Moscow has used the Libyan experience to highlight both the disingenuousness of the West and the perils of outside intervention in the name of universal values. It has accused NATO of grossly exceeding its mandate through the “illegal” pursuit of regime change. It contrasts the relative stability that prevailed under Gaddafi to the anarchy of today’s Libya, the spread of Islamist extremism across the Middle East, and the growing threats to regional and international security. It notes that in several Arab Spring countries—Tunisia, Libya, Egypt—popular revolt that began as a predominantly liberal, middle-class phenomenon was subsequently taken over by Islamists. And it warns of a similar scenario in Syria should the Assad regime fall—an argument that has been strengthened as a result of the spectacular gains made by Islamic State (IS) forces in Iraq and eastern Syria during 2014.

For the Kremlin Libya exemplified Western hypocrisy. The imbroglio over Syria offers another, starker example. The United States and the leading Europeans speak of universal values and human rights, but viewed from Moscow their policies are driven by geopolitical and commercial interests. Western capitals call for the removal of Assad, yet turn a blind eye to political repres-
sion in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, both of which happen to be key U.S. allies. Russian resentment is compounded by the West’s lack of squeamishness in cooperating with authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet neighborhood, such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan.

The “primacy of international law.” Many Western commentaries have depicted Russia’s conduct over Syria, and foreign policy more generally, as motivated by the worst kind of realpolitik. Syria is a major arms market; Russia retains useful, if modest, naval facilities in the port of Tartus; and Damascus is its closest ally in the Middle East. These are all influential considerations, yet they tell only part of the story. Unlikely though it may seem, Moscow’s position is founded on principle—that of the “primacy of international law.”

Its conception of this, however, differs radically from that of most Western governments. The Kremlin interprets international law as, essentially, the body of rules and conventions that govern relations between the major powers and, through them, smaller states as well. One such rule is that of non-interference, except in cases like Mali where the host government has specifically requested outside intervention, or in the post-Soviet neighborhood, where Russia’s vital interests are at stake (see below). In instances such as Syria, however, the original principle applies: foreign powers may only intervene with the endorsement of the UN Security Council, in other words, with Russia’s consent.

Moscow’s frequent resort to “international law” is motivated by a mixture of self-interest, moral relativism, and basic instinct. At the most existential level it reflects opposition to the idea that grassroots democracy movements may be considered legitimate sources of regime change. The Putin elite fears that the democratic contagion of the Arab Spring and Ukraine could, if unchecked, spread to Russia and other parts of the post-Soviet space. Appealing to “international law” is therefore of a piece with the consolidation of domestic order.

As noted earlier, the Kremlin has become increasingly resistant to the perceived tyranny of a Western-imposed moral code. Emphasizing the primacy of international law has consequently become synonymous with the assertion of Russian sovereignty and independence. It does not necessarily mean abiding by the decisions of, say, the European Court on Human Rights, but sometimes entails just the opposite. For the highest law is the one that protects the inviolability of Russia’s rights in the face of external “interference” and domestic subversion.

Geopolitically, international law à la Russe serves to restrain the exercise of American power. It is critical that the main institution for implementing its
principles is not the International Criminal Court, of which Russia (along with the United States and China) is not a member, and whose decisions Moscow cannot control, but the UN Security Council, where it retains significant influence. Putin’s understanding of international law is consistent with, and indispensable to, his vision of a multipolar order. The “law” here brings a measure of stability and predictability to a disorderly world.

Limited sovereignty and the Ukrainian exception. This raises the question of how the Kremlin is able to square the contradiction between its advocacy of national sovereignty and its annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine—not to mention its interference in other ex-Soviet republics, such as Moldova and Georgia.

There is no integrated intellectual rationale to such behavior. Instead, the contradiction between theory and practice is managed through various devices. One is flat denial. The conflict in eastern Ukraine is portrayed as a civil war between the local Russian-speaking population and Kyiv, while the Kremlin rebuts Ukrainian and Western claims of Russian military involvement.

Another, more heartfelt, justification is to argue that Ukraine and Russia are not separate countries, but have been intertwined for centuries. The implication is that the usual rules therefore do not apply. Since Ukraine is not a “real” country, the issue is not Russian interference, but fraternal support—a view founded in the Brezhnevian concept of limited sovereignty. This is discussed in the next chapter, but suffice it to say here that Moscow operates on the premise that international law applies only to properly independent entities. Ahistorical creations like Ukraine and other ex-Soviet republics are seen neither to merit nor to require such protection. That “obligation” falls to Russia.

This segues into the belief that instability and conflict in Ukraine affect Russia’s most vital interests, including its national security. No responsible government in Moscow can afford to ignore developments in such an important neighbor—especially when the United States and European Union have conspired to overthrow its legitimately elected government. For the Kremlin their actions epitomize the depth of Western hypocrisy when it comes to observing international law.

Finally, on a narrowly legalistic level the Kremlin has given itself an out by claiming the right of humanitarian intervention on behalf of Russian expatriates, wherever they may be. To this purpose it has issued tens of thousands of passports to residents in neighboring territories and countries: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Ukraine. In the 2008 Georgia war Russia claimed a right of intervention on these grounds. At the time of writing (spring 2015)
it has yet to exploit this resource to justify a large-scale, official deployment of Russian troops in Ukraine. But the option remains open.

*Changing the rules of global governance.* The contrasting cases of Libya, Syria, and Ukraine highlight the particularities in Russian attitudes toward global governance. There is acceptance that this cannot simply be dismissed as an artificial Western construct. Accordingly, the Russian leadership has become more calibrated in its responses. It will almost invariably oppose external military intervention. But it also favors softer methods in defense of the sovereign rights of nation-states. These include tactical partnerships with supposedly like-minded countries, such as China, India, and Brazil; playing on the doubts of key Western players, such as Germany (over Libya and Syria); using the UN and other multilateral mechanisms to mediate conflict, thereby postponing the imposition of punitive measures; and reinforcing regional solidarity through organizations such as the CSTO, EEU, and SCO.

Throughout all this, however, one recurrent theme has emerged from the Kremlin: the management of international affairs can no longer be imposed on the basis of norms decided and enforced by the West. By their actions the United States and its European partners have forfeited any moral superiority they ever had. If there is to be global governance, then it must reflect the realities of a post-American century. This means, above all, a much enhanced role for the non-Western powers. Decisionmaking must be collective and equal. And it should also be somewhat exclusive, limited to the big players acting in concert.

The Putin regime’s vision of global governance allows for a significant, but supporting, role for multilateral organizations. Their purpose is to provide a reliable institutional framework within which the major powers can manage the world. They are emphatically not there to democratize international politics, other than in the narrow sense of devolving decisionmaking from the United States to other centers in the “polycentric system,” including Russia.

Global governance, as viewed from Moscow, entails rules that are at once more flexible *and* more binding than those of the American-led system of the past two decades. The flexibility lies in the lack of prescriptiveness regarding the domestic governance of states, which is the business of legitimate national governments. However, the norms of *international* behavior are taken as binding. Neither the United States nor any other country has the right to act solely on the basis of its national interests (let alone Western liberal values). They must abide by the rules of the central coordinating mechanism that regulates international relations—in other words the UN Security Council.
Global Governance and the New World Disorder

How then does the Kremlin’s vision of global governance tally with the realities of the new world disorder? One should start by admitting that it is not without some basis. The enormous human and financial costs of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the immorality of some of the West’s actions in the conduct of these wars (Guantánamo, extraordinary rendition, Abu Ghraib), and the unsatisfactory outcomes of external intervention in Libya have severely undermined the case for supranational action, particularly when it involves military measures. These difficulties have not only discredited humanitarian intervention among a growing number of non-Western nations, but also exposed the weaknesses of American and European decisionmaking. The alacrity with which Obama seized on Putin’s offer to intercede with the Syrians over chemical weapons in September 2013 suggests that Russia, rather than the West, may be on “the right side of history” in opposing moral interventionism—a position in which it is supported by China and India.

Yet moral interventionism is only one aspect of a much bigger picture. Global governance is about establishing and implementing broader principles of international conduct, and prosecuting a policy agenda that corresponds to twenty-first-century realities. It is here that the Putin concept of Russia as a global actor has shown itself to be inadequate.

The most serious weakness is that it is rooted in an idealized vision of the past, a revamped Concert of Great Powers, rather than looking to a new model of international relations that reflects the changing dynamics of power and influence in our time. The world may not be flat, as Thomas Friedman has claimed, but the days of major powers running global affairs are gone. The real lesson from the fiascos in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria is not the decline of U.S. power, but the inability of any power (or powers) to direct positive change beyond its borders. Moscow is no more able to dictate to Damascus, Tehran, or Kyiv than Washington is to Jerusalem, Cairo, or Kabul. The “end of followership” is apparent everywhere. The Kremlin’s construct of multipolar or polycentric governance ignores the extent to which international society has become so much more democratic and (in the Hobbesian sense) anarchic.

Another shortcoming of Putin’s conception of global governance is that it is mired in a decidedly old Americentric obsession. Moscow asserts that the era of American dominance is over, but continues to take the United States as the prime reference point not just for Russian foreign policy, but for international politics more generally. Regional and global governance has
become reduced, in many instances (Central Asia, Iran, Syria, Ukraine), to an extension of the U.S.-Russia relationship. “Good” governance has come to be defined by a diminished American role and status, while “bad” governance is identified with American “unilateralism.” The irony, of course, is that U.S. policy setbacks have not resulted in gains for Russia, but often just the opposite. This is especially true in central Eurasia, but it also applies to other regions, such as the Middle East and Northeast Asia.

The Kremlin’s great power view of the world ensures that it continues to focus on traditional foreign policy priorities: disarmament and defense, international crisis management, geopolitical power projection, and the preservation of spheres of influence. It pays lip service to the emergence of new challenges, such as economic rebalancing, resource management, and cooperative security. But in practice Moscow treats these as subsidiary manifestations of more old-fashioned problems. Thus rebalancing is primarily a stick to challenge the economic and moral leadership of the West; resource diplomacy is oriented toward maximizing geopolitical advantages; and cooperative security is about maintaining a privileged status in the international firmament, and reinforcing the legitimacy of the Putin system.

There is no objective reason why Russia should not be a substantial contributor to global governance. Despite its troubles since the fall of the Soviet Union, it retains formidable resources: vast territorial reach, permanent membership in the UN Security Council, a pivotal position as a supplier of energy and other natural resources, a large and well-educated population, and a huge nuclear arsenal. Some of these trumps are less important than they used to be, but they are still significant.

But potential is one thing, lasting influence quite another. Under Putin, Russia has demonstrated that it retains real preventative powers. There is no doubting its capacity to make life difficult for others, whether it is the United States, the Europeans, or post-Soviet neighbors. There is also little question about its inclination to react vigorously to perceived provocations. The task, though, is to achieve something more than these negative outcomes, to move from an obsolete view of the international system and old “rights” of dubious validity and become instead a leading player in global problem solving.112