



Richard Sakwa. *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. ix + 362 pp. \$24.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-316-61351-1.

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Richard Sakwa does not like the term the “new Cold War.” To him, the label is misleading and obscures a much broader shift in global politics since 2014. His new book, *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*, is an account of that larger shift, and Russia’s place within it. Sakwa is Professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent and an associate fellow at Chatham House. He is a remarkably productive scholar. This is his seventh book on Russian politics since 2008, and there is another, *The Putin Phenomenon*, in the works (cited p. 119). Sakwa, who is of British Polish decent, is also no stranger to controversy. His 2015 book, *Front-line Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, argued that Euro-Atlantic expansionism and Ukrainian nationalism were key negative forces contributing to the Ukraine crisis of 2014. The book was strongly criticized by some Ukraine scholars though critically appreciated by others. Sakwa is part of a select group of scholars regularly invited to the Valdai Discussion Group (which includes the chance to hear Vladimir Putin in person) and his latest book reflects his deep knowledge of Russian elite thinking on world order and geopolitical change.

Sakwa provides a comprehensive account of post-Cold War geopolitics, with a decided emphasis on great power diplomacy, institution-building,

strategic competition and its baleful results. He dubs the twenty-five years between 1989 and 2014 an era of “cold peace,” one characterized above all by the failure of Western security organizations to transcend Cold War institutions and habits. Russia was shut out of negotiations over the creation of a post-Cold War security order in Europe as NATO and the EU saw matters in terms of enlargement of their own existing structures, not the creation of something new in dialogue with Russia. By denying “the logic of transcendence,” Sakwa argues, this enlargement precipitated the result it sought to avert. “Europe could not be ‘whole and free’ if Russia was effectively excluded” (p. 6) is an arresting early claim (repeated p. 165). Throughout Sakwa uses a distinctive vocabulary of contrasting geopolitical visions to describe this dynamic. The EU and NATO represented the Historical West; they viewed themselves as victors in the Cold War. Afterwards, they wanted to create a Wider Europe based around extended and radicalized Historical Western norms and practices (what others term an expanded liberal empire). Russia’s aspiration, however, was to become a founding member of a transformed Greater West that would establish a Greater Europe on the Eurasian landmass. Mikhail Gorbachev’s “common European home” and Charles de Gaulle’s Europe “from the Atlantic

to the Urals” are expressions of this vision. Greater Europe is ostensibly pluralist, open to political regimes of many different types. The European Union is only one of many different visions of being European. The problem of the cold peace, according to Sakwa, was that NATO and the EU represented monological visions of security and prosperity. The Historical West viewed the United States as the security lynchpin on the European continent and liberal market democracies as normative for the domestic structure of states. Willing only to enlarge not to change, the Historical West generated accumulating frustration, disillusionment, and resistance on the part of an excluded Russia. With Greater Europe off the table, Russia sought instead to create a Greater Eurasia (the Eurasian Economic Union). In 2014, the cold peace impasse on the European continent gave way to a hot war in Ukraine. Russian neorevisionism emerged as a predictable backlash against the expansionist logic of Euro-Atlantic liberal hegemony. Today, Russia and China are both neorevisionist powers. It is not, in the end, Russia against the Rest but Russia as part of the Rest against the Historical West.

Sakwa documents this thesis in great detail in the book, providing an impressive synthesis of international relations theory, post-Cold War history, and in-depth discussion of contemporary contentious issue areas. The great value of Sakwa’s work is its thorough articulation of Russian leadership perspectives and commentariat writings on the dilemmas of cold peace geopolitics alongside those of select Western observers, usually political realists but not exclusively so. Sergei Karaganov, dean of the faculty at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, and honorary chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, and Henry Kissinger are liberally quoted through the text. Karaganov argued in 2016 that the West after the Cold War sought to continuously limit Russia’s freedom, sphere of influence, and markets while expanding its own. The West “used Russia’s weakness to take away its centuries-old

gains and make it even weaker” (p. 39). Sakwa sees this argument as “going too far” for the West was open to Russia’s inclusion in Western security structures but “it wanted a different Russia to the one on offer; while Russia wanted to join the community, but on its own terms” (p. 39). Kissinger argued that Russia should have been engaged by the West in traditional *realpolitik* terms. The goal should not have been transformation of Russia but the development of a strategic concept that could manage their differences within an emerging multipolar world order.

There are some standout chapters in *Russia against the West*. Using English school international relations theory, Sakwa provides a compelling account of the Kremlin’s geopolitical attitude towards world order. This distinguishes between two levels of the international system, the primary institutions of international society which are states, and the secondary level of institutions which are collective organizations that seek universal practices and norms. Russia is a clear supporter of the primary level of institutions, which rest on state sovereignty and bargaining between great powers in a multipolar system. The secondary level is the realm of international organizations, regimes of norms, and systems of global governance. These bind and constrict state sovereignty in the name of universal norms and aspirations. Russia and other non-Western powers object to what they see as the capture of this second level by liberal internationalist norms and values, which ultimately advance the self-interest of Western states. Sakwa argues that Russia is not a revisionist power seeking to tear up the current international order. Rather, it is a neorevisionist state, critiquing the hegemonic ambitions and double standards of the liberal international order but, at the same time, defending the autonomy of an international society organized around state sovereignty. “Moscow assumed the paradoxical position of challenging the practices of the liberal order while defending the principles of international society” (p. 129). Putin is a

traditionalist, not a radical; a “legitunist,” not a revolutionary. Neorevisionism is “an unstable combination of attempts to modify the structures and practices of the hegemonic global order while remaining firmly ensconced in that order” (p. 132). International law has different meanings in this contest. To neorevisionist states, international law belongs to the primary level of international society. It is or should be delimited by respect for state sovereignty above all else. To liberal hegemony, international law is an expression of universal values and rules. It can and should be used against states that violate these.

Sakwa also gives us a succinct chapter on Russia’s grievances against the West, one that is empathetic without being uncritical. NATO enlargement gets a full discussion but so does missile defense, critique of Western interventionism, and objections to “trans-democracy.” This latter notion describes how democracy got absorbed into Euro-Atlantic visions of security. The spread of democracy and the pursuit of security became fused in practice. Democratic peace theory became dogma: “the security of the Atlantic power system is best advanced by creating a system of states moulded in the Western image and committed to liberal internationalism, the ideological foundations of post-war American power” (p. 99). This liberal imperial compound generated a Kremlin backlash that saw “colored revolutions” as Western-sponsored active measures, interpreting popular protests against autocratic and kleptocratic rules on Russia’s borders as Western plots. Implicit here is a Kremlin domino theory wherein the West is toppling autocratic regimes as a means of eventually knocking over the final piece: Putin’s Russia. Sakwa will infuriate many when he writes: “In a philosophical sense Putin was right: popular democratic revolutions have become a way for the Atlantic ideological and power system to advance. There is plenty of evidence that Western agencies have prepared for, funded and provided ideological support for pro-democracy movements whose ideological orienta-

tion is Atlanticist” (p. 102). But he also writes that this denies independent agency and popular demands for free and fair elections, less corrupt administrative systems, and, above all, civil dignity (p. 102). This mode of reasoning—affirming a Kremlin-friendly position yet articulating criticism also—is one he adopts on the all-important question of Crimea: “Crimea’s return can legitimately be considered a ‘democratic secession,’ since the overwhelming majority of the population (as later independent opinion polls confirmed) favored being part of Russia; although the view that it represents an ‘imperial annexation’ is justified to the degree that it lacked agreement with the country from which the territory seceded” (p. 157). Sakwa also writes that the armed insurgency in the Donbas was “covertly assisted by activists and some state bodies in Russia” (p. 157).

Sakwa’s work is impressively comprehensive. He discusses in relative detail the evolution of Russian foreign policy and European Union diplomacy, Eurasian integration, the Ukraine crisis, Western sanctions, Russia’s evolving military doctrines and modernization efforts, NATO’s responses to Russia, the breakdown of arms control regimes, US foreign policy and Russian interventionism in the Syrian civil war, information warfare, and Russia’s aspirational pivot towards China. The book concludes by outlining what he describes as a “global impasse.” This is a new “normal” of wide-ranging and increasingly deeply rooted confrontation between Russia and the United States. The United States is concerned to maintain its hegemonic status while China, Russia, and other powers are forcing a global realignment of power and the rules governing international affairs. He sees a rising of McCarthyism in the United States which is having a chilling effect on the quality of public debate, with those advocating “dissident” views condemned as “Putin apologists” (p. 313). On the central issue inflaming elite opinion in the United States (Russia’s information operations during the 2016 presidential election), Sakwa is skeptical that Russia’s role has

been fully proven. The Steele dossier “hit a new low in its puerile collection of unsubstantiated allegations” (p. 241). Instead, he sees a renewed “Russian threat” as generating considerable budget increases for US and NATO agencies to fight Russian “information warfare.”

Sakwa’s work has some clear weaknesses. First, his focus is largely on great power politics. As a result, he has little to say about the strategic dilemmas faced by post-Soviet states next to Russia. There is some discussion of Ukrainian crisis but little about Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, or Armenia, nor of the enduring territorial conflicts in the near abroad. Central Asia is discussed but only as it relates to the great powers. He shows little interest or empathy for the position of these states. Instead his arguments are shaped by conversations on panels at Valdai, Moscow, London, and Brussels—not Kyiv, Tbilisi, and Tallinn. Sakwa’s book is valuable in terms of enriching the quality and depth of debate over topics that tend to quickly polarize interlocutors, but debate should extend to consider the historical experiences and aspirations of small and medium states too. This does not mean privileging that experience over Russian experiences, as often happens in the West where curated nationalist versions of subaltern experiences, and traumas, are a means of establishing superior victimhood. Rather, the conversation need to include everyone and hold all to the same critical standards of reasoned debate.

Second, Sakwa’s schemas and categorizations tends to structure debate toward Russian standpoints and positions. In some ways, this is a function of his desire to be a correction to widespread antipathy against Russia. But this correction itself needs a critical check. For example, Sakwa makes frequent use of the distinction between “monological” and “pluralist” perspectives, with the former standing in for Western liberal hegemony or Ukrainian nationalism whereas the latter expresses tolerance for diverse regime types and civil na-

tionalist traditions. In practice, however, this reduces divergent traditions of politics—liberal, center-right and social democratic—into a singularity while creatively configuring acceptance of autocracy as “pluralism.” Indeed, autocracy is a category that is largely missing from Sakwa’s discussion. It deserves greater consideration as do variant kleptocratic state arguments made by scholars of Eurasian states. Sakwa does articulate positions that are critical of Russian government behavior, but in a mild manner. The Duma election of December 4 2011, is described as “flawed” (p. 115). Putin’s lies to Angela Merkel early in the Crimea crisis were his “being economical with the truth” (p. 217). Russia’s endorsement of European populists has damaging reputational consequences (p. 276). Because he is much more a hermeneutist of Putin than critic, Sakwa’s arguments shows considerable empathy for Russian government positions. This leads him to re-present arguments more than probe them for contradictions. Thus, for example, he writes that “Russia is not so much concerned with changing international hierarchy, but to defend a space for the conduct of international relations for itself, through the universal application of international law and respect for state sovereignty throughout the international system” (p. 129). Needless to say, many of Russia’s neighboring states would scoff at this.

Third, Sakwa engaged throughout his work with international relations theory but only the most traditional kind: realism (offensive and defensive), liberalism, and some constructivism. Emergent issue areas like cyber warfare and climate change are discussed in passing. There is little consideration of gendered practices or the role of affect, of feminist analysis, or of contemporary scholarship on visibility, memory, and nonhuman agency. This is not because it is absent in the speeches, debates, and practices he discusses. Rather, it is not called out and given separate analytical treatment by him. We need to think deeply, after all, about the micro- and macrosociological dynamics of respect, humiliation, frustration,

anger, fear, and reassurance, as well as about the gripping power of spectacles of revolution, “self-determination,” and national glory. Sakwa’s work is more a deliberative approach to Russia-explaining, focused on presenting contentious debates and divergent practices based on clashing conceptualizations.

Finally, some may find the book frustrating because its key concepts and arguments are discussed again and again in the text. Because the book strives to engage with nearly all aspects of current debates on Russia, it sometimes feels like Sakwa has written too much and that his chapters are not as joined up as they could be. In sum, however, *Russia against the West* is a valuable addition to the growing literature on the “new cold war” (that may not be a new cold war). It deserves to be read, debated, and criticized.

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