

Dominic Lieven:

“Russia and the rest of the world are heading into a storm”

| DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2020-18-1-134-144

In an interview conducted by Alexander SOLOVYOV, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Russia in Global Affairs, prominent British history scholar with Russian roots Dominic LIEVEN contemplates on the foundations of Russia’s foreign policy and relevance of historical studies for understanding international relations and the challenges the world will face in the near future. 2018 Valdai Prize-Winner; the prize is given by the Valdai International Discussion Club for outstanding contribution to the analysis of international processes.



– Arguably, one of the most well-known international attempts to provide a comprehensive conceptual description of Russian/Soviet foreign policy was George Kennan’s “Long Telegram,” which was later made public as the “X Article.” Is there a need for a kind of “X Article Revisited” today? If there is, how would you approach this task?

– I doubt that in today’s Washington such a piece would get much attention since the American political elite is so obsessed with domestic issues that foreign policy (especially vis-a-vis Russia and Ukraine) has become intertwined with and subordinated to domestic and partisan concerns to an extent well beyond even the American norm. I am not an expert on contemporary international relations and would therefore not be the person to write such a piece in any case. But, actually, I agree with most

of what Thomas Graham wrote in his recent article “Let Russia Be Russia” published in *Foreign Affairs*. Together, my brother Anatol [Peter Paul Anatol Lieven, a British Orwell Prize-winning journalist and policy analyst, a regular contributing author of *Russia in Global Affairs*] and I might perhaps produce quite an interesting “Article X,” but the only problem would be that no government would accept it!

– Which of Russia’s foreign policy concepts can be considered fundamental? “Moscow is the Third Rome”? Or “Northern Accord,” “Concert of Nations,” “Sacred Union,” Pan-Slavism (also known as the “Russian World”), “Russia has no allies but the Army and the Navy”?

– It seems to me that the most important reality underlying Russia’s geopolitical position and foreign policy was that until the 16th century it neighbored on the most powerful military polities in the world (various Eurasian semi-nomad polities based on the steppe and culminating in Genghis Khan and Tamerlane) and from that time until the 20th century its western neighbor was Europe, the most powerful and most expansionist region in world history.

Russia derived some benefits from its peripheral position, for example, when the Mongol empire disintegrated and military technology (and other factors) turned in favor of sedentary polities and against nomads. Russia was able to advance all the way to the Pacific without much opposition. Note the contrast with the Ottomans: when the Mongol Ilkhanate (Hulagu Khaganate) disappeared in Iran it was in time succeeded by the Shia Safavid regime which was a formidable military and ideological threat to the Ottomans in Anatolia and a firm barrier against any idea of Ottoman expansion eastwards.

– What are the immanent components of Russia’s international (self) identity (great)powerness, imperial grandeur, fixation on sovereignty, security imperative, etc.? Have they changed over time?

– Empire is part of Russian history and identity. The same is true, for example, of China and of the English. But it is far harder to shed a contiguous land empire than a maritime empire beyond the oceans both psychologically and for hard practical reasons. The old saying “The English

had an empire, but *Russia was* an empire” had some truth. It is harder to shed what you are than what you possess. That said, a major factor behind the Brexit was English nostalgia for the time when the lion could thump its tail while the rest of the world gasped in awe.

– Would you say that Russia’s foreign policy from imperial times was strategically coherent and consistent? Or was it opportunistic? Was Russia a leading actor or did it just follow the situation whatever it was? Is today’s Russia an active player in international politics or an opportunist?

– I think most states act according to the context and the circumstances, at least up to a point. Sometimes they take the initiative, sometimes they are constrained by forces beyond their control, to which they have to react. Russia was no different. But there were consistent elements in imperial Russian grand strategy. Expanding into fertile regions and controlling riverheads, to take but two examples, were priorities pursued consistently and effectively in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 19th century and up to 1914, Russian foreign policy operated according to the same principles as the foreign policies of most of the other great powers. It accepted the principles of the European system and the balance of power.

In many political systems and certainly in the European system from 1500 to 1945 peripheral power had greater freedom than the powers at the core, which is why the great European empires were created by peripheral powers: the English, the French, the Spanish, the Portuguese, and to some extent the Dutch at one end of Europe and the Russians at the other. If you look at the way China was united over two thousand years ago, it isn’t a coincidence that it was a peripheral power—Qin Dynasty, which conquered its rivals at the system’s core and unified China.

The point about being a peripheral power is that you can use the military, administrative, and fiscal machine, which has been honed by competition within the system against formidable competitors, to conquer areas beyond the periphery ruled by less powerful and developed states. In China, a peripheral power (Qin) achieved this in the 4th and 3rd centuries BC. It is far harder to conquer an international system from the core. This was the key to European geopolitics between 1750 and 1945. The French in 1799-1814 and the Germans twice in the 20th century conquered Europe’s

core but then faced the great challenge of overcoming simultaneously the two great peripheral power centers—England and Russia, both of which drew huge resources from outside Europe.

– Has the continuity of Russian foreign policy (from imperial times, through the Soviet period and to modern Russia) been palpable? If so, did Gorbachev try to “break the system”? Was it a deviation, or can we see continuity in this, too?

– I didn’t see Gorbachev as an exception in 1984-1991 (by a series of accidents I was a—unimportant but privileged—foreign policy advisor to Margaret Thatcher and for the only time in my life spent much time studying and writing on Russian contemporary politics in the press, commenting on television, etc.). I saw Gorbachev as the heir of Alexander II. Just as Alexander’s Russia was threatened by movements in the world economy, in other words the arrival of the Industrial Revolution in Western Europe, so Gorbachev’s Russia also risked losing its position as a modern superpower as the era of the Industrial Revolution ended and was replaced by the challenge of the micro-chip and the computer. In my opinion, Gorbachev, like Alexander II, was motivated above all by the desire to make Russia competitive and a country of which its rulers could be proud in a new era for the global economy and therefore also for international relations.

Like Alexander II, Gorbachev was operating in an era when liberal values were triumphant in the West and when key elements of liberalism were seen not just as desirable values in themselves but also essential to successful economic, cultural and political modernity. I saw it as no coincidence that many key terms of the *perestroika* years—*zakonnost’* (rule of law), *glasnost’* (freedom of speech and transparency), etc.—were borrowed straight from the time of Alexander’s reforms. This all sounds a bit derogatory but isn’t meant to be. There is nothing wrong with leaders wanting to rule a country of which they can be proud. In any case, for most of history the alternative to being an empire yourself was to be eaten by another empire.

– To what extent are historical analogies applicable to the study of international relations?

– Historical analogies don’t yield answers, but they do ask questions and provide warnings. In any case, countries and their leaders are partly

steered by historical memory and national myths, so historical knowledge is essential to grasping contemporary policymaking.

– How can historical science help or hinder the study of international relations?

– I'd rather think about the significance of history for foreign policymakers in today's world. When Gorbachev launched his reforms, it screamed in my face that he would necessarily create great domestic political dangers not just for his regime but for the imperial polity itself—i.e. the Union, which I saw as a sort of neo-empire. The parallels with Alexander's dilemmas were only too obvious. In Gorbachev's case the dilemmas were certain to be greater because democracy was far more universally championed in the 1980s than it had been in the 1860s. Even the Soviet Constitution spoke of democracy and allowed republics to secede in theory—which made *zakonnost'* an even worse threat in the 1980s than it had been in the 1860s.

It would be harder to legitimize liberalizing reforms that stopped short of full democracy. In addition, the empire now stretched across the whole of Eastern and Central Europe. Remembering the Polish revolt of 1863 was an additional reason to fear trouble both in Eastern Europe and in some Soviet republics if Gorbachev reverted to the Old Regime's policy of attempting to marry the Russian autocratic tradition and polity with certain aspects of Western liberalism.

It astonished me then (and still does) that full-scale liberalizing reforms werelaunched even in the political sphere without much seeming grasp of theirlikely consequences. I do think that one reason for this was that the Sovietleadership had to a great extent cut itself off from Russian history, which meant, above all, pre-revolutionary history. Communist ideology not just distorted the past but made it ideologically impossible for a leader to see historical parallels for contemporary challenges or make sensible comparisons.

Without meaning any insult to Mikhail Gorbachev, who was an honorable and humane patriot, I found myself in a rather odd situation (given my family's background and my then position in Thatcher's foreign policy think-tank) of having most sympathy for Nikolai Ryzhkov. I suppose basically he was a conservative and so am I.

– Could you elaborate on the classic liberal premise that foreign policy is a continuation of domestic policy in the context of Russia? Its validity is often challenged and even confuted here.

– I don't think that Russian foreign policy in the imperial era was more driven by domestic political considerations and influences than was the case in Britain, France or Germany—if anything, rather less in my opinion. And, certainly, less than the impact of domestic politics on foreign policy in the contemporary U.S.

– Is “orientation to the West” (West-centrism), and the associated “catch-up modernization,” revanchism (or revisionism, of which Russia is accused today by the West), an indispensable component of Russia’s foreign policy?

– As regards the whole period between 1613 and 1991, the greatest single common thread as regards Russian policy was the drive to survive as a great power in the face of challenges from the West, the basic point being that “the West” was ahead of Russia in terms of economy, education and administrative-fiscal resources. Of course, Communist ideology made a significant difference after 1917, but the basic paradigm of “catching up with the West” survived, in my opinion. In fact, it was in some respects strengthened since Soviet dogma about overtaking the capitalist West fed into older concerns and insecurities about Russian inferiority and backwardness.

Peter the Great and his successors sought to catch up with the Europe of the Old Regime (L'Ancien Régime) Russia's victory over Napoleon signaled their success. Then the Industrial Revolution came along and tipped the balance of European power firmly westwards. The Crimean War (1853-1856) brought this reality home sharply to Russia's rulers since their empire fought, moved and communicated with the technology of the pre-industrial world and the Anglo-French had steamships, railways, the telegraph and semi-mass-produced rifled muskets.

To my mind, Russian history between 1856 and the 1970s was driven in large part by the wish to survive as a great power in the industrial era. Of course, this was not just a question of external power. The Industrial Revolution (and to some extent the legacy of the French Revolution, too) had dramatic implications as regards how a modern society could be governed.

The Romanovs had created a very successful pre-modern empire in most key respects. Turning that empire into a viable modern polity was a huge challenge. It is to the point that all the old empires faced this challenge and none survived it. The Soviet Union was a very interesting attempt to merge aspects of empire and modernity of a specific (socialist) kind, but the “experiment” imposed huge costs on the Russian people and ultimately failed.

– You’re an expert on the history of empires. Can you describe what the post-imperial syndrome is? How does it evolve, what are its phases? Does Russia experience it, and if so, how does it manifest itself?

– I think the post-imperial syndrome in Russia is easy to understand. In Britain, I tell people that to understand post-1991 Russia, an Englishman would have to imagine that the British Empire disappeared almost overnight in the 1930s (when most Englishmen took its existence for granted) and that this was accompanied by the secession of Scotland (Ukraine) and Wales (Belarus). Except it would be worse since no Englishman thinks that English religion or statehood started in Edinburgh.

Add to this the collapse of the monarchy and parliamentary government (the Soviet party and state) and an economic depression worse than in the 1930s. Even the phlegmatic English of the 1930s would have become a bit excited. If Trump got to power on the slogan “Make America great again!”, it’s hardly surprising that a similar slogan worked in Russia, given a far sharper decline and the much greater suffering it entailed for the population.

– Does the security imperative stem directly from expansionism (as territorial expansion makes it necessary to protect an ever-expanding border, an ever-expanding territory, including the creation of buffer states along the perimeter)? Is it possible to overcome this and begin to be guided by other principles?

– The territories Russia conquered in Asia against pitiful resistance yielded first furs and then precious metals. The Russian military and heavy industries until the 19th century were based in the Urals. Russia defeated Napoleon because it had the biggest reserve of horses in the world thanks to its domination of the Eurasian steppe in an era when the horse was still

a key to military power (the weapon of reconnaissance, shock, pursuit, transport, and mobile firepower). The Russians were also the only great power in the Napoleonic era able to put “colonial” troops on the European battlefield. The Cossacks’ contribution to victory in 1812-1814 was great.

To an extent Russian expansion was part of overall European expansion at the expense of non-European peoples. A key difference was that because this expansion went overland, the key areas of Russian settlement remained part of Russia whereas Western European expansion created settler colonies which in time became independent states (Spanish and English America, Australia, etc.). That is a key reason why post-imperial Russia is still a truly great power (though no longer a true superpower) whereas no Western European country (the UK, France, Spain) remains a serious international player after the loss of empire. On the other hand, “decolonization” for the Western Europeans meant (and in the British case was partly driven by) the lessening of military responsibilities and burdens. Russia as a Eurasian power with priceless resources in Siberia and on the Pacific has great and expensive defense commitments in Asia.

– Broadening the borders and creating the buffer zones obviously was a traditional security policy for the Russian Empire even before it was an empire, starting with the Grand Duchy of Moscow at least. Is this concept insurmountable or did it change over time? And is it an “exclusive” Russian recipe for strategic security or other empires and nations did use the same strategy?

– All rulers used the same strategy when they could. Trying to keep your enemies away from your borders was basic common sense. Buffer zones controlled by reliable clients provided security at acceptable cost. Actually, the principle still applies to some extent and we probably will see it applied even more in the next generation as climate change and the resulting political crises generate much greater flows of refugees. Look at the war happening in Turkey and Syria. Any government wants to secure its borders in order to stem the immigration of hordes of refugees.

– Could you outline fundamental geopolitical changes and challenges that Russia faces today and will face in the near future?

– It may well be that the priority that drove Russian foreign policy in the past—catching up with the West—no longer applies. The rise of China may well be leading us towards a different global order than the one which existed in the previous five centuries of Western predominance and then domination. In a sense, ever since the late 18th century the world’s leading powers have been the Anglophones—first the British, then the British plus the Americans, and then after 1945 the Americans leading a bloc whose inner core was still made up of English-speaking allies. To some extent the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, the two world wars and the Cold War were all attempts to challenge Anglophone hegemony which failed (at vast cost). Viewed from London or Tokyo (the two cities in which I live) it seems that the elements underpinning Anglophone hegemony are disappearing every day.

That has its advantages and its dangers, not least for Russia. Above all, it means that Russia faces geopolitical challenges and opportunities that are fundamentally different from those it confronted from the 7th to the end of the 20th centuries. The most obvious point to make is that, having destroyed itself in two terrible wars with Germany and then exhausted itself in competition with the American bloc in the Cold War, Russia has simply a vast interest in forging a peaceful and mutually advantageous method of managing China’s rise. Personally, I find some of the writings of the much-derided “pro-German” lobby before 1914 very relevant. Above all, that means the works by Roman Rosen, former ambassador in Washington and the brother of Victor Rosen, one of Russia’s leading Orientalists.

– Russia’s foreign policy (since Russian Empire at least) can boast of a whole plethora of bright personalities, many of whom later became second persons in the state (chancellors, prime ministers)—Bestuzhev, Panin, Gorchakov, Primakov. As such, personalism in foreign policy is not Russia’s exclusive domain, of course. But isn’t it becoming an anachronism today? Or, on the contrary, it is not diplomats who do foreign policy nowadays, but the leaders themselves?

– If the era of professionalism in foreign policy is truly over then that to me is a cause for concern. I’m not sure, however, that this is wholly true; nor is this totally new. Russian emperors (and many other monarchs) were

often their own foreign ministers. The man who actually held this title was their deputy. Many of the monarchs were highly competent diplomats: Catherine II and Alexander I were brilliant. But the emperors were also often served by highly intelligent and competent statesmen. Actually, I see Mr. Lavrov as an heir to Karl Nesselrode. Since I view Nesselrode as an extremely intelligent and resourceful defender of Russian interests, I mean this as an unequivocal complement.

– Let’s get back to the current (and future) affairs on the global stage. As an expert on the history of empires, can you say that an empire is a thing of the past? Or will we witness the rise of new empires in the foreseeable future?

– To be a truly great power in today’s world you need to have resources on a continental scale. The pre-1914 prophets of geopolitics were in that sense right. The U.S., China, India, and Russia are not empires in the full historical meaning of the term. But they are in a sense neo-empires and face some of empires’ problems—above all, territorial scale and the size and diversity of their populations. Empires were always very hard for monarchs to run for these (and other) reasons, but in most empires at most times the rulers only greatly needed to concern themselves with the top two percent of the population. The key to success was to create a viable and stable compromise between monarchs and elites to share the peasant “surplus”: local elites “managed” the other 98 percent of the population, usually through local systems of patronage and coercion. In today’s world of mass literacy, urbanization and mass politics, ruling vast neo-empires is far harder, yet in the last resort it is on those neo-empires that the fate of the world depends.

– To conclude our conversation, could you outline major global trends that would affect all (or most of) international actors—and the means to approach them, for that matter?

– Clearly, the rise of China increases the danger of conflict. Major shifts in global or regional power in history usually caused wars. If the Anglophone-dominated world failed to manage peacefully the rise of semi-liberal, entirely capitalist and European Germany before 1914, then

one would expect the problem of finding a worthy place for China in today's global order to be much harder. Climate crises in the past greatly exacerbated international and domestic political conflicts. When one looks at Europe's current problems with refugees from the southern shores of the Mediterranean and then contemplates far greater ecological crisis in the African continent containing a projected three billion people, predictions get a bit dire. Similar problems in Asia (possibly linked, above all, to water shortages) are even more serious simply because East and South Asia in the future are likely to matter more in geopolitical terms than Africa or even Europe.

So my basic answer to your key questions is that, as far as I can see, Russia and the rest of the world are heading into a storm as dangerous as that of the first half of the 20th century and maybe even more so. But history—especially the history of the last three hundred years—is a very inadequate guide either to the challenges Russia faces or how to meet them. Survival seems likely to be the key issue. Great caution and much imagination will be required of rulers. If the pre-1914 world is anything to go by, public opinion will need careful management, whatever form of government a ruler presides over.