

# Good Enough Power

*Andrei P. Tsygankov*

**Andrei P. Tsygankov**, PhD in International Relations  
San Francisco State University, USA  
Professor, International Relations and Political Science

Scopus AuthorID: 7102020604  
ORCID: 0000-0003-0011-2339  
ResearcherID: K-1423-2013

E-mail: andrei@sfsu.edu  
Tel.: 0117 415-338-7493  
Address: Office: HUM, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132 282

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-2-206-212

**Stoner, Kathryn E. *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 344 pp. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/russia-resurrected-9780190860714?cc=us&lang=en#>**

In the Western mind, Russia remains among the most important significant Others. These days, given the rapidly developing identity crisis of the modern West, even more so than before. The crisis affects historical identity, splitting Western countries into conservative supporters of the nation-state and traditional values, on the one hand, and campaigners for the universal

rights of racial and other minorities, on the other. The crisis manifests itself in the perception of historical and contemporary development issues, paralyzing any attempts at conducting a well-considered and consistent foreign policy.

The confrontation between liberal globalists and those who press for a geographically limited understanding of national interests has deepened since the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States, and has not gone anywhere since his term of office drew to an end. Russia merely facilitated this process. In a greater segment of the U.S. establishment, the perception of Russia as a partner and ally in the

fight against terrorism in the early 2000s has transformed since the mid-2010s into an image of the most important threat and strategic adversary. The prevailing consensus regarding a Russian threat has now turned into a means of cementing a political class that is very far from unity. Again, as it was during the Cold War, the image of a “dark double” is intended, firstly, to emphasize the bright democratic image of the United States as a “city on a hill,” and secondly, to make the elite certain America is strong and destined to triumph in the 21st century. The presence of this consensus in the American liberal establishment is well seen in a number of actions and statements by the Joe Biden administration’s officials.

Nevertheless, in the U.S. political class’s modern perceptions the image of a weak Russia, strategically losing competition to the West, has considerably faded away. The country’s foreign policy, its role in the events in Ukraine, Syria and other regions, the surging importance of cyber and special operations, informational and other support for the pro-Russian segments of Western societies that are inclined to have a dialogue with Russia, the national leadership’s demonstration of new types of weapons, adaptability to Western sanctions and political pressures,

including those in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, are working to destroy the country’s previous image. Jubilant Barack Obama-style prophecies of an impending collapse of the Russian economy as a result of sanctions and the groundlessness of Russia’s ambitions to be a global rather than a regional power are ever-less frequent. This gradual sobering of the U.S. establishment results not only from the rise of China or its close relations of alliance with Russia, but also the Russian leadership’s demonstration of its power and geopolitical competencies.

Kathryn Stoner’s book is important primarily as a manifestation of the fact that the previous consensus is falling apart and new ideas about Russia and its foreign policy opportunities are taking shape. Obviously, a new look at the country’s capabilities is in great demand among Biden’s entourage. The latter’s views have undergone significant transformations since his vice-presidency in the Obama administration. Faced with new crises since coming to power in November 2020—diplomatic and cyber crises over the SolarWinds affair and Ukraine—Biden is forced to revise the old ideas of containing “weak” Russia and to opt for a high-level dialogue.

Stoner’s reasoning stems from the need for recognizing that

the previous U.S. consensus that Russia is hopelessly weak was fundamentally wrong. Stoner straightforwardly calls Russia a great power, “good enough power” to meet its global and regional challenges. At the same time, she objects to those who do Putin credit for his art of bluffing and “playing weak cards.” She argues that Putin’s cards as such are not weak, but quite strong in many respects.

Stoner comes to the conclusion about Russia’s great-power positions as a result of analyzing various dimensions of power. In doing so, she deviates significantly from the traditional assessments of power potential, characteristic of the U.S. political mainstream and academic neorealist theorists. Basically, in their analysis, neo-realists rely on the aggregated parameters of power, such as population, the economy, and military spending. Without discarding these indicators altogether, Stoner also considers the country’s information capabilities (soft power) and cyber capabilities (sharp power). She also draws attention to the possibility of turning soft power into sharp power. For example, information resources can be employed for discrediting an opponent by means of a purposeful campaign and well-considered ideological narrative. This is exactly how, according to the book’s author,

the Russian media operate in the Western information space and very often achieve their goals.

The comprehension of Russia’s economic and military potential in the book also turns out to be richer and far more interesting than the clichés generally accepted in the American political class. For example, both politicians and international researchers have repeatedly referred to Russia’s economy in the late Senator John McCain’s way; he was in the habit of calling Russia “a gas station masquerading as a country.” Stoner demonstrates that Russia’s positions in the economic field cannot be considered weak either, even though the level of dependence on energy exports and corruption remains high and a number of other problems feature on the agenda. She is certain that the Russian economy has shown stability and the ability to develop even under the sanctions, although not at a pace some other emerging powers demonstrate.

At the same time, Stoner’s understanding of the power potential is not only structural. She departs from the realist understanding to drift towards social constructivism in determining the applicability of Russian power in the world. On the basis of works by David Baldwin, Michael Barnett, Raymond Duvall, and other researchers, the book’s author examines not only various

dimensions of power, but also its geography and scope. Since power should be viewed not only as a potential, but also as a ratio of the parties' potentials, it is important to understand to what extent, in relation to whom and under what conditions the use of power can be effective. This relational-geographical understanding of power allows for determining Russian power's variability and diversity and also its limits.

The author demonstrates that in a number of regions and situations Russian power has special advantages. Chapters Two and Three examine the potential and results of Russian power in the former Soviet and other regions. Stoner shows that over the past decades, Russia has been able to strengthen its influence in the former Soviet republics, using trade, economic and infrastructural ties, military power, and similarities to "autocratic" regimes in Belarus, Central Asia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The author describes the influence on the "liberalizing" Baltic countries, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova as significant, and in a number of areas as "decisive," despite their desire to leave the sphere of Russian influence. To varying degrees, but in almost all major regions of the world—in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa—Russia has built up its influence, although this influence is still way behind the Soviet one.

Stoner does not call for a revision of all essential elements of the anti-Russian consensus. Her convictions remain those of a liberal globalist. The author of the book on the resurgence of Russian power is Deputy Director of the Institute for International Studies and a fellow at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law. She is a colleague and co-author of a number of works by a former ambassador to Russia and supporter of the global spread of democracy, Michael McFaul. As the Russian readership knows, the latter was and remains a supporter of not so much a dialogue with Russia, as of its tough containment.

Stoner's position does not differ from that of many other contemporary critical Western scholars of Russian "autocracy," including S. Green, G. Robertson, T. Fry and other authors. According to this viewpoint, outlined in the final chapter, Putin's system of government is a sign of Russia's weakness, and not of its strength. In foreign policy, Putin acts not so much in the interests of defending the country as against them. The motive of Russian "aggression" in Ukraine, interference in U.S. and other elections, the information policy, etc. are not so much the pursuit of the country's national interests as results of activities by Putin's "regime." The author is

certain that an internally vulnerable “autocratic regime” depends on foreign policy aggression and needs it to cover up its lack of legitimacy. Therefore, when Putin is eventually out of office, Russia’s policy will not necessarily retain continuity, but may change significantly under the influence of the Russian civil society striving for change. Russia “without Putin” is possible and desirable.

In light of the above, the emerging new consensus on Russia is not so much fundamentally new, as an upgraded version adjusted to the new realities of the country’s foreign and domestic policy. If Stoner’s book is to be seen as a herald of a modernized consensus, then the gist of this consensus is that Russia is a fairly strong foreign policy power with weak domestic political foundations. In view of its power capabilities Russia should be negotiated with. Given the nature of the regime and its misunderstanding of Russia’s foreign policy interests, serious cooperation with Russia is still impossible. Therefore, the dialogue with Putin should be conducted from a position of strength, especially when it comes to the development of the values of democracy and human rights, to which the future belongs.

The position illustrated in Stoner’s quite remarkable book has several weaknesses worth discussing. One is associated with an inadequate

understanding of Russia’s foreign policy interests, the principles of formulating them, and a strong connection with the country’s power potential and political system. Detaching “greatpowerness” from the country’s internal realities and interests is hardly correct, both logically and from the standpoint of Russia’s historical experience. After all, if autocracy leads to a wrong understanding of national interests, then the overwhelming part of Russian history should be recognized as “wrong.” In other words, as pro-Western Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev formulated this idea, Russia was not just an undeveloped country, but an “improperly developed” one. Clearly, both Kozyrev and Stoner would like to see the Russian state adjusted to match the “correct,” “universally” Western standards. However, transforming a country with a thousand-year history is an overly ambitious undertaking and not a very rewarding one. Kozyrev and others have already tried this.

Undoubtedly, Putin’s foreign policy has its own style and important features that deserve special analysis. However, it is also obvious that the reaction of an overwhelming majority of Russian state leaders to attempts at weakening the country’s position in Eurasia and controlling its domestic and foreign policy would be unequivocally negative. Whatever

McFaul, Stoner or other analysts may write about the “peacefulness” of democracy and the “defensiveness” of NATO’s intentions, it is a hard fact that the expansion of the “peace-loving” alliance has significantly undermined Russia’s positions in the neighboring countries, especially during the critical years when Russia was still shaping its new statehood. The support for Yeltsin’s oligarchs in the 1990s and the regularly imposed sanctions today, too, could not but undermine the political and economic interests of the Russian state, while support for the radical, anti-systemic forces inside Russia cannot but contribute to weakening the positions of its political class.

The latter circumstance points to yet another mistake liberal researchers make more often than not while trying to understand the Russian political system as inevitably weakening the country. However well-known the problems of Putin’s rule are—corruption, excessive dependence on energy exports and weak social policies—some of Russia’s important stabilization tasks were solved during his terms of office and thanks to the abolition of the 1990s’ “democracy.” The system of government created in the country is still far from perfect and it is experiencing difficulties not so much because it is not a Western-style decentralized democracy, but because a strong state remains

institutionally incomplete for the time being. As Putin himself has remarked once, the system is still half-baked, that is, based mainly on informal arrangements and agreements. Russia’s nation-building project is far from completion and should be a priority.

In Russian history, an autocratic or centralized system succeeding autocracy is reproduced by virtue of the need to solve important national development problems. Some of these challenges cannot be coped with in a decentralized democratic system and require strong executive power. By the way, the country’s power potential that Stoner discusses and judges on the merits was recreated under the conditions of “Putin’s autocracy.” In various periods of Russia’s history autocracy was not only a weakness, but also a major strength. Probably, a mixed political system consistent with the historical, internally set tasks suits the country much better than a Western-style democracy.

Finally, it is worth noting that theoretically the term ‘power,’ and Russian power in particular, is not examined in the book thoroughly enough. Stoner’s arguments concerning different dimensions of power, its geographical and relational capabilities are surely a step forward in contrast to the deeply ingrained primitive evaluations of the military-strategic

and demographic potential. But the tradition of realism is not confined to John Mearsheimer's neo-realism only and implies a far more subtle understanding of the geopolitical and power capabilities of states, including an analysis of the national character, political system, qualities of the elite and supreme leader of the country by representatives of classical realism. Incidentally, Stoner does not draw an important distinction between the two above-named traditions of realism. The set of criteria of power she has chosen does not evoke objections, but it does not achieve the level of

theory, either. Denial of neorealism is not a theory. In the meantime, the book essentially lacks an overview of research literature on the issues of power, strength and statehood. Such a review should have taken into account, in particular, the fact that these issues have been interpreted by historical sociology and a number of other social scientists professing other approaches. Theoretical research should be continued to encompass various traditions and trends of comprehending both the features of the international system and the variability of the models of nation-states.