

Russia and the New World disorder
Bobo Lo

A broad survey of today's Russian diplomacy. Today's Grand Chessboard, with Ukraine as the black queen.

This is a very long book review – my reading notes, and reactions, as much as a review. In brief, it is an excellent book, touching on all of the relevant topics. Bobo Lo has a deep knowledge of Russia, and is able to describe in excellent detail the weaknesses in the way Russia manages its affairs. Though not his central theme, he also writes accurately on the west's misperceptions about Russia.

Dr. Lo writes on behalf of the Brookings Institute, a very establishment, left-centrist think tank in Washington D.C. This book's intended audience will be diplomats and academics. Though he pitches it towards Russia itself, it is unlikely to be widely read there. The academic English makes it inaccessible, the source makes it suspect, and the message will be unwelcome.

The book is divided into three parts: background, then specifics elements of Russian foreign policy, and lastly a look to the future, what would be best for Russia to do, and what they are most likely to do. Here is the table of contents:

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The book is strong on diplomacy and foreign relations, somewhat weaker in its analysis of economic and business trends, and relatively silent on demographic trends.

The book is well conceived for its audience. It will be a must-read for people dealing with Russia in the realms of diplomacy, defense and business. Truly a five-star effort.

That's the end of a short review. Here follow my reading notes

Dr. Lo claims that you cannot know what is going on inside the Kremlin. Those who know don't

say, and those who say don't know. Putin, however, is a known quantity. People continue to fall out of his favor, and people who know him intimately have given extensive interviews. For an example, google " Yuri Shvets." What comes out is the following:

1. He never impressed anybody is a genius during his rise to power. Yeltsin picked him from obscurity because he thought he was a guy who could be trusted not to disrupt Yeltsin family interests.
2. He has surrounded himself with people from his days as deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. People he has known a long time and whom he trusts. As Custine says in "letters from Russia" this has been the trait of czars throughout history. The nature of power in Russia may be absolute, but it is not possible to delegate effectively. Witness how ineffective Medvedev was and remains. Putin cannot trust him to take initiative. The same is true for the others from the Petersburg days. The result is that Putin suffers from a lack of good advice, the lack of a kitchen cabinet that will refine his ideas. He also lacks truly competent subordinates fishing carry out his plans.
3. He is described in his youth as a man who drank excessively and was unfaithful to his wife. He is narcissistic – wedded to his workout regimes and facelifts in Botox. Projecting his masculinity, as Dr. Lo sells, seems to be an important psychological trait.

Lo accepts without question the liberal agenda of the West. He does not give any credence to Putin's view that global warming is a canard, a liberal ploy to seize power – a position held by a significant number of serious scientists in the West, expressed in recent books such as [[ASIN:B00YW3GQAE The Neglected Sun – Why the Sun Precludes Climate Catastrophe]]. He criticizes Putin's refusal to share world concern about famine, water shortages and the like. The opposite side of the coin is that Europe is being inundated with immigrants that it is unable to assimilate but unwilling to identify as such. Uncritically accepting the modern liberal European view appears to me to be a cultural blindness on Lo's part. Putin's notion of what we owe our fellow man – less than what we owe ourselves and our progeny - appears to be closer to the world consensus than that of the altruistic West.

Putin and the West both tend to overestimate their strength with regard to Ukraine. Many Ukrainians are skeptical about the multiculturalism and destruction of the family taking place in Western Europe. For instance, there was little sense that Putin had overstepped himself in the Pussy Riot and the gay propaganda cases, which took place before the invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainians are culturally conservative. Their orientation toward the West is a pragmatic matter – the West is where the jobs are, and where they would like to shop and vacation. Culturally they still have more affinity for the conservative Orthodox Christianity that Putin hypocritically espouses.

Ukrainian culture is not identical to Russian. There is a continuum, albeit with a somewhat steeper cline on the eastern border of Ukraine. The Russians, as [[ASIN:B00HO11CMS The Marquis de Custine]] wrote, are a docile people who are inclined to tolerate and even support a strong czar. They put up with Ivan the Terrible and Stalin. As [[ASIN:0465031471 Timothy Snyder]] writes, Ukrainians suffered as these despots impose their will on them as well.

Ukrainians were diluted as Catherine the great and Stalin settled thousands of ethnic Russians among them, and scattered Ukrainians throughout the Russian Far East. Nonetheless, Ukrainians are more like their neighbors to the west in their sense of freedom and fair play. Yanukovich and Putin underestimated the degree to which Ukrainians are not like Russians. Yanukovich thought that he could steal as wantonly as Putin does in Russia, and Putin expected the citizens of Crimea and Donbas would embrace the Russians. Both were disappointed; their control comes through repression, not the love of the citizenry.

The West, however, also misjudged the Ukrainians. They conflated Ukraine's desire to conclude an association agreement with the European Union with the desire to join the union. No, the Ukrainians mostly wanted travel and trade. American neocons such as Victoria Newland were disappointed that for the most part Ukrainians just wanted Yanukovich out.

Dr. Lo does not talk about the Yanukovich depredations during the years between 2004 and his ouster in 2014. The theft was [[ASIN:0954376412 blatant and shameless]]. It was also artless. One could say that he broke as much as he stole. His behavior discouraged foreign companies from investing. The grain embargo he imposed in 2011 in order to enrich himself through granting licenses to his friends was immensely harmful to farmers and international grain traders such as Cargill. It was a badly executed theft. The vicious tactics of his tax police collecting from small entrepreneurs, while the oligarchs were blatantly able to shift their profits offshore, created a great deal of resentment. The Ukrainians resented Russia as much for their support of Yanukovich as for anything else.

Lo absolutely gets it right when he says it is richly ironic that Putin has developed a reputation in the West as a clever chess player. His lack of strategic insight or sense of danger points to just the opposite – as no less of an authority than former world chess champion Garry Kasparov has it observed. This is absolutely true. He is playing it by ear.

The blunders are evident even to a civilian such as myself. He moves his troops all over the place along the Ukrainian border, placing between 50,000 and 100,000 of them in the border stretch between Rostov on Don and Chernigov. He sent a similar number on exercises and the Russian Arctic just to make a point. Such misuse of the military is incredibly demoralizing to the troops. A soldier wants to feel he is being used effectively, and Russian troops cannot feel anything other than being jerked around. The same goes for the troops that he has actually deployed in the Donbas. His commitment to deception dictates that support for the separatists must be arm's-length. The supplies he gives them, and the financial support he gives to the civilians in those occupied areas, is intermittent. Russia cannot afford more, either financially, or to be seen giving more. He denies Russian soldiers when they are captured or killed. This means that Russian staying power in Ukraine must be limited.

Dr. Lo writes aptly. "It is difficult to identify a cohesive Russian strategy toward Ukraine. Instead there is an odd *mélange* of mystical vision, historical and geopolitical anxieties, feelings of strategic entitlement, gut instincts, and tactical dexterity. Putin's approach reflects the contradictory influences of the two worlds that shaped his foreign-policy more generally. On

the one hand, the Kremlin conceives of Ukraine, and Russia's relationship with it, in terms of historical inevitabilities. On the other hand, developments in the real world act as a constant reminder of the artificiality of such hopes."

He divides the former Soviet Union countries into three tiers on the basis of Russia's level of interest in them. At the top of the first tier is Ukraine, in a class by itself. Also of great interest are Belarus, the other fully Slavic country in the FSU, and Kazakhstan, physically the largest and the closest to Russia. The second tier consists of smaller countries that are not quite so central to Russia's interest: Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The third category is the leftovers: Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia.

Dr. Lo uses quotes from several places to express the idea that without Ukraine, Russia is just an ordinary country. He quotes Putin telling Bush in 2008 that Ukraine is "not really a country." Russia cannot seem to let it go. I will provide a bit of history that Dr. Lo does not. Kiev is the historic center of the Slavic peoples, who coalesced into Kievan Rus in the first millennium A.D. It held sway for a couple of centuries, but was riven by dynastic infighting. There was seldom an adequate plan of succession when a powerful leader died. In the 13th century the Mongols swept in with superior fighting tactics – mainly their horses – and conquered most of what is now both Russia and Ukraine. The Mongols were never as good at administration as they were at conquest, and when they receded in the 15th century Moscow came out to be more powerful than Kiev. Each government seems to be involved in interminable wars, Ukraine the more so because its geography has it surrounded by enemies: Turkey, Romania, Hungary, the German states, Poland, Lithuania and Russia. In the 17th century Ukraine fought off the Turkic Tatars to their South only to be attacked from the west by the Poles. They ran into the embrace of Russia, which did not let go.

The Russians were not kind masters. Catherine the Great brought in Russians and Germans to settle the steppes which had been freed from the Tatars. Stalin moved Ukrainians out by the thousands to populate Siberia, moved Russians in to fill the vacuum, and led the Holodomor which killed 3 million people (by Dr. Lo's reckoning – it could have been twice as many). They forced the Russian language on the Ukrainian people.

The upshot is that Ukraine is the largest bilingual country in the world. More than half the population speaks both languages fluently. Putin would like to pretend that Ukrainian is no more than a dialect of Russian, but it is vastly more than that. This reviewer found it easy to learn Portuguese on the strength of a knowledge of Spanish. Learning Ukrainian on the strength of Russian turns out to be more difficult. There are significant differences in the root words of the vocabulary – Ukrainian is closer to Western European languages – and far from trivial differences in the sound structure: consonants and vowels.

Dr. Lo cites a statistic that Ukraine is 17% ethnically Russian. That kind of number that is very difficult to know, and would change significantly depending on who was asking the question and how it was phrased. A respondent would be stupid to call himself a Ukrainian in the Crimea of 2015, or a Russian in Lviv. Since most speak both languages and pretty much look the same

the answer will often be whatever is most convenient at the time. This reviewer's wife speaks native Russian – the language she used in school – whereas her parents speak native Ukrainian, the language they used in school.

The Russian exercise of power has always been heavy-handed. The czars were despots. [[ASIN:B00HO11CMS The Marquis de Custine]] captured their essence, Tocqueville wrote about them, Russian literature describes him in these terms, [[ASIN:0061138827 Archie Brown]] writes that Soviet history is a long reign of terror. Putin follows in this bloodthirsty, ham-fisted tradition.

During the Yushenko and Yanukovich years Putin would clamor for higher prices for natural gas, then turn the gas off in the middle of winter (2006, 2009) if he didn't get his way, freezing hapless souls in Western Europe – not a good idea. He would arbitrarily ban imports of foodstuffs from Ukraine such as candies, meats, wheat and other commodities. The pretexts were transparently contrived: veterinary inspections and the like. Archie Brown wrote of the Communists that they not only lied, but they lied in such a way that you knew they were lying. It was a demonstration of power to force people to swallow obvious lies. Putin seems to operate on the same principle. Today he is lying about the absence of Russian soldiers in Ukraine and guilt in downing MH17, among other things. This lack of diplomacy does not work in the 20th century. The victims can fight back, among other things by simply publicizing Putin's bad behavior. He is in bad odor throughout the world for his transgressions.

Dr. Lo often cites the extreme corruption in Russia. He says that the APEC (Asian-Pacific economic conference) in Vladivostok in 2012 cost \$22 billion, 50 percent more than the London Olympics a month earlier. To put this into perspective, it is roughly 1 percent of Russian GDP of 2 trillion. The Sochi Olympics cost 2%, and the World Cup soccer championships will also be vastly expensive. All these projects are dogged by mismanagement and cost overruns. Instead of displaying Russian prowess, they showcase the worst aspects of a dictatorial economy. For an appreciation of how deeply ingrained these practices are in Russian culture, read [[ASIN:0801473527 How Russia Really Works: The Informal Practices That Shaped Post-Soviet Politics and Business]].

Dr. Lo repeatedly says that the Russian orientation has always been toward Europe rather than Asia. Although it likes to call itself Eurasian, 80 percent of the population lives west of the Urals. The people are European. They simply do not understand Asians very well. There is a collective desire to distance themselves from the Mongols, who dominated them for two centuries. The historical orientation established by Peter the Great and Catherine the great was toward the west, from which they borrowed what they could of Enlightenment ideas and modern methods in manufacture, agriculture, science and literature. Although Russia participates in many Asia-Pacific groups, it appears not to take a leadership role.

Dr. Lo repeats often that the mindset of Russian diplomacy is that of a big power. It jealously guards its prerogatives as a nation sitting at the big table with the world level players: the

United States, Japan, China, and the European Union. Russia displays little finesse in dealing with smaller countries, and shows little appreciation of the power these can wield in the modern information oriented world. This is especially true in Asia. Outside of China, Russia has relatively few important trade relationships. Russia simply has little to contribute in Asia.

Dr. Lo writes "... Russia is generally viewed in a negative light – as a country with a stagnant political system, non-modernizing economy, and complacent elite. Many Asians doubt its capacity and commitment to contribute meaningfully, except as an exporter of natural resources and weapons."

The backwardness of the Russian Far East is a drag on Russian aspirations to be accepted by the Asian countries. This area has historically been poorly managed by tsars, commissars and now Putin. The rest of Asia looks at it as a source of natural resources and as a market. It certainly does not give Asia any prestige. [[ASIN:0307389049 *The Tiger: A True Story of Vengeance and Survival*]] gives a clear portrayal of life in contemporary Siberia.

Dr. Lo repeatedly says that Russia's Asia policy is very Sinocentric. Russia shares a 4000 km border with China and depends on China to at least be neutral in the scraps that Russia picks elsewhere in the world, notably Ukraine and Georgia. Russia lacks the finesse, the resource, and the shared interest that would draw it into greater partnership with others.

Dr. Lo writes "To alter this fate Moscow will need to recognize that tired strategic habits and an indigenous neo-conservatism offer Russia nothing. But such a message is not easily absorbed. Today the Kremlin's self-satisfaction appears stronger than ever, driven by the anticipation of a new multipolar order in which Russia stands as an equal with the United States and China. As long as this illusion persists, the likelihood of a productive approach toward Asia will be slim, and the "turn to the East" will remain a fantasy." To me that is the essence of his message, despite sounding a somewhat hopeful tone in the conclusion.

I add that the stove pipe, totally hierarchical decision-making structure that has always persisted in Russia is antithetical toward good diplomacy. Diplomats by their nature have to be empowered to engage in their opposite numbers and to work out creative solutions to mutual interests. They need to be heard and appreciated, and they need some authority. Moscow has never granted either.

Dr. Lo stresses the fact that Soviet diplomacy envisions a world of great powers, and discounts the influence of the smaller countries. This is absolutely true, and I would like to add a couple of notes. Putin did not anticipate the moral force of countries such as the Netherlands and Australia when their citizens were killed in the MH 17 disaster. Another major factor is the diaspora communities. There are strong Ukrainian communities in the United States and Canada, even Argentina and Australia, and they have a significant impact on the legislative process in those countries. The Russian immigrant community is not so useful. It includes a great many people who are extremely happy to be out of Russia and will do nothing to support it. On the other hand, it includes a lot of rabid Russophiles, the Internet trolls who spread

Putin's propaganda on all of the conservative and libertarian websites. As overwhelming as they are, they are ultimately self-defeating. They get tangled in their own lies, which become all the more evident as the Ukraine crisis approaches its third year. Ron Paul, Mish Shedlock and Paul Craig Roberts may hate Obama, but it is becoming more difficult to see Russia as an alternative.

Dr. Lo traces the US – Russian relationship from the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. There are three periods of relative thaw: the early 1990s, post-9/11, and the Obama reset in 2009. Each of these was relatively limited. Both Russia and the US sought some quid pro quo on topics of interest to their countries, but they did not put in place the foundation for a long-term relationship. The 2009 reset simply ran out of steam, and was overwhelmed by issues such as Syria, the anti-Putin demonstrations in Moscow, and of course Ukraine. Lo forecasts a long period of an uncomfortable relationship before things can be reset again.

Absent from the discussion is the consideration of the economies. Russia is in a depression brought on by low energy prices. Half of its foreign exchange earnings come from energy, and that price has fallen from above \$100 to below \$50 a barrel. What Dr. Lo does not mention is that the United States and Western Europe seem to be teetering on the edge of recession themselves. Their central banks have employed quantitative easing to expand the money supply in each of these countries, and the game seems to be coming to an end. Russia, with less debt as a percentage of GDP and a history of enduring hard times, may be in a relatively strong position to outwait the West.

Dr. Lo could investigate other aspects of Europe's lack of resolve. The nationalist parties are becoming increasingly anti-immigrant. Germany is facing up to 800,000 asylum-seekers in 2015 alone. The latter figure would represent almost 1 percent of their population. They have been signally ineffective in absorbing the prior waves of immigrants. Ethnic Germans are increasingly restive, demonstrating in the streets against the government policy. One can anticipate that it will only become worse in the upcoming financial crisis. This is worth mentioning only insofar as Dr. Lo's projections for the future are predicated on a stability that appears under imminent threat. The enmity between Russia and the West may be overtaken by events. Domestic issues might consume both parties, reducing their interest in international involvements.

Dr. Lo does not discuss the attraction of Russia's cultural conservatism to people in the West. The nationalist parties in Western Europe and libertarians in the United States are drawn to Putin's advocacy of the white man and rejection of Western gender politics, embodied in feminism and the homosexual rights movement. The Western elites appear to be out of step with their people, forcing them in directions that they are loath to go. Moscow is benefiting and will benefit more from the reaction to the elites' "New World Order" agenda.

Dr. Lo recognizes that Russia's current power structure is very conservative and unlikely to change. This is absolutely true. It is in the mold of Russian power structures for the past several centuries. It is an environment in which the cream does not rise to the top. Talented people such as Google's Sergei Brin immigrate to the United States, as Lo says, and to other countries

in the West. Because in Russia prerogatives are jealously guarded by those in charge, talented outsiders rarely have an opportunity. Note that Putin himself was allowed to rise to power because he was considered a mediocrity, and he has surrounded himself with mediocrities. This is an ongoing problem for tyrants everywhere. By the way, this aspect of Soviet culture was very visible in Ukraine under Yanukovich. He installed thugs in positions of power, and they were resented. Thuggery is highly visible in the governments that Russia has established in Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk. Putting puppets in charge may ensure loyalty, but severely compromises competence.

Dr. Lo's assertion that something must change is at odds with the conservatism he describes. Russia has needed change for centuries. Although the people in power have changed, the nature of the society has not. It appears quite unlikely to do so now. Russia has no external enemies to speak of. China may infiltrate over the long eastern border, but even if it does it will not impact Russia to any extent whatsoever. None of its neighbors on the west covet Russian land. Russia can easily remain the static backwater that it largely is today. It can remain dependent on natural resources extraction and agriculture. If it fails to modernize, the people will not suffer anything more than they suffer already.

Dr. Lo may be correct in writing that "A Russia that fails to adapt to the demands of the New World disorder will remain backward, in comparison not only with the developed West, but also with the rising non-West. It would be less actor than acted upon, unable to defend its interests against the competing agendas of others. Such an outcome would be more than merely unfortunate; it would represent a terrible betrayal of Russia's vast potential, and the on unprecedented opportunities offered to it by the current international contacts."

Russia's isolation and conservatism will protect the people from the financial excesses that the West is now enduring. Social conservatism will protect them from the forces which are depopulating the West. The family is coming apart in the West. Feminism, homosexuality, and the very individualistic lifestyle, the lack of family values, have deprived the west of the ability to repopulate itself. Every society in the West is being overrun. They are tending away from European and more toward the social values, their societies of the immigrants: Middle Easterners, Africans, and Hispanics. Russia itself is experiencing immigration from within – the expansion of the Muslim minorities. What will inspire the Slavic, Orthodox population to once again be as fruitful as it was two centuries ago is an interesting question. Orthodoxy is a more likely bet than Western liberalism. It appears that the post-Enlightenment west has passed its apogee and is decaying. Per Helmut Nyborg's thesis in "Doubly Relaxed Darwinian Selection," Russia may indeed rise again, having served as a repository of a western culture and genetic inheritance that the West has squandered through unchecked immigration and an unwillingness to reproduce.

In the last chapter, dealing with the future, Dr. Lo downplays the West's interest in Kiev. Russia certainly doesn't see it that way, and my view from Kiev is that western NGOs and diplomats would like to see Ukraine adopt their values. Although few in the West want to see Ukraine quickly join the European Union, they hold NATO out as a promise and will probably

continue to do so. Moreover, the West would like Ukraine to validate its own courses of action in the realms of diversity, gender politics and social policy by adopting them. The Western banks and international lending institutions such as the IMF and World Bank would like Ukraine to bear enough of a debt burden that it is beholden to the west. Ukrainians are appropriately suspicious.

Dr. Lo offers the proposition that Ukraine will probably continue to be dysfunctional. My observation is that there is a lot of dysfunction remaining in the ministries. There is vast corruption in the healthcare, roadbuilding, customs, and education ministries just a name four of them. However, the light is now shining on this corruption. The Poroshenko government has appointed ministers who saying the right things about cleaning them up. This is a long process, but the progress over the course of the year and a half has not been negligible. Ukraine is under the gun to do something. Poroshenko is as aware as anybody of the West's inclination to give up on Ukraine, and he cannot afford that. Poroshenko needs the West for investment, trade, and the military equipment to hold off Russia. It must continue to improve, and however slowly it seems to be doing that. If nothing else, Ukraine has gotten rid of stupid oligarchs (Yanukovych, the Klyuyev brothers, Abuzov) in favor of smarter ones such as Akhmetov and Kolomoisky who have some talent for improving assets they steal.

The book concludes with the chapter offering Dr. Lo's opinion as to how Russian foreign policy will evolve, and the advice that Dr. Lo would offer Russia, knowing of course that it probably would not be followed. Like most forward-looking chapters at the ends of books like this, it tends to be a bit optimistic and to overlook factors that the mainstream players are loath to admit exist. The bottom line is that Dr. Lo expects Putin to continue more or less as he is, inasmuch as he has painted himself in a corner. Though the closing chapter does not say as much, Dr. Lo makes it clear earlier in the book that Putin is riding a tiger. Having invaded Ukraine, he has left himself no face-saving exit. He cannot face the Russian people if he lets go, and he cannot deal with the Ukrainians themselves or the West if he pushes ahead. The status quo, however, is bleeding him to death. The fact that there is no well-defined way out means that any prognosis is bound to be problematic. Ukraine is not Russia's entire problem, however. It is bound up in the problem of the top-down management structure that has always characterized Russia. Putin does not get good advice coming up from his supporters, and is unable to put the most competent people in positions to execute his will. His personal power depends on absolute loyalty from people who will not question his decisions.

The biggest factor absent from Lo's equation is the impending economic crash. Most pundits, even the mainstream media joining them within the last month (August 2015), are looking back at the crisis of 2008 as only a prelude. The problems have not been fixed, and central bank activity has only exacerbated them. Other complicating factors that have not been reversed, only accentuated, are the flood of immigrants into North America and Western Europe, the declining birth rates of Caucasian and North Asian people in their homelands, and the intractable gap in educational and workplace attainment between those Caucasians and North Asians and the immigrants who would replace them. To revisit his title, Dr. Lo's analysis is predicated on a stability that is unlikely to persist. There are many reasons to expect,

however, that the coming disorder, due largely to financial overextension and immigration issues, will affect Russia and Ukraine less than Asia and the West. It is not inconceivable that a smug (and lucky) Putin may in five years be smirking "Told you so" from his solid perch in the Kremlin.