



The attitudes and beliefs of the Russian establishment are not hard to understand, at least for anyone with a minimal grasp of Russian history and culture. Moreover, the realism of Russian policymakers fits the mindset of many American security officials, writes Anatol Lieven. The vital interests of Russia are adhered to by the Russian establishment as a whole. They consist chiefly of a belief that Russia must be one pole of a multipolar world — not a superpower, but a great power with real international influence. Also: that Russia must retain predominant influence on the territory of the former Soviet Union, that any rival alliance must be excluded, and that international order depends on the preservation of existing states. In addition, as with any political system, there is a commitment to the existing Russian political order and a determination that any change in it must not be directed from outside. There are obvious tensions between some of these Russian interests and secondary U.S. interests, but on one issue — the danger from Sunni Islamist extremism and terrorism — a vital interest of Russia is completely identical with our own. Because of this danger, U.S. administrations, like the Russians, have often supported existing authoritarian Muslim states for fear that their overthrow would lead to chaos and the triumph of Islamist extremism.

In Syria, Russia followed the policy of the U.S. in Algeria 20 years earlier — and indeed in its support for General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt today. Russian fears of an ISIS takeover of Syria if the state collapsed were echoed in briefings to President Obama by the CIA. Yet a Western narrative has emerged of Russia engaging in wicked support for "brutal dictatorships" in the Middle East, and that this policy in turn is linked not to fear of Islamist extremism, but implacable anti-Americanism and reckless geopolitical ambition. (Editor's note : And access to a warm water port less constrained by the Black Sea. See centuries passim)

Straightforward Western prejudices (now dignified with the abominable euphemism of "narratives") are part of the reason for these false perceptions derived from the Cold War. The collapse of Communism, however, also led to a growth in Western hubris that led Western

policymakers to fail either to listen to their Russian colleagues when they stated Russia's vital interests, or to study Russia in sufficient depth to understand that they were not bluffing but really meant what they said. Instead, you had the tragicomic picture of American officials lecturing Russian officials on the "real" interests of Russia.

As a result, U.S. and British officials ignored Russian warnings that if Washington persisted in trying to extend NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine, Russia would fight. And when Russia did fight — albeit in a very limited way — this was taken as a sign not of a Western failure to listen, but of Russian "madness," aggression, and evil. Though if one thinks of the Monroe Doctrine, Russian concerns in this regard should hardly be incomprehensible to an American official. It should also have been easy enough to accept the Russian point that this was a vital interest for the sake of which Moscow was prepared to make very important concessions to Washington on other issues.

Instead, the United States establishment embroiled itself in confrontations with Russia, only to recognize at the last moment in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 that these countries were not in fact American vital interests, and that the U.S. was not prepared to fight to defend them. An additional danger therefore in refusing to study other countries' vital interests is that it makes it more difficult to think seriously about your own. We had better hope that in dealing with the vastly more formidable challenge of China our policy elites will engage in real study, eschew self-righteousness, and identify and not attack the vital interests of China, as long as Beijing does not seek to attack our own.

Extract from an article by Professor Anatol Lieven which can be found at <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/11/03/how-u-s-strategists-lost-simple-empathy-along-with-their-wars/>