



# LITERATURE REVIEW

**Paul Robinson, *Russia's World Order: How Civilizationism Explains the Conflict with the West*, Cornell University Press, 2025, 168 pp.**

When it comes to foreign adversaries, American leaders have a tendency to focus on what unites us rather than what divides us. In a New Year's Eve broadcast to the people of the Soviet Union in 1986, President Ronald Reagan stated that Americans and Soviets "share our common hopes for the future, our hopes for peace on Earth, our hopes for good will among all humanity, our hopes for a better world for ourselves and our children."<sup>1</sup> President George H.W. Bush called for "a new world order, where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind—peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law."<sup>2</sup> Addressing the Russian people, President Bill Clinton stated that the United States wanted "to join with others to meet common goals; to give its people their chance to live their dreams," noting that "on many issues that matter to our people, our interests coincide." He stated, "increasingly we find that the fundamental threat to our security is not the threat that we pose to each other, but instead, threats we face in common."<sup>3</sup> President George W. Bush declared that Russia and the United States "have common interests" and that he and Vladimir Putin "share a lot of values."<sup>4</sup> President Barack Obama said, "I believe that on the fundamental issues that will shape this century, Americans and Russians share common interests that form a basis for cooperation.... and I believe that you will see that we share common ground."<sup>5</sup>

The emphasis on seeking common ground, while acknowledging differences, reflects a quintessential Western view that problems are not insoluble, and that good faith attempts to seek out areas of common interest will lead to mutually beneficial solutions. This includes the desire for greater understanding that will lead to better political relations, arms control agreements, and cooperative security arrangements. U.S. leaders have also believed that over time, autocratic governments will inevitably confront popular desires for greater liberalization and reform, resulting in a convergence with the West that narrows ideological differences and results in a lessened risk of conflict. This convergence, it was thought, would

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Reagan, "New Year's Radio Address to the People of the Soviet Union," December 31, 1986, available at <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/new-years-radio-address-people-soviet-union#:~:text=That%27s%20what%20I%20would%20like,for%20ourselves%20and%20our%20children.>

<sup>2</sup> George H.W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," January 29, 1991, available at <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2656>.

<sup>3</sup> William Jefferson Clinton, "Address to the Russian Duma," June 5, 2000, available at <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/wjclintonrussianduma.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> The White House, "Press Conference by President Bush and Russian Federation President Putin," June 16, 2001, available at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/06/20010618.html#:~:text=PRESIDENT%20BUSH:%20Good%20afternoon.,world%20that%20we%20do%20so.>

<sup>5</sup> The White House, "Remarks By The President At The New Economic School Graduation," July 7, 2009, available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-new-economic-school-graduation>.



lead to a global liberalism that was famously described as “the end of history.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, for decades, supposed “experts” have argued that China’s movement toward a more market-based economy would undermine the ideological dogma of the ruling Communist Party and lead to a convergence of views and behaviors between China and the West. That prediction has proven woefully wrong.

Paul Robinson’s book, *Russia’s World Order: How Civilizationism Explains the Conflict with the West*, explains why this thinking is naïve and unlikely to result in the kind of shared beliefs that will lead to greater cooperation between the United States and Russia. In short, Robinson argues that Russia’s views of “civilization” differ markedly from those of the United States, and this difference accounts for the improbability of achieving agreements that are mutually beneficial. Moreover, official Russian narratives emphasize the view that competing “civilizations” should be allowed to chart their own course, separate and distinct from Western approaches and influences. In this context, the notion of “Westernization” is to be resisted. A contemporary Russian foreign policy analyst is quoted as saying, “A new era has dawned.... The realignment of forces on the world stage is taking its course, with China and Russia, whether they like it or not, on one side and the United States and its allies on the other.”

Robinson dissects Vladimir Putin’s speeches and his repeated use of the term “civilizations” to explain Moscow’s insistence that Russia’s development path be accepted uncritically by the West. According to Robinson, “Civilizationism is more than a philosophy. It is also a powerful political tool. Russia’s leaders are using it to resist what they see as the West’s efforts to export its values and institutions to the rest of the world and to smother worldwide civilizational diversity under a bland homogeneity of universal Westernism.”

The book reviews Russian history and how civilizational theory has permeated Russian thinking over many centuries, arguing that its contemporary manifestation “places more emphasis on the differences between Russia and the West” rather than their similarities. Within this strain of thought, Western concepts of universal values and an international world order structured under universally accepted morals and norms are dismissed as examples of Western hegemony to be strenuously opposed. The traditional American emphasis on freedom and democracy as goals to be achieved throughout the international system is seen as a direct challenge to the notion of civilizationism. Consequently, Russia sees itself in a “battle against attempts by the West to preserve a unipolar world order in which it has hegemonic power.”

The book is well documented, sourcing numerous Russian thinkers, philosophers, and strategists from pre-Soviet days to the present. Robinson argues that Vladimir Putin has adopted Russian civilizational theory, noting his comment at the turn of the century that “Moscow will strive to create a multipolar world.” Years later, Putin decried the notion of a unipolar world led by the United States, declaring that “one center of power, one center of strength... has nothing in common with democracy.” And as another Russian official

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Fukuyaka, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, No. 16, Summer 1989, pp. 3-18, available at <https://pages.ucsd.edu/~bslantchev/courses/pdf/Fukuyama%20-%20End%20of%20History.pdf>.

commented, “before our eyes, the West is losing its five-hundred year old dominance.... The rules of the game are changing.”

The implications of this little understood distinction between the Russian and American notions are far reaching and touch on every aspect of U.S.-Russian relations, including the bilateral security relationship. Indeed, Russian civilizational theory helps explain why the prospects for meaningful arms control agreements that serve American security interests are improbable if not impossible.

This is, in essence, the difficulty faced by the West as it confronts a Russia determined to overturn the existing world order. Robinson concludes that Putin believes “the move toward a multipolar, multicivilizational world is unstoppable.” Clearly, the United States must factor this into any policy considerations regarding how best to deter Russia. The stakes could not be greater.

Winston Churchill once described Russia as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”<sup>7</sup> For those who wish to understand Russia and the factors that influence its mistrust and suspicion of the West, Robinson’s book peels back that wrapping to expose the sinews of a people and philosophy that make mutual cooperation on weighty national security issues impractical if not impossible. It offers useful lessons for U.S. policy makers—lessons that hopefully will be heeded.

*Reviewed by David J. Trachtenberg  
National Institute for Public Policy*

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**Matthew Fuhrmann *Influence Without Arms: The New Logic of Nuclear Deterrence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 366 pp.**

In *Influence Without Arms: The New Logic of Nuclear Deterrence*, Matthew Fuhrmann asks an important if academically somewhat overlooked question: can countries derive influence from a latent nuclear program? In other words, can states derive benefits from mastering technologies that would help them build a nuclear weapon without actually building it?

Fuhrmann finds that U.S. allies and adversaries can leverage latent nuclear programs to advance their national interests. For example, U.S. allies can pursue latent nuclear programs and threaten to develop nuclear weapons to induce more accommodating policies on the part of the United States (e.g. more U.S. troops on their territory in the case of allies). Spain used this tactic during the Cold War, South Korea and Poland appear to be using it today. Fuhrmann calls this “deterrence by proliferation.” Countries can also leverage latent deterrence by threatening a delayed retaliatory strike if an opponent attacks them first. This

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<sup>7</sup> David Owen, *Riddle, Mystery, and Enigma: Two Hundred Years of British-Russian Relations* (London, UK: Haus Publishing, 2021), reviewed by W. Mark Hamilton, “The Enigma of Russia,” Bulletin #166, International Churchill Society, April 3, 2022, available at <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/churchill-bulletin/bulletin-166-apr-2022/the-enigma-of-russia/>.

is a situation in which a country develops all the necessary technologies short of putting together a nuclear device, but then plans on assembling and using one or more nuclear bombs in retaliation for an invasion or other serious military attack. When a country is extremely close to building a nuclear weapon, uncertainty about whether it actually possesses a nuclear weapon may deter other countries from attacking it, what Fuhrmann calls “deterrence by doubt.” Fuhrmann considers U.S. deliberations regarding attacking North Korea’s nuclear program in the 1990s an example of this dynamic.

Herein lies a conceptual difficulty—if the existence of a nuclear weapon deters another country from pursuing a course of action it would otherwise take, then the program should no longer be considered latent. How much do leaders know about another country’s nuclear program and how long have they known it before they make that information public? Archival work in the future will be required to answer the question, because public disclosures regarding a nuclear program sometimes come after the program was detected by another country’s intelligence services and therefore the program’s influence on policymakers can predate the publicizing of the existence of another country’s program.

The book distinguishes between restrained and unrestrained nuclear programs; an important factor regarding whether a country reaps the benefits of latent deterrence. A country pursuing a restrained nuclear program likely does not have dedicated research to produce a nuclear weapon, but may be pursuing technologies for a civilian nuclear program. According to the author, such a country will appear less threatening to others and less likely to cause them to adopt countermeasures. This is the “sweet spot” for a country in terms of obtaining benefits like greater foreign policy alignment with rivals, fewer crises, more U.S. troop deployments to allies, and a lower risk of nuclear armament by adversaries. An unrestrained program, the book argues, leads to less reliable deterrence of crises and conflict, increases the risk of preventive military attacks, and arms racing.

Fuhrmann uses qualitative and quantitative analysis to examine these important and intellectually interesting questions. The methodological part is competently executed, although the quantitative analysis strips the cases of the important characteristics necessary for understanding countries’ motives and goals when pursuing nuclear technologies. The case studies, including Argentina, Brazil, and Iraq, mitigate this shortcoming to some degree, and Fuhrmann’s book is a good advancement of the discussion so far.

*Reviewed by Michaela Dodge  
National Institute for Public Policy*

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