

DECISIVE POINT

The USAWC Press Podcast Companion Series

Podcast Transcript

Caitlyn P. Irby

“US-Russia Foreign Policy: Confronting Russia’s Geographic Anxieties”

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The United States must place Russia’s focus on geographic concerns at the center of future strategy development to build a constructive relationship with Russia and achieve US regional goals. This article analyzes Russia’s geography and historical impact on Russian foreign policy, outlines Moscow’s current foreign policy goals, and highlights underlying concerns for US policymakers and military practitioners. By pursuing policies that support Russian goals of economic integration, mitigation of demographic concerns, and security of national borders, the United States can set the foundation for productive engagement on critical issues. Read the article [here](#).

Email usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil to give feedback on this podcast or the genesis article.

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Stephanie Crider (Host)

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I’m talking today with Major Caitlin Irby, author of “[US Russia Foreign Policy: Confronting Russia’s Geographic Anxieties](#),” which was published in the autumn 2023 issue of *Parameters*. Irby is an Air Force Intelligence officer currently serving at Fort Liberty, NC.

Welcome to Decisive Point, Caitlin.

Caitlin P. Irby

Good morning, and thanks for having me.

Host

Your article takes on the topic of the future of US Russia policy. What inspired you to write this piece?

Irby

Well, I really started studying Russia during my assignment at Special Operations Command, Europe. “I got there in 2015, so it was shortly after the Russian incursion into Crimea and the Donbas. I enjoyed that work so much, I started reading about Russia outside of work and in my free time. And I really started thinking about the fact that the US goal was stated to deter Russia, but we had obviously failed at that a couple of times at this point. And so, I started just sort of thinking about what might actually work in line with all of my reading. And then, unfortunately, we failed again come 2022. So, really, this article is a conclusion of about seven years worth of me thinking about the subject.

Host

In your article you address two types of geography. What are they?

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Irby

Geography is broken into physical and human geography. In the military, we tend to really focus on physical geography: mountains, rivers, key terrains. But there’s also human geography, which can involve the spatial distribution of human characteristics like ethnicity, industry, or political boundaries. It’s fairly unusual for analysts to group all of these together as part of a geographic analysis, so I really wanted to highlight both sides of the field

Host

How does geography influence Russian leaders?

Irby

On the physical geography side, Russian leaders have historically had to compete with Russia’s insecure boundaries. They’re located on the European Plain. That really creates an insecure homeland. As a response, throughout history, they have had to militarily expand to keep their core safe, and this really manifests in trading space for time when an invading army tries to attack them, such as with Hitler and Napoleon. So, that’s one aspect: expansion is viewed as a matter of national survival.

The second major physical geographic factor is their lack of access to warm-water ports. This is particularly relevant today in a globalized economy because Russia can’t export their primary exports, so oil and natural gas, like many countries do via the ocean. They have to use pipelines, which forces them to engage in multilateral agreements, as pipelines cross multiple countries. It generally makes them less stable, and you see this throughout the history of the Russian economy. It goes up and down based off of oil prices because, frankly, they’re just less competitive than countries that have access to warm-water ports.

And then on the human geographic side, Russia has a shrinking population and has for a while now. And it’s only getting worse because their birth rate remains below replacement rate. When you combine that with the physical geographic factors, that means there’s fewer soldiers to put into their army to defend their expansive borders and fewer workers to run their economy. So, all of these geographic factors combined create potentially regime-threatening effects within the country. And so, that’s why it really preoccupies Russian leaders.

Host

So what are your recommendations for how the United States can acknowledge and address Russia’s geographically derived anxieties to develop future policy?

Irby

I broke my recommendations down into three categories. The first one involved economic assistance to enable Russia to develop in a way that decreases their reliance on warm-water ports. I recommended Russia transition from a oil and natural gas export to things that are more viable going into the future, such as renewable energy. Renewable energy is forced via technology to largely be a regional enterprise, which means it’s less competitive than the global oil market, which gives Russia an advantage, at least within its region. I also talked about expanding their agricultural sector because climate change might actually help Russia, they could develop more agricultural land. And then, also, building on their pre-existing manufacturing capability to sort of pivot into manufacturing sectors that are going to remain relevant in the future. They have a highly educated population, a robust industrial base, so they’ll be able to pivot to some of the more advanced manufacturing that is going to be required as the global economy continues to rev up, and that will allow them to remain relevant.

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My second category of recommendations involves improving governance and investing in advanced technology to address their demographic challenges. Numerous studies have found that the Russian economy is severely hampered by corruption and government inefficiency. And as a counterpoint, countries like Estonia and Latvia started from the same Soviet base, but their per capita GDP now exceeds Russia because they’ve made improvements in these areas. Building on their experience in helping Russia improve in governance areas will help their economy capitalize on what they are doing and not drag them down. Additionally, automation and artificial intelligence could ease the strain associated with the declining population. Germany and Japan already face declining populations, and they are some of the most heavily automated countries in the world. And so, these are US allies that could potentially help a Russian state improve in these areas to make their economy more viable.

The third category of recommendations- most controversial category—has to do with giving Russia security guarantees that they’re not going to be invaded so that they don’t need to constantly expand to maintain the security of their state. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US debated a number of ways to expand NATO in a way that wouldn’t antagonize Russia. These included a NATO-Russia charter to have Partnership for Peace be nonbinding. Unfortunately, instead the US just expanded NATO right up to the Russian border, including former Soviet states, and that’s a sore spot for Russia. I sort of recommend revisiting some of those ideas and recommended giving Russia those legally binding agreements of nonaggression that they’ve sought. However, I also recommend that we do that in exchange for limited amounts of denuclearization and demilitarization. Obviously, a heavy cost. It would be difficult to execute. That is sort of the core of getting to the security guarantees.

Host

Do you have any concluding thoughts you’d like to share before we go?

Irby

My last bit is just that ultimately, I think an increasingly unstable and aggressive Russia poses a variety of threats to US interests. Whether it’s cyber attacks, interfering in elections, irregular warfare and partner States and the growing relationship with China. I think all of that is bad for the United States, and I think that investing in a stable and secure Russia in the future is the best way to secure our interests, which is why I ultimately make these recommendations.

Host

Listeners, you can read the article at press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters Look for Volume 53 Issue 3. Caitlin, thank you for making time to speak with me today. This was really insightful and informative.

Irby

Thank you for having me.

Host

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