

# POLITICAL REFLECTION

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Prof. Neil Macfarlane on**

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*by Dr Ozgur Tufekci*

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Counter-Insurgency  
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**The Crescent in the  
Antarctic: Isolationism,  
Science and Foreign  
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*by Dr Hüsrev Tabak*

**The Impact of Groupthink on  
Decision Making Case Study:  
The Afghanistan and Iraq  
Wars**

*by Dr Sharifullah Dorani*





# Political Reflection Magazine

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“ADVANCING DIVERSITY”

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## Interview With Professor Neil Macfarlane on Russia's Role in World Politics

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**R**ussia Federation as the core successor of the Soviet Union has been profoundly influential in world politics under the prolonged Putin's administration. Yet, the current world politics is not the same with the conditions when the Soviet Russia dismantled. It is claimed that multipolarity is embedded in world politics. With these new world dynamics, Russia is/will be one of the key international actor to define current and future of world politics. Therefore, the role of Russia in world politics is worth to discuss.

Professor MacFarlane is a specialist on Russian foreign policy and the regional dynamics of the former Soviet Union, with particular reference to that regions southern tier.

After a career in the United States and in Canada, he moved to Oxford in 1996 as the first Lester B. Pearson Professor of International Relations. From 2005 to 2010 he was Head of the Department of Politics and International Relations. From 2008 to 2010 he was Deputy Head of the Social Sciences Division at Oxford. He is currently a member of the Council of the University and serves on numerous University committees.

**Ozgur Tufekci:** *I would like to start with a specific question. In one of your papers, published in 2006 "The 'R' in BRICs: is Russia an emerging power?", you were claiming that "Russia is more properly seen as a state that has recently experienced substantial damage and is attempting to stop the bleeding." Do you believe that Russia has stopped the bleeding and recovered?*

**Neil Macfarlane:** No, I do not. It is true that the rise in energy prices in the 2000's reduced the bleeding and allowed Russia to begin a rebuilding process both in the economy and in the state. The concentration of power in the hands of Mr. Putin and his inner circle added a new sense of direction to Russian policy. They have substantially rebuilt a smaller, but effective, military apparatus. However, the 2007-8 financial crisis was deeply damaging to Russia, as was the 2014-2016 collapse of global oil prices, and revenue. Since the Russian state has largely failed to diversify beyond the energy sector, they are now struggling. Growth has slowed, investment is sluggish, and sanctions are biting, as is the cost of Russian intervention in Ukraine. So, they are better off in comparison to 2006, but they still have a long way to go. It is not clear whether they are going forward or back at the moment.

***Ozgur Tufekci: What is your opinion on Russia's long-term plan about the Ukraine crisis? Do you think that it will affect the Russia-EU relations negatively in the spheres of security, economy and politics?***

***Neil Macfarlane:*** I am not sure they have a long-term plan, other than to ensure the destabilization of Ukraine. If they do have a plan (for example the taming of Ukraine's government and the inclusion of Ukraine in the Eurasian Economic Union), they are very far away from achieving either one.

The annexation of Crimea and the intervention in eastern Ukraine have already had significant negative effects on EU-Russia relations and on Russia's standing in world politics.

Three other points – first, the sanctions do have a significant effect on Russia economically; second, the possible departure of the UK from the EU may have a significant effect on the durability of the EU sanctions regime; and, third, although the EU does not have much of a military role re. Russia, NATO does. Russia's actions in Ukraine have had a deeply negative impact on NATO-Russia relations, not least in that they provoked forward NATO deployment and consequent risks of inadvertent collisions.

***Ozgur Tufekci: What do you think about Russia's strategy on the future of the Syrian civil war?***

***Neil Macfarlane:*** Russia wants a durable base in the Middle East-Mediterranean region. They also want status as a global strategic player. Their support of the Assad regime in Syria has served both purposes, for the moment, but at considerable cost.

***Ozgur Tufekci: Do you think the cooperation between Turkey, Iran and Russia could help to establish a peace agreement in Syria?***

***Neil Macfarlane:*** This depends on the domestic politics of Syria, and on the capacity of the three to develop and sustain a joint perspective. On the first, that would depend on how far their joint position suits Assad and the opposition (what is left of it) in Syria. In particular, how would the three reconcile with the Kurds? This relates to a larger point. Academic and policy work on international mediation of peace generally underestimates the capacity of local actors to veto.

Then there is the question of whether peace can be achieved without the United States – another veto player. Will the Americans continue to support the Kurds? If they do, the prospect of agreement among the mediators and parties, and also the prospects of a peace agreement, will be reduced.

**Ozgur Tufekci: I would like to carry on with a saddening issue, “the Jamal Khashoggi murder”. Why does not Putin criticise Saudi Arabia for the killing of Khashoggi? Is it because the murdered is a journalist (who maybe deserves to be punished to his mind) or because of some political and economic expectations? Is it more an ethical or political/economic stance?**

**Neil Macfarlane:** Putin may be too busy with other things. More seriously, he may not wish to be a hypocrite – remember the murders of Anna Politkovskaya (a journalist) and Boris Nemtsov (an opposition politician). On the basis of his professional formation, he may think that killing annoying people is just part of the game.

Finally, getting to your political economy point, he may see an opportunity here to develop a more solid relationship with Saudi Arabia, an important player in the global economy. That is particularly important, given Russia’s sensitivity to energy prices and Saudi market power. He does not lose anything by silence, and he would be foolish to jeopardise initiatives towards better relations with Saudi Arabia over an issue like this.

I stress that this is pretty speculative, but I would guess it is some combination of the three.

**Ozgur Tufekci: What do you think on Russia’s role in Eurasia? Would it be affected by the China’s Belt and Road Initiative?**

**Neil Macfarlane:** I take this to be an enquiry concerning Russian policy in what it considers to be its regional space. Given the general view that Russia has a single policy in its region, it is striking how different Russia’s role in Central Asia differs from that in Ukraine and the Caucasus. On Russia’s western border, it is assertive and coercive; they invade and interfere. In Central Asia, they negotiate and accommodate. How do we account for the difference? At the systemic level, one basic reason is that the West (Russia’s significant other) challenges Russian preferences in institution building and institutional enlargement, threatening Russia’s own regional institutional project. This challenge is not significant in Central Asia.

That is related to a common view on governance in Central Asia. That view is largely consistent with Russian preferences. There is no danger of potentially threatening demonstration effects from neighbouring states. To the contrary, they share Russia’s concerns about soft power penetration. At the regional level, for the most part, they participate in Russian-led regional cooperative institutions in the political, economic, and security spheres.

You asked about BRI. I guess the major point here is that BRI does not challenge Russia’s core interests in the short term. Again, quite the contrary. It is anticipated that Russia is on the road. Chinese investment permits infrastructural development and natural resource investment that Russia cannot afford on its own. Moreover, BRI networks through Afghanistan and

Pakistan give Russia more efficient access to South Asian markets. If all of this works, then the BRI payoff for Russia is greater than the potential costs of their neighbours developing alternative transport networks for their goods. Much depends here on the evolution of the Russia-China relationship, leading me to the next question.

***Ozgur Tufekci: What kind of future do you anticipate for the China-Russia relationships? Would it be possible for the both countries to build a new world order in the foreseeable future?***

***Neil Macfarlane:*** The China-Russia relationship has a short term and long-term dimensions. In the short term, many of the factors that explain the relationship between Russia and its Central Asian neighbours also help to understand the Russia-China relationship. China is also anti-western. It is hostile to democratization and to the American model of unbridled economic liberalism. So one principal source of the tensions and conflict in the western part of the neighbourhood is absent in the cross-regional Central Asian relationship. Despite the increasing dominance of China in Central Asian trade and investment, the relationship continues to be positive. This is bolstered by Russia's cooperation with China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In that organization, China and Russia have important shared interests, not least in counter-terrorism. Moreover, reflecting on Russia's status concerns, and given China's position as an external, much stronger state, on the borders of Russia's neighbourhood, it is significant that in the SCO China considers Russia to be equal. That contrasts starkly with the pattern of NATO and EU treatment of Russia in the West. Finally, the two states share a number of positions on the broader international order, not least their unhappiness with unipolarity and commitment to multipolarity. This is associated with close coordination in the UN Security Council.

The latter point brings me to the second question. China and Russia already do cooperate in the hope of generating a new world order. They do so not only through their shared antipathy to American and western dominance, but also through their support of institutions such as the BRICS.

However, there is a question whether this joint effort is sustainable over the long term. This has two aspects, at least. The first is the growing asymmetry in the power of Russia and China. As the imbalance continues to grow, it is reasonable to suggest that Sino-Russian relations will become more problematic. In addition, many Russian analytical and strategic observers take the view that the longer-term existential threat to Russia is not the West (which in their view is declining), but China, with whom Russia has an historically troubled relationship. In other words, the short-term perspective is reasonably positive, but the longer-term perspective is ambiguous. In fact, some in Russia are already speaking of the need to rebuild relations with the West in order to balance China. If that phenomenon grows more widespread, then one might expect a rebalancing towards the status quo and away from attempts to replace it.





The final point is that, trump notwithstanding, the US will resist efforts to replace it at the top of the pile.

***Ozgur Tufekci: This question might be hypothetical but I can not refrain myself to ask, what would be Russia's position in case of western-centric world order was changed? Would it be one of the co-founders or superseding the US.***

***Neil Macfarlane:*** Russia has long advocated an alternative world order, as has China, as noted in the previous response. Given the seeming decline in US relative power that may become feasible. One caution here is that this is not the first time American decline has been predicted. Predicting American decline among American IR academics after Vietnam and into the 1980s. It did not happen.

It is true that the US under its current president says it wants to withdraw from managing the world and to focus on its own interests. But, since its interests are profoundly entwined with its management of the world, this idea doesn't seem credible.

I do expect some change in world order, but it is likely to be slow and negotiated rather than abrupt and conflictual. Russia would not be a co-founder. It is too small, and its constituency is also too small.

***Ozgur Tufekci: Current US-EU relations seems to be chattering because Trump's demand of previous cost of NATO to protect the Europe from Soviets and his claim of unfair trade relations with Europe. Do you think that there is even a slight chance Europe would side with Russia against the US?***

***Neil Macfarlane:*** That begs a prior question. Who is Europe? Are we talking about the core (France, Germany, the Benelux)? Or are we talking about the dissenters (Poland, Hungary, Italy). Moreover, the core states have severe differences among themselves. Leaving aside whether Europe is cohesive enough to take such a decision, the US is Europe's security guarantor, not least against Russia. I am not sure the Europeans would agree to dump that in pursuit of Russia, which has, in the meantime, returned to its old status as Europe's major traditional threat. In short, for this to happen you would need Russia to change fundamentally, the US to change fundamentally, and Europe itself to change fundamentally.

***Ozgur Tufekci: Thank you for your time and sincere answers.***

Thank you.