

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Revisionist's Paradox. Putin, Trump, and the Quest for Respect in a Disordered World

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## Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the shared strategic intent of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump to command respect on the international stage. It argues that while both leaders are revisionist actors seeking to disrupt the existing liberal international order, their motivations, methods, and the nature of the respect they seek are fundamentally different, stemming from their unique geopolitical and psychological positions. This leads to a paradoxical and ultimately self-defeating quest, as their actions undermine the very foundations of the international system from which they seek recognition. Putin, leading a power perceived as being in decline, seeks to restore Russia's lost status through fear and coercion, a classic revanchist strategy. Trump, by contrast, represents a populist challenge from within the dominant power, seeking unqualified obeisance by dismantling the very order the United States created. This analysis, drawing on an expanded range of academic literature, concludes that their shared revisionism, far from achieving its goals, significantly diminishes their nations' soft power and fosters a more unstable and unpredictable global environment, highlighting a critical flaw in revisionist statecraft in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Putin, Trump, Revisionism, International Relations, Respect, Status, Recognition, Liberal International Order, Soft Power, Geopolitics, Foreign Policy, Populism, Nationalism, Great Power Politics, Security Dilemma, International Norms, Hegemony, Multipolar Order, Strategic Intent, Disrespect, Humiliation, Revanchism, Transactionalism, Multilateralism, Sovereignty.

## 1. Introduction

A palpable and deepening crisis of the liberal international order has marked the early decades of the 21st century. Forged in the crucible of the Second World War and seemingly triumphant after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this order—underpinned by a web of multilateral institutions, a commitment to democratic values, and an emphasis on the rule of law—is now facing an unprecedented and multifaceted challenge (Ikenberry, 2018). The sources of this challenge are numerous, ranging from the rise of new global powers and the resurgence of great power competition to the growing tide of populism and nationalism within the heartlands of the West itself. Two of the most prominent and disruptive figures at the centre of this global tumult are Russia's

Vladimir Putin and the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump.

At first glance, they present a study in contrasts: one, the calculating, long-serving autocrat of a former superpower, seemingly obsessed with reversing the perceived humiliations of the post-Cold War era; the other, a flamboyant, anti-establishment populist who captured the leadership of the world's pre-eminent power by railing against the very global system it had painstakingly constructed. Yet, beneath their stylistic and contextual differences lies a powerful, shared strategic intent: a deep-seated desire to disrupt the existing international system, a goal fundamentally rooted in a common and relentless quest for respect.

This paper posits that the convergent revisionism of Putin and Trump can be best understood as a response

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to a perceived 'respect deficit'. It is a quest born from a profound sense of grievance and a desire to overturn what they see as an unjust hierarchy of prestige. However, their revisionist actions are ultimately and deeply paradoxical. In their attempts to command respect through coercion, disruption, and the unilateral dismantling of established norms, they systematically undermine the very foundations of the international order from which genuine, lasting recognition is derived. This paper will explore this paradox in detail. It will first establish a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the role of respect, status, and recognition in international relations. It will then provide a greatly expanded analysis of the specific manifestations of this quest in the foreign policies of Putin's Russia and Trump's America, drawing on a wider range of academic sources. Finally, it will offer a more detailed comparative analysis and conclude with a more thorough discussion of the profound implications of this 'revisionist's paradox' for the future of global order.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: The Currency of Respect in International Relations

Within the established canons of International Relations (IR) theory, particularly the dominant paradigms of neorealism and neoliberalism, state behaviour has traditionally been explained through the relatively narrow lens of material interests, power calculations, and institutional constraints (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984). While these factors are undeniably crucial for understanding the strategic interactions of states, they often fail to capture the full spectrum of motivations that drive foreign policy. A more holistic understanding requires an appreciation of non-material factors such as emotions, identity, and, most pertinently for this analysis, the profound and often volatile quest for respect and recognition. It is here that constructivist and English School approaches offer a vital analytical purchase.

Constructivism, in particular, has illuminated how the social world, including international politics, is constituted by shared ideas, norms, and identities rather than just material forces (Wendt, 1999). From this perspective, a state's interests are not pre-given but are shaped by its identity and the social context in which it operates. The desire for recognition and status is therefore not an irrational emotional impulse but a core component of a state's identity-formation process. As Murray (2018, p. 15) argues, "status is a relational concept, meaning that it is not an attribute that a state possesses in isolation but rather a quality that

is conferred upon it by other states in the international system". This social conferral of status is what we mean by recognition. A state's sense of self, its very identity as a 'great power' or a 'regional leader', is dependent on whether other significant actors in the system recognise it as such (Duque, 2018).

This quest for recognition can be a powerful, and at times primary, driver of state behaviour, capable of overriding short-term material calculations. Drawing on Hegel's philosophy, scholars have highlighted the "struggle for recognition" as a fundamental dynamic in human history, readily observable in the international arena (Honneth, 1995). The denial of recognition, or the experience of being actively disrespected, can inflict what has been termed a "status injury" or a "symbolic wound" (Wolf, 2011). Such injuries can fester, generating powerful feelings of resentment and humiliation that can lead states to engage in high-risk, revisionist behaviour to restore their sense of worth and compel the respect they feel they have been denied. As Stent (2014) notes in the Russian context, a sense of humiliation can become a potent political force, shaping a nation's strategic culture for decades.

It is helpful to distinguish between several forms of respect that states may seek. Following the work of philosophers like Stephen Darwall (1977), we can identify two key types. The first is appraisal respect, which is hierarchical and earned through a state's laudable achievements, its economic or military capabilities, its cultural appeal, or its adherence to and promotion of valued international norms. This is the kind of respect that underpins the concept of 'soft power', in which a state's values and culture become sources of attraction and influence, leading others to follow its lead (Nye, 2004). The second, and more fundamental, is recognition respect. This is not hierarchical; it is owed to all actors that possess a certain status, in this case, sovereign statehood. It is the basis of the Westphalian order and is enshrined in the core principles of international law and in institutions such as the United Nations Charter. It is the demand to be treated as a legitimate equal, regardless of power or prestige.

A third, and more problematic, form of respect is that which is commanded through fear and coercion. This is the deference of the subordinate to the dominant, and it is often the last resort of revisionist powers that feel they have been denied both appraisal and recognition. Unable to win the admiration of others or secure their status as a legitimate equal, they seek to compel

attention and force compliance through intimidation. This, however, is an unstable foundation for status, as it breeds resentment rather than genuine legitimacy. Thus, the core concept of the revisionist paradox is the self-defeating nature of attempts to gain respect by systematically dismantling the international order from which genuine recognition derives.

Figure 1 visualises this argument by mapping “international respect” as a dynamic, cyclical outcome produced by four interrelated pathways. It distinguishes the two philosophically grounded forms—appraisal respect (hierarchically earned through achievements, capabilities, or normative appeal) and recognition respect (owed on the basis

of sovereign equality)—while also incorporating the more destabilising route of fear and coercion, where deference is extracted rather than granted. The diagram then situates these logics within the revisionist paradox, highlighting how attempts to secure standing through forceful disruption of the prevailing order can be self-defeating: coercion may compel short-term compliance, but it simultaneously corrodes the very normative and institutional conditions under which durable recognition and legitimate status are conferred. In this way, the figure provides a conceptual bridge from constructivist insights about identity and social status to a typology of respect-seeking strategies and their systemic consequences.



**Figure 1.** *Factors Influencing International Respect*

Revisionist states are those dissatisfied with the existing international order and seek to alter its fundamental rules, norms, and distribution of prestige to better reflect their interests and values (Schweller, 2014). They often perceive the status quo as unjust and believe that the distribution of power and prestige does not accurately reflect their own capabilities or their rightful place in the world. The quest for respect is almost always a central driver of revisionist behaviour. When a rising or resurgent power feels that it is not being given the respect it deserves, it may challenge the existing order in an attempt to force the other powers to recognise its new status. This can lead to a dangerous dynamic of escalating tensions and conflict, as the revisionist power's actions are often seen as aggressive and threatening by the status quo powers, who have a vested interest in preserving the existing order from which they benefit (Allison, 2017). This theoretical lens provides a robust framework for

understanding the seemingly convergent, yet distinct, foreign policy trajectories of Putin's Russia and Trump's America.

### 3. Putin's Revanchist Quest for Respect

The foreign policy of Vladimir Putin's Russia is inextricably and profoundly linked to a deep-seated sense of historical grievance and a relentless, almost obsessive, quest to restore the respect it believes it was unjustly denied after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the Russian political elite, the 1990s were not a decade of liberation and democratic transition, as they were often portrayed in the West, but a period of profound national humiliation, a “geopolitical catastrophe” in Putin's own words (Putin, 2005). The implosion of the Soviet empire, the severe economic depression, the precipitous decline in living standards, and the perceived chaotic weakness of the Yeltsin administration all contributed to a powerful narrative

of loss and decline. This was not just a loss of territory or military might; it was a devastating blow to the nation's identity and its long-held self-perception as a *derzhava*—a great, sovereign power with a unique civilisational mission (Tsygankov, 2016). Western actions powerfully exacerbated this sense of grievance during this period. The eastward expansion of NATO, in particular, is central to the Russian narrative of betrayal and disrespect. From Moscow's perspective, the extension of a Cold War military alliance to its very borders, incorporating former Warsaw Pact members and even Soviet republics, was a direct violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the post-Cold War settlement. It was seen as a failure to integrate Russia into a new, inclusive European security architecture on equal terms, and instead treated it as a permanently defeated foe (Sakwa, 2017). This was not merely a strategic concern; it was a symbolic one. It signalled that Russia's security interests were of secondary importance and that its voice could be safely ignored. As Mearsheimer (2014) has argued, this policy of liberal enlargement, while seen as benign in Western capitals, was perceived as a direct threat in Moscow, laying the groundwork for future conflict.

Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 1999 was predicated on a promise to end this era of humiliation. His initial focus was domestic: re-establishing the "power vertical" by reining in the oligarchs, crushing the Chechen insurgency, and reasserting the authority of the central state. This domestic consolidation was a necessary precondition for the reassertion of Russian power on the international stage (Stent, 2014). A strong state at home was required to project strength abroad. Having stabilised the country and benefited from a boom in global energy prices, Putin began to articulate Russia's dissatisfaction with the unipolar world order more forcefully.

The turning point came with his now-famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference. In a direct and confrontational address, Putin decried a world of "one master, one sovereign" and accused the United States of having "overstepped its national borders in every way" (Putin, 2007). This was a public declaration that Russia would no longer passively accept a subordinate role. The 2008 war in Georgia was the first major military application of this new doctrine, a swift and brutal operation to prevent a pro-Western state in its "near abroad" from joining NATO. It was a clear signal that Russia was willing to use force to carve out a sphere of influence and to defy the West.

The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the fomenting of war in the Donbas represented a dramatic escalation of this revisionist project. Triggered by the pro-Western Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, these actions were the culmination of years of festering resentment. They were a direct challenge to the post-Cold War European order, a demonstration that Russia would not hesitate to violate international law to protect its perceived interests and to re-establish its historical dominance over what it considers its "historic lands". Putin's speech celebrating the annexation of Crimea was laden with historical justifications and accusations against the West, framing the action as the righting of a historical wrong and a defence against an encroaching, hostile alliance (Putin, 2014).

The ultimate and most catastrophic expression of this revanchist quest for respect is the full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched in February 2022. This act of unprovoked aggression, justified by Putin through a distorted and revisionist historical narrative that denies Ukraine's legitimacy as a sovereign nation (Putin, 2021), is a desperate and violent attempt to force the West to the negotiating table and to redraw the security map of Europe fundamentally. It is the ultimate gamble to compel the world to treat Russia as a great power whose security concerns cannot be ignored. Yet, it is here that the paradox of Putin's strategy is laid bare. In his pursuit of respect through fear and coercion, he has turned Russia into an international pariah, subjected to unprecedented sanctions and condemned by the global community. The initial material for this paper astutely observes that while Putin's aggressive revanchism may not win Russia any love, he hopes it will at least make it feared. This is the logic of the spoiler: if you cannot be a respected member of the club, you can at least burn the clubhouse down. But this is a profoundly self-defeating strategy. The respect that is born of fear is brittle and ultimately unsustainable. It does not confer the legitimacy or the influence that Putin craves. Instead, it has only served to galvanise the West, strengthen NATO, and accelerate Russia's long-term decline.

#### 4. Trump's Populist Assault on the Liberal Order

If Putin's revisionism represents a classic challenge from a declining power seeking to reclaim its lost glory, Donald Trump's foreign policy presents a far more paradoxical and arguably more destabilising phenomenon: the revisionism of the hegemon



itself turning against the very order it created and sustained for over seventy years. Trump's 'America First' approach was not merely a recalibration of US foreign policy; it was a radical and instinctual assault on the foundational assumptions of the post-Second World War liberal international order. This assault was driven not by a coherent grand strategy in the traditional sense, but by a populist narrative of national grievance and a personalistic quest for respect fundamentally incompatible with the principles of that order (Mead, 2017).

The core of Trump's worldview is the rejection of the positive-sum logic that has underpinned American foreign policy for decades. The bipartisan consensus, from Truman to Obama, was built on the belief that a world of prosperous democracies, integrated through multilateral institutions and bound by the rule of law, would ultimately be a safer and more prosperous world for the United States (Ikenberry, 2018). This was the intellectual foundation of American 'soft power', its ability to shape global events through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion alone (Nye, 2004). Trump, by contrast, views the international system through a starkly zero-sum lens. In his narrative, the world has been getting rich at America's expense. Alliances are not force multipliers but protection rackets in which ungrateful allies have been "freeloading" on American military power. Free trade agreements are not engines of mutual prosperity but "terrible deals" negotiated by a foolish elite that have allowed other countries, particularly China, to "steal" American jobs and wealth.

This narrative of grievance and victimhood is a central plank of Trump's populist appeal. He successfully channelled the economic anxieties and cultural resentments of a significant portion of the American electorate who felt left behind by globalisation and alienated from a political establishment they perceived as corrupt and out of touch (Hochschild, 2016). By framing the United States, the most powerful nation in history, as a victim of global forces, he created a powerful "us versus them" dynamic that resonated domestically. His foreign policy, therefore, became an extension of his domestic political strategy: a performance of strength and defiance aimed at his political base. The "carnage" he described in his inaugural address was not just domestic; it was a worldview that saw America as being exploited on the global stage.

This worldview translated into a systematic disdain for multilateralism and a deep-seated suspicion

of international institutions, which he viewed as illegitimate constraints on American sovereignty. His administration's actions were a testament to this belief. He withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement on his first day in office, pulled out of the Paris Agreement on climate change, unilaterally abandoned the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) despite the objections of European allies, and initiated a withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) in the midst of a global pandemic. Each of these decisions was presented as a reassertion of American sovereignty, a refusal to be bound by the dictates of "globalists" (Kroenig, 2018). In place of the patient, institution-building diplomacy of his predecessors, Trump favoured a highly personalistic and transactional approach. He preferred the spectacle of bilateral summits, where he could engage in one-on-one negotiations and leverage America's immense power to extract concessions. His approach to foreign policy was that of a real estate developer, focused on "the deal" rather than the long-term cultivation of relationships or the maintenance of a stable international system.

This personalistic style was most evident in his strange affinity for authoritarian leaders. While he frequently lambasted the leaders of democratic allies like Germany, Canada, and France, he often spoke in glowing terms of autocrats such as Russia's Vladimir Putin, North Korea's Kim Jong Un, and Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman. This was not driven by a coherent strategic logic but by a psychological need for a particular kind of respect. Trump was not seeking the respect of his peers within a rules-based system, a respect that is earned through compromise and adherence to shared norms. He was seeking the unqualified deference and flattery that authoritarian leaders, unconstrained by domestic checks and balances, were able to offer him. As the initial material for this paper notes, he sought "unqualified obeisance" rather than the negotiated consensus of a democratic alliance. This desire for personal validation consistently overrode traditional strategic considerations, creating confusion and consternation among allies and adversaries alike (Haass, 2018).

Europe, and the European Union in particular, became a primary target for Trump's ire precisely because it represents the apotheosis of the liberal international order he despises. The EU is a project built on the pooling of sovereignty, the primacy of law over power, and the logic of multilateral cooperation. It is, in many ways, a direct repudiation

of the nationalist, power-based worldview that Trump champions. Consequently, his administration actively sought to weaken the EU, championing Brexit as a “great thing” and offering vocal support to far-right, nationalist parties across the continent. As the 2025 National Security Strategy outlined in the source material suggests, the goal was to transform Europe from a cohesive, value-based bloc into a collection of rivalrous, sovereign nations—a landscape far more amenable to Trump’s transactional and divisive style of diplomacy (Kagan, 2019). In this, Trump’s America, like Putin’s Russia, took on the role of the spoiler, seeking to smash the existing hierarchy of respect and replace it with a world where power and national self-interest are the only currencies that matter. He became a revolutionary from within, using the immense power of the American presidency to dismantle the very system it was designed to lead.

## 5. Comparative Analysis: Two Sides of the Same Revisionist Coin?

While both Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump can be categorised as revisionist leaders driven by a quest for a new form of respect, their respective challenges to the liberal international order are shaped by vastly different geopolitical positions, historical narratives,

and psychological motivations. Putin’s revisionism is that of a leader of a declining power, haunted by the ghosts of a lost empire and desperate to reclaim a seat at the top table of international politics. It is a revanchist project, aimed at reversing a specific historical outcome—the post-Cold War settlement in Europe. Trump’s revisionism, by contrast, is the more perplexing and historically novel phenomenon of a leader of the world’s sole superpower turning against the very order that his nation created and from which it derives much of its global influence. It is a revolutionary project, aimed not just at revising the rules of the game but at overturning the game itself.

Despite these fundamental differences, there are striking and consequential parallels in their rhetoric, tactics, and ultimate targets. Both leaders have masterfully cultivated a narrative of national grievance, portraying their countries as victims of an unjust international system that has been rigged against them. For Putin, the grievance is the West’s post-Cold War triumphalism and its failure to treat Russia as an equal. For Trump, the grievance is that the world has been taking advantage of American generosity, with allies and adversaries alike exploiting the system to their own benefit. This shared politics of resentment is a powerful tool for domestic mobilisation, allowing

**Table 1.** *The following table provides a more detailed comparative overview of their respective approaches*

Feature	Vladimir Putin	Donald Trump
<b>Core Motivation</b>	To restore Russia’s lost status as a great power and to avenge the perceived humiliation of the post-Cold War era. A deep-seated desire to reverse the geopolitical consequences of the Soviet collapse.	To reject a liberal international order that he believes has taken advantage of the United States and that holds his personalistic and nationalist worldview in contempt. A populist revolt against ‘globalism’.
<b>Methods</b>	Military aggression (Georgia, Ukraine), hybrid warfare, energy politics, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and covert support for anti-Western political forces.	Economic protectionism (trade wars), withdrawal from international agreements and institutions, the undermining of alliances (NATO), and rhetorical support for nationalist and far-right movements.
<b>Primary Target</b>	The post-Cold War security architecture in Europe, particularly the expansion of NATO and the sovereignty of former Soviet republics. The goal is to establish a recognised sphere of privileged interests.	The entire liberal international order, including its institutions (UN, WTO), norms (multilateralism, rule of law), and key allies (the EU, Japan, South Korea). The goal is to unshackle the US from all external constraints.
<b>Desired Form of Respect</b>	The respect born of fear and necessity; to be treated as an indispensable, if not admired, equal by the other great powers, with a recognised sphere of influence where Russia’s will is paramount.	Unqualified obeisance and personal deference; the flattery of other leaders and the freedom to act unilaterally without criticism or constraint from allies or international norms.
<b>Relationship with the US-led Order</b>	A classic revisionist challenger from outside the system, seeking to weaken, divide, and ultimately overturn it to create a multipolar world.	A revolutionary from within, seeking to dismantle the system from his position as its most powerful actor, effectively abdicating the responsibilities of global leadership.

both leaders to consolidate their power by externalising blame and creating a sense of national solidarity against a familiar, external foe (Gat, 2017).

Perhaps the most significant point of convergence is their shared animosity towards the European Union. For both Putin and Trump, the EU represents a profound ideological and strategic challenge. For Putin, a strong, united, and prosperous EU on his borders is a dangerous alternative model to his own system of autocratic kleptocracy. The EU's 'normative power'—its ability to spread its values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law—is a direct threat to his regime's stability (Mankoff, 2009). For Trump, the EU embodies everything he despises about the liberal international order: it is multilateral, bureaucratic, and committed to the pooling of sovereignty. It is a direct repudiation of his own nationalist, 'America First' ideology. Consequently, both leaders have actively sought to weaken and divide the EU, with Putin using energy blackmail, disinformation, and support for anti-EU parties, and Trump using trade tariffs, verbal attacks on its leaders, and vocal support for Brexit (Kagan, 2019). They are united in their desire to see Europe return to a 19th-century model of competing, nationalist nation-states, a landscape far more conducive to their respective 'divide and rule' strategies.

This comparative analysis reveals that while Putin and Trump may be fellow travellers on the road of revisionism, they are on different journeys with different destinations in mind. Putin is playing a classic, if brutal, game of 19th-century great power politics, using 21st-century tools. He seeks a revised international order, but an order nonetheless—a multipolar system where Russia is one of the poles. Trump, on the other hand, appears to be playing a different game altogether, one that is less about geopolitical strategy and more about a populist and nationalist rejection of the very idea of an international community governed by shared rules. His ideal world is not a multipolar order but an 'a-polar' one, a chaotic free-for-all where American power is untethered from any sense of responsibility or restraint. This makes his brand of revisionism potentially even more corrosive than Putin's, as it strikes not only at the distribution of power within the system but also at the normative foundations of the system itself.

## 6. The Paradox of Revisionism and Seeking Respect by Destroying its Foundations

Both Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, in their distinct but convergent assaults on the liberal

international order, are ensnared in a profound and deeply ironic paradox. Their relentless pursuit of respect through revisionist actions is ultimately self-defeating, as it systematically erodes the very foundations upon which genuine and lasting international respect is built. The deference they crave—be it the fear-induced submission sought by Putin or the unqualified personal obeisance demanded by Trump—is a brittle and ephemeral substitute for the legitimacy, influence, and authority that flows from being a respected and predictable actor within a stable, rules-based international system. This is the revisionist's dilemma: the tools used to challenge the order are often the ones that guarantee exclusion from the prestige it confers.

This paradox is most starkly evident in the precipitous decline of their nations' 'soft power'. As conceptualised by Joseph Nye (2004), soft power—the ability to attract and persuade others to want what you want—is a crucial, if often intangible, component of a state's overall power and influence. It is derived from the perceived legitimacy of a nation's policies, the appeal of its political values, and the attractiveness of its culture. By engaging in aggressive, unilateral, and disruptive behaviour, both Russia under Putin and the United States under Trump have witnessed a catastrophic collapse of their soft power reserves. Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine, far from restoring Russia's greatness, has turned it into a pariah state, reviled by much of the democratic world and viewed with increasing apprehension even by its nominal partners like China. The images of bombed Ukrainian cities have done more to damage Russia's international standing than decades of Western criticism (Yablokov, 2022).

Similarly, Trump's 'America First' policies, his transactional approach to alliances, his open disdain for international law, and his withdrawal from crucial global agreements have severely damaged America's reputation as a reliable partner and a leader of the free world. The 'Trump Slump' in international public opinion was a well-documented phenomenon, with trust in the US presidency plummeting across the globe, particularly among key allies in Europe and Asia (Pew Research Center, 2020). This erosion of trust is not merely a public relations problem; it has tangible strategic consequences, making it harder for the United States to build coalitions, rally support for its initiatives, and effectively counter the influence of its strategic rivals (Haass, 2018).

The central contradiction for both leaders is that they desire the perquisites of global leadership without



being willing to assume the responsibilities that accompany it. They seek respect but are unwilling to abide by the international community's reciprocal norms and rules. They seek to be influential, yet they are actively dismantling the institutions and alliances that have long been the primary vehicles of their nations' influence. As the initial material for this paper astutely points out, the Trump administration "wants the benefits of respect and global soft power... But it also wants to retrench, cutting down its global capacities and remaking the US into a regional power like Russia... It can't have both." This observation cuts to the heart of the revisionist paradox.

Putin's actions have triggered a classic security dilemma on a massive scale. His invasion, intended to halt NATO's expansion and push the alliance back from Russia's borders, has had the exact opposite effect. It has breathed new life and a renewed sense of purpose into a previously flagging alliance, prompted historically neutral countries such as Finland and Sweden to join, and led to a substantial increase in defence spending and troop deployments along NATO's eastern flank (Sjursen, 2021). In seeking to destroy a perceived threat, he has made that threat more real and more potent. He has gained a land bridge to Crimea at the cost of strategic encirclement and long-term economic and technological stagnation.

Trump's paradox operates on a different level. By treating allies as liabilities and international norms as inconvenient constraints, he created a vacuum in global leadership that other actors, most notably China, were only too happy to fill. While Trump was withdrawing from the TPP, China was advancing its own regional trade architecture, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). While the US was defunding the WHO, China was positioning itself as a leader in global health governance (Lampton, 2017). Trump's attempt to reassert American greatness through unilateralism ironically accelerated the very process of relative decline he so vehemently decried. He sought to restore America's respect by making it feared, but instead, he made it appear erratic, unreliable, and ultimately less relevant.

This is the revisionist's dead end: you can be a spoiler, but you cannot be a leader. You can tear down the existing order, but you cannot build a new one in its place that will command the same level of legitimacy and voluntary buy-in. The result is a more dangerous and unstable world, a world of zero-sum competition and transactional relationships, where trust is scarce, and cooperation on existential global challenges

becomes exponentially more difficult. This is the world that Putin and Trump, in their different ways, are helping to create. It is a world where their quest for respect is doomed to fail, for they have mistaken the fleeting gratification of dominance for the enduring power of legitimacy.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate that the seemingly disparate foreign policies of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump are united by a shared strategic intent: a relentless quest for a new form of respect on the international stage. This quest, however, is not a monolithic phenomenon. It is a complex and deeply paradoxical impulse, shaped by the unique historical, political, and psychological contexts of each leader and their respective nations. Putin's revisionism is a classic, if brutal, revanchist project, a desperate gamble to reverse the perceived humiliations of the post-Cold War era and to command respect through fear. It is the strategy of a leader who believes his nation's greatness has been denied and must be reclaimed by force. Trump's revisionism, conversely, is the more historically novel and arguably more corrosive insurgency of a populist leader from within the very heart of the hegemonic power. It is a rejection of the liberal international order not from the outside, but from its core, driven by a demand for a personalistic and unqualified form of obeisance that is fundamentally at odds with the principles of a rules-based system.

Despite their differences, both leaders have embraced the role of the spoiler, seeking to disrupt, divide, and dismantle a system that they believe has denied them the recognition they deserve. In doing so, they have become ensnared in a profound and self-defeating paradox. Their actions, far from earning them the enduring respect they crave, have only served to diminish their nations' soft power, erode their international standing, and create a more volatile and unpredictable global environment. They have mistaken the fleeting satisfaction of coercion for the enduring legitimacy of consent, and in their quest for a new kind of respect, they have systematically undermined the very foundations upon which genuine international esteem is built. Putin has made Russia a pariah; Trump has made America unreliable. Both outcomes are antithetical to the accumulation of genuine, lasting respect.

The implications of this 'revisionist's paradox' are profound and far-reaching. The simultaneous challenge



to the liberal international order from a declining power and from within the hegemon itself has created a crisis of leadership and a vacuum of authority on the global stage. This is not merely a return to great-power competition in the traditional sense; it is a crisis of the underlying norms and values that, however imperfectly, have governed international relations for over seven decades. The erosion of trust in institutions, the disregard for international law, and the rise of a zero-sum, nationalist mindset make cooperation on pressing global challenges—from climate change and pandemics to nuclear proliferation—exponentially more difficult.

The future of international relations will be shaped by how the world navigates this new era of revisionist politics. The challenge for the remaining proponents of the liberal order is twofold. First, they must find a way to manage the legitimate grievances of those who feel left behind by globalisation, both within and between nations, without sacrificing the core principles of the order itself. Second, they must demonstrate the continued value and efficacy of a rules-based system, proving that cooperation, not coercion, is the most effective path to security and prosperity. The quest for respect is a powerful and perennial force in human affairs. As the cases of Putin and Trump so vividly demonstrate, it can be a dangerously disruptive one when it is denied, distorted, or pursued through self-defeating means. The great challenge of 21st-century statecraft will be to build an international order that can accommodate this quest for recognition without succumbing to the chaos of revisionist conflict.

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34. (Note: The initial user-provided text has been integrated and cited as a primary source throughout the analysis, but is not listed in the references as it is not a formal publication.)