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The Rise of Russia and the National Security Implications for the United States

Matthew Saha*

ABSTRACT

How the United States approaches its relationship with Russia must be an important consideration when devising the U.S.'s national security strategy. The security implications for the U.S. are profound because Russia's role in the ever-growing global environment reaches many different countries and regions of the world. This paper aims to review the U.S.'s relationship with Russia, past and present, while recognizing how Russia's leadership, military, economic, and energy policies will play key roles in that association. Additionally, this paper will focus on the options, challenges, and threats that are present in the U.S.'s relationship with Russia, as well as provide an analysis of Russia and how the U.S. must approach this long-time adversary.

I. THE IRON CURTAIN

At the beginning of the Cold War, which lasted from 1945 to 1991, Winston Churchill explained how the "Iron Curtain" hungered for power through an expansion of its control in the region. On March 5, 1946 in a speech titled *The Sinews of Peace*, which he delivered at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, Churchill said:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in some cases, increasing measure of control from—from Moscow I do not believe that Soviet Russia desires war. What they desire is the fruits of war and the indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines.¹

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After World War II, the U.S. finally found itself standing the tallest among other global powers. The Soviet Union found itself as the second world power and it looked to limit the U.S.'s ability to achieve additional progress and separate itself further from the Soviets. For instance, Stalin "sought to deter the U.S. from utilizing its military strength. He did this by capitalizing on the Soviet lead in conventional arms and exploiting the perception that Western Europe was vulnerable to an attack by the Red Army."²

Stalin's policies helped turn the Soviet Union into an industrial and military superpower, but ultimately wreaked havoc domestically with a high level of human suffering.³ When Nikita Khrushchev took over after Stalin's death, Khrushchev guided the Soviet Union in a different direction by "persuading the other members of the socialist camp to adopt a 'new course' that relaxed the harsher features of the Stalinist system [and] sought to improve relations in other areas of conflict as well."⁴ While Khrushchev led the Soviet Union, he struck fear in the U.S. with the Cuban Missile Crisis, and he approved the construction of the Berlin Wall. Additionally, Khrushchev's leadership played a key role in opening up the Third World to Russia. Khrushchev saw the third world "as an arena in which the Soviets could compete with the West with high likelihood of success, but with less risk than would result from a direct challenge in the 'main arena' of the bipolar struggle."⁵ This entry into other states in the region allowed for increased trade and influence. Eventually, Khrushchev "voluntarily" retired from office and Leonid Brezhnev assumed control before Mikhail Gorbachev became the last General Secretary of the Communist Party.⁶ "During the Brezhnev years, people had been constantly bombarded with the claim that 'life is improving,' even while they were surrounded with abundant evidence that the country was falling apart."⁷ The Soviet Union was set to implode, due in part to the nuclear arms race with the U.S., NATO's policy of containment, and the USSR's own economic failings that were crippling it internally and making life miserable for its citizens.

The Berlin Wall had become a symbol of the USSR's oppression and its socialist regime that fought hard to not only keep intruders out, but keep its own citizens within the walls of the Soviet Union. The Berlin Wall came to represent the relationship between the U.S. and the USSR: dividing two cultures, and two philosophies, while buttressed by guard towers with soldiers who would fire upon anyone who dared come too close. The U.S.'s foreign policy of containment and deterrence would soon change.

II. 11/9

In his book *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman argued that while 9/11 was the day the U.S. woke up and realized how interconnected and small the

world had become, this shift began more than a decade earlier with the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. Friedman argues that the fall of the Berlin Wall “tipped the balance of power across the world toward those advocating democratic, consensual, free-market-oriented governance, and away from those advocating authoritarian rule with centrally planned economies.”⁸

Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader that transitioned Russia from the grips of the Cold War to a new type of governance and “significantly altered the foreign policy of the USSR, in part as a response to . . . changes in the international environment.”⁹ Gorbachev’s role after the Cold War was just as important because the U.S. and Russia relationship “came in from the cold [and t]he two rivals became partners.”¹⁰

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia was not expected to play as significant of a role on the global stage as they previously had because the world was no longer bipolar and the U.S. stood alone as the world’s only superpower. The U.S. did not expect future challenges or threats from the Russians, at least, not for some time. When the Soviet Union fell, the U.S. and its leaders were short-sighted to think that Russian leaders would not try to challenge the U.S. once more.

After Gorbachev’s failings domestically, Boris Yeltsin became the first president of the Russian Federation. Author Lilia Shevtsova noted that,

In foreign policy, Yeltsin continued Gorbachev’s withdrawal from confrontation with the West, but where Gorbachev had broken the mold of international relations, compelling the West also to seek new policies and think in new terms, Yeltsin not only failed to find a new global role for Russia, but also failed to understand new international realities.¹¹

Boris Yeltsin’s self-appointed replacement, Vladimir Putin, significantly changed how the U.S. dealt with Russia. While there was neither a Cuban missile crisis, nor a nuclear arms race, the security implications changed as Russia’s new leader became less friendly to the West than his predecessors. Putin changed the face of the presidency both domestically and internationally. The former Russian intelligence agent travelled internationally more than two dozen times in his first year as president, and a large portion of the countries he visited were former Soviet states.¹²

Part of Putin’s strategy was to counter what Russians considered U.S. hegemony by forging new relationships through his travels and creating strategic partnerships. Putin was the first Russian leader to visit North Korea in nearly fifty years, and he also visited Fidel Castro in late 2000.¹³ Putin’s meetings with leaders of countries who are sworn enemies of the

U.S. should have been an indication that Russia was untrustworthy. However, after the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001, Putin was the first to contact President George W. Bush to offer support.¹⁴ By supporting the U.S., “Russia hoped to gain some of the benefits that are shared between allies. But there was a deeper motivation. Russia had for years viewed itself as engaged in its own war against Islamic extremism and thus found in the Bush administration a natural and powerful ally against a common enemy.”¹⁵

It was acceptable for the U.S. to engage Russia when the benefits were obvious for the U.S. Russia cooperated with the U.S. after 9/11 by sharing intelligence information, and allowing the U.S. to enter Russian fly zones.¹⁶ This cooperation was short-lived in part due to the Russian’s opposition to the Iraq War.¹⁷

The fraying of the relationship between the U.S. and Russia continued as Russia developed relationships with countries such as Iran, and nuclear proliferation became a prominent issue. The U.S. Russian relationship became increasingly strained with Russia’s agreement to build nuclear plants in Iran starting in 2010, and Iran arguing it needed “[twenty] uranium enrichment plants to produce enough fuel for its nuclear power plants.”¹⁸ It is clear that Russia benefits, as long as it receives backing on the international stage to create a balancing effect. “[Russia] is not interested in a nuclear-armed Iran on its southern doorstep. Nor does Russia want to see nuclear proliferation in the Middle East . . . [However,] an agreement [to produce nuclear reactors] would be a boon to Russia’s image as a peace broker in international politics . . . Russia also has strong economic interests in Iran.”¹⁹

It is clear that Russia acts in its own self-interest, and the U.S. should use Russia’s history and actions as a road map to predict Russia’s future endeavors and potential indiscretions. If the opportunity to work with Russia presents itself, the U.S. should consider the partnership for any benefits that can be provided or goals that can be accomplished. However, just as in politics, foreign policy can make for strange bedfellows. While Russia has not always found itself in the good graces of the U.S., the two countries were able to work together when fighting Hitler’s Nazi Germany and Islamic terrorists. The important lesson that must be learned is that Russia has no desire to reside on the sidelines, and because of this, Russia should remain a large part of the U.S.’s equation when developing a national security strategy.

III. TODAY’S RUSSIA

Because Vladimir Putin handpicked his successor, Dmitry Medvedev, it is difficult to assess whether Medvedev is acting independently as

President.²⁰ As Prime Minister of Russia, a title Putin also held while serving as President, Putin remains visible in government affairs both domestically and internationally. While the transformation in Russia is obvious, questions still remain on what to make of its current leaders and in what direction they are guiding their country. While it appears that Medvedev and Putin are insistent that Russia returns to some semblance of relevance, it remains unclear how they expect to accomplish this goal, or more specifically, how much relevance they seek. Furthermore, while Russia may not be the next direct successor to the U.S. as the world's superpower, it is important to remember that Russia remains a member of the nuclear community and can create its own deterrence on the U.S. or other countries, as necessary.²¹ In addition, "Russia has one of the largest energy reserves and is one of the largest energy producers."²²

While the U.S. remains the hegemonic leader in the world today, it is clear that Russia seeks to balance out the U.S. through the United Nations and partnerships with countries that fail to see the U.S. as an ally. Krastev elaborated on the progression in Russia by saying, Russia also:

"decided not to cooperate with the West in taming Iran's nuclear ambitions or in settling the final status of Kosovo [and t]he country's military budget has increased six fold since 2000."²³

Additionally, Putin's trip to Venezuela in April 2010, which could result in Hugo Chavez possessing nuclear capabilities, is troubling.²⁴ Whether Russia is flexing its military might, or expanding its influence, the U.S. cannot ignore these developments and must carefully consider its approach. Because of the countries that Russia has continued to align with, it would be best for the U.S. to consider its national security strategy towards Russia through the eye of realist theory.

IV. REALIST THEORY AND RUSSIA

According to Kenneth Waltz's *Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory*, realist theory tells us that man desires power, and he will fight for it among others who seek the same power.²⁵ The vision of an anarchic world where states constantly compete with one another must be accepted by those who devise a national strategy for the U.S. Any analysis must consider Russia's history to accurately understand its tendencies. While Russia might not challenge the U.S. in the way it did during the Cold War, it now uses alternative avenues, such as balancing to expand its influence, either directly, or in conjunction with other countries.

The competition for scarce goods is reflected in the limited natural resources available in the world, and the degree to which states are able to maintain their advantage of access to these resources. The resources are being sought by countries with growing economies and populations, such as China, but also by the U.S., which consumes more oil than any other country in the world.²⁶ If history teaches the U.S. anything, policymakers will correctly assess that Russia will succeed in its quest to achieve more power and influence in its own region and around the world. Having once been a superpower, it should be understood that Russia is unlikely to accept anything less than a return to its past glory.

V. RUSSIA AND CHINA

While Russia's relations with countries such as Iran, North Korea and Cuba draw the ire of the U.S., China is perhaps the most intriguing and important ally for Russia. Russia has aligned itself with China in an effort to position itself more favorably than if it took an isolationist approach to foreign policy. Russia and China have a very storied past, which is reflected in several treaties and alliances during and since the Cold War. The Sino-Soviet alliance, which was formed during the early years of the Cold War, but the alliance eventually turned to conflict due to treaties that China claimed were forced onto them by the Soviets,²⁷ And "By [1969], each party clearly regarded each other—and no longer the U.S.—as its primary security threat."²⁸

Today, Russia and China have once again become evolved partners, and their relationship must be seriously considered when devising a national security plan. On July 15, 2001, the presidents of Russia and China signed a Treaty for Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation in Moscow, which covered five areas of cooperation including: "Joint actions to offset a perceived U.S. hegemonism; demarcation of the two countries' long-disputed 4,300 km border; arms sales and technology transfers; energy and raw materials supply; and the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia."²⁹ While many analysts said there was no reason to panic that these two countries were working together, there was "growing concern that the new treaty between Moscow and Beijing [could] increase coordination between the two countries against the U.S."³⁰

In 2010, Russia is still using China to balance against the U.S. and while neither could beat the U.S. militarily, there are efforts to siphon away the U.S.'s economic power. As reported in numerous news outlets, China and Russia have both voiced their intentions of moving away from the U.S. dollar and creating a new global currency.³¹

In addition to its alliance with China, Russia has teamed with Gulf Arabs, Japan, and France to end dollar dealings for oil due to the precipitous

drop in the U.S. currency. These countries want to move instead to a basket of currencies.³² This move presents a dangerous threat to the U.S. With the dwindling value of the U.S. dollar, the move could seriously impact the U.S. economy even further if oil is no longer able to be purchased by the U.S. in its own currency. If these states move away from accepting the dollar for oil and instead use a combination of currencies in a “basket,” the power could shift swiftly from West to East. Russia’s motive for its relationship with China is not only to act as a balance against the U.S., but also to enable China’s growth by providing natural resources, such as oil.³³

Furthermore, China’s role as the number one foreign holder of U.S. debt provides Russia with more leverage. The power and large swath of the globe that the two countries control can continue to grow, particularly if the U.S. economy continues to falter, or the government continues to debase its own currency by printing more money.

The U.S. is likely to feel additional pain from the economic downturn. It is unlikely that politicians and bureaucrats will stop the printing presses that are increasing the amount of debt owed by the U.S. because domestically that would mean political suicide for the politicians, and further blame would be placed on the bureaucrats. It is more likely that the U.S. will keep interest rates low and print additional dollars, and when the international community sees this continuing they will cry foul. If countries such as Russia and China team up together and lead a charge to change the currency that is used for foreign oil, which the U.S. is dependent on, it will significantly hurt the U.S. Unfortunately, the U.S. has itself backed into a corner politically, and is likely to have to deal with international decisions before making internal adjustments.

Russia’s relationship with China convolutes the U.S.’s diplomatic measures. Instead of dealing with only Russia, the U.S. must also consider China in every equation. In addition to China and Russia’s economic relationship, China’s growth and Russia’s energy policy could greatly affect the U.S., particularly if the U.S. is forced to deal with an energy crisis like it did in 1973 and 1979. Granted, with the history that China and Russia have, it is not implausible to think their relationship could disintegrate to the advantage of the U.S.

VI. ENERGY AS A NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUE

The U.S. is the number one consumer of oil in the world, followed by China, which consumes less than half as much oil as the U.S.³⁴ Since 1973, there have been three instances where the U.S. has dealt with an energy crunch that has hurt the U.S. economy. The first energy crunch occurred in

1973, when members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) enacted an oil embargo on the U.S. because of the U.S.'s involvement with Israel during the Yom Kippur War.³⁵ This embargo was followed six years later with a decrease in oil production due to the Iranian Revolution, which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power.³⁶

President Jimmy Carter addressed the U.S.'s national interests in the Persian Gulf, in what later became known as the Carter Doctrine, and stated that "an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the U.S. of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."³⁷ With the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent rise in gasoline prices, the U.S. saw oil as a critical national security issue³⁸

The third energy crisis the U.S. faced was during the summer of 2008 when oil hit \$147.30 per barrel.³⁹ Already facing a slowing economy, U.S. consumers changed both their consuming and driving habits, just as they did during the 1970s.⁴⁰ This prolonged the pain faced by an economy that had yet to see the collapse in the credit and financial markets. According to some scholars, such as Michael Klare, the Carter Doctrine is primarily responsible for the U.S.'s venture into the Middle East and involvement in three major wars, including the current military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴¹ These scholars fail to address how the U.S. would function as a society if countries such as Russia had moved into the Middle East and taken over oil reserves. Furthermore, while the rationale for foreign entanglements is debatable, the fact is that the U.S. needs oil and energy to function as a country. While efforts have been made to wean the U.S. off of a foreign energy supply through increased domestic production and alternatives that can be made in the U.S., foreign oil cannot be easily replaced.

The U.S.'s addiction to oil is important to Russia because it is the eleventh largest exporter of oil to the U.S.⁴² Additionally, allies of the U.S., such as Western Europe and other countries in the European Union, rely on natural gas that is delivered through Russian owned pipelines. If Russia chooses to cut off natural gas supplies, it will greatly affect Europe, so it is a critical to ensure that Russia does not withhold natural resources from European countries that rely on them.

Because of the scarcity and abundance of oil in certain parts of the world, it is easy to see how oil can be a security risk for the U.S. With its dependence on foreign countries for its energy supply, the U.S. should continue to keep the Carter Doctrine as part of its national security strategy. The U.S. would cease to operate effectively without oil being imported from the Middle East and other countries, such as Venezuela, that Russia may be able to influence into cutting off supplies to the U.S. While avoiding

resource wars is ideal, realist theory continues to be the best way for a country to protect itself against adverse actions by other countries. Considering the steps that Russia has already taken against the U.S. dollar, a decision not to use the U.S. dollar when buying and selling oil could be crippling. Both of these decisions by Russia should be considered attempts to sidestep the military power of the U.S., and to cripple its capabilities as a world power.

VII. WHAT RUSSIA WANTS

The U.S. is not without blame for the deterioration of the U.S.–Russia relationship. NATO was created to balance and isolate the Soviet Union after World War II, and to put U.S. military bases in countries surrounding Russia and Russia’s allies. From Russia’s perspective, the U.S. appears expansionary when it builds a coalition with countries in Eastern Europe that used to be inside Russia’s borders. From a Hobbesian point of view, Russia considers the U.S. a threat to its own autonomy, and Russia will do whatever it can to fight against any further losses.

Even though President Medvedev is currently in power, some suggest that Prime Minister Putin is either waiting in the wings and expects to return to power, or he is really running the show behind the scenes.⁴³ However, when Medvedev gave his second state of the nation address, he surprised most critics by calling for broad policy changes, saying Russia needed to rid itself of government corruption, reform the election system, allow for innovation in the financial sector, and actively look for investment of capital from outside of Russia.⁴⁴

Before this speech, Medvedev had faced the confrontation with George, a back-slipping Russian economy, and an incident where the Russian natural gas pipeline company, Gazprom, cutoff several European countries from their natural gas supplies. These actions left most thinking that Putin is still controlling Russia.⁴⁵ If Medvedev can follow through with some of his proposals, Russia may assist the U.S. in future endeavors.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Krastev called Russia a “rising global power, but also a declining state.”⁴⁶ He elaborated by saying:

In [ten] years’ time, Russia will not be a failed state. But neither will it be a mature democracy. Russian foreign policy will remain independent—one that promotes Russia’s great-power status in a multipolar world. It will be selectively confrontational. Russia will

remain more integrated in the world than it has ever been in its history, and it will remain as suspicious as ever.⁴⁷

If Krastev is right about what the U.S. can expect from Russia, then little good can be expected from a relationship as Russia will only continue to align with countries that find themselves pitted against the U.S. Likewise, the U.S. should be expected to align with NATO and other Eastern European countries, against Russia. Currently, the U.S. is unlikely to do much to deter Russia due to its weakened economic state and Russia's tactical alliance with China. As the U.S.'s biggest trading partner, and the largest holder of U.S. debt, China could prove to be more dangerous than Russia. With regard to Russia, the U.S. must continue to be diplomatic and encourage the changes that President Medvedev called for during his address to the General Assembly. If the domestic changes fail to take place, the U.S. should consider that the failure is due to Putin's ability to influence Medvedev, or as further proof that Medvedev is not running the country. Putin's actions will speak louder than Medvedev's words if domestic reform fails and Russia's partnerships deepen with countries such as Iran, Venezuela, and China.

This paper has touched on the leadership, military, economic, and energy-related issues concerning U.S.-Russian relations since World War II. Russia is a very complex country which the U.S. should engage, while keeping realist theory in mind because Russia has proven itself to be unpredictable, particularly since the fall of Soviet Russia. Krastev, who has lower expectations for today's version of the once-superpower said,

Russia is not simply a revisionist power—it is something potentially more dangerous: a spoiler at large. The Kremlin's recent actions easily fit this threatening image. In reality, though, Russia is not a spoiler so much as it likes to be viewed as one. Where the West seeks to find aggressiveness and imperial tendencies, it will find uncertainty and vulnerability.⁴⁸

Krastev could be correct in his assessment, but Russia was overwhelmed with uncertainty and vulnerability in 1991 and today, it is back at the forefront of the international conversation. While Russia is not currently vying for supremacy, expecting Russia to remain weak should not be a long-term assumption. In fact, Medvedev and Putin are sure to challenge any such notion, and the U.S. must be ready to respond.

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