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Russia says no: Power, status, and emotions in foreign policy

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ABSTRACT

Since 2003, Russian foreign behavior has become much more assertive and volatile toward the West, often rejecting U.S. diplomatic initiatives and overreacting to perceived slights. This essay explains Russia's new assertiveness using social psychological hypotheses on the relationship between power, status, and emotions. Denial of respect to a state is humiliating. When a state loses status, the emotions experienced depend on the perceived cause of this loss. When a state perceives that others are responsible for its loss, it shows *anger*. The belief that others have unjustly used their power to deny the state its appropriate position arouses *vengefulness*. If a state believes that its loss of status is due to its own failure to live up to expectations, the elites will express *shame*. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has displayed anger at the U.S. unwillingness to grant it the status to which it believes it is entitled, especially during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and most recently Russia's takeover of Crimea and the 2014 Ukrainian Crisis. We can also see elements of vengefulness in Russia's reaction to recognition of Kosovo, U.S. missile defense plans, the Magnitsky act, and the Snowden affair.

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Since 2003, Russian foreign behavior has become much more assertive and volatile toward the West, often rejecting U.S. diplomatic initiatives and overreacting to perceived slights. Russia's war with Georgia in 2008 and its rapid takeover of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 have generated heightened Western concerns and a backlash against Russia's strategy in international affairs. Does Russia's increased assertiveness mark the beginning of a policy of “balancing” against U.S. power? Is Russia's tougher diplomacy a necessary corollary to the growing centralization of its domestic politics or a consequence of Russia's improved economic position? Is it an integral part of an “energy superpower” strategy supposedly promoted by the country's economic and political elites?

While Russian power is a patchwork of formidable strengths and glaring weaknesses, there is little doubt, as exemplified by the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, that Moscow is “more than capable of playing the role of spoiler” in international politics (Govella and Aggarwal, 2012, p. 136). Russia as a veto-wielding member of the United Nations (U.N.) Security Council can block intervention or economic sanctions against problem states. Russia is an important variable, a “wild card” in American attempts to integrate China into the Western order. It is also a crucial player in the emerging competition over hydrocarbon reserves in the Arctic region. Finally, Russia is an essential player in efforts to deal with global warming, energy security, and instability in the vast Eurasian land mass that adjoins Europe and East Asia (Legvold, 2012).

Some *realpolitik*-inclined analysts (Shleifer and Treisman, 2011) view Russian tensions with the West as reflecting the absence of shared interests. Russia's policy has been “purposeful, cautious and—even when misguided—reasonably

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consistent” (ibid., p.131). Russia’s cooperation with the United States, however, has varied significantly, ranging from Vladimir Putin’s strategic assistance to the United States in the War in Afghanistan and the New START to Russia’s exercise of its veto on Syria and refusal to initiate a new round of arms reductions. At times Russia’s overreacting to perceived slights has undermined Russian interests in attracting foreign investment to facilitate modernization.

In this essay we outline a theoretical framework for explaining ostensible shifts and vacillation in Russia’s foreign policy. Realism would expect Russia to assert its predominance in neighboring areas where it would come into conflict with the United States and China. Liberals would attribute Putin’s anti-American stance to his return to authoritarianism and domestic repression and the corresponding need for an external enemy. A review of Russia’s actions since the end of the Cold War, however, does not lend support to either power or domestic politics as the main source of variation in Russian foreign policy. Instead, Russia’s stance toward the United States has been strongly influenced by the degree of external validation of its self-image as a great power. Russia is striving for enhanced global recognition while at the same time retaining its national identity. Russia reacts strongly, at times emotionally, to perceived humiliation and disrespect. We argue that a better understanding of Russia’s status concerns is essential not only to understand Moscow’s volatile behavior but to encourage its cooperation in global governance.

Our theoretical argument derives from social identity theory (SIT) (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) in social psychology, which argues that social groups strive for a positively distinctive identity and offers hypotheses concerning the identity management strategies used by groups to enhance their relative position.

Extrapolating the identity management techniques predicted by SIT to status-seeking in the international arena, we argue that states may enhance their relative standing by imitating more advanced states (strategy of social mobility), trying to displace the higher-ranked state (strategy of social competition), or finding a new arena in which to be superior (strategy of social creativity). Emotions accompanying aggrieved status (in particular anger and vengefulness) can explain the *intensity* of social competition as well as the breakdown of social creativity efforts. We apply these theoretical insights to Russian status-seeking since the end of the Cold War as a plausibility probe.

1. Explaining Russia’s assertiveness

What explains Russia’s abrupt shifts and prickly sensitivity to alleged slights and insults? Available theoretical explanations account neither for the pattern of changes in Russian policy, nor for the tone of grievance frequently adopted by Russian elites.

Russia’s increased assertiveness might be viewed as the inception of long-awaited “balancing” against U.S. predominant power. Russia’s opposition to U.S. initiatives in the United Nations (U.N.) could be described as “soft balancing,” that is, coalition-building and diplomatic bargaining within international institutions to constrain the dominant power (Layne, 2006). On the other hand, a genuine balancing strategy for Russia would entail competition with the United States for predominant influence in Eurasia while forming an anti-U.S. coalition with China and other non-Western states, as advocated by Russian Eurasianists, but Russia has avoided commitments to these states (Tsygankov, 2008, 2014). An even more pessimistic interpretation argues that Moscow is trying to overturn the post-Cold War order, restore its position as a global superpower, and reassert control over its lost empire in a modern guise (Bugajski, 2009; Lucas, 2014). While Russia’s takeover of Crimea and its behavior during the 2014 Ukrainian crisis seem on the surface to validate this “offensive realist” reading of Russian foreign policy, Russia’s determination to prevent further enlargement of NATO and its demand for a *droit de regard* (historically, an intrinsic aspect of great power status in international politics), should not be confused with imperial expansionism. Russia’s aspiring for greater regional influence may lead to spoiler behavior, but not full-scale revisionism.

Others charge that Russia’s assertiveness reflects the “energy superpower” strategy, an effort to use Russia’s energy exports as an instrument of power and prestige (Baev, 2008; Goldman, 2008). It is difficult to see how Russian elites could reasonably expect to carry out such a policy, given Russia’s greater dependence on the European energy market (for two-thirds of its foreign exchange revenue) than Europe’s on Russian gas (about 25 percent of their imports) (Trenin, 2007, p. 107). Relative changes in the market price of oil and gas are imperfectly correlated with Russia’s overall stance toward the West. Russia’s recent chilly relations with the United States coincide with the emergence of U.S. shale gas, which has lowered the market price of gas (Herszenhorn and Kramer, 2013).

Another explanation rooted in the liberal tradition and popular among prominent Russia watchers views anti-Westernism in Moscow’s foreign policy as an attempt to distract public attention from the growing centralization of Russia’s domestic politics and shift towards authoritarianism, camouflaged as “sovereign democracy” or discourse about national specificity (Shevtsova, 2007, 2010). Despite his anti-American rhetoric, though, Putin has continued the policy of allowing U.S. military and supplies to transit through Russian territory to and from Afghanistan and has cooperated on important geopolitical problems such as removing chemical weapons from Syria and negotiating the future of Iran’s nuclear program.

A number of scholars have attributed the deterioration of Russian relations with the United States and Europe to Russia’s desire to recover its status as a great power and reaction to perceived humiliations by the United States, going back to the 1990s when Russia’s wishes on international security issues were ignored (Stent, 2014; Sakwa, 2011; Simes, 2007; Trenin, 2006; Tsygankov, 2008). Building on that insight, we attempt to place Russia’s status aspirations within a well-developed theoretical framework from social psychology that relates social groups’ desire for status to their strategies for achieving a positively distinctive identity – Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Larson and Shevchenko, 2003, 2010; Clunan, 2009).

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