



The Russia-NATO mistrust: Ethnophobia and the double expansion to contain “the Russian Bear”



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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Russian-Western mistrust persists due to historical and cultural developments with roots in the Cold War. The post-Cold War imbalance of power served to exacerbate the problem. The United States emerged as the world's superpower acting on perceived fears of Russia, whereas Russia's undermined capabilities dictated a defensive, rather than a hegemonic response. The paper analyzes the decision to expand NATO by excluding Russia from the process. It also asks why the process suddenly stopped in 2008. What changed the West's mind about the expansion was not a revised perception of Russia, but rather concern with its growing power and assertiveness as revealed by the Kremlin's use of force during the Caucasus' war.

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“NATO must not lose its original purpose: to contain the Russian bear.” (Safire, 2004)

Introduction

The end of the Cold War has not solved the problem of mistrust between Russia and Western countries; the two sides' definitions of national interests have been largely incompatible. While Western governments have expected Russia to follow their lead insecurity policies, Russia has insisted on equal relationships and viewed the unwillingness of the West to accommodate the Kremlin as threatening or disrespectful to Russia's interests. The recent efforts to “reset” U.S.–Russian and NATO–Russian relations have yet to produce evidence of robust cooperation between the sides. For instance, NATO has declined Russia's invitations to jointly address the security vacuum in Eurasia by pooling resources with the Moscow-dominant Collective Security Treaty Organization. Progress on cooperation with the Missile Defense System is also quite limited, with NATO and Russia increasingly pursuing two separate tracks of developing their security infrastructures. Finally, Russia has demonstrated ambivalence over the Western military presence in Afghanistan. The Kremlin understands that Russia alone cannot secure the area, yet some of its statements reveal that it views the West's role as potentially destabilizing and undermining of Russia's geopolitical influence in the strategically-important region (Tsygankov, 2012).

This paper argues that Russian-Western mistrust persists due to historical and cultural developments with roots in the Cold War. The Constructivist theory of international relations assists us in understanding the two sides' relationship by pointing to the significance of “the other” in the process of forming self-identity (Campbell, 1992; Doty, 1996; Neumann, 1999; Hopf, 2002; Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004; Clunan, 2009; Pouliot, 2010). Although scholars have often explained the process vis-à-vis the West's concerns with preserving peace and stability in Europe, it is equally important to understand the uneasiness of the Western self about the intentions of the Russian other. Allies for only the brief period of the Second World War and enemies for almost half a century, the two sides could not overcome some of the old perceptions and stereotypes of viewing each other as a potentially dangerous nation. The United States insisted on reshaping the world according to the

American image by promoting neo-liberal economic policies and NATO-centered security institutions in Europe and Eurasia. Russia too acted from an ethnophobic perception of the West, which was strengthened by the Western inconsiderate policies. Acting on the old Soviet phobias over the Western nations' intentions, the Kremlin sought to balance the United States' "global hegemony" by integrating the former Soviet region under a tighter control from Moscow and establishing stronger ties with China, India, and the Islamic world. The country's National Security Concept of 1997 recommended that Russia maintained equal distance in relations to the "global European and Asian economic and political actors" and presented a positive program for the integration of CIS efforts in the security area (Shakleyina, 2002).

The post-Cold War imbalance of power served to exacerbate the problem. That the United States emerged as the world's only superpower removed some of the older constraints for acting on perceived fears of Russia. The West's promotion of its favored economic and security policies assumed that Russia would eventually accept them. The humiliated Russia refused to follow the West's lead, but was in no position to challenge the Western policies. The Soviet disintegration led to the emergence of a whole series of new conflicts in the Russian periphery. Russia lost one sixth of its territory, its economy shrank by some 50% and the state was divided by powerful oligarchs. Russia's undermined capabilities and the new context of growing disorder, corruption, and poverty that had resulted from the Soviet breakup and government's reforms dictated a defensive, rather than a hegemonic response.¹

Both sides' international policies may be analyzed using the proposed framework of perceiving the other as a potential threat. For the purpose of this paper, I concentrate on the United States' decision to expand NATO by inviting Russia's neighbors to join the alliance while excluding Russia from the process. In addition to analyzing the double expansion of the Western alliance, I ask why the process suddenly stopped in 2008. I consider the end of the enlargement to be an important factor for theoretical reasons. If ethnophobia underlies the U.S. decision about eastward expansion of the alliance, then only a change in Russia's relative power is likely to stop the process. I argue that what changed the West's mind about the expansion was rather concern with Russia's growing power and assertiveness, as revealed by the Kremlin's use of force during the Caucasus' war.

The paper is organized in the following way. The next section explains the formation of ethnic prejudices, the political process of exploiting ethnophobia in foreign policy debates, and the relationships between ethnic stereotypes and power capabilities in forming state international decisions. The following section describes the perception of the Cold War and the role it has played in forming the U.S.–Russia stereotypes of each other. I then describe the process of NATO expansion and why it took place despite Russia's desire to become a security partner of the West. The final two sections analyze how the process was promoted by the concerted efforts of ethno-political entrepreneurs in the United States and how it was viewed in Russia. The conclusion summarizes the analysis and draws implications for scholarship.

Ethnocentrism, ethnophobia, and international relations

As humans jointly meet and overcome external challenges, they assume a common identity and a common sense of their historical origins, accomplishments, and losses. As a result, they develop what scholars define as an ethnocentric perception of the world, in which values of the self tend to be viewed as superior to those of the other(s). Defined as the belief that one's own culture represents the natural and best way to do things (Van der Dennen, 1987, 1), ethnocentrism is rooted in certain historically reproduced institutional, societal, and discursive contexts. The power of ethnocentrism is therefore difficult to overcome. Even when human groups are not particularly successful in advancing their values in the world, they are not easily turned to accepting those values that have not been central to their own socialization. Instead, they are more likely to cling to those values that have been at the core of their group's existence.

Historically, ethnic prejudices take on different forms. Whereas traditional ethnocentrism is focused on culture, language, or religion, modern ethnocentrism is associated with loyalty to a nation and national political system. Modern conditions, with their exclusive boundaries and the centrality of state, produce a new form of human attachment by giving rise, in Max Weber's words, "to groups with joint memories which often have had a deeper impact than ties of merely cultural, linguistic, or ethnic community" (Weber, 1978, 903). Nevertheless, even while serving as the institutional fabric of modern societies (Deutsch, 1979; Gellner, 1983; Giddens, 1985; Smith, 1993; Haas, 1997), this nation-state-based ethnocentrism does not fully break with its original traditional roots. Modern nations have grown out of traditional communities by building upon their way of relating to those outside the home group. Indeed, the modern conditions of exclusive territoriality have served to reinforce the old self/other dichotomy and failed to come to terms with the self/other dialectic (Chakrabarty, 2000; Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004).

Externally, ethnocentrism may manifest itself in various forms of ethnic prejudices and hidden or openly expressed phobias. In the ethnocentric presentation of reality, the self-centrism and the other-phobia are therefore two sides of the same coin. Ethnocentrism and ethnophobias are fundamentally connected by constituting the inner and outer expressions of a group's values. When a human group grows in size and develops successfully, it has a tendency to assume that others will follow its lead. In this case, the self tends to suppress its phobias of the other by denying the other its cultural difference.

¹ The literature on Russia's relations with the West after the Cold War is rapidly growing. In addition to items listed in the previous footnote, see Trofimenko (1998), Black (2000), Cohen (2001), Goldgeier and McFaul (2003), Tsygankov (2004, 2006), Bowker (2007), Antonenko and Pinnick (2008), Thorun (2008), Belopolsky (2009), Mankoff (2009), De Haas (2010).

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