

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

“The laughing third man in a fight”: Stalin's use of the wedge strategy

Robert P. Hager Jr.

Instructional Television, Los Angeles Mission College, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Ideology
World War II
Stalin
Balancing
Wedge strategy

ABSTRACT

Although much IR theory focuses on balancing, this paper examines a version of the wedge strategy, what Stalin allegedly called being “the laughing third man in a fight.” This is the practice of advancing one's goals by setting up other states to fight each other. The first case study is Soviet strategy in Europe from September 1939 until June 1941. The second is Soviet strategy in the Far East in 1941–45. What I am looking at here is a policy of deliberately encouraging the start of a war and/or aiding its prolongation in order to weaken both sides. The two case studies indicate that the Soviet Union used such a strategy at times in place of the usual forms of balancing, discussed in the international relations literature. Additionally, analysis of Moscow's conduct, statements by Soviet leaders, and the policies of a number of foreign communist parties indicate that, in addition to any security goals, Stalin's agenda included furthering the USSR's goal as a revolutionary state, even though this had at times to be constrained by *realpolitik*.

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Discussion of divide and rule tactics in international relations has generally focused on undermining an adversary's alliances or undermining his attempts to recruit allies. For example, [Crawford \(2011\)](#)'s study of the “wedge strategy” defines it as “a state's attempt to prevent, break up, or weaken a threatening or blocking alliance at an acceptable cost.”

This article attempts to take the discussion of the wedge strategy a step forward by examining *conflict promotion*, a strategy by which one state advances its goals by setting up other states to confront each other. Soviet founder V. I. Lenin had argued that wars among capitalist states were inevitable and that this would lead to attacks on the Soviet state. Stalin would avoid these conflicts until it was opportune to enter them like “the laughing third man in a fight ([Gellately, 2013](#)).” In his diary, Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian Secretary General of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), summarized Stalin's attitude to the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe in September 1939 as follows

A war is on between two groups of capitalist countries- (poor and rich as regards colonies, raw material and so forth)- for the redistribution of the world, for the domination of the world! - We see nothing wrong in their having a good hard fight and weakening each other. It would be fine if at the hands of Germany the position of the richest capitalist countries (especially England) were shaken. Hitler, without understanding it or desiring it, is shaking and undermining the capitalist system The next step is to nudge the other side forward ([Firsov et al., 2014](#)).

The point about “undermining the capitalist system” indicates not only a desire to weaken other states but also a desire to see the war lead to revolution. One would in fact expect such views from the leaders of the Soviet Union. The founder, Lenin

E-mail addresses: hagerrp@lamission.edu, hager53@aol.com.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2016.11.002>

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Please cite this article in press as: Hager, R.P., Jr., “The laughing third man in a fight”: Stalin's use of the wedge strategy, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2016.11.002>

had based his ideology on a virulent hatred of the bourgeoisie and of the Tsarist state. His desire to destroy them was coupled with a lack of moral qualms and a capacity for cruelty (Pipes, 1991). Lenin's pupil, J.V. Stalin, as early as 1920 drew the historical conclusion that it was Russia's defeats by Japan in 1904–05 and by Germany in 1914–18 that had enabled the revolution to triumph in Russia (Kotkin, 2014). Raack (1995) argues that this technique of dealing with rival powers by setting them against each other is what one would expect from a man who had consolidated his domestic power by playing one faction against the other.

However, the Soviet dictator was not the first to have used conflict promotion. Sometimes a state has used conflict promotion for largely defensive purposes, such as ensuring that other states do not form coalitions against it. This will be termed *defensive conflict promotion*. Imperial Germany's Chancellor Otto von Bismarck used such an approach after German unification in 1871 until he was compelled to resign in March 1890. Although quite willing to exploit the disputes that arose between other states, Bismarck does not seem to have wanted any conflict between them to upset a peace in Europe that left Germany the strongest power. This was a policy pursued by a status quo power for defensive purposes (Kagan, 1995).

Although one would expect defensive conflict promotion to be used by status quo powers, states that wish to alter the status quo might go so far as to adopt a strategy of encouraging others to fight. This will be termed *offensive conflict promotion*. Persia's role in the Peloponnesian War of 432–404 BCE provides an example of this. It was Persian assistance during the final years of that conflict (413–404 BCE) which enabled Sparta to defeat the Athenians but in a way that would enable the Persians to realize their ambitions to regain territories that they had lost in Asia Minor and to weaken the Greek city-states in general (Kagan, 2003).

Although the Peloponnesian War serves to show that the basic idea behind offensive conflict promotion has been around since ancient times, it also has occurred to decision-makers in more recent eras. Crawford (2011) has noted a major failed attempt: Imperial Germany's 1917 effort to embroil Mexico in war with the United States. Ulam (1974) noted that, in 1941, then-Senator Harry S Truman, among others in the West, expressed the view that the Third Reich and the USSR should be encouraged to destroy each other.

The above discussion illustrates something about world politics. Although attempts to advance a state's goals by divide and rule tactics sometimes seem underappreciated in the literature,¹ conflict promotion has been used to one extent or another, or at least considered by statesmen with differing agendas and of different historical eras going back as early as to ancient Greece.

This article will look at several topics. The first is the theoretical issues posed by the matter of how revolutionary states react to the pressures of the international system. The article then examines two case studies of conflict promotion as used by the USSR of Josef Stalin. Conclusion emphasizes the importance of ideological concerns in explaining the actual policies pursued by the Soviet Union as a revolutionary state and also puts divide and rule strategies into some historical perspective.

1. Theoretical issues: systemic pressures, balancing, and revolutionary states

For some time, systemic-level international relations theory generally focused on the impact of anarchy on states' behavior. Waltz (1979) argues that the structure of the international system compels each state to act to ensure its own survival. As a result of this, much of the theoretical literature has stressed balancing behavior. Balance of power theory argues that states balance against power. Those that wish to survive must balance against the power of others. They can do this by forming alliances, even with what might seem to be unlikely alliance partners, and by self-strengthening, even when such efforts are costly or otherwise distasteful. Walt (1987) refines this into balance of threat theory. This argues that states do not balance against power as such; they are more likely to balance against threat.

Balancing theory has generally focused on increasing power against the target state. However, more recent studies have focused on *capabilities disaggregation*. Power is a relative concept and weakening one's adversary can just as easily obtain the goals one might seek by means of costly self-strengthening and/or alliance-building. Divide and rule strategies might be possible. Among such strategies is that of *competitive decolonization*, a policy where, as Hager and Lake (2000) argue "states can seek to enhance their own power by dismantling the empires of others."

How revolutionary states deal with systemic pressures has been a contentious subject in the international relations literature. Systemic-level theory stresses how much states placed in analogous positions in the international system pursue similar policies. Using the Bolshevik regime in the 1920s as an example, Walt (1996) argues that after a revolutionary regime effectively takes state power within a specific area, it acquires a stake in self-preservation more than in promoting revolution elsewhere. The logic of systemic-level international relations theory would dictate that a revolutionary state's actions would be limited by the constraints of *realpolitik* much as another's (Waltz, 1979). Accordingly, it can be expected to pursue security policies similar to those pursued by a different regime type. This can be labeled the geopolitics and balance of power explanation (G&BP).

History does record a number of occasions where a revolutionary regime bowed to *realpolitik*. For example, despite the humiliating cession of territory and opposition within Russia that included much of the Party, the Bolshevik regime signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk when faced with the prospect of a renewed war with Imperial Germany that it would lose (Pipes, 1991). Despite its ideological commitment to anticolonialism, the Soviet Union's support for Southeast Asian

¹ For example, Snyder (1997) discusses such approaches only very briefly.

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