

Leighann Kimble

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Dr. Gordon Bowen

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Term Paper: Russia and Soft Balancing

The end of the Cold War Era marked the decline of the Soviet Union as one of the bipolar powers in the international system. For this reason, it has often been assumed that Russia can no longer undertake a position as an influential power in international affairs. However, as would be suggested from a realist prospective, Russia has continued to reestablish its power by acting as a facet against the United States in the now deteriorating unilateral order. Russia has derived power in the international system through its economic advantage as a “petropower” and from establishing relations with anti-American powers such as Iran and China. Since the Cold War, Russia has reemerged as an influential power through its use of soft balancing against the United States. However, the way in which Russia has gained its power in the international system has involved the use of force and coercion, as in the case of Georgia and Ukraine.

Soft power in itself complements the realist theory in allowing nations to pursue their own interests in the international system and increase their potential power without the direct use of force or coercion. More directly, as stated by Nye, “Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye, Jr. 256). In order to increase potential power while avoiding the use of direct power over a nation, “Soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideas,

and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced” (Nye, Jr. 256). In contrast, Nye explains that “hard power” or “the ability to coerce, grows out of a country’s military and economic might” (Nye, Jr. 256). In terms of the use of soft power by Russia, “Soft power includes all aspects of Russia’s attractiveness to foreigners: Russian mass media, a large and efficient economy, familiar language and religion, aspects of historical legacy, family ties, and electronic products. In particular, in attempting to repair what they see as Russia’s image problem, the authorities have established a state funded international television network to broadcast in English” (Tsygankov 1079-1080). The attempts made by Putin to increase worldwide familiarity of Russian culture and history reflect the effort to gain influence and power by developing popularity and legitimacy in the international system at a time in which both U.S. popularity and legitimacy continues to decline, particularly following the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Russia’s attempt to increase its power in the international system has been evident in its use of hard power in policies that focus on obtaining energy resources. Russia’s use of hard power includes the use of coercion, as evident in Putin’s recent policies toward the Ukraine in which “Russia’s actions during the December 2005 dispute with Ukraine over the price of natural gas were interpreted by some as an example of the Kremlin’s ‘gas imperialism’ or an attempt to punish the new leadership of Ukraine” (Tsygankov 1088). In this way, Russia’s treatment of nations such as the Ukraine is comparable to the Athens and Melos relationship explained by Thucydides in the realist perspective. Russian control over energy resources in the region combines with its international influence because of Russia’s use of hard power has given it the

ability to coerce nations in the region to yield to its interests. In recent years, Russia's actions in Ukraine have displayed its strong-hand power over these nations: "the Ukrainian gas crisis in January 2009 changes the mood too in border state like Bulgaria and Slovakia, where cutoffs of Russian natural gas supplies were felt most keenly" (Wilson 2010). As an exploitative energy power, Russia's ability to deny access to energy resources to nations, as in the case in Ukraine in 2009 display the willingness of Russia to use direct force to obtain national goals. This strategic use of force extends to Georgia: "Russia [...] fought a war in Georgia in 2008 at least in part to provide a demonstration of both its power and its keen interests in the region" (Wilson 2010). The fact that Putin has previously used violence to obtain national interests is of particular importance in regard to its ability to force nations to submit to Russian international goals in opposition to the United States, as experienced by pro-U.S. nations such as Ukraine and Georgia.

Russia's influence over the region's energy resources and soft power as explained by Tsygankov exposes remnants of Soviet dominance in the region: "Russia participated in energy privatization in the former Soviet region, and as a result of bilateral negotiations, the Kremlin asserted control over the strategic property and transportation of the former republics. Its most important achievement has been a strategic energy accord with Turkmenistan, under which virtually all of Turkmenistan's gas falls under Russia's sphere of influence until 2028" (Tsygankov 1083). By gaining a hold on energy resources throughout Eurasia, Russia has increased its control over economic matters and in current years, "With high energy prices, sound fiscal policies, and tamed oligarchs, the Putin regime no longer needs international loans or economic

assistance and has no trouble attracting major foreign investment despite growing tension with Western governments”(Simes 46). By gaining power over oil resources through the use of coercion and force, Russia has obtained leverage in the region as a “petropower”, providing the nation with economic weight in the international system. The importance of Russia as an energy provider has allowed her to gain additional influence in the international system through its newly formed alliances with nations such as China and Iran.

Before the year 2005, the establishment of Russia’s relations with nations such as China and India seemed of little threat to the power of the United States (Lieber and Alexander). Likewise, Russia’s interest in China was minimal until China gained authority in the international community, thus providing Russia with an opportunity to increase its power. More specifically, Russia’s increased desire to establish relations with China are explained by increased conflict with the West: “growing irritations in US-Russia and Europe-Russia relations have redounded to the benefit of the China-Russia relationship” (Kuchins 2007). Given the decline of U.S. influence in global affairs since 2003, Russia’s bonds with such powerful nations has developed a strategic advantage in Russia’s position as a balancing power against the United States by increasing Russia’s relative power. The strength of Russia’s relations with influential nations such as China has become evident through the balancing of the United States in international decisions, as demonstrated when “In 2002-03 Russia, China, and several EU members broadly coordinate diplomatically against granting international-institutional approval to the 2003 Iraq invasion,” (Lieber and Alexander 124). From the realist perspective,

Russia uses as a way to earn and maintain power in the international system, thereby allowing Putin to maintain national interests:

In some respects, Russia's strategic partnerships with India and especially China represent the strongest case of soft balancing. These are treaty-governed relationships that have resulted in a net shift in the distribution of military power against the United States. Russia's own military is presently unable to use most of the output of its defense industry. To the extent that its strategic partnerships with India and China permit the transfer of some of this output to militaries that can use it effectively, the net effect is a shift in relative power. Moreover, Russia-China cooperation includes the creation and promotion of a regional security organization that excludes the United States – the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). (Brooks and Wohlforth 83)

The alliances Putin has made in recent years have been developed in a modest way in order to avoid direct conflict with the United States. Despite the international increase in anti-Americanism, the United States still plays a prominent role in the international system. To prevent the provocation of the United States, "At the moment, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization – which promotes cooperation among China, Russia, and the Central Asian states – is a debating club rather than genuine security alliance" (Simes 51). Although Russia's alliances with nations such as China and India have only gradually surfaced as influential powers, Russia and her new allies have strengthened their alliance, increasing their potential ability to counter the power of the United States. For instance, in recent years, "The Russian general staff is lobbying to add a military dimension to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and some top

officials are beginning to champion the idea of a foreign policy realignment directed against the West. There are also quite a few countries, such as Iran and Venezuela, urging Russia to work with China to play a leading role in balancing the United States economically, politically, and militarily” (Simes 51). Russia’s greatest balancing act will involve its relationships with Iran, especially in regards to its support for the Iranian nuclear weapons projects that have long been detested by the United States.

Russia’s interests in Iran, as with China are not the result of its interest in balancing the power of the United States. Rather, Putin has acted to develop alliances that will benefit national interests, particularly in the economic realm. The development of economic stability through these alliances have resulted in an increase in potential power which has led indirectly to the ability of Russia to balance the United States, especially in instances when Russia’s opposition will benefit its own interests: “Initially, Russia’s interest in undertaking the job of finishing Iran’s nuclear reactor was driven by the need for foreign currency and jobs for scientists and technicians. More recently, as the price of oil has increased, and as an oil- and gas-rich Putinized Russia has been able to afford a more assertive foreign policy, the desire to stand up to the United States – and to use Iran’s nuclear program as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the West – has been the driving force behind Russia’s willingness to help Iran develop its nuclear capabilities” (Milani 2007). The controversy over Iran’s nuclear program and Russia’s support for its development forces the United States to not only create policies and strategies against Iran to maintain American national security interests, but now require the U.S. to consider the implications of Russian support for Iran when developing policies. Russian support of Iran has therefore provided it with a means by which it can

balance the United States through its legitimacy and particularly significant amount of power gained from this alliance. However, Russia's primary goal of obtaining national interests through its relationship with Iran extends to a form of more coercive soft balancing, a gray area: Russia's "alliance" with Iran not allows economic national interests to be met but provides Russia with a more hard power form of balance of the United States through coercion. Russia's ability to coerce the United States is by no means of the same strength as its power in the Eurasian region. However, the fact that Russia has obtained some leverage over the United States through its threatening relationship with Iran reminds us that alliances are not simply "friendly" relationships and sometimes include a hard power effect in the international system. The goal in international relations is an increase in national potential power, not geniality.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has underestimated Russia's ability to regain influence in international affairs. As an example from recent years, "The Clinton Administration in particular appeared to view Russia like postwar Germany or Japan – as a country that could be forced to follow U.S. policies and would eventually learn to like them. They seemed to forget that Russia had not been occupied by U.S. soldiers or devastated by atomic bombs. Russia was transformed, not defeated. This profoundly shaped its responses to the United States (Simes 37). With the dissolution of the unilateral system headed by the United States due to rising anti-Americanism, coupled with Russia's economic and political stability through its use of coercion, Russia has used soft power as an advantageous method of gaining power and fulfilling national interests. In this way, Russia's leverage in the in the international system through its status energy power has allowed Putin to develop alliances that have not only allowed

Russia to develop a defense to protect its national interests through opposition to the United States but has acted allowed it to act as a soft balancer to the United States through the legitimacy it has gained through these alliances. Acting as a cycle, the legitimacy of Russia in the international system through its control over energy resources using coercion has provided Russia with the opportunity to utilize coercion and force to obtain resources and promote its national interests. In this way, Putin's actions have represented Russia's collective national interests by acquiring soft power through both alliance and coercion. The alliances that Russia has developed are not due to the fact that Russia wishes to "cooperate" in the international system: Russia wants power through economics and international influence. Russia still uses force to attain its goals. Nonaggressive alliances with nations such as China and Iran are simply another means by which Russia can acquire potential power and maintain national interests, including its interest in preserving regional influence through conventional coercion and force.