The Re-Emergence of Russian Super-Power?

Jennifer Fishkin Cornell University, 2010

Industrial Labor Relations, International Relations

VP Political Cornell Israel Affairs Committee, Center for Future Security Strategies

Intern Hudson Institute, Diamond Intern at American Israel Public Affairs Committee

Russian-American relations have become increasingly adversarial with Russian efforts to regain its power and standing in the world. While Russian-American relations are not at Cold War levels of antipathy, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, has described them as “alarming,”⁵ and with senior Bush officials commenting that “Russia has provided overwhelming evidence that it seeks to weaken America. Thus wherever possible internationally, Moscow will work to stop America from achieving success.”⁵ Russian foreign policy has currently been steering away from the relative accord and partnership of the two countries under the Yeltsin era. It has become what some call the Red-Brown coalition of rule, which has led to changes in foreign policy with the goal of building coalitions to hedge against the United States. To understand this Russian foreign policy, it is necessary to address the Russian domestic political factions, as well as their policy vis-à-vis Iran.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia looked to the United States to bail it out of its economic crisis and looked to the ideas of liberalism. Yeltsin’s policy was to convince the West, with the US in particular, that it was within the US interest for Russia to be integrated into the multilateral international framework for managing the global capitalist economy, eventually becoming part of the G-8.¹⁵ According to Peter Shearman in a book entitled Russian Foreign Policy Since 1990, “Yeltsin made it clear immediately with the collapse of the Soviet Union that Russia did not see the United States as a potential threat, but rather as an ally in developing new methods of collective security.”¹⁵ Under Yeltsin the push to liberalism and pro-US policy was remarkable, however it did not last. This was in part due to the greater complexity of Russian domestic politics as well as the many economic problems that Russia faced that emerged out of the rapid privatization of the economy and the political chaos caused by the shift away from a one party state.¹⁸

While there are reformers within the Russian *Duma*, also known as the Russian parliament, the Red-Brown alliance, the alliance of communists and nationalists, is a powerful force that has since captured increasing

power, especially with the increased economic stability of Russia. By the end of 1999 there was a clear shift from the initially strong pro-Western policy in 1992 to one characterized by high nationalism. This was due to a shift in power within the government where there were three main groups vying for power within the Russian political scene. The first supported Yeltsin’s pro-Western foreign policy, including such things as positive relations with Israel and the reform and privatization of the Russian economy.⁶ The second group advocated a “Eurasian emphasis in foreign policy” which focused on good relations with the US, Western Europe, China, and the Middle East. While in favor of reform, this group advocated a far slower process of privatization.⁶ The last group of the Red-Brown alliance needs to be analyzed extraordinarily carefully, as this group has since become increasingly powerful in Russian policy formation today. This third group wanted a powerful and confrontational approach toward the United States, seeing it as Russia’s main ally, strengthening ties with Iraq and Iran, as well as establishing dominance over the former soviet republics (NIS).⁶ To understand the evolution of Russian foreign policy, it is essential to understand this Red-Brown alliance more clearly and the ways in

which it influenced the Putin regime.

The Red-Brown alliance is a political alliance of neo-communists, hoping for the reinstitution of Stalin-esque regime, of right-wing nationalists, and of whites romanticizing the Czarist period. These forces were all united in their desire to see Russia rescued from the powers of the West subjugated under Yeltsin's policies.⁹ They wanted to expand their country to reflect the days of the Russian empire. In fact, a subcategory of this movement, *Eurasianism*, made most famous by Aleksandr Dugin, (although some within this coalition disagree), affirm "the necessity of maintaining the Russian imperial structure and reject any prospect of a global equilibrium."¹⁰ Dugin thus asserts that all anti-globalization tendencies are Eurasianist and proposes an alliance structure based on this conception of the world (Russian version of the European radical right). Putin's and now Medvedev's policies clearly have undertones of this ideology although both men also have an understanding, however decreasingly so, of their need for the Western powers and of appearing legitimate in the liberal international institutional arena. Increasingly, with the Russian-Georgian War, as well as Russian policies toward Iran, it is

clear that Russia is trying to separate itself and hedge against US/Western power, although still having a semi-schizophrenic policy of not fully alienating itself from western institutional structures and alliances. This, especially in the Georgian scenario, becomes obvious because Russia is linked financially to the rest of the world. Thus, with the current collapse of financial markets in the US and Europe, and the resulting pullout of Russian troops, Russia realizes it still has a lot to lose from a total breakdown of relations with their "western partners".¹¹ Despite this, there is no questioning the nationalist tendencies such as the reestablishment of the two headed eagle as the national symbol, the reinstatement of the tune of the Soviet Union as the national anthem, and the redefinition of citizens of the Russian Federation as "*Rossiyan*" implying that the various ethnic groups of the Russian Federation—as in the USSR and Imperial Russia—are now one people, one nation.¹⁶

As Leon Aron states in his book "Russia's Revolution," "the deterioration of Russian-American relations is to blame on each side's pursuit of its ideologically determined strategic agendas and of its perceptions of the other's reaction to the implementation of these

agendas.”³ He continues to explain that the weakening of the Russian state in the 1990s was seen as shameful and caused a return of policy reflecting the conception of state tantamount to society and a desire to reclaim Russian authority. This led to a reassertion of a sphere of influence, the demise of the goal of the integration of Russia into the Western capitalist democratic world, and a policy of *realpolitik*.³

By looking at Russian policies towards Iran, the evolution of Russian foreign policy and Russian self-conception becomes evident. Russian policy toward Iran has evolved from a more careful relationship to one that reflects their mutual antipathy toward the United States. It is not only because of motivation from opposition to the US, but also because many feel that the US is a hegemon, that it could form or already has formed a dictatorial regime, and therefore that needs to be stopped. Thus, there needs to be an alliance made against it. This concept is a large underlying force toward the Moscow-Tehran alliance.¹⁴ Proof of Russian expansionist, anti-American desires is shown in a Council on Foreign Relations Report that states:

Russia has sold Iran hundreds of major weapons systems, including twenty T-72 tanks, ninety-four air-to-air missiles, and a handful of combat aircraft like the MiG-29. Late last year, Russia agreed to sell Iran a \$700 million surface-to-air missile defense system (SA-15 Gauntlet) along with thirty TOR M-1 air-defense missile systems, ostensibly to defend its soon-to-be-complete, Russian-built nuclear reactor at Bushehr. Moscow also plans to upgrade Tehran’s Su-24, MiG-29 aircraft, and T-72 battle tanks. Iran has shown interest in S-300 anti-aircraft missiles from Russia and Belarus, which can intercept enemy aircraft ninety to 180 miles away.⁴

However, when looking through the 1990s it appears that Russia’s policy was to deny arms sales to the US and other western countries (such as Israel¹⁹), while making massive arms sales and nuclear deals with Iran.² (In addition, the Bushehr plant construction alone was a \$1 billion dollar deal.) Furthermore, Moscow has been unwilling to

step up pressure on Iran after the March 2007 resolution. The specter of crisis with Iran also drives up oil prices to Russia’s benefit. Even the threat of a U.S. military strike on Iran, might, from a Russian perspective, be seen as “win-win-win”: it would raise the oil price further, isolate the U.S. globally and set back the Iranian nuclear program. Russia seeks the restoration of its pride, re-acquisition of the states lost in the breakup of the Soviet Union, and restoration of its superpower status.⁸ It is believed that China, Iran and Russia compose the new axis seeking to thwart the United States.⁷ The Russians are clearly looking toward their own self-interest both financially and in terms of their own hegemonic agenda rather than engaging in the liberal western structure.

However, the inability to fully commit to the Iranians, due to the wish of the Russians not to fully isolate the West, as well as their understanding that they are interdependent, has led to problems with their policy vis-à-vis Iran. In many Iranian newspapers¹⁴ it appears that the Iranians are uncomfortable with Russian policy towards them because they feel as if Russian support is simply a means to achieve its own interests concerning the US. While Russia has been reticent to step up pressure on Iran by trying to find other solutions mediating between Iran and the western powers, for instance selling them nuclear fuel for civilian purposes, they have supported Security Council resolutions for sanctions.¹ Thus, while Iranian relations are largely an economic decision for the Russians, their relationship demonstrates how Russian alliance structures are overwhelmingly based on their competing domestic identities and how those react vis-à-vis the United States.

The Russian problem presents a key factor in what is currently a quintessential turning point in history in terms of the world order that will emerge. With the utter failure of the American liberal, capitalist structure that has occurred with the collapse of the financial markets, it is clear that not only is it

necessary that the United States reconfigure its conception of its place in the world, but also how dependent the rest of the world is on the United States whether they like it or not—Russia included. As is clear from this study of domestic politics and foreign policy, Russia is recreating its position in the world system, both in terms of wanting to hedge against the United States and regain its power in the world and in realizing how dependent it is financially on the Western economic

institutions. As a result, the consequences of how the United States engages Russia at this critical time are vital to whether or not Russia will seek to join an American sponsored multilateral conception of states. If such a world system is not constructed, Russia will fully emerge as a critical threat to US power through the creation of a strong Russo-Sino-Islamist alliance structure, leaving the Red-Brown alliance conception of Russian identity as the sole Russian foreign policy.

Works Cited

1. "Adopting Resolution 1803." United Nations Security Council, Security Council Tightens Restrictions On Iran Proliferation-Sensitive Nuclear Activities, Increases Vigilance Over Iranian Banks, Has States Inspect Cargo, 3 Mar. 2008, New York. Security Council. 3 Mar. 2008. UN Security Council. 9 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.un.org/news/press/docs/2008/sc9268.doc.htm>>.
2. "The American Foreign Policy Review of Russian Government Actions and U.S. Policy." Russia Reform Monitor. 1996. American Foreign Policy Council. 22 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.afpc.org/rm/96index.htm>>.
3. Aron, Leon. Russia's Revolution : Essays 1989-2006. New York: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 2007.
4. Beehner, Lionel, comp. "Russia-Iran Arms Trade." Background. 1 Nov. 2006. The Council On Foreign Relations. 10 Oct. 2008 <http://www.cfr.org/publication/11869/russiairan_arms_trade.html>.
5. Blank, Stephen J. "Towards A New Russia Policy." Feb. 2008. Strategic Studies Institute. 9 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub833.pdf>>.
6. Freedman, Robert O. "Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s." Middle East Review of International Affairs 4 (2000).
7. Glazov, Jamie. "The China-Russia-Iran Axis." 22 Jan. 2008. FrontPageMag.com. 11 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.frontpagemag.com/articles/read.aspx?guid=1bfad8e3-3390-4cc9-bca6-d8cb60c9a1b1>>.
8. Gordon, Philip H. "Russia is Crucial to Action over a Nuclear Iran." 4 Dec. 2007. Brookings. 10 Oct. 2008 <http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2007/1204_iran_gordon.aspx>.
9. Lee, Martin A. The Beast Reawakens : Fascism's Resurgence from Hitler's Spymasters to Today's Neo-Nazi Games and Right-Wing Extremists. New York: Routledge, 1999.
10. Lurell, Marlenne. "Aleksandr Dugin: A Russian Version of the European Radical Right?" Kenan Institute.
11. Matthews, Owen. "Why Russia Plays Nicer." Georgian Front. 4 Oct. 2008. Newsweek. 8 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.newsweek.com/id/162318>>.
12. Parland, Oscar. The Extreme Nationalist Threat in Russia : The Growing Influence of Western Rightist Ideas. New York: Routledge, 2004.
13. Rogozin, Dmitriy. "Russia's New Foreign Policy Priorities." The Nixon Center (2000).
14. "RUSSIA: Yelstin Returns; Moscow Woos China and Iran." Foreign Media Reaction Daily Digest 1 July 1997.
15. Shearman, Peter, ed. Russian Foreign Policy since 1990. New York: Westview P, 1995.
16. Shlapentokh, Dmitry. "Two Sides of the Georgia-Russia Conflict." Prague Watchdog. 16 Nov. 2006. 10 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.watchdog.cz/index.php?show=000000-000004-000003-000127=1>>.
17. Van Dyke, Vernon. "Communism in Eastern and Southeastern Europe." The Journal of Politics 9 (1947): 355-91.
18. Worth, Owen. Hegemony, International Political Economy and Post-Communist Russia. Grand Rapids: Ashgate, Limited, 2005.
19. "Yeltsin Says Russia Will Not Sell Missiles to Iran." Weapons of Mass Destruction. 12 . Mar. 1997. GlobalSecurity.org. 22 Oct. 2008 <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/1997/970312_03.htm>.

Photo Courtesy of: Carlos Latuff 2008