

RUSSIA'S USE OF SUBVERSION IN ITS NEAR ABROAD: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Russia heavily relies on subversion as a tool of statecraft to respond to the threat of Western expansionism, as well as to restore its status as a great power. It uses a variety of methods to subvert its targets, including military attacks, disinformation campaigns, and cyberattacks. Subversion allows Russia to violate the sovereignty of its targets at a low cost, while maintaining plausible deniability. While Russia's use of subversion has not always been successful, it still poses a serious threat to US strategic interests, and the US must not ignore it as it pivots towards Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Although the Cold War ended in 1991, Russia continues to view its position in the global order as one that is threatened by Western expansionism. This realist worldview significantly shapes Russian foreign policy today, especially in its near abroad. Over time, one of the tools Russia has grown to rely heavily upon to achieve its objectives is subversion, or the act of interfering in the domestic politics of another state without its consent (Wohlforth and Kastner 2021, 119). By doing so, it violates their sovereignty and coerces them into pursuing policies that align with its interests. In this paper, I will argue that Russia uses subversive tactics in its near abroad primarily in response to what it perceives as the threat of Western expansionism, along with an overarching desire to regain its great power status.

WHAT DRIVES RUSSIAN SUBVERSION?

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia sought to integrate the post-Soviet states within new structures such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), to counter growing Western expansionism, and restore its great power status in the process, especially once it became evident that the US would not allow Russia a place in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Tsygankov 2019, 105-116). Today, it assesses an operational environment in which US-backed regime change threatens its security and requires active or extended defense, not just deterrence (Kofman 2020). Thus, Russia's policy towards its near abroad involves a zero-sum calculus that calls for the spread of its spheres of influence in the region, and the establishment of buffer zones against NATO (Kofman 2020). Stemming from its self-image as a providential power that must act as a conservative leader in its neighborhood, Russia also seeks to revive its fading status as a great power (Kofman 2019). Therefore, it is in pursuit of these objectives that Russia employs the use of hostile measures in the post-Soviet space.

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Nonetheless, alternate explanations of Russia's use of subversion are worth consideration. At the domestic level, Russian subversion is often equated with a desire to divert attention from its failures at home (Götz 2017, 228-253). However, this does not explain why Russia tends to pursue an aggressive policy abroad at times when its economy is recovering and the popularity of its leadership is booming, or why it would risk sanctions and isolation when it seeks regime security in the long-run (Götz 2017, 235). Alternatively, the individual level of analysis prioritizes Putinism as being the primary driving force of Russian foreign policy (Götz 2017, 230). Yet again, this explanation falls short as Putin is not free from domestic decision-making pressures (Götz 2017, 231). Additionally, Russia's active measures in its near abroad did not begin with Putin—different policymakers in Russia have advocated for similar courses of action (Götz 2017, 232). Thus, I would argue that Russia's geostrategic environment, and its desire for great power status, provide the most compelling explanation for its actions, with other factors being only supplemental at best.

However, scholars critical of the realist lens when examining Russian subversion contest that it does not explain Russia's policies towards China, which is likely to pose a greater threat to Russia than NATO, given its geographical proximity and economic influence (Götz 2017, 240). However, I would argue that NATO and the EU pose a more immediate threat to Russian legitimacy in its neighborhood, and that Russia is more secure in its relations with China than with the West. While China is a major trading partner for many post-Soviet states, the EU is still a more lucrative prospect for them. Similarly, NATO remains the world's strongest and most powerful alliance (SHAPE, n.d.). Moreover, China does not seem to pose as much of a threat to Russia as it does an opportunity to divert the West's attention and allow Russia to pursue its malign activities abroad (Wohlforth 2022). Another line of criticism involves Russia's rather muted response to NATO's invitation to the Baltic states in the late 1990s, and their subsequent accession in 2004 (Wohlforth 2022). However, Russia's lack of overt action does not indicate a flaw in the realist argument, for Russia was only responding in a manner reflective of its economic and military capabilities at the time (Wohlforth 2022). In fact, this episode only further incentivized Russia to use subversion.

Similarly, those unconvinced by the ideational explanation of Russia's near abroad policy question why it has differed over time in its assertiveness, if it is indeed driven by matters of status and prestige (Götz 2017, 235). However, I would argue that the desire to restore Russia's great power status has been a fairly consistent theme in Russian politics, and the variations in its policy can merely be attributed to differing interpretations of its desired status, and appropriate ways of achieving the same underlying objective (Tsygankov 2019). For example, both the Westernizers and the Statists sought to shape Russia's role in the world as a relevant power after the breakup of the USSR, but only the latter saw an important role for Russia's near abroad in achieving the same (Tsygankov 2019, 68). Others question the logic behind why Russia would continue to use subversion in its near abroad as a means of regaining its status when

it only seems to have been counterproductive (Götz 2017, 238). However, Russia's actions merely reflect a path dependency that does not take away from the ultimate motive behind its policy.

HOW DOES RUSSIA DEPLOY HOSTILE MEASURES?

Russia has used multiple tools to carry out subversion in its near abroad. The oldest of these includes the use of military means. For example, in 2013-2014, Russia used its intelligence agencies like the GRU, along with non-governmental proxies like the Wagner Group, to crackdown on protests after the ousting of Viktor Yanukovich (Radin, Demus, and Marcinek 2020, 9). It also tried to coerce Ukraine into federalizing by launching a raid in Donbass, in a bid to reverse its move towards integrating with the West (Kofman 2016). Another tactic it has used frequently involves backing political movements abroad that either explicitly support the Russian agenda, or align closely with it (Radin, Demus, and Marcinek 2020, 11). Since 1994, Russia has used its intelligence agencies and proxies to carry out disinformation campaigns, along with providing direct support for candidates in Moldova, Belarus, and Ukraine (Way 2018). It has even implemented regime change—in 2010, Russia gave the green signal for the removal of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan, after he reversed his stance on removing the US military presence at Manas airport (Starr and Cornell 2020).

Russia also uses its economic influence in the region as leverage to assert its dominance as a great power. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited most of its industrial infrastructure, making many post-Soviet countries dependent on it for their energy supplies. Thus, it has used both “carrots” and “sticks” as levers, to offer lucrative subsidies and withdraw access to oil resources respectively, as and when required. For example, in 2006, Russia cut off oil supplies to Lithuania when it decided to sell the Mazeikiiai refinery to a Polish company (Radin, Demus, and Marcinek 2020, 12). Similarly, in 2014, Russian energy giant Gazprom was suspected of supporting anti-fracking protests in Moldova (Higgins 2014). Russia has also deployed the use of cyberattacks against its neighboring states. In 2007, it targeted government owned entities like banks and state media in Estonia, and in 2015 a Russian group was attributed with directing an attack on a Ukrainian power grid (Radin, Demus, and Marcinek 2020, 15). These tools are often used in conjunction to achieve maximum effect—in 2014, Russia exerted diplomatic pressure on Ukraine, supported armed separatists, unleashed a large-scale false information campaign, and raised gas prices (Radin, Demus, and Marcinek 2020, 16).

RUSSIA'S COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

For Russia, there are significant benefits to using subversion, as opposed to more overt forms of warfare, which explain its reliance on this measure. Primarily, subversion is a relatively low-cost tool, and Russia's economic and military strength is waning relative to the US. It is also less risky than conventional warfare, as it can be adjusted fairly

rapidly in response to external developments (Wohlforth and Kastner 2021, 123). Most importantly, however, subversion is “less visible, which reduces the likelihood of detection. And when it is detected, ambiguity permits plausible deniability” (Lee 2019). This explains why Russia has been able to use subversion in its neighborhood without suffering detrimental consequences.

However, there are real costs associated with subversion as well for Russia. It can lead to escalation, especially when certain red-lines are crossed, while also reducing trust among powers, thereby exacerbating the security dilemma (Lee 2019). Hostile measures are also especially controversial, as they infringe upon the sovereignty of the nation being attacked—Russia’s actions have repeatedly invited international scrutiny in the form of sanctions and exclusion.

SUBVERSION: SUCCESSFUL OR NOT?

Russia’s experience with the use of hostile measures has yielded mixed results. It has achieved tangible success in terms of coercing its neighbors—for example, after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Armenia sought full membership of the Eurasian Union (Gill & Young, 322). To an extent, it has also been successful in preventing further NATO expansion. Nonetheless, where Russian subversion has failed to a great extent is in making Russia a regional power. Its use of hostile measures has pushed some of these post-Soviet countries further away from it, towards seeking NATO protection instead, even if they can no longer realistically become members: after 2014, Ukraine increasingly sought closer ties with NATO (until 2022 when Russia traded the use of hostile measures for direct warfare). Additionally, while Russia focused on keeping its neighbors away from Western institutions, they formed alternative institutions guided by democratic values like the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development for Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, and the Community of Democratic Choice and the Eastern Partnership, which brought the EU and these former Soviet republics closer, contrary to Russian efforts to assert its dominance in the region (Ofitserov-Belskiy and Sushenstov 2018, 283).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Russia has evidently become more aggressive in its policy towards its neighborhood. The very nature of subversion as a covert tool of statecraft enables Russia’s boldness—Russian-backed cyberattacks in Estonia show that it is not deterred by collective defense arrangements when it comes to the use of subversive tactics, given the flexibility they afford the attacker. It has also been willing and able to extend the use of subversion beyond its neighborhood—in 2016, Russia shocked the world by interfering in the American presidential elections (Abrams 2019). Thus, there is no guarantee that it will not get even bolder if the US were to remain silent. Moreover, ignoring Russia’s use of subversion is dangerous because it is clear that at times this tool can only be a stepping stone for Russia, and it is willing to escalate matters as far as it thinks is required—the ongoing Ukraine war is a case in point. And, of course, Russia’s actions

have been extremely de-stabilizing to the world order America has spent years creating and defending.

Given this assessment, I propose a three-pronged strategy for the United States to follow to address the challenge of Russian subversion. Firstly, America needs to take the consequences of its actions seriously. It is evident that Russia scales up its use of subversion whenever it perceives an increased threat of Western expansionism. For example, NATO's 1994 "Partnership for Peace" program and the US' opening of military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan after 9/11 evoked negative reactions from Russia (Omelicheva 2018, 326). Another example includes Russia's switch from subversion to direct war against Georgia less than six months after the 2008 Bucharest Summit, when NATO proclaimed Georgia and Ukraine would soon become members (Dickinson, 2021). Similarly, in 2021, NATO's shipment of weapons and exercises with Ukraine threatened a confrontation with Russia (Mearsheimer 2022). According to prospect theory, if the West continues to isolate and humiliate Russia by excluding it from the post-Cold War European security structure it has sought to be a part of for so long, while seeking to integrate other post-Soviet states, Russia's perceived losses will only push it towards taking greater risks. This implies that America has to be extremely strategic in the way it shapes NATO's open-door policy, given that "major powers, regardless of their ideological bent, don't like it when other major powers stray into their neighborhoods" (Kupchan 2022). Thus, while NATO can incorporate nations important to its strategic interests, "it should not make countries strategically important by extending them security guarantees" (Kupchan 2022). It is important to note that an American policy aimed at correcting the West's record of provoking Russian aggression is not necessarily a concession. Rather, it reflects an accurate assessment of Russia's behavior and will allow for an effective counter-strategy.

Following this acceptance, the US must aim at improving the defensive capabilities of these countries, rather than arming them with conventional weapons, which will only worsen the offense-defense distinguishability. Such measures would include investing in cybersecurity infrastructure, media literacy, and finding alternative sources of oil and gas supplies for these countries, which can be used as a backup in case of Russian aggression, as well as accelerating energy transitions to sustainable sources—a process in which Russia can be incorporated as a partner to minimize threat perceptions (Miriam et al. 2021; Kupchan 2022). Russia is able to exert its economic leverage given that it knows its neighbors are highly dependent on it and lack alternate sources of supply – it is this asymmetry the US needs to correct. However, such alternate supply lines must not seek to completely replace Russia as a trading partner for these nations.

And finally, the US must work towards addressing the ambiguity surrounding the use of hostile measures. It must concentrate on formulating global norms that clearly define and identify subversion as a tool of statecraft, allow for rapid attribution, and establish red-lines, in order to reduce the scope for plausible deniability that subversion affords to the aggressor, and discourage its unfettered use (Radin, Demus, and

Marcinek 2020, 22).

CONCLUSION

Russia is increasingly relying on subversion as a means of responding to what it perceives as Western expansionism in its neighborhood, and to regain its status as a great power. In doing so, it is violating the sovereignty of its neighbors – one of the most important tenets of international relations today. Not surprisingly then, Russia's actions have become extremely de-stabilizing to the liberal world order America has a strategic interest in protecting. There has been a tendency in the recent past to overlook Russia's actions, given the decline in interstate conflict with the prevalence of nuclear deterrence (Lee 2019).

However, according to the stability-instability paradox, the more stable the nuclear deterrence between the US and Russia, the more likely it is that the latter will engage in indirect forms of warfare, including hybrid or subversive tactics. Hence, despite Russia's flawed track record with subversion, it would be highly naive for America to undermine this threat to its strategic interests in Eurasia. Therefore, as the US seeks a pivot towards Asia amidst the rise of China, it cannot afford to be distracted by Russia.

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