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Has Russia Become a Destablising Force in the World Today?

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A matter of foundational importance here is stability's definition. Kenneth Waltz (2001, p.211) maintains that states interpret their own stability requirements and thus act variously but for the same ends; as such, one state's stability might impair another's, *but that is not their primary aim*. "Destabilising" is therefore an attribute not self-imposed, but ascribed from afar. The accomplishment of such security, defined by John Mearsheimer, is 'hegemony,' a status pursued by all great powers whereby one becomes "so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.40). Also discerned must be the global and the regional hegemon, for while the global seeks to dominate the world, the regional is content with a "distinct geographical area" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.40). What will be argued here is that Russia, bar a brief period of weakness, is a 'status quo' power, content with its relatively stable regional hegemony, while its main competitor, the United States, is a 'revisionist' power, sharing with Russia its interests in the struggle with terrorism, but differing in its territorially-focused eastward expansion, often expressed through NATO.

During the Cold War, the most contested region was Europe, and altercations were bitterly disputed; it was thusly that Europe remained stable—'bipolarity' was the most stable formation (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.362). Eastern Europe was of the Soviet Union's utmost concern in the 1980s (Bowker, 1995, p.71); however, while that has certainly changed, there is little evidence that Europe has become any less stable. Struggling for an explanation, it is no surprise that "[a] large body of opinion in the West holds that international politics underwent a fundamental transformation" (Mearsheimer attributes it to the US' enduring 100,000-strong garrison) (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.360; p.361). Such views were aired in President Clinton's speaking of a time when "freedom, not tyranny, is on the march," and by Russian foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, of partnership with Russia's erstwhile foe being critical to "the transformation of an unstable, post-confrontational world into a stable and democratic one" (Bobo, 2002, p.107).

Without doubt, there was some sincerity in the new order, however the Realist view would attest Russia's actions to the *Melian Dialogue*, that "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept," (Thucydides, 1972, p.402). Indeed, it was no coincidence that such optimism coincided with a period of unprecedented American strength, and with turmoil in Russia; amidst such circumstances the "new order defined by cooperation" became increasingly strained (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.360). Economic cooperation had brought little more than frustration to Russia, in the words of deputy finance minister, Sergei Alexashenko, "[t]he real influence of Western society on Russia's economic reforms […] would be greater if there were tangible results" (Kampfner, 1994, p.198). This frustration would peak during the conflict in former Yugoslavia, declared by Boris Yeltsin as "overt aggression," and NATO's airstrikes "an illegal military action" (BBC News, 1999). Yeltsin also felt he was not afforded the importance he deserved when the airstrikes were launched without his consultation (Kampfner, 1994, p.199). In Russia there was a backlash against the "anti-Russian military coalition," NATO, for attacking the Serbian people (Bowker, 1995, p.82), and while such 'pan-Slavic' feelings between the Russians and Serbs were exaggerated (Bowker, 1995, p.88), they were sufficient to cause an exodus of Russian volunteers and arms to the conflict (BBC News, 1999b; Kampfner, 1994, p.198). In the eyes of the ex-propagandist publication, *Pravda*, this was an assault on Yugoslavia by NATO, in response to which Russia stood damnably idle, stating: "Russia was guilty of Yugoslavia's collapse" (Pravda, 2009). In addition to the bombings, there were also indications that Clinton was flying in Hezbollah and Al Qaeda—both known terrorist organisations—to support the US side, and counter the

volunteers (Chomsky, 2003, p.35). Gone was the balance bipolarity afforded, and Russia found itself unable to maintain such a form of stability, being too weak to offer a deterrent to NATO beyond its own borders (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.381), and was unwilling to commit forces—evident in Yeltsin's side-line condemnations—for a conflation of its weakness and waning commitment to this 'new era of cooperation.'

Times, however, were changing. The price of oil rocketed in the early 21st century and at $75 per barrel, Russia "swaggers like a superpower" (Lucas, 2008, p.109), increasingly using "its supply of oil and gas to neighbouring countries as an instrument […] of political influence" (Service, 2003, p.537). Emerging too, were elements in Russia who entertained no illusions about cooperation. This was exemplified by the rise of Zhirinovsky, a man whose autobiography was tellingly entitled "My Struggle" (Моя борьба) in which he staked his ambition to clad the Russian army in summer uniforms all year round, and have the Indian Ocean "lap at our southern shore" (Zhirinovsky, 1996, pp.90-91). There persisted a "genuine fear" that Zhirinovsky might win, which indeed "brought home to Western leaders what they should have known a long time earlier, that this was no time to antagonise Russia" (Kampfner, 1994, p.169; p.198). Eventually his support foundered, but visible was a marked change in Russian foreign policy. The concept of the 'near abroad' (that Russia's interests lie among the Soviet Union's successor states and its eastern hegemony [Russell, 1995, p.53]), which had long been "a right-wing oppositional slogan," became the new consensus (Wœver, 1996, p.234). Even the later-dismissed Kozyrev (charged with having a "love affair with the West" [Kampfner, 1994, p.56]) had demanded that NATO recognise Russia's 'sphere of influence,' saying "Russia's special role and responsibility in the former Soviet Union must be borne in mind" (Shearman, 1995, pp.102-103); a request that went demonstrably unheeded.

Perhaps the greatest cause for dismay in Russia was the continued presence of NATO. Given its own "relatively peaceful retreat from empire" it had been expected that NATO would be dismantled, or at least transformed from a military to a political organisation (Kampfner, 1994, p.199; Bobo, 2002, p.106). Instead, NATO was becoming more active than ever, and indeed expanding into what Russia considered its sphere of influence with the applications—among others—of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and then Lithuania, all of whom subsequently joined (Kampfner, 1994, p.199; Mearsheimer, 2001, p.379); it seemed that NATO was determined to press home its apparent 'victory.' While there were still attempts at cooperation—the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, a "pioneer institution of post-confrontational interaction" for example (Shearman, 1995, pp.100-101)—they were characterised more by their disagreements than by their successes.

One such disagreement, considered by the International Crisis Group to be a "dramatic shift in Russian-Western relations" (Gahrton, 2010, pp.176-177), was the 2008 Russia-Georgia War. Previously, Clinton had acted delicately in creating NATO's "Partnership for Peace" scheme, whereby ex-Soviet states were invited to NATO on a partial membership, and had avoided "extending its remit right up to Russia's borders" (Kampfner, 1994, p.199). Even Russia, which had been "wary of becoming just another junior member of a Western-dominated club," would join in June 1994 (Kampfner, 1994, p.199). The Bush administration showed no such delicacy in 2008 when Georgia, a Caucasus state that bordered Russia and the volatile Chechen region, was handed its 'Membership Action Plan' bestowing in it hope that its long-sought integration might be fulfilled (Gahrton, 2010, p.214; pp.20-22). It cannot have escaped NATO's planners that Russia might fear the deployment of conventional NATO forces on its borders, as Mearsheimer makes clear it does (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.144). It should not have been surprising that Russia declared Georgia "part of a hostile strategy that is aimed at containing Russia" (Gahrton, 2010, p.217), when one stated aim of the 2001 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was to avoid such conflicts in which the US might seek to intervene (Fels, 2009, p.23).

In a conflict that lasted five days, the Russian army faced an Israeli-armed and American-trained Georgian force and concluded the war in control of South Ossetia, with many troops garrisoned in Georgia (Gahrton, 2010, p.176). While responsibility for the conflict, specifically US complicity, is difficult to attribute—both sides conducted provocative training operations on their borders: the Georgia-US "Caucasus 2008" and Russia's "Immediate Response" (Gahrton, 2010, p.177)—it is well-documented that Georgia began the fighting by invading South Ossetia (Gahrton, 2010, p.178). Furthermore, as a supposedly neutral observer, the US' position might have been to rebuke the aggressor, instead it facilitated the transportation of 2,000 Georgian soldiers engaged in Iraq to supplement the invasion (Gahrton, 2010, p.180). The portrayal of such events is also significant, for "[i]n the Western media, it often

appears as if the behaviour of Russia is just getting 'worse'" (Wœver, 1996, p.234), while in Russia, the Georgian war "won support at home and respect in those parts of the world that are keen to see the reestablishment of some counterbalancing power to the global hegemony of the United States" (Gahrton, 2010, p.183).

The modern Russia, its most dangerous elements (Zhirinovsky) defeated, is a status quo power. Contrary to Mearsheimer's claims that it may have territorial ambitions, and conversely that the US does not (as it already enjoys a stable European hegemony) (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.381), it has been shown that in both recent conflicts Russia has acted in response to NATO or US-backed action and has reached a settlement that does not enlarge its territorial or military influence beyond its own region. How then, do the wars in Chechnya weigh against this claim?

The first war's origins were in the turmoil that had engulfed Russia after the USSR's break-up. A claim for independence was made, and Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev believed Chechnya could survive economically due to its wealth of oil and gas pipelines. "Unfortunately for Chechnya, its economic importance also made it less likely that Moscow would give it up without a fight" (Bowker, 2007, p.69); the first part of a conflict was thus fought and lost by Russia. It is the second war, however, that piques most interest for its changing transnational and ideological character.

The protracted second war, it is agreed, provided ample opportunities for "new actors, new forces, and new ideas to come to the fore" (Hughes, 2007, p.94); the rise of "political Islam," specifically Al Qaeda, would see Chechnya become one of many "fronts in [the] global jihad" (Hughes, 2007, p.98). This jihad, however, began long before the rise of radical Islam in Chechnya, with the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The US response was to arm and train Mujahideen fighters to fulfil the wishes of their benefactors: not necessarily to "defend the Afghans, but to harm the Russians" (Chomsky, 2006, p.108). The short-sightedness of this policy is difficult to overstate, and for Russia it has meant two things: an international diaspora of American weapons and trained fighters (Blum, 2001, p.37), and these fighters "carr[ying] out terrorist activities right inside Russia" (Chomsky, 2006, p.108). Here, however, a new era of cooperation really has dawned; Chomsky writes that Russia "eagerly joined the 'coalition against terror' expecting to receive authorisation for its atrocities in Chechnya, and was not disappointed," and Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote of the US War in Afghanistan that Russia was "delighted to see Muslim hostility diverted from itself" (Chomsky, 2003, p.218; cited in Levin, 2008, p.108).

Terrorism is without doubt the greatest threat to international security in the present world, and so far counteractive actions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Chechnya have only exacerbated it (Chomsky, 2003, p.211). If Russia is to be condemned for its complicity, it must be acknowledged that this threat was, in some part, unleashed by the US. Russia remains a status quo power, acting in its self-interest with aspirations that lie within its own region. If it is to be concluded that its activities in Chechnya make it a destabilising power, then it can be no more so than the infinitely more proactive adversary, the United States.

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