

American Regime Change and the Russian Response

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Since the end of the Cold War, the overuse of regime change in American foreign policy has both created Russian anxieties and harmed American interests. As some analysts of American-Russian relations have noted, Moscow has interpreted the lessons from US interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and support for Color Revolutions and the Arab Spring, as evidence that the United States has an insatiable drive for regime change. This has manifested itself in Russian military, coloring how Russia views missile defense technologies, alliance politics, support for NGOs, and other features of American foreign policy. This has had the effect of increasing Russia's drive to pursue tools to reduce the threat to their regime, but by doing so, has also made itself appear more threatening. In essence, this policy memo argues that American regime change behavior has had the paradoxical effect of making other tools of American foreign policy seem threatening to the Russian regime and helped stimulate greater resistance to the American-led international order. Most importantly, I contend that policymakers have not fully appreciated the long-term effects regime change policies have had on other foreign policy tools and also on the behavior of Russia. Understanding how regime change missions have affected Russian foreign policy thinking provides a vital way to think about the unintentional side-effects of American post-Cold War foreign policy and the need for a more prudent American grand strategy.

American Regime Change Intent

Following the Cold War, the United States has pursued a foreign policy of democratic expansion under the logic that American security and prosperity would be best served by a wider community of democratic regimes. The focus on promoting regime change was driven primarily by this desire to help promote democracy across a variety of formerly non-democratic societies, and mostly used tools of soft hegemonic influence to help prod democratic transitions forward, including investments in quasi-NGOs, such as the NDI and IRI, civil society programs, political party building efforts, development initiatives, international institution expansion, conditionality programs, and also expanding human rights and the rule of law throughout various political communities.

However, beyond these softer tools, Russia has interpreted American regime change intent to be targeting potentially targeting Moscow due to three main trends. First, American

efforts immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union to help Russia transition to democracy and support Boris Yeltsin used a variety of the same tools listed above. While perhaps out of noble intent, it was also designed to remove Russia as a threat to American security as the assumption was a democratic Russia would no longer harm American interests. Second, American support for color revolutions also provided more evidence to Russian elites about American regime change intentions. The US role in these color revolutions in particular has made Russia think the US has a continued intent to continue to engage in regime change in their near abroad, harming their own interests as well as increasing pressure on the Russian regime. Finally, and most importantly, America's use of armed force in regime change wars has signaled a particular hostile intent and means to overcome resistance to their softer efforts at regime influence. In particular, the US mission in Serbia, Iraq, and Libya provided a narrative that America will remove regimes they view as problematic through force if necessary.

Combined, these factors created a view of American intentions as interested in promoting regime change in Russia, and willing to escalate to military force if regime change efforts were resisted. This created a problem where, even if most cases of democracy promotion involved soft tools of hegemonic influence, the non-militarized forms of regime change became associated with forcible regime change. The soft tools of hegemonic influence could be seen as potentially the first stage of armed regime change. While it is the case that the US would and does not use armed force to install democracy everywhere, the use of armed force in a limited number of cases provided a template that showed Russia how the United States could move from softer forms of regime change behavior to armed imposition of a new regime.

Russian Reactions to American Regime Change Capabilities

Russia's interpretation of American regime change threats extend beyond a focus on American intentions and toward many foreign policy tools and capabilities that could exert influence on the Russian regime. American intentions toward regime change do not matter much if they do not possess the capabilities to actual enact the regime change mission. In this case, the capabilities that could be brought to bear include not only military power, such as nuclear modernization and alliance commitments, but other forms of so-called 'soft power', such as NGOs, international institutions, and ties with local actors that could be used as means through which to organized regime change. Understanding how Russia views these capabilities in light of American regime change missions and intent provides a new lens to view a variety of different disputes between various foreign policy issue areas.

Initially, non-military instruments such as NGOs, civil society programs, democracy assistance and other foreign policy tools are seen as capabilities that can help promote regime change abroad. These capabilities are designed for use by well-intentioned civil servants, activists, and democracy builders abroad and have also promoted human rights and the rule of law as a feature of American foreign policy. However, these foreign policy tools have also helped create a network of democracy builders and provided linkages to promote pressure on regimes that was not present previously. As such, even though these programs have no military component, they can still threaten the regime by highlighting its corruption, by helping to mobilize those who are opposed to the regime, by providing support for opposition parties, and creating international linkages that foster democracy. Given that there are some

minor funding linkages between civil society groups and American-backed or US government programs, these groups are sometimes seen as a form of influence that can be exerted to help start a regime change operation, these can be seen as capabilities that have to be defended against to protect the regime. In Russia, this manifested in 2006 when Russia passed laws imposing new Russian controls on foreign NGOs and also in 2012 when Russia passed a new law requiring NGOs to register as foreign agents, particularly aimed at American NGOs and institutions like NDI and IRI that they saw as potentially meddling in domestic affairs.

Another capability that Moscow sometimes sees as potentially threatening given American intentions is the realm of humanitarian intervention. In particular, the ability for the United States to go beyond the United Nations Security Council when attempting to justify armed intervention abroad for nominally humanitarian reasons has made Russia convinced that American interventionism can be turned against its own regime if they try to repress any domestic opposition movement. As noted above, American armed action in Serbia, Iraq, and then finally with the armed intervention in Libya has painted a picture in Moscow that America could use the veneer of humanitarian intervention, the responsibility to protect, or other international humanitarian justifications to garner support for regime change operations that could just as easily be turned against Russia. Because of this fear that humanitarian intervention can be turned into regime change, Russia possesses anxiety stemming from belief that similar justifications can be turned against their own regime.

Moving away from the non-traditional capabilities that can target regime change, regime change anxieties also affect nuclear cooperation and nuclear agreements. In particular, Russia views American missile defense technology and other nuclear modernization programs as a threat to the Russian nuclear deterrent and could be seen as a prerequisite for potential regime change mission in Moscow. In particular, American precision guided munitions as a first strike capability in regime change missions has created anxieties over Russian military elites. This has led Russia to attempt to develop new technology that might violate various arms control agreements in order to deal with their anxieties over American capabilities to target their strategic deterrent that is protecting against potential armed regime change. In general, this paints a dire picture where regime change anxieties extend to nuclear arms control talks and capabilities and creates hostile spirals between the US and Russia.

Finally, particular aspects of American NATO alliance commitments have created larger fears about their use for regime change. NATO expansion, rather than provoking fears of invading Russian territory, has created anxieties about the use of new alliance members on Russia's borders to foment regime change. These fears, driven by NATO expansion, in turn tie together the NGOs, humanitarian intervention, and nuclear dimensions discussed above to create a unified perception that a NATO mission could use all of these capabilities to initiate a regime change mission in Moscow. Further, the expansion of NATO towards Russia's borders can be seen as threatening due to the focus of democratization and the creation of transnational linkages between democracy activists, but also through the way NATO has been used to support perceived regime change missions outside of the UN Security Council's auspices. It is not just that with NATO on Russia's border there are more bases for American airpower, but there are also more territories that would be willing to justify and legitimate American regime change interventions.

Policy Implications for American Grand Strategy

Given these concerns, what can American foreign policy-makers do to prevent increased regime change anxieties but also still attempt to achieve American interests? In other words, are there any means that can reduce regime change anxieties in Russia but maintain American interests in democracy promotion? Two options exist. First, the US could attempt to reduce its regime change capabilities. However, this would be difficult to do because the non-military means that theoretically could affect regime security are still useful for a variety of other foreign policy goals. There could be actions taken to reduce certain capabilities that explicitly targeted at regime change, but it will be hard to convince others that other foreign policy tools could not be used for nefarious purposes if so desired. In other words, it is not clear how to make costly signals showing that American NGOs and democracy promotion capabilities will not be targeted at Russia. To do so would require America stopping all efforts to build and promote democracy abroad, which goes against American public opinion and long-standing interests.

Second, the US could try to actively signal that they do not have intentions for regime change. This is the more likely option to succeed and would include ending calls for armed regime change abroad. This, unfortunately, would include not attempting to use force to change odious regimes in other locations but instead working with other foreign policy tools to try to prevent the regimes from impacting the American security. Reducing concerns over international interests and security to external features of states rather than focusing on internal characteristics would go a long way to help signal benign regime change intentions to Moscow. However, it could be the case that certain regimes do pose a threat to the United States. In such cases however, policymakers should recognize the long-term effects their various foreign policies play in the assessments of US intentions towards regime change by others and how seemingly disconnected policy choices can be re-interpreted by an adversary who is facing uncertainty over US intentions. Each time the United States threatens regime change or uses soft tools in an effort to pressure regime change, it will signal to others that they possibly will need to defend their regime.

In general, resisting the urge to engage in armed intervention abroad is the best means through which to defuse regime change anxieties in Moscow. A grand strategy of restraint premised on non-interventionism for regime change would serve American interests by showing that the US is not willing to go 'out-of-area' to impose regime change. This will not remove all capabilities that could carry out regime change, but it would signal that American democracy promotion efforts will not take the shape of a Kosovo or Libya-style bombing campaign. While this will not solve many of the contentious issues underlying declining US-Russian relations, it will help provide the basis for not deteriorating relations further and allow the basis for cooperation on common strategic issues.