FORECASTING UNCERTAINTY: U.S. AND RUSSIAN THREAT DYNAMICS DURING THE “RESET”

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The steady improvement in relations between the United States and Russia since the spring of 2009 presents a puzzle to international relations scholars and policymakers alike: under what circumstances do two adversarial states reverse a threatening relationship? I posit that threat cannot be understood in terms of power relations, intentions, interests, or state identities alone, but rather the underlying processes that put these elements in relation to each other. The process of accelerating pessimism about a bilateral relationship—worst case forecasting—generates high threat relationships by changing mutual perceptions of intentions and power capability, altering perceptions of actor coherency, and driving two states to construct mutually exclusive identities. In turn, the paper hypothesizes that the reversal of this process—framed in the U.S. and Russia as the “reset”—has a rather unexpected cause: the external onset of great uncertainty in a bilateral relationship, which increases the cognitive room for two parties to re-imagine and thus reset their relations.
Dedicated to my wife, Katharine.

Many thanks,
Gregory R. LaBanca
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INTRODUCTION

The steady improvement in relations between the U.S. and Russia since the spring of 2009 presents a puzzle to international relations scholars and policymakers alike: under what circumstances do two adversarial states reverse a threatening relationship? U.S. Vice President Biden in February 2009 promised to “press the reset button” on relations with Russia during his speech at the annual Munich Security Conference, a phrase that has since dominated the policy dialogue between the U.S. and Russia. Commentators in the U.S. and Russia have reached different conclusions about whether the two countries’ proclamation of a reset has in fact changed their perceptions of each other. Some look at the reset with suspicion, convinced that it is fated to sink under the weight of history, cultural differences, or divergent interests. Others look at the reset with optimism, pointing toward it as an articulation of shared, emergent interests and changing identities. Yet others stoically refuse to make any conclusions. All commentators, either implicitly or explicitly, approach this analytic problem with different assumptions about the nature of “threat” in the international system. This study seeks to shed light onto the question of how states change their threat perceptions about each other by looking at the mechanisms underlying worst case and best case forecasting.

Concentrations and dissipations of threat in a bilateral relationship have significant foreign policy implications. The steady concentration of threat between the U.S. and Russia, most noticeable between 2002 and 2009, contributed to Russia’s increasingly assertive efforts after 2005 to create a balancing coalition against the U.S., the 2007 breakdown in negotiations on the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, and the fall 2008 severance of Russia-NATO ties following the August 2008 Russia-Georgia War. Conversely, the reset has been credited with achieving successful negotiations on New START, the provision of Russian logistical assistance to the International Security Assistance Force’s war in Afghanistan, Russian cooperation on Iranian and North Korean nuclear sanctions, and the gradual opening of the Russian economic and political system. The health of the reset moving forward will determine whether further cooperation is possible on a host of issues, including bilateral trade, missile defense, counterterrorism, and nonproliferation.

The future is inherently uncertain. When states try to forecast the intentions of other states, they are stymied both by too much information, for the mind is limited in the amount of data it can store and process, and by too little, for foreign leaders sometimes seek to keep their intentions private or to deceive others. States can resolve uncertainty by assuming the best or the worst in others’ intentions; they also can choose to remain undecided and cautiously wait for additional data. Whether we trend toward optimism or pessimism, our assessments are to some degree always underspecified. At the far ends of this spectrum, when belief and data are maximally incommensurate, our beliefs are delusional. International relations scholar Randall Schweller, for example, frames his book *Unanswered Threats* by positing that foreign policy is
marked both by unwarranted fears that others are “out to get you” and by unwarranted beliefs that “everyone loves you.”

The process of resolving uncertainty in favor of delusional optimism or delusional pessimism is self-reinforcing because it subsumes powerful interactive effects. This paper seeks to elucidate this process by exploring how threat concentrated in the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship from 2002 to 2009 and then how it began to dissipate from 2009 onwards. I argue that accelerating pessimism about a bilateral relationship—worst case forecasting—generates high threat relationships by changing two states’ perceptions of their mutual intentions and capabilities, altering their perceptions of actor coherency, and driving them to construct mutually exclusive identities. In turn, the paper hypothesizes that the reversal of this process—framed in the U.S. and Russia as the “reset”—has a rather unexpected cause: the external onset of great uncertainty in a bilateral relationship, which increases the cognitive room for two parties to re-imagine and thus reset their relations.

In the first section of the paper, I will lay out an initial discussion of the meaning of “threat” and introduce a methodology that can better explore how threat dynamics operate than do present approaches in the international relations literature. I will follow by looking at how existing theoretical approaches for explaining threat dynamics would hypothesize the reasons for and the implications of the reset. I then proceed to apply the process-based theory of worst case forecasting to the U.S.-Russia relationship to determine if it can help to resolve some of the foundational debates among those competing theories and provide new insights into threat dynamics. Finally, I will outline the implications of this theory to the U.S.–Russia relationship.

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and suggest how it might impact our understanding of threat spirals and uncertainty within the international relations literature.

## Threat as Interactive Process

The term “threat” in this paper refers to threatened states, threatening states, and threatening modes of interaction among states. When I say that a particular state perceives a threat, I mean that state leaders assesses that another state intends to harm it. When I say that a state issues a threat, I mean that a state’s leaders have signaled to another state that it will harm it, or permit another to harm it, unless certain conditions are met. A threat is not necessarily based on objectively verifiable capabilities or intentions. A state may incorrectly judge that another state has threatened it, it may issue a threat that another state fails to observe, or it may issue a threat that is differently construed by another state in scope or type. Likewise, threats may be implicit or intentionally ambiguous, as in the “threat that leaves something to chance” in nuclear deterrence literature.\(^4\)

I specify “state leaders” when discussing the issuance and perception of threats because state leaders are those people recognized by the state’s citizens and the international community as formulating that state’s security policies. While other domestic bodies within the state, including political parties, religious institutions, media organizations, and commercial and political advocacy groups may perceive different threats—or issue their own threats as partial foreign policy actors—sub-state political actors are beyond the scope of this paper. I acknowledge that no state is truly unitary in its decisionmaking, but both the U.S. and Russia present relatively

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coherent foreign policy actors at the state level in which significant policy choices debated at the lower levels of their respective governments are usually resolved into a single policy pursued and implemented by all elements of the state apparatus. This paper’s conclusions will be less applicable to countries with highly decentralized decisionmaking processes.

I use a process-oriented analysis to explore the concept of threat by starting from the constructivist premise that people make society and society makes people in a continuous, two-way process.\(^5\) I extend this logic to propose that a state’s identity shapes the threats it perceives in the world as much as the threats a state perceives shape its identity. In other words, threat and identity are inextricably entangled. In contrast to this view, a great majority of the international relations literature on threat dynamics privileges substance over process. This means that the literature tends to view “threats” as objectively existing things out there that “states” address or ignore at their own peril. Likewise, existing literature tends to view “states” as stable social constructs with inherent identities and interests. Even within the constructivist paradigm, most studies of threat perception take a substance-oriented approach to threat by looking at state decisions or identity in explaining security outcomes.\(^6\) A process-oriented analysis is most appropriate for this study because it privileges change and development (like interaction) over fixity and persistence (like identity).\(^7\)

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By treating the state and the international system as endogenous to process, we can tease out how processes, like narratives, can induce unit-change. This methodology has enjoyed increasing attention from international relations scholars. Thus, instead of looking at the units—Russia and the U.S.—in isolation or the things that link them—shared and divergent interests—I look instead at the mechanisms and processes that put the U.S., Russia, and threat in relation to each other. The specific mechanism I am studying I have termed “worst case forecasting,” the tendency of resolving uncertainty about another’s intentions in favor of pessimism. I seek to identity the processes that instantiate this mechanism and to demonstrate how it concentrated threat between the U.S. and Russia and then how that threat dissipated during the reset. The benefit of this methodology is that it illuminates policy relevant interactive processes different than those illuminated by existing approaches to threat dynamics.

I employ the term uncertainty in its constructivist sense, as described by Brian Rathbun. For constructivists, states are uncertain about each other’s interests and identities because interests and identities are intersubjective and thus indeterminate. This is distinct from how uncertainty is treated by other paradigms within international relations. For example, realists tend to equate uncertainty with fear and liberals equate it with lack of knowledge about another’s true, objectively verifiable interests. In constructivist accounts, “uncertainty” leads to the output “fear” only when states interpret information about another state in terms of “threat.”

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process of updating expectations through interaction—complex learning in constructivist parlance—is really a process of constituting and reconstituting social reality.  

The best way to identify what another state finds threatening is to look at what those empowered to speak for the state say is threatening. States, of course, do not enumerate everything they find threatening within publicly available documents and it is plausible that some official documents themselves may have messaging functions for external and internal audiences. Nevertheless, official state documents at least provide a consistent record of stated threats over time and are less prejudicial than threat analyses by media or political commentators.

Russian national security strategy is expressed thorough a “troika” of official state documents: the Foreign Policy Concept, The National Security Strategy, and the Russian Military Doctrine. The Russian Government bases its decisions on how to allocate national security, diplomatic, and military resources on these documents. All three were updated during President Putin’s first full year in office in 2000. They were updated again during President Medvedev’s first several years in office: the Foreign Policy Concept in July 2008, The National Security Concept in May 2009, and the Russian Military Doctrine in February 2010. These documents provide the most comprehensive assessment of Russian threat perceptions, but because they are infrequent and because they take several years to conceptualize and draft, they capture only very broad trends within Russian security strategy over time.

In order to fill in the years between, I look at the Russian presidents’ yearly addresses to the Federal Assembly—analogous to the American State of the Union addresses—and the yearly

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Munich Security Conference speeches by Russian officials, both of which Moscow regards as meaningful and important declarations of Russian foreign, security, and military policy. While these are more frequent, and thus can reflect changes in threat perception “in real time,” their downside is that they reflect a mixture of sincere assessment and foreign and domestic messaging, which can be difficult to separate. For example, the Munich Security Conference speeches undoubtedly portray actual Russian fears; however, in high threat periods they also are probably used as a means to signal Russian displeasure and during low threat periods are used to signal intent to cooperate.

For the U.S., I look at the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) for 2002, 2006, and 2010 and the National Security Strategy, released in the same years as the QDRs. These documents are analogous to the Russian Military Doctrine and the Russian National Security Strategy respectively. I also look at the Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) put together by the Director for National Intelligence (DNI) for his briefings to Congress. The same caveats identified above for the Russian documents regarding time and messaging apply.

EXISTING EXPLANATIONS FOR THE RESET

Threat can be understood in terms of power, intentions, interests, and culture. Each of the following four hypotheses, which are based on these four frameworks, differs in the assumptions they make about the nature of threat and therefore reach different conclusions about the nature of the reset. It is not the goal of this section to try to determine which of the following four

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hypotheses (H1 – H4) will most accurately predict the future—how durable the reset is and its policy implications will hinge on many, contingent factors—but rather to assess the assumptions behind each of these frameworks and the predictions that flow from those assumptions. The following hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, but rather present broad and sometimes overlapping explanations.

**H1: Threat as Power Disparity:**

*Rapidly rising Russian power during the first half of the 2000s increasingly threatened U.S. hegemony, prompting the U.S. to seek to contain Russian ascendance. Russia’s relative decline in power during the international financial crisis of 2007-2009 and Russia’s failure to create a balancing coalition against the U.S., however, reduced the chances of a hegemonic shift thereby dissipating bilateral threat perceptions and opening room for the reset. The reset will probably founder if and when Russian power once again rises relative to the U.S.*

This first hypothesis assumes that “threat” is a function of the vulnerability created by imbalances of power in the international system. Most realist accounts of international relations view states as either power seekers or security seekers. Since power is the zero-sum currency of international relations, concentrations of power are inherently threatening or potentially threatening to other states. Simply put, in an anarchic, self-help world the most powerful states
are the most threatening.\textsuperscript{13} Within the realist paradigm, power transition theory provides particular utility in exploring the U.S.-Russia reset because it is sensitive to changes in relative power between two states over time. Power transition theory posits that differential rates of growth, imperial overextension, and the development of vested domestic interests lead to the rise and fall of hegemons. The probability of major war—that is, a maximally threatening international system—occurs at the point at which the declining leader is being overtaken by the challenger, usually because the declining power launches a preventative war to roll back the rising power.\textsuperscript{14}

According to power transition theory the U.S. in the decade leading up to the reset was a status quo hegemonic or near-hegemonic power and Russia, following Putin’s assumption of the presidency in 1999, a rising, revisionist power. Putin’s Russia was characterized by political centralization, strong economic growth rates buoyed by rising energy prices, and an increasingly active role in international politics. The American investment banking and securities firm Goldman Sachs in 2001 coined the term BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) forecasting what it assessed would be the four dominant economies by the year 2050. Russian dominance in the energy market allowed Russia to build up substantial foreign reserves, which in turn was funneled into modernization, regime security, and military improvement. Russia parlayed its influence, especially after the beginning of the U.S.-led 2003 invasion of Iraq, to seek to overturn U.S. hegemony in favor of a multipolar world order in which Russia and other middle and great powers would ensure international security through a Concert of Europe style system of


bargaining and collaboration. Moscow reached out to U.S. adversaries in Iran, Venezuela, and China; engaged in “wave the flag” military visits around the world; railed against U.S. double standards; and used its United Nations Security Council veto power to oppose international interference in the domestic affairs of third parties. By 2005, the international community had recognized a “resurgent Russia” as an evolving great power on the world stage—only seven years after Russia’s 1998 financial meltdown left Moscow’s relevancy in a post-Cold War world in doubt.\footnote{For treatments of Russia’s growing power during the 2000s under President Putin, see: Anne Clunan, \textit{The Social Construction of Russia’s Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests} (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009); Daniel Treisman, \textit{The Return: Russia’s Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev}, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011); Jeffrey Mankoff, \textit{Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics} (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); and Robert Levgold, “U.S.—Russian relations: An American Perspective,” \textit{Russia in Global Affairs}, no. 4 (December 2006).}

The Russian effort to try to accelerate the U.S.’s relative decline faltered, however, beginning in 2008 due in part to Russia’s relative decline compared to the U.S. and other great powers. The international financial crisis of 2007-2009 hurt Russia relatively worse than most other developed countries. In addition, the associated drop in energy prices revealed structural deficiencies within the Russian economy and required Russia to raid its stabilization fund in order to cover its current account deficits. Russia’s ambitious effort before 2007 to make the ruble a global currency to replace the dollar was scrapped. From the U.S. perspective, these signs of Russian weakness together with Russia’s inability to forge a political alliance with any other rising powers reduced U.S. fears of a Moscow-facilitated counter-balancing alliance, meaning that the U.S. almost certainly did not see Russia’s calls for a new multipolar world order as a viable effort to overthrow U.S. hegemony. The reset, accordingly, was made possible because
neither the U.S. nor Russia saw a power transition as viable after 2008 and thus perceptions of mutual threat dropped as well.

**H2: Threat as Fear of Intentions:**

_The U.S. and Russia perceived each other’s intentions as less hostile in the months preceding the reset because they engaged in less overtly threatening behavior. Prospects for the bilateral relationship going forward are ambiguous, but increasing historical distance from the rivalry of the Cold War and a rapidly changing security environment will further incentivize the two states to collaborate and to shelve their prior suspicions._

Stephen Walt’s seminal work, _The Origins of Alliances_, provides a significant amendment to standard realist approaches by arguing that perceptions of threat matter in addition to the material balance of power. Walt identifies four elements of threat that shape international interaction: aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions. The first three elements include measures of population; industrial, military, and technological capability; power projection capability; and efficiency of mobilization. Walt’s final element, “offensive intentions,” extends the traditional realist and liberal institutionalist understandings of threat by adding the insight that states will view one another as potentially threatening, rather than actually threatening, absent the intention of that state to use its power in harmful ways. The defensive realist approach outlined by Walt is largely compatible with the approach of power transition

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theory, except that it pays greater attention to states as security seekers rather than states as power seekers.

According to this framework, the U.S. in the decade prior to the reset engaged in a foreign policy that Russia could not help but feel threatened by. The U.S. reached military basing agreements in 2007 with former Soviet allies Romania and Bulgaria. More ominously for Russia, NATO—an alliance explicitly founded to contain Soviet power—inexorably marched eastward, claiming not only former Warsaw Pact countries but former Soviet republics too. By 2009, the alliance was contemplating adding Ukraine and Georgia, both of which contain either large numbers of ethnic Russians (Crimea) or geographic regions historically linked to Russian territory (South Ossetia). Western military action in nations ringing Russia (Serbia, Iraq, and Afghanistan) completed America’s perceived encirclement of Russia. Finally, the U.S.’s unilateral abrogation in 2002 of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, a key Cold War era founding document on nuclear deterrence, and efforts in 2007 to expand ballistic missile defense infrastructure to Poland and the Czech Republic threatened to damage Russia’s nuclear deterrent capability. Even if these actions were not targeted against Russia, they nevertheless made Russia less secure by raising the cost, and thus the threat, of any future political or military crisis with the West.

The reset can be explained by the reversal of many of these inherently threatening postures. President Obama scrapped plans for the East European missile defense sites, refocused attention away from Ukraine and Georgia NATO accession and toward counterterrorism and nonproliferation, began withdrawing American forces from Iraq and set a timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan, and restarted nuclear disarmament discussions with Moscow.
Thus, Obama reversed or moderated many of the foreign policy actions that had signaled aggressive intent to Moscow in years prior.

This moderated view of realism suggests cautious optimism for the reset, especially because changes in perceived intentions have mirrored changes in leadership in both countries. As offensive realists would argue, changes in power relations were a necessary casual factor in the reset, but the loss of Cold War thinking helped move both parties to see each other as security seekers rather than aggressive power seekers. Cold Warriors in Washington and Moscow have left, including George W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, and Richard Cheney on one side and the ex-KGB officer Putin now shares leadership duties with the more progressive and lawyerly Medvedev. Unlike Bush and Putin, both Obama and Medvedev represent a newer generation of foreign policy makers not as influenced by the experiences and history of U.S.-Soviet antagonism.

**H3: Threat as Lack of Common Interests:**

*The emergence of new, transnational security threats has reordered the interests and priorities of Russia and the U.S. The reset is an indication, albeit delayed, of both countries’ realization that failure to coordinate an approach to these challenges poses a greater risk to their security than the risk posed by entering into binding security agreements with each other. The reset will succeed in stabilizing relations and dampening bilateral threat so long as it is institutionalized.*
According to institutional theorists, threat derives from states’ fears that others will renege on their promises. Institutions help to ensure trust in the international system by making commitments more credible, reducing transaction costs, and providing information to both sides about each other’s interests, thereby facilitating bargaining. Effective institutions allow states to focus less on relative power—that is, seeing each other as potential threats—and more on pursuing common goods—that is, identifying and solving common threats. Institution building is nevertheless difficult; enforcement mechanisms are necessary in order to ameliorate fears of defection, implying that threat cannot be entirely divorced from bargaining practices.

The bilateral relationship prior to the reset was marked by high levels of mutual distrust, largely due to the accumulated failures of security treaties and negotiations between the U.S. and Russia. Institutional cooperation slowly unraveled, beginning with the U.S. abrogation of the ABM Treaty in 2001 and continuing with the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe through the early and mid 2000s, the latter of which Russia perceived as a violation of implied promises by NATO not to move closer to Russian borders. These problems were compounded by disagreements on the CFE Treaty, in which both parties accused the other of violating commitments on the stationing of troops within Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Moscow likewise maintained that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE),

established as an institutionalized security dialogue between the West and the Soviet Union, had been used by the West more to shame Russia on human rights issues than to ensure security and predictability within Eurasia.\textsuperscript{22}

According to this framework, the reset is a function of the U.S. and Russia facing increasing incentives to cooperate due to emerging transnational threats like terrorism, climate change, and nuclear proliferation. The emergence of shared interests, in the form of common threats, will further incentivize cooperation between the U.S. and Russia, cemented over time through increased working level ties between their national security officials. By late 2008, the then-imminent expiration of the START Treaty and instability in Afghanistan prompted the U.S. and Russia to shelve their differences and engage in a self-reinforcing process of interaction, trust building, and reciprocal confidence building measures. Since early 2009, the greater institutional connections that gradually emerged out of these negotiations helped reduce the risks of cooperation while also expanding the number of common interests and threats that each side was willing to tackle, from piracy to counterterrorism.

**H4: Threat as Reflection of Culture and Identity Formation:**

*Russian threat perceptions are based on a deeply-rooted historical tendency to see threats from outsiders and American threat perceptions are based on pervasive assumptions about the threat posed by illiberal regimes. The reset is unlikely to work because both countries are poorly*

primed to understand or value each other’s threat perceptions, which will lead to inadvertent misperceptions and signaling errors. Given the ideational differences between the U.S. and Russia, mutual missteps are likely to sunder cooperation before the two countries manage to form any type of meaningful, shared identity.

Constructivist authors find causes at both the state and structural level for the emergence of threatening relationships. At the structural level, some authors posit that threat is the result of the process of self-other identification, in which state leaders will explicitly construct external enemies to consolidate domestic power. However, other authors reject the notion that self-other identification is necessarily conflictual.23 Constructivist scholar Alexander Wendt, for example, argues that different states can form a common identity while still remaining distinct entities through interactions that socialize expectations of trust and cooperation, in turn changing state identities in ways that perpetuate assurance.24 Generally speaking, states that see themselves as more alike—e.g., the U.S. and the U.K.—can be hypothesized to be less likely to view each other as dangerous whereas states that are less alike—e.g., the U.S. and Russia—may be more inclined to interpret each other’s actions as potentially threatening.25

Other constructivist authors focus less on the structural effects of identity formation and more on how domestic strategic culture affects a country’s foreign policy strategy. According to

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25 Hopf, 293 and Rousseau, 152-153.
proponents of the strategic culture argument, the choices a state makes—including both what and who it finds threatening—are influenced by values or assumptions rooted deeply in the state’s ideational history. Arguments from the strategic culture lens would stress how the thematic content of Russian threat perceptions has focused on the dangers of encirclement, subversion, and containment. Russia has contended with a long history of foreign invasion, which has often posed existential threats to the survival of the regime. The great powers of Europe have invaded Russia from the West on four different occasions: Poland (1603-1618), Sweden (1700-1721), France (1812) and Germany (1941-1945). Moreover, Russia has a long history of peasant revolt, anarchy, and civil war, a reflection of Russia’s vast size, halting modernization, and ethnic and religious pluralism. Accordingly, Russian foreign and domestic policies flow together and the Kremlin has long used the tactic of creating external enemies in order to consolidate internal power.

Moreover, surrounded by long, difficult to defend borders with few geographic barriers, Russia has tended toward a defense-in-depth, which after the collapse of the Soviet Union has meant that Russia keeps itself surrounded by weak and pliable neighbors in Central Asia and Eastern Europe in order to insulate itself from Islamic radicalism and NATO respectively. The two examples of democratic rule in the past—briefly by the Mensheviks and then in Yeltsin’s first several years—ended in political weakness, shrinking borders, and economic collapse. Russia has accordingly primed itself to identify and neutralize examples of foreign encirclement, containment, and internal subversion.  

27 See Sebastian Kaempf, “Russia: A Part of the West or Apart from the West?” *International Relations* 24, no. 3 (September 2010) 313-340; Vladimir Shlapentokh, “The Hatred of Others: The Kremlin’s Powerful but Risky
The U.S., on the other hand, is poorly primed to understand Russia’s cultural framework and therefore tends to inadvertently take actions Russia deems threatening. The U.S. is inclined to view illiberal regimes as a threat to international order and lack of free market economies and democratic rights as a pathway to instability. The American “crusader spirit,” based on a fundamental belief that the world can be saved and redeemed, if only in the American image, is so radically divergent from the Russian identity that it is doubtful that any Washington-Moscow consensus can survive for long.

**WORST CASE FORECASTING**

Each of the above hypotheses reaches a different conclusion about the causes and viability of the reset. Yet, they all share the approach of taking either an aspect of power or identity as immutable. In contrast to these approaches, I will focus on how threat becomes increasingly concentrated within state interaction through the process of those states changing their perceptions of each other’s capabilities and constructing mutually exclusive identities. These mechanisms do not stand alone; they have interactive effects that lead to self-fulfilling worlds populated by threatened selves and threatening others. I will proceed by looking first at how the increasing concentration of threat between the U.S. and Russia from 2002 to 2009 was driven by increasingly worst case assessments in how they perceived each other’s capabilities and intentions, a process that began to reverse in 2009. Finally, I will look at how these perceptions

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were mirrored by and reflected changes in how the U.S. and Russia conceived of their identities in relation to each other.

Capabilities and Intentions

This first section will demonstrate that as the U.S. and Russia became increasingly certain that they posed a threat to each other from 2002-2009 they viewed not only each other’s intentions as increasingly threatening, but each other’s capabilities as greater. That is, the process of worst case forecasting alters mutual perceptions of the physical material balance between two states. Each side came to judge over time that the other was more powerful than they had previously assumed, resolving their uncertainty over the capabilities of the other party in favor of increasingly pessimistic portrayals. As the reset set in from 2009 onwards, both countries began to reverse these assessments, viewing each other’s capabilities as less impressive.

The U.S. and Russia in the first several years of the 2000s perceived Russian weakness as inviting instability in the bilateral relationship. The 2000 Russian National Security Concept cited the primary threats to Russia as structural economic weakness, including over-reliance on energy exports; the decay of Russian scientific and technological capability; and societal fragmentation along economic, social, and ethnic lines. Only after these weaknesses did Russia list foreign threats.29 Thus, the key to Russian insecurity was Russian weakness which invited domestic disintegration and foreign predation. Likewise, the U.S. 2002 National Security

29Russian Federation, National Security Concept, 2000, http://www.russiaeurope.mid.ru/russiastrat2000.html. The full list, which contains the seeds for what would become primary Russian threat perceptions in later years, includes U.S. efforts to undermine international security organizations, Russia’s weakening international influence, NATO’s eastward expansion, the potential for foreign military bases around Russia, WMD proliferation, fragmentation in the post-Soviet space, outbreak and escalation of conflict along Russian borders and Commonwealth of Independent States borders, and territorial (i.e., Chechen) claims on Russia.
Strategy mentioned Russia only briefly, did not name Russia as a threat, and assessed that Russia’s weakness was the main thing preventing greater cooperation between the two countries on areas of shared interest like counterterrorism and non-proliferation.\(^{30}\)

After 2002, the U.S. and Russia entered into a pernicious threat spiral. Washington increasingly assessed that Moscow was seeking to subdue its neighbors to turn them away from the West, to blackmail Europe through control over energy resources, and to use its military capability to balance the U.S. These assessments, however, began to change dramatically between 2009 and 2011, even though Russia did not halt the actions that prompted the earlier, malign assessments. Compare, for example, the language used in the U.S. Annual Threat Assessments over the course of several years regarding Russia’s alleged intent to use energy as a tool of its foreign policy:

2006: “High profits from exports of oil and gas and perceived policy successes at home and abroad have bolstered Moscow’s confidence.” \(^{31}\)

2007: “. . .high energy prices and abundant oil and gas reserves continue to fan Kremlin aspirations for Russia to become an energy super-power. . . Indeed, Russia is attempting to exploit the leverage that high energy prices has afforded it, increasingly using strong-arm tactics against neighboring countries.” \(^{32}\)

2008: “Russia is positioning to control an energy supply and transportation network spanning from Europe to East Asia. Aggressive Russian efforts to control, restrict or block the transit of hydrocarbons from the Caspian to the West—and to ensure that East-West energy corridors

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remain subject to Russian control—underscore the potential power and influence of Russia’s energy policy.”

2009: “Moscow also is trying to maintain control over energy supply and transportation networks to Europe to East Asia, and protect and further enhance its market share in Europe through new bilateral energy partnerships and organizing a gas cartel with other major exporters. Russia appears to believe the continued heavy dependence of European countries and former Soviet states on Russia’s state gas monopoly, Gazprom, provides Moscow with political and economic leverage.”

The 2009 assessment clearly hedged more in its assessment of whether Russia’s energy policy posed an inherent threat. The 2010 and 2011 ATAs did not mention Russian energy policy at all.

There is a similar dynamic in how the U.S. analyzed Russia’s use of long range military and aviation maneuvers. The 2008 ATA warned of “a growing number of exercises with foreign militaries” and the use of missile launches and long-range aviation flights “to showcase Russia’s continued global reach and military relevance.” Yet, the 2010 ATA was more ambiguous and less threatening in its characterization by stating that Russia’s long range missions “can have greater demonstrative impact than operational military significance.” U.S. assessments were even more benign the following year: “High-profile but small-scale operations in the Atlantic, Caribbean, Mediterranean, and Indian Ocean, in part, represent traditional peacetime uses of naval forces to ‘show the flag’ and convey that Moscow remains a significant military power.”

In fact, the 2011 ATA stated that Russian military capability should be viewed as posing both risks and opportunities for the U.S., the first time that “opportunities” was mentioned in an ATA

with regard to Russia’s military forces. It stated that as Moscow became more capable and more comfortable at asserting its power, Russian leaders “may be more inclined to participate in international peacekeeping operations,” an assessment that harkened back to the 2002 National Security Strategy, which judged Russian military power a benefit to U.S. international security interests. It is unlikely that this evolution in the ATA reflected a changed philosophy toward power within the U.S. Government. For example, in the same assessment, the perception of rising Chinese power was treated as a potential threat to regional stability and as an indicator of Chinese expansionist intent.  

Russian national security documents and security speeches prior to 2009 mirrored American documents. Moscow identified a maximally expansive list of foreign policy tools allegedly controlled or directed by Washington, including: sponsorship of interstate terrorism; covert direction of non-governmental organizations (NGOs); proxy use of international institutions to structure the international economic, political, and legal system against Russian interests; and anti-Kremlin propaganda in the American press. In essence, Moscow presumed the worst case scenario not only about American intentions, but the elements of American power itself, perceptions which fed off of and reinforced each other. If we consider that in at least some of these cases Russia over-played the American capacity to leverage its foreign policy capabilities, then it means that Russia accorded more power to the U.S. than it actually had.

America’s relative military strength over Russia was hardly controversial. Putin admitted U.S. military primacy, when at the 2007 Munich Security Conference he claimed that the U.S. had

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
used its unipolarity to amass an “uncontained hyper-use of military force,” almost certainly in reference to U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But, it is unlikely that it was American military action that prompted Moscow to perceive that Washington held threatening intentions toward it. Rather, Russia’s growing slide toward worst case forecasting can be attributed to the “color revolutions,” a wave of pro-democracy protests that changed governments in the post-Soviet states of Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan from 2003-2005.

The effect of the revolutions on Russian security thinking is evident in Moscow’s changing perceptions of the U.S. Global War on Terrorism. Russia, which had long dealt with the threat of international terrorism in the Caucasus, had pressed the international community on terrorism since before the 9/11 attacks. Following the attacks, Moscow and Washington quickly sought to find a joint approach to the threat—the foundation of a short-lived post 9/11 rapprochement. Putin effused about the partnership in his 2003 speech to the Federal Assembly, even though elsewhere in the same speech he obliquely rejected the U.S. military invasion of Iraq.

Russia was one of the first countries to confront the major threat of international terrorism. As we all know, quite recently it threatened the very territorial integrity of the Russian Federation. After the notorious tragedies caused by terrorist acts, the world formed an anti-terrorist coalition. This coalition was set up with active participation and in cooperation with the United States of America, and other countries. The operations in Afghanistan were an example of just how effective this coalition can be combating the threat of terrorism . . . Furthermore, successful

cooperation within the coalition and within the framework of international law may become a
good example of consolidation of civilized nations in fighting common threats.\textsuperscript{41}

Just one year later, Putin’s assessment of counterterrorism cooperation had changed
dramatically. Following the September 2004 terrorist attack at an elementary school in the North
Ossetian village of Beslan—in which 334 civilians including 186 children were killed—Putin
remarked:

On the whole, we have to admit that we have failed to recognize the complexity and dangerous
nature of the processes taking place in our own country and the world in general. In any case, we
have failed to respond to them appropriately. We showed weakness, and the weak are trampled
upon. Some want to cut off a juicy morsel from us while others are helping them. They are helping
because they believe that, as one of the world’s major nuclear powers, Russia is still posing a
threat to someone, and therefore this threat must be removed. And terrorism is, of course, only a
tool for achieving these goals.\textsuperscript{42}

Putin was most likely sincere in his argument that the U.S. had used terrorism as a tool to contain
Russia. It is unlikely that Putin’s language was based on emotion and hyperbole or that it was a
calculated effort to scapegoat the Kremlin’s failure to prevent the attack, because the theme
would surface again in Russian speeches up through 2008, during both Putin’s and Medvedev’s
administrations. For example, in Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2006, he concluded
a discussion of the terrorist threat to Russia by stating “I know that there are those out there who
would like to see Russia become so mired in these problems that it will not be able to resolve its
own problems and achieve full development.” Just prior to Medvedev’s election to the

\textsuperscript{41} Putin, \textit{Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation}, May 16, 2003,  
\url{http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2003/05/16/0000_type70029type82912_44692.shtml}.
\textsuperscript{42} Putin, “Excerpts from President Putin’s Address,” \textit{BBC}, September 4, 2004,  
\url{http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3627878.stm}.  

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presidency in March 2008, Deputy Premier Sergey Ivanov claimed at that year’s Munich
Security Conference: “. . . some states strive to exploit antiterrorist activities as a pretext to
achieving their own geopolitical and economic goals . . . which even includes attempts to return
to the containment policy.”43

During the mid-2000s, Moscow increasingly framed the threats it faced in terms of an
expansionist, threatening Washington that sought to limit and roll back “resurgent Russia.” Putin
argued at the 2007 Munich Security Conference that the U.S. posed a threat by imposing an
American-centric democratic and economic order on the world through its domination of
international financial institutions.44 He also claimed that human rights NGOs were covert tools
of foreign governments and of the OSCE, designed to promote their foreign policy interests at
Russian expense.45 Putin expanded on this argument during his annual address to the Federal
Assembly later that year. He stated, “Looking back at the more distant past, we recall the talk
about the civilizing role of colonial powers during the colonial era. Today, ‘civilization’ has been
replaced by democratization, but the aim is the same—to ensure unilateral gains and one’s own
advantage, and to pursue one’s own interests.”46 Thus, Putin equated power, as traditionally
defined, with democratization, and linked it rhetorically to the meme of colonialization, creating
a threat drawing on historical, identity, and structural foundations. In this context,
democratization is not a ‘new’ threat, but rather the same old threat of foreign power politics in a

43 Sergei Ivanov, *Speech at the 44th Munich Security Conference*, February 10, 2008,
45 Ibid.
46 Putin, *Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation*, April 26, 2007,
new guise. Putin, throughout the rest of the speech, gave further body to the threat of
democratization by explaining the tools of democratization, which he claimed included the
ignition of inter-ethnic and inter-religious hatred and the influx of foreign money, all to “return
us to the recent past, some in order to once again plunder the nation’s resources with impunity
and rob the people and the state, and others in order to deprive our country of its economic and
political independence.”47 Russia’s perceptions of American power fed off of and reinforced
Russian views that an international system structured on U.S. hegemony was inherently
threatening not only to international security, but to Russian security.

Concerns about U.S. capabilities were solidified in the July 2008 Russian Foreign Policy
Concept, which gave the first official rendering of Russia’s threat environment since 2000.
Whereas the 2000 document referenced Russian weakness, the 2008 version was framed by a
discussion of how changes in the international system had benefited Russian influence, including
the end of ideological confrontation in the Cold War period, the emergence of multipolarity, and
the reduction in the chances of major state conflict. It referenced similar transnational threats as
mentioned in American security documents, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and WMD
proliferation, but it also named two different types of transnational threats: the competition
between different value systems and the “onslaught” of globalization, which the Concept defined
as a process impinging upon nation-state “economic sovereignty.” The Concept explicitly cites
perceived Western efforts to contain Russia both politically and psychologically, through the
“reinterpretation” of history for propaganda purposes. It notes in the same section that
unipolarity—that is, U.S. hegemony—is destabilizing because it provokes tension, arms racing,

47 Ibid.
ethnic and religious strife, a degradation of international law, and an enlargement of conflict into
the geopolitical space around Russia.  

As with the U.S., Moscow’s stated threat perceptions began to change starting in early 2009,
although less quickly and dramatically than within the U.S. Some identified threats remained the
same, including Russia’s perception that U.S. power continued to be destabilizing to
international security because it led to the application of unilateral force, the undermining of
international institutions, and interference in third nation sovereignty. Russia’s 2010 Military
Doctrine, for example, looks very similar to the 2000 doctrine, with two significant differences.
It specifically mentions NATO expansion as a potential threat to Russia and places it as the first
item in the external threat list.  

This is a change from the 2000 document which merely cited
the threat from unspecified “military blocs” halfway down the external threat list. Second, the
2010 document removed the allegation in the 2000 version of foreign efforts to contain the rise
of Russian power.

This change is consistent with the change in Russian security speeches after 2009, which
dropped references to perceived U.S. intentions to perpetuate its power at the expense of Russia
and replaced them instead with language referencing how U.S. power can be redirected toward
cooperative endeavors. In Medvedev’s 2009 speech to the Federal Assembly he acknowledged
that Russia was hurt relatively more than most other countries in the economic downturn, but
cautioned that “We should not lay the blame on the outside world alone,” citing Russia’s

48 Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, July 12, 2008,
49 Russian Federation Ministry of Defense, Russian Military Doctrine, February 5, 2010,
“primitive” economic structure and “humiliating dependence” on raw materials. He expressed a similar reversal on the Caucasus, calling it Russia’s most serious *domestic* problem and stating that the source of instability there is in local socio-economic grievances.\(^5\) These are both significant reversals from the Kremlin’s claims in previous years, referenced above, that the international financial crisis and terrorism in the Caucasus were reflections of American power.

From 2009 onwards, Moscow used the Munich Security Conference speeches to try to convince the West that Russia did not pose a threat to the West and that it sought an accommodation with Western institutions commensurate with preserving Russia’s existing power and influence. In other words, Russia had identified both itself and the U.S. as status quo powers in an international environment in which multipolarity was already an established fact, a significant difference from previous years in which Moscow viewed both itself and the U.S. as competing expansionist powers. In February 2009, Deputy Premier Sergei Ivanov set out a vision of a common Euro-Atlantic security sphere and announced that Russia was ready for cooperation with the U.S.\(^5\) In 2010, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov reiterated coinciding interests and noted that institutional cooperation with the U.S. and the EU could only occur if neither country secured itself at the other’s expense. Although Lavrov was vague on details, the reference to the pernicious effects of the security dilemma was a significant shift from Putin’s 2006 address to the Federal Assembly when he stated that Russia needed to build up its military forces in response to the U.S.’s military might: “We also need to make clear that the stronger our

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armed forces are, the lesser the temptation for anyone to put such pressure on us, no matter under what pretext this is done”—a classic statement of the security dilemma.53

Identity and Actor Coherency

When two states presume the worst about each other, they are making assumptions not only about each other’s capabilities and intentions, but each other’s identities. I previously argued that the process of worst case forecasting drives states to regard the other’s capabilities as more threatening. This process also shapes and reshapes identities, driving them in mutually exclusive directions. Processes of interaction that are marked by high degrees of mutual suspicion will tend to generate state identities primed to see threat in ambiguous and uncertain situations and to move two states to define their identities and interests in terms of opposition to each other. This process of interaction between two states creates a path dependency that “locks in” trajectories. Thus, patterns of interaction in which mutual suspicion has been “locked in” will tend to reproduce identities that perpetuate threat. 54

We cannot construct our identities without reading the actions of others as coherent articulations of their identity. By coherency, we mean that when a state views another as maximally coherent, it views that state as having a single-minded focus on one, overarching foreign policy goal to which everything else is subordinated. Under conditions of worst case forecasting, this perception moves in tandem with subjective assessments about that state being a

54 Philip Allott, “The Future of the Human Past,” in Statecraft and Security, ed. Ken Booth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Allot explores how identity is established through recursive narratives: “...we endlessly create the past as we make the future. As we suppose ourselves to have been, so we cause ourselves to become” (Allot, 331).
more capable actor with more malign intentions. Through the pernicious effects of self-fulfilling threat spirals, these perceptions generate relationships that are increasingly constituted by powerful, discrete, and focused entities—the ideal-type state.

Even under low-threat conditions of relative ambiguity, the discrete actions taken by multiple actors within a society are generally not thought of as isolated events by other social groups observing them, but as evidence of a coherent and related whole within a universe in which meanings are socially articulated and shared.\textsuperscript{55} Political scientist Paul Kowert argues that in cases where there are clear divides between in-groups (the self) and out-groups (the other) the in-group will attribute the behavior of political out-groups to their intent or desires but behavior of the in-group to environmental constraints, the so-called “attributional effect.” Kowert builds his argument from group studies conducted by sociologist Jean-Claude Deschamp, who demonstrated that the attributional effect is heightened by large power disparities. Deschamp found that the more powerful an out-group, the more that group’s behavior is attributed to dispositional qualities, because others will tend to believe that powerful out-groups could overcome situational constraints if they so chose.\textsuperscript{56} The tendency to view more powerful actors as more coherent and capable actors, and vice versa, thus should play a key role in the generation and persistence of threat perceptions.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{57} See also Lebow, who argues that actors regarded as friends or allies “evoke images rich in nuance and detail” while actors regarded as enemies evoke “simpler and more superficial stereotypes.” The trend in the latter situation is a mutually reinforcing and accelerating process of worst case analyses about mutual motives, behaviors, and expectations (Lebow, 89). At the interstate level, Robert Jervis finds that states will tend to view hostile actions by others as evidence of hostile intentions. (Jervis, “War and Misperception,” \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary History} 18, no. 4 (Spring, 1988): 675-700).
According to the above logic, we should expect that when one state perceives another as an increasingly coherent and unitary actor, it will tend to view it as more powerful and knowledgeable, it will privilege conspiracy over evidence, and it will distrust signals of cooperation as efforts at deception. In contrast, during periods of lessening threat, we should expect to see each side reassess behavior they had previously judged “threatening” as instead the epiphenomena of benign environmental factors, such as foreign actor distraction, coincidence, or internal bureaucratic processes. With respect to the U.S-Russia relationship, prior to the reset both Washington and Moscow viewed each other as coherent, threatening actors but after the reset saw each other as having a less coherent and directed strategy toward their country.

In the years prior to the reset, U.S. and Russian strategic documents increasingly referenced interests that each state came to regard over time as inherently opposed to the other. The 2002 National Security Strategy is the blueprint for what the U.S. perceived as its core security interests during the decade. Written in the changing context of a post-9/11 world, it began by averring U.S. dominance in traditional military terms and set out a path to increase U.S. capability to respond to threats from non-traditional sources. It claimed that the U.S. would seek to foster democratization in authoritarian countries, build the capacity to use force preemptively against potential threats, and expand American-style market economies internationally. The document itself treated Russia in benign terms, but the assumptions it made about how the world works and its vision of American identity greatly influenced Russia’s perceptions of U.S. intentions toward Russia.

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U.S. security documents followed the 2002 National Security Strategy world-view by linking Russia’s perceived identity to its perceived threat to the U.S. The 2006 ATA judged that Putin’s centralization of power, his drive to assert control over civil society, and endemic corruption would make Russia a difficult interlocutor on areas of concern to the U.S. Likewise, the 2006 QDR stated that although rising Russian military power was unlikely to pose a threat to the U.S. comparable to the threat the Soviet Union had posed, Russian intentions were threatening because of the erosion of democracy, the curtailment of NGOs and freedom of the press, and the centralization of political power and limits to economic freedom. That is, Russia’s internal regime type was seen as an indication of intention when deciding the Russian military and security threat.

Unlike its predecessor, the 2006 National Security Strategy applied the world-view introduced in the 2002 National Security Strategy directly to Russia. It stated that U.S. interests were not “unaffected” by other states’ treatment of their own citizens and claimed that those states that are governed well “are the most inclined to behave well.” The document stated that the U.S. must encourage Russia to respect freedom and democracy at home and not to impede the cause of freedom abroad. It noted that if Russia nevertheless impeded democratization in either its own country or abroad, then it would “hamper the development of Russia’s relations with the U.S., Europe, and its neighbors.”

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Reflecting the thesis in the 2002 National Security Strategy that global instability and authoritarianism are inherently linked, American security documents in the mid-2000s increasingly stressed how political stagnation, repression, corruption, and socio-economic disturbances within the former Soviet states of Central Asia could foster radicalism and trans-national terrorism. This was contrasted with the conditions of those former Soviet republics like Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and Ukraine who, following their respective “color revolutions,” embarked on a path of democratization that purportedly improved their long term trends for stability. Moscow’s support to repressive regimes in the region and animosity toward the democratizing governments was thus analyzed as a threat to the U.S.’s democratization and counterterrorism agenda and taken as further evidence of the authoritarian nature of Moscow itself.\footnote{See \textit{Annual Threat Assessments} 2006 and 2007.}

It is almost certainly the case that Russian identity formation during Putin’s presidency was significantly impacted by American strategy, as laid out in American national security documents. Putin’s speech at the 43\textsuperscript{rd} Munich Security Conference in February 2007 is the clearest articulation of the degree to which Russia perceived its identity as fundamentally different from the perceived U.S. identity. Putin railed against the American unipolar model, claiming that U.S. unipolarity was inconsistent with the moral foundations for modern civilization.\footnote{Putin, \textit{Munich Security Conference Speech}, 2007.} Putin’s argument is an identity argument. Russian national security strategy has consistently connected the concepts of external security to the solidity of Russia’s social, cultural, and spiritual foundations. For example, in Putin’s 2007 address to the Federal Assembly, he stated that the protracted economic crisis, as well as foreign democratization efforts within Russia, had severely harmed the culture, spiritual, and moral traditions of Russia.
He claimed that Russian power could not be assured by blindly copying foreign development models. Russia needed to come up with its own models, or risk losing its national identity.\(^6\)

Tellingly, Medvedev repeated many of these same themes in his first address to the Federal Assembly in November 2008 when tensions with Washington were still high. Medvedev argued that the international financial crisis not only discredited the American economic model but the universality of that model on the international stage. He enumerated the Russian values that constituted Russian identity and provided examples of those values both domestically and abroad. He stated that Russian “justice” meant political equality, honest courts and responsible leaders at home and a worthy place for the Russian nation in the international system. He stated that Russian “freedom” meant individual freedom of speech, religion, residence, and employment and the national freedom of the Russian state. He stated that the Russian value of “welfare and dignity of human life” meant interethnic peace and unity of Russia’s diverse cultures and the protection abroad of disadvantaged groups, including in the breakaway regions of Georgia.\(^6\)

Medvedev built a conception of the Russian state in which its foreign policy was a reflection of its internal and unique identity and posited that the external actions of Western countries reflected their different and, as of 2008, incommensurate identity.

Both Putin and Medvedev prior to the reset combined beliefs about the widening gulf between U.S. and Russian identities with beliefs about the coherency of U.S. policy toward Russia. Referencing the U.S.’s overwhelming military strength, perceived support to terrorists in Russia, and alleged American hypocrisy on human rights, Putin posited a deeply conspiratorial view of

\(^6\) Medvedev, *Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation*, November 5, 2008,  
the outside world in his 2006 address to the Federal Assembly: “We see, after all, what is going on in the world. The wolf knows who to eat, as the saying goes. It knows who to eat and is not about to listen to anyone, it seems. . . in the name of one’s own interests everything is possible, it turns out, and there are no limits.”66 Two year later, Medvedev expressed a similar sentiment about the breadth and effectiveness of U.S. power when he implied that the U.S. could have prevented Georgia from invading South Ossetia and starting the Russia-Georgia War, if only it had chosen: “It makes no sense to hide the fact that the tragedy of Tskhinvali [South Ossetian capital] was made possible in part by the conceit of an American administration that closed its ears to criticism and preferred the road of unilateral decisions.”67

Following the reset, the perceived identity gap between the U.S. and Russia began to narrow. The U.S. 2010 National Security Strategy focused much less on democratization overall than its predecessors and it stepped back from overt criticism of Russia’s democratic status. It stated that the bilateral relationship was based on mutual interests, limiting its commentary on internal Russian matters, stating, “We support efforts within Russia to promote the rule of law, accountable government, and universal values.” The document did not reference a value gap with the U.S. and it did not pose values as a core part of American security interests. Likewise, the 2010 Department of State’s QDR—the agency’s first—did not mention Russia’s human rights record. This is a substantial shift from previous years in which Russia’s human rights record and its treatment of NGOs played greatly in the Defense Department’s QDRs, the DNI’s ATAs, and the yearly State Department human rights reports.

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With regards to identity, the 2009 ATA was a transitional document. It stated that threats from Russia included its cultivation of China, Iran, and Venezuela as partners, Russia’s attempts to “maintain control” over energy supply and transportation networks, and its effort to “counter the perceived threat” from the U.S. and NATO by maintaining its nuclear deterrent. The document is skeptical about the prospects for meaningful cooperation, but importantly, it stresses issue-specific constraints, like flashpoints in Eurasia, rather than differences in ideological orientation as in past ATAs. Instability in Ukraine and Georgia were blamed largely on the internal incoherency of those regimes, rather than on Russian efforts to quash democratic development. These trends were accelerated in the 2010 and 2011 ATAs, in which democratization was not mentioned at all with respect to Russia. The 2010 ATA assessed that the degree to which Russia would perceive the U.S. as a threat would turn on whether U.S. policies are threatening to Russian interests rather than crediting threat perceptions to the illiberal or undemocratic nature of the Russian leadership. The 2011 ATA went further. It eschewed discussion of Russian democratization even while remarking on the upcoming Russian presidential elections: “Putin and Medvedev indicate that the decision about who will be president hinges primarily on an arrangement between them. Both have shown interest in running.” It was cautiously optimistic about the potential for greater U.S.-Russian cooperation, with the caveat that internal weakness and suspicions of the reset by some elites could constrain Russia’s ability to follow through.

There are also limited signs that Russia and the U.S. are changing their perceptions about mutual perceptions of actor unity and coherency. The 2011 ATA was cautiously optimistic

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70 US, Annual Threat Assessment, 2011.
about the prospects for greater cooperation in U.S.-Russia relations, citing “significant improvements” and “encouraging signs” of Russian intentions. The ATA chose to hedge this assessment by citing internal Russian policy disagreements over the scope and extent of cooperation with the U.S. rather than citing efforts by Moscow, as a unitary actor, to hedge its cooperation.

These changes appear to have been mirrored in Russia. Lavrov did not reference U.S. hypocrisy or differences in identity during the 2011 Munich Security Conference for the first time in a Russian speech at Munich since 2004. He called for building resiliency to “ideological prejudices” in order to remove the “threat of emerging dividing lines.” He called for objectivity by all parties, a call to “not designate enemies” and to shed “accumulated historical clichés, phobias, and suspicions” that had undermined collective security and joint threat assessments in the previous decade. Medvedev shared this same sentiment in an interview with domestic press. Asked why America continued to distrust Russia, Medvedev explained that the distrust ran in both directions and blamed the phenomenon on a history of Cold War thinking in which both nations’ populations were socialized to view the other as the enemy—conceptions that have lived on in simplified stereotypes about each other’s identities:

“... these stereotypes have a pernicious effect on the potential for mutual understanding and ultimately poison the atmosphere of the planet. This applies, incidentally, not only to Russia. There are stereotypes for a number of other large developing countries, our neighbors. I think we have to free ourselves of these stereotypes and we really have a lot to do in this regard. I don’t want to throw stones at the Americans or the Europeans alone, because we live in a fairly glassy

house ourselves. But it seems to me that we in Russia have made some much more serious progress in this area.”

CONCLUSION

Assessing the Hypotheses

The process of worst case forecasting created an increasingly threatening relationship between the U.S. and Russia from 2002-2009. The U.S. came to regard Russia as an increasingly U.S.-focused actor (intent on subverting the American democratization agenda abroad); an increasingly powerful actor (willing to exert economic, energy, military and political power toward this end), and an increasingly coherent and different actor from itself (the model of anti-democratic authoritarianism). Likewise, Russia came to perceive the U.S. as an increasingly Russia-focused actor (seeking to contain an expansion of Russian power in the name of American hegemony); an increasingly powerful actor (capable of launching successful bottom up revolutions in multiple countries simultaneously) and an increasingly coherent and different actor from itself (naively focused on making every other country look like itself). These processes hung together and were mutually reinforcing. The “reset” reflected the decoupling of these self-reinforcing processes. This assessment poses a substantial challenge to existing theoretical approaches to threat dynamics, because those approaches cannot fully account for the way in which perceptions of capability and identity interact over time.

Power transition theory correctly identifies power equalization between a hegemon and a rising power as the most threatening moment in a bilateral relationship. However, it fails to

recognize that *perceptions* of material capabilities are as significant to the overall power balance as are the actual, objectively verifiable capabilities. This perceptual element skews the key inflection point in power transition theory—the point at which a rising power is approaching a dominate power. Although Russia became a more powerful actor during the early and mid 2000s, it also perceived that the U.S. was an increasingly powerful actor due to its perception that democratic revolutions and international terrorism were part of the U.S. foreign policy toolkit. Accordingly, the inflection point described in power transition theory should not have been reached until late 2008, the moment at which, in Russia’s eyes, the U.S. was at its weakest. The August Russia-Georgia war “revealed” that the color revolutions had not produced the enduring U.S. allies that Russia perceived the U.S. had sought. Moreover, the U.S. was maximally over-extended in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to power transition theory, we should have seen a deepening of the threat spiral, marked by an aggressive Russian effort to undermine a relatively weaker U.S. and an aggressive U.S. seeking to contain Russian power. Since U.S.-Russian threat dynamics moved in exactly the opposite direction, power transition theory does not convincingly describe the bilateral threat dynamic.

Defensive realism’s focus on the role of intentions helps to address realism’s over-reliance on material balance of power. However, it fails to articulate how material elements and perceptual elements interact to generate threat perceptions. Walt, for example, admits that his balance of threat theory “cannot determine a priori . . . which sources of threat will be most important in any given case.”\(^3\) Walt’s theory is limited because it holds state identity constant and because it focuses, like most rationalist theories, on future expectations of utility in isolation from processes.

\(^3\) Walt, 26.
of interaction. Since realist theories do not admit the possibility of states updating their identities during interaction, and since interests are defined significantly by identities, realist theories cannot account for how perceptions of intention influence threat dynamics. For example, as explained above, Moscow only determined that it was in its interests to try to work with the U.S. to dispel the pernicious effects of the security dilemma when it assessed that the U.S. was no longer capable of using or willing to use democratization as a foreign policy tool to contain Russia.

For both defensive realists and liberal institutionalists, security seekers can find themselves in threatening interactions because uncertainty about future expectations generates fear—the essence of the security dilemma—prompting both sides to accumulate more power in order to hedge against the possibility that the other side may choose to harm it. However, this assumption about the role of uncertainty is wrong. Rather, threat is a subjective realization that someone has sufficient capabilities to harm you and the intention of harming you. The language of realism, the theoretical dialogue through which we seek to understand why we ought to fear others, is really the “voice of the cautious paranoid.”

Liberal institutionalism, in turn, is the voice of the cautious optimist; both views, and the identities of the states that hold them, can quickly slip toward increasingly delusional performances of either unwarranted threat or unwarranted trust as their perceptions of self and other move in self-reinforcing lock-step.

Rationalist presumptions about the role of shared interests in dampening threat perceptions likewise fail to shed light on threat dynamics. This thesis suggests that simply providing two states with more information about where shared bargaining room might be found is insufficient,

because information about intentions and interests is fundamentally indeterminate in intersubjective processes. In times of accelerating threat, it is unlikely that signals of cooperative intent will be read as anything more than signals of deceit. Due to the attributional effect, as actors’ intentions and identities are perceived as increasingly exclusive to the other and as increasingly coherent, suspicions about another’s “true” intentions will grow as well. It is through this pernicious, interactive cycle of mistrust that states in turn define and constitute their national interests.  

The role of interaction in the formation of national interests presents a problem for cultural based arguments as well. Both the U.S. and Russia framed their increasing sense of fear of each other prior to the reset in terms that drew upon mythological conceptions of their identities. However, after the reset, both states simply drew on different elements of their national history to justify their changing articulations of their identities. Identity formation is a continually evolving process in which states can draw on and co-opt old memories, identities, and loyalties—there is no need to draw on all of them at the same time. Since identities change in reaction to processes of state interaction, if we freeze a state’s identity at a given point in time in order to try to understand its approach to threat, we will end up losing both the explanatory and predictive power that only dynamic explanations can provide. At any given time there are multiple alternative accounts carried along within a society until they are resolved into one

75 Rathbun, 549.
account from which the “next phase of reality constructing takes off.” \(^{77}\) “Resets” are precisely such points in time.

**Embracing Uncertainty**

Since worst case forecasting is a self-reinforcing process, it is surprising that the U.S. and Russia would have transitioned from a relationship of increasing threat to one of lessening threat. The discussion above suggests that since perceptions of power and identity are interactive, we should not expect that any one state caught in a threatening interaction can break out of the dynamic by simply changing its policy. Rather, the key circumstance determining whether a threatening relationship resets is not entirely under the control of either state. Since threat is a function of states resolving their uncertainty in the favor of believing the worst about another’s intentions, it stands to reason that the reintroduction of uncertainty into the relationship can break a cycle by forcing the participants to reconsider their conceptions of themselves, each other, and their mutual relations.

The idea that uncertainty can free states from fear is surprising, if not anathema, to our common understanding of international relations. For example, the security dilemma—which posits that the measures a state takes to ensure its security in turn cause a decrease in the security of all states, including itself \(^{78}\)—treats uncertainty as a key motivating driver. \(^{79}\) Yet, if we regard uncertainty as rooted in the “other mind” problem—that is, we can never entirely get inside the

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heads of other actors—then the core delusion of the security dilemma is that we nevertheless presume to have successfully peered into the minds of our counterparts and judged their intentions and identities as malign. If that is the case, then having our delusions broken by the sudden recognizance of a more contingent, uncertain, and variable world than we had otherwise imagined can create the type of cognitive dissonance that “resets” our mental frameworks.

There were multiple sources of uncertainty preceding the reset that facilitated its emergence by creating the cognitive space necessary for the U.S. and Russia to re-imagine their bilateral relations. For example, both the U.S. and Russia underwent a change in leadership within one year of each other that brought in administrations whose platforms challenged existing bilateral interpretations of the other’s identity. In the U.S., Obama entered office on a foreign policy platform premised in part on a fundamental reframing of the U.S. relationship with the rest of the world. In Russia, a dual Medvedev-Putin leadership structure emerged, unprecedented in Russian politics since Peter the Great’s regency. Independent of the bilateral relationship, Ukraine’s reversion to its pre-color revolution leadership in the 2009 presidential elections and Georgia’s territorial fragmentation from 2007-2009 put up a barrier to NATO’s expansion, making NATO’s identity uncertain not only for the West, as had long been the case, but for Russia as well. The dual nuclear revelations in Iran and North Korea in 2009 introduced doubt in both the U.S. and Russia about those countries’ nuclear ambitions, reordering international priorities. In

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81 Charles Kupchan makes a related argument when he states that an initiating actor can start a virtuous cycle that leads toward bilateral rapprochement by deliberately making itself vulnerable to exploitation in order to signal benign intent toward an adversary. However, Kupchan underestimates the degree to which a less powerful adversary is likely to misread signals of benign intent through a conspiratorial lens. (Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 38).
short, U.S. and Russian identities and interests became far more uncertain to the other in the year leading up to the reset, and the reset could not have happened otherwise.

Although the circumstances underlying a reset are largely beyond state control, a state can help to tip a relationship toward an assurance spiral, versus a threat spiral, in moments of uncertainty by seizing on these very moments to provide small gestures of cooperation or trust; it is during moments of uncertainty that actors will be the most likely to doubt their assumptions about the world around them and the threats they face. If timed correctly, these small acts can create the room needed to re-imagine shared interests and identities, allowing them to then manifest through more virtuous cycles. Of course, uncertainty can work in the other direction as well. If two states find themselves in a virtuous cycle, whereby they forecast the best about each other’s intentions, then sudden uncertainty can break the cycle, as both states develop suspicions about the other’s “real” intentions. This makes sustaining a reset difficult in uncertain times.

Moreover, whether states shift and accelerate toward the polarity of suspicion or the polarity of trust can be decided by relatively small acts due to the interactive mechanisms underlying worst case and best case forecasting. Indeed, changes within any of the mechanisms which connect two polarities of any type can ripple through a system quickly, causing major systemic change.\textsuperscript{82} Resets, therefore, can be sustained, but they are tenuous and timing is critical. The US is likely to have its work cut out for it. As the most powerful actor on the world stage, the US is the “logical” target for the world’s dispossessed seeking coherent and simple stories to explain their discontent.

\textsuperscript{82} Lebow, 55.
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