Regime Change Anxieties: American Hegemony and the Regime Change Security Dilemma

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Abstract

What role do regime security dilemma dynamics play in understanding challenges to American hegemony? In this paper, I argue that one under examined piece of modern great power relations is the regime security dilemma and the regime change anxieties it produces. Using the case of American-Russian relations since the end of the Cold War, I contend that the post-Cold War foreign policy of the United States focused on democratic enlargement has produced anxieties in potential peer rivals that drive their foreign policy decision-making and defense posture towards the United States. Anxiety over security of the regime due to increased capabilities that can help foment regime change and increasingly unclear intentions over American willingness to pursue regime change has produced a regime security dilemma that pushes targeted regimes to resist broad swaths of American foreign policy to ensure their own regime security. These anxieties have manifested themselves in various foreign policy venues, including nuclear politics, NGOs and civil society programs, human rights missions, international institutions, and military alliances. Thus, I contend that the regime change anxiety produce by the United States’ post-Cold War foreign policy has directly contributed to the rise of competitive behavior by peer challengers to resist the American-led liberal order.
Introduction

In his first week as Ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul faced resistance to his diplomatic mission almost immediately. After organizing a visit for Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns, which included meeting with civil society groups at the Moscow embassy, state-controlled television began labelling the meetings as proof that the new Ambassador was a “specialist in color revolutions” that President Obama had sent “to Moscow to orchestrate a revolution against the Russian regime.”¹ McFaul’s arrival in Russia came on the heels of protests against the Putin regime that President Putin viewed as orchestrated by Obama administration officials.² At the time and throughout his later writing, Ambassador McFaul was incredulous that anyone would think that America, or him specifically, would be trying to orchestrate regime change in Russia.³ Alternatively, the Putin regime in Russia seemed incredulous that the United States would send McFaul as Ambassador and continue with programs that worked with opposition and civil society leaders.⁴ This short encapsulation of Russian-American relations presents an analytic puzzle about how to think about Russian challenges to American foreign policy and vice-versa. Was Ambassador McFaul correct to identify that Putin was manufacturing narratives about American regime change intent for domestic audiences? Or was President Putin correct that McFaul and others had been fomenting regime change in Russia that required defense? I contend that neither of these perspectives are correct and instead this story is an encapsulation of what I call the regime security dilemma, where American intentions and capabilities against certain regimes have created genuine fears in some peer states about willingness to attempt to remove regimes, and pushing these regimes to work on regime security that makes them appear more threatening to America, deteriorating relationships and inspiring revisionist behavior.

As the United States has recognized that it is increasingly facing a world of revisionist powers and resurgent great power competition, scholars have presented different arguments as to why peer challengers are increasingly acting to challenge American hegemony and its liberal order.⁵ One under examined aspect of the return of competition and resistance to

². McFaul noted that President Putin had created a theory of American intentions were to foment color revolution, as had also occurred in Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia. ibid., 244.
American hegemony is the emergence of regime change anxieties through regime security dilemma dynamics. While traditional theories of balancing can help explain part of the story of rising competition against American hegemony, I contend that the post-Cold War foreign policy of the United States that has included the pursuit of forceful regime change has produced anxieties in potential peer rivals that drive their foreign policy decision-making and defense posture against the United States.

In particular, I argue that the regime security dilemma inspired by American foreign policy post-Cold War has made the American-led international order appear particularly threatening to various regimes and peer competitors, even when traditional forms of security threats are not as abundant. While traditional theories of international politics focus on the threat of invasion, conquering territory, or other military action, for certain states and regimes a threat to the leadership of a country is often as, if not more, threatening. A lack of recognition of these regime security dilemma dynamics then makes Russian responses to American hegemony appear more threatening, driving further spirals.

To be clear, this paper is not an excuse for Russian revisionism aggression nor argues that the United States should not pursue democracy promotion as a foreign policy. Rather it highlights an underrated aspect of international politics, namely that regime change behavior inspires regime change anxiety and the regime change security dilemma. This, then, hampers democracy promotion efforts and encourages balancing behavior that would not be otherwise expected. In the rest of this paper, I first lay out the regime security dilemma and discuss how regime change anxieties can produce deteriorating relationships. Second, I turn to the case of American and Russian relations since the Cold War to examine how the regime security dilemma operates in this case and provides a valuable means to fill the gaps between existing theories of Russian revisionism and poor US-Russia relations. Finally, I briefly examine whether there are ways out of the regime security dilemma for the US and Russia and determine a foreign policy based on non-interventionism and restraint might be the only means available. Overall, this paper attempts to take a step in explaining how fears of regime change, even when overstated, can contribute to downward spirals in international relationships.

Regime Change Anxieties and the Regime Security Dilemma

Anxiety has been shown to be a crucial factor in explaining a variety of political attitudes, beliefs, and actions. Specifically, anxiety is an emotion that occurs after appraising “a situation as being unpleasant, highly threatening, and uncertain,” and the actor cannot control the threat. In international relations, anxiety is an implicit factor in many theories and stems from conditions in the international system. Indeed, concerns about unpleasant threats, unknown intentions of others, and the uncertainty they impose are a common feature on many theories of international relations due to the anarchic nature of the international system.

This is seen most clearly in the idea of the security dilemma, where uncertainty and anxiety over lack of security can produce sub-optimal outcomes and competition. Anxiety and fear produce security dilemmas because states cannot guarantee their own security and are uncertain about the intentions of others to use their capabilities for harm. Under the security dilemma, anxiety over the intentions and capabilities of other states leads to arming decisions to increase the sense of security, which in turn raises the anxiety of other actors who see the arming as a threat and something they cannot be sure will not threaten them, so can lead to arm spirals and other negative effects. With security only being assured through self-help measures, states feel anxious about their security when the relative strength of other states grows and their intentions are more uncertain, harming a state’s ability to feel secure and not have to arm and build capabilities to maintain the security themselves.

There are two ways through which the anxiety that results from security dilemma dynamics can be reduced: reducing the gap in capabilities or removing the uncertainty over intentions. Building capabilities (or finding a way to reduce the capabilities of the other


state) is the first way through which many states in the security dilemma approach mitigating anxiety. However, if undertaking arms buildups to remove the difference in capabilities, then this could appear threatening to the other state and make them more anxious, starting a spiral. The second way security dilemma anxieties are reduced requires removing uncertainty about the current and future intentions of the rival state. Finding ways to create clear intentions means less concerns about uncertainty, but disagreements about what types of actions can signal intentions is varied, and states often focus more on capabilities and history for understanding intentions than the words of the other states. It is also hard to signal benign intentions if they do not know that the capabilities in other states are not targeting them or their interests. Hence, anxieties over security dilemma dynamics can be difficult to remove.

Traditionally, discussions of security dilemma anxieties have focused on anxiety over security emerging from interstate threats to invade a territory, annex the territory, or harm the territorial security of the state. To illustrate, in rationalist bargaining models of war, concerns over credible commitments and ability to know intentions are presented as threats related to territory and bargains over territorial division. These dynamics typically are focused on capabilities of states to invade territory, project military force abroad, and harm the territorial security concerns of other states. In trying to think about how states can overcome anxiety, different theories have sought to explore how different types of arming processes or signals might reduce anxiety and help signal benign intentions, but mostly focus on territorial security. In discussions of the nuclear revolution, nuclear weapons are theorized to remove anxiety of territorial invasion because they are the ultimate defensive weapon that removes the need for buffer states and robust arms competition. Others argue that territorial integrity norms have helped reduce the uncertainty over territory that is a chief flashpoint of international conflict, and thus reduce anxiety over the possibility of revisionist intent of other powers. On the other hand, theories such as offensive realism argue that security dilemmas and anxiety can only be reduced once obtaining regional hegemony

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in the territory and the elimination of potential rival great powers that could threaten key territorial locations.\textsuperscript{17} The point here is that in discussions of how to mitigate the capabilities and uncertainty that drive security dilemma anxieties and to obtain certain security are all largely premised on anxieties over territorial security issues.

Crucially however, anxiety about threats to security go beyond territory. Challenges to who rules a states or threats to the regime from an external power can be equally if not more salient threats. Indeed, throughout history, challenges to who rules over a territory has been a common source of international conflict. As Betts explains, “Wars have many causes, and each war is unique and complicated, but the root issue is always the same: Who rules when the fighting stops?”\textsuperscript{18} Wars of succession were common throughout Europe and wars over the type of religious regime that would govern a territory became the normal ways wars were seen. While leadership and territory did go hand in hand in much of this time period, the concerns over who ruled rather than which territory was included in that administrative boundary was often more important.\textsuperscript{19} In this way, concerns over insecurity of a regime ruling a territory is not a new phenomenon but has been a key concern for various regimes. Even during the Cold War, certain leaders viewed the internal regime characteristics of foreign territories as inherently threatening more so than the territorial or conventional security concerns, making them prime targets for regime change action rather than traditional concerns over territorial security.\textsuperscript{20} Whether in various Wars of Succession in Europe, or the proxy wars fought by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, often conflict and anxiety over threats to the state emerge from threats related to changing the government of a territory. And yet even with these cases, regime security threats are not typically discussed as features of security dilemmas, whether as covert or overt armed actions, and are often omitted from thinking about security dilemma anxieties which retains a focus on territorial conventional discussions.

This is odd, ironically, because in the canonical formulation of the security dilemma by Jervis, he makes the point that regime security is just as important for security dilemma anxieties. As he states, “When there are believed to be tight linkages between domestic


and foreign policy or between the domestic politics of two states, the quest for security may drive states to interfere pre-emptively in the domestic politics of others in order to provide an ideological buffer zone.”\textsuperscript{21} Even in an era traditionally thought of as a high point of Westphalian sovereignty focused on territory, Metternich discussed how great powers seek to decide who rules in foreign territories to ensure their own security. As he claimed “Any false or pernicious step taken by any state in its internal affairs may disturb the repose of another state, and this consequent disturbance of another state’s repose constitutes an interference in that state’s internal affairs. Therefore, every state—or rather, every sovereign of a great power—has the duty, in the name of the sacred right of independence of every state, to supervise the governments of smaller states and to prevent them from taking false and pernicious steps in their internal affairs.”\textsuperscript{22} When threats are seen as emanating from who rules, then regime security dilemma dynamics are clearly at play. Combined, conflict over who rules in a territory and threats emanating from states over who is in charge of various territories provides a key security issue that states have been concerned about.

I contend then that anxieties over regime security can create a regime security dilemma, where anxiety over the security of the regime, emerging from capabilities that could target it from another state and the uncertain intentions about great powers who may want to harm the regime creates incentives for a state to build up their own capabilities to ensure their regime is secure. This, in turn, can make the regime appear threatening. In particular, the regime security dilemma can exist in two directions. First, a state can fear that certain regimes are inherently threatening to their interests. Alternatively, the regime security dilemma could emerge because capabilities that could harm their regime and are inherently threatening. These regime security dilemma dynamics become particularly insidious when both things are occurring simultaneously, with one state viewing a certain regime as a threat to their interests and the other regime viewing the first state’s capabilities as a threat to their own regime. This creates a spiral when a great power views a regime as a threat, and the actions taken to protect their interests or remove that threat create greater anxiety among the other regime, pushing them to take more aggressive actions to try and protect the regime, which then makes the regime then appear more threatening.

In traditional security dilemma dynamics, the focus is often on military arming decisions and signaling with arms.\textsuperscript{23} However, regime security dilemma dynamics are unique from

\textsuperscript{21} Jervis, “Cooperation under the security dilemma,” 168.
\textsuperscript{22} Paul W. Schroeder, \textit{Metternich’s Diplomacy at Its Zenith, 1820-1823} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), 126.
\textsuperscript{23} For instance, in traditional security dilemma dynamics, there are often arming decisions that play other this way. Initially, a state buys and develops new missile defense technology that would protect them from incoming missiles and boost security of the state, but that also makes the opponent more wary of their ability to deter future aggression so they need to build new military capabilities to maintain their own security.
these traditional security dilemma dynamics is a few different ways. First, the types of capabilities that can threaten regime security are much more varied than traditional military capabilities and also can be more difficult to defend against to be able to deter. These capabilities include in some cases covert actions, quasi-NGOs, coup plotting, political party linkages, civil society programs, international institutions, sanctions, non-proliferation agreements, and other types of foreign policy tools that can be used to apply pressure towards regime change. The tools available to threaten or impact regime security can be also cheaper, more diffuse, and less controllable from the highest echelons of power. Further, not all capabilities that can harm the regime are inherently nefarious, but rather only appear threatening to certain regimes and often are considered normal foreign policy tools.

Beyond these capabilities, the ability to signal benign intentions is also different. In order to signal benign intent, there would have to be a way to show that these broad foreign policy capabilities would not harm the targeted regime. However, due to the diffuse and multifaceted nature of these capabilities and tools, it is much more difficult to show the great power would not use them since the costs are so low and they cannot be as controlled. It could be the case that it might be more easily believed when said that not interested in harming the regime and becomes easier to trust that will not view other regimes as a threat. However, it’s unclear exactly how trustful or credible these promises are and what makes certain promises to not harm a regime more credible than others. Regardless however, when a regime believes there are hostile intentions against it, and especially when armed force has been used against certain regimes in the past, then regime security dilemmas will emerge. This creates anxieties over the intentions of the state and leads to viewing all types of foreign policy as designed for regime change and assuming the worst intentions.24

While regime security dilemmas can produce negative outcomes, but there are three factors make regime security dilemmas more likely to emerge. First, regime security dilemmas are particularly salient for authoritarian regimes, where the linkage between who rules and the security of the state are more intimately entwined.25 Authoritarian regimes are often

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25. In democratic regimes, who rules is less seen as a matter of state security, but it could still be the case that threats to democratic regime could emerge. Particularly during the Cold War, both communist and democratic states, namely the Soviet Union and the United States, both attempted to intervene in various democratic elections and regimes through various means, but the regime security threats were never as acute as when it was authoritarian regime being targeted. See Dov H. Levin, “When the Great Power Gets a Vote: The Effects of Great Power Electoral Interventions on Election Results,” International Studies Quarterly 60, no. 2 (2016): 189–202; Lindsey A. O’Rourke, Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).
more concerned about regime security than democratic regimes at the domestic level, with authoritarian leaders often seeking to remove potential internal threats to their regime. This often includes coup-proofing measures, co-optation of elites, and other actions aimed at promoting regime security.26 Given authoritarian regimes are willing to sacrifice traditional territorial security concerns for regime security, this implies that regime security dilemmas should affect them more. Further, authoritarian regimes are also more concerned about personal security after they might lose power given they are more likely to face threats of death, imprisonment, or exile compared to democratic leaders.27 Thus, regime security dilemmas could become particular acute for authoritarian states because the individual leaders in the regime might also fear for personal security.

Second, regime security dilemmas are particularly salient when threats to state territory are less common. The anxiety that remains most acute is insecurity over the regime. If annexation, territorial change, and large cross-border attacks become less likely to occur, then the largest security concerns remaining are aimed at the regime rather than the territory. The remaining sense of threat that can emerge is one to the leadership of the state, and that threat then filters how they view threats. When these traditional external threats are seen as less important or less likely to occur, then the worry about regime security becomes even more paramount. Put differently, when traditional territorial security dilemma dynamics are reduced, regime security dilemma dynamics can then become even more acute or the main locus of continued competition.

There are reasons to think the decline of territorial threats might be real. Since 1945, a variety of different changes have made territorial security concerns less threatening as previous eras, though potential regime change remains as a core threat to certain states. Nuclear weapons have reduced the need for territorial conquest of buffer zones as they are no longer required to protect capitals from invading militaries.28 As the ultimate defensive weapon, then threats to territorial integrity are less likely to emerge. In addition, the settling of borders and removal of territory as a source of insecurity has made the prospect of conven-

26. In fact, it is often the case that they weaken the military against external threats because they are so concerned about internal threats. Caitlin Talmadge, The Dictator’s Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).
27. In fact, it has been shown that authoritarian leaders are much more likely to face death, imprisonment, or exile when removed from office. Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, Randolph M Siverson, and Gary Woller, “War and the fate of regimes: A comparative analysis,” The American Political Science Review, 1992, 638–646; Giacomo Chiozza and H. E. Goemans, “International conflict and the tenure of leaders: Is war still ex post inefficient?,” American Journal of Political Science 48, no. 3 (2004): 604–619. In addition, as golden parachutes have become less likely in the world due to increased jurisdiction of international courts, exile is seen less as a viable option and makes maintaining hold on the regime a crucial factor.
tional great power war unlikely and has lessened traditional security dilemmas about military expenditures and offensive or defensive capabilities.\textsuperscript{29} Finally, changes in international institutions and alliances, such as NATO, and other comprehensive security agreements have had the effect of reducing security concerns by removing the traditional security lines between states and placing them under the same alliance or institutional umbrella.\textsuperscript{30} While there are obviously still concerns over maritime claims and other flashpoints, territorial security dilemma concerns seem muted due to these technological, normative, and structural changes in the international system. And yet even with these changes in flashpoints that typically create interstate competition and provoke challenges to the international order, regime security dilemma dynamics shows how competition can re-emerge.\textsuperscript{31}

Finally, hegemony or unipolarity can make regime security dilemma dynamics more salient. In a multipolar system, regimes that are facing regimes threats from a great power could find a patron or other power to help defend them. However, in an era of unipolarity, the threat to regime security cannot be buttressed against by another power and instead requires other solutions for defending the regime’s security. Typically, when unipolar powers or hegemons emerge, other states in the system recognize that their security is at the whims of the intentions of the unipolar power. However, when territorial threats are reduced, then the typical territorial threats from hegemons are not concerning, but then other tools of power that could threaten the domestic regimes of other states still exist. Hegemons might not target territorial expansion, but they could target regimes that do not follow the goals of the hegemon for the international order. Gunitsky has illustrated that hegemons often do look to exert their power through changing regimes or influencing domestic regimes after changes in the international system.\textsuperscript{32} Thus when a great power obtains hegemony, it becomes difficult for regimes that they dislike having any certainty that their regime will not be targeted for regime change in the future and the regime security dilemma emerges.

As Monteiro points out though, there is nothing determinative about unipolar hegemons

\textsuperscript{29} As Fazal explores, the relative decline in the number of state deaths in the international system shows that the threat of annexation, while not removed, has been drastically reduced since 1945 and removed this typical source of security anxiety from many states minds. Tanisha M. Fazal, \textit{State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation} (Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Gibler, \textit{The Territorial Peace: Borders, State Development, and International Conflict}.


\textsuperscript{31} To be clear, territorial security dilemmas can still exist in the nuclear age and with territorial integrity norms, especially when it was the inter-German border in the Cold War. However, nuclear weapons and other factors reduce these tensions and then make regime security dilemmas even more acute.

\textsuperscript{32} He illustrates, in periods of hegemonic transition, that is where the most changes to domestic regimes occur as other states emulate the new hegemon’s domestic regime, and prodded through inducements or coercion to a new hegemon’s preferred regime, or are forcibly changed. Seva Gunitsky, \textit{Aftershocks: Great Powers and Domestic Reforms in the Twentieth Century} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
that will make them seek to impose new regimes by force, but there is also no constraint stopping them if they choose to do so.\textsuperscript{33} While the hegemon might not intend to target changing a regime. The regime security dilemma can still emerge if peer competitors can not know that the hegemon does not have intentions to target the regime. Particularly once it is clear that the hegemon has some interest in exerting its influence and imposing regimes somewhere, it becomes more difficult to signal that they are not interested in targeting the regime of a peer competitor. Because of the unknowable intentions of the hegemon, once a reputation for regime change emerges, anxiety over regime change intentions makes other tools of foreign policy appear as security threats to the regime, regardless if they are or not.\textsuperscript{34}

Finally, when there is hegemony it becomes more difficult for states to see the regime change capabilities of the unipole as inherently threatening. Sechser argues that often hegemons can ironically produce more resistance to their coercive requests and threats from weaker powers because the weaker state cannot be certain they will not ask for something more in the future.\textsuperscript{35} In other words, the sheer power differential means that weaker states cannot be certain of the hegemon’s intentions and assumes that all forms of revision should be resisted. In a similar but different vein, the power differential the hegemon has over other states makes their ability to convince others that their tools of foreign policy are not being used to undermine the regime security of others. And even if they are not being used to foist regime change now, it is difficult under hegemony to trust future intentions because they could be used that way in the future. Thus, hegemony enhances the regime security dilemma because it is fundamentally difficult to credibly commit to not use tools of foreign policy to attempt to influence regimes. At the same time the actions taken to resist the influence of the hegemon, then can become seen as a threat to the interests of the unipolar power, encouraging more coercive threats and spiral to emerge.

Any action taken by a hegemon to influence domestic politics of another country then becomes a signal that could target or threaten the regime security of a peer competitors and makes them update their beliefs about intentions and the threat that is posed to their regime. Thus, democracy promotion programs, civil society support, humanitarian aid, political party building, or other foreign policy factors can be seen as threatening even when there is no hostile threat intended. When these mechanisms are seen before or after the violent overthrow of a regime, other regimes then will try to find ways to protect the regime

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by resisting these programs. Once a hegemon demonstrates a possible interest in carrying out regime change, their intentions are unclear as to whether they will use these foreign policy tools only for peaceful means or to possibly overthrow regimes. And with no means to credibly commit to not using these foreign policy tools in service of mission to overthrow the regime, the hegemon faces broader balancing and targeted efforts than we would normally expect.

Overall, I argue that the regime security dilemmas creates a regime change anxieties that push states into security competition because it is difficult to not credibly commit to overthrowing regimes when the hegemon has capacity to do so and particularly when it is an authoritarian regime that is under threat. Competition, rather than cooperation, emerges as regimes cannot be certain that the hegemon will not try to overthrow the regime and thus there is larger competition that theoretically expected. Thus, even with the power differentials indicating the unipolar era should continue, regime change anxieties produce other outcomes that lock in competition and harm American hegemony.

The Regime Security Dilemma and Russian Anxiety of American Regime Change

To examine the regime security dilemma in depth, I move to the case of American and Russian relations following the Cold War. Through this case, I examine how American regime change behavior has impacted regime security anxieties in Russia, and how anxieties have manifested in Russian foreign policy approaches towards the US. I first explore common theories that seek to explain rising Russian revisionism and aggression against American hegemony, in particular the 2014 Ukraine crisis and Crimea annexation. Second, I review American grand strategy since the end of the Cold War and attempt to highlight the converging patterns that have signal regime change intentions and also increased regime change capabilities. Next, I try to integrate the regime security dilemma dynamics into these explanations of increased Russian revisionism and highlight how the post-Cold War trajectory of American intentions and capabilities produced regime change anxieties in Moscow. Finally, I look to how the actions taken in response to this regime change dilemma has made the United States distrust the regime more and furthered the ongoing dilemma in various issue areas affecting both American and Russian foreign and defense policies.

To be clear, I am not arguing that American foreign policy behavior directly causes or excuses Russian aggression, that the United States should not attempt to promote democracy, the rule of law and human rights, or that it is worth omitting these values to achieve
better foreign policy outcomes. Rather, I simply seek to highlight that regime security dilemma dynamics can explain straining relations and should be factored into foreign policy decision-making. Understanding how the variety of different signals and capabilities that the US possesses as a hegemon might produce anxieties is crucial for better analysis and policymaking.

**Traditional Accounts of Post-Cold War Russian Revisionism**

Following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia emerged in the American unipolar also transitioning from great power status and to a new regime, which included American support moving to a more democratic political structure and new capitalist economy. This transition featured severe reductions in military power, international power, and status on the global stage. While this transition to away from great power status played out, Russian assertiveness was also reduced. As the Partnership for Peace program and other forums for increased US and Russian cooperation emerged, fruitful partnership seemed like a possibility for a time in Russia, even with political and economic instability continued to hamper Russia.36

However in 1999 the Russian military began a robust modernization program to attempt to rebuild some of its capacity it had lost in the decade after realizing how inadequate it was.37 This largely did not threaten US interests at the time but eventual growing Russian military capabilities manifested in the 2008 Georgia War where they utilized force in a border crisis over South Ossetia and Abkhazia.38 This assertiveness and successful military operation by Russia was followed however by the Obama administration attempting to ‘reset’ relations and move back towards a path of peaceful cooperation.39 However, while there some positive takeaways from the ‘Reset’, it ended with Putin returning to power after the Libya mission grew to include overthrowing the Qaddafi regime and tensions reasserted themselves to grow.40 Finally, with Russia annexing Crimea and intervening in eastern Ukraine, and

38. For an accounting of this crisis, as well as later discussions of Russian actions in Ukraine, see: Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
the full re-emergence of Russian assertiveness, the breakdown of prospects of American and Russian partnership was finalized.\textsuperscript{41} This led to increasing cases of American strategy documents identifying Russia as a challenger to American interests, fully ending the idea of the Russian Reset, and eventually led to a refocusing on great powers and hegemony in the Trump administration’s national security strategy focused on great power competition.\textsuperscript{42}

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea, there has been a robust debate over why Russia revisionism and aggression against American hegemony has re-emerged.\textsuperscript{43} One strand argues that Russian aggression is a natural outgrowth of NATO expansion towards their spheres of interest.\textsuperscript{44} This argument has a few different strands, but they focus broadly on either the US expanding NATO to former Warsaw Pact countries starting in 1999, turning back on promises allegedly given to the Russians at the time of the end of the Cold War. As some put it, Russian resistance and assertiveness against “further enlargement of NATO to the east...is hardly surprising: no state would welcome the extension of a historically hostile military alliance up to its borders.”\textsuperscript{45} Others argue that while these promises were not given, US signaling interest in expanding NATO beyond central and Eastern Europe to Georgia and Ukraine right on Russia’s border was the major catalyst for aggression.\textsuperscript{46}

Others have disagreed with these assessments and have argued that Russian revisionism is instead a reaction to a loss of status and is seeking to return to the great power status the Soviet Union once had.\textsuperscript{47} This argument holds that following the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia faced two decades of lower status and humiliation at the hands

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\item[41.] On Ukraine, see: Andrew Wilson, \textit{Ukraine crisis: What it means for the West} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).
\item[46.] Sakwa, \textit{Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands}, 4-5.
\end{enumerate}
of the West and the United States that they were not accustomed to as a former great power. However once economic stability returned following the 1990s and the military gained more capacity, that the unifying vision of Russia under Putin was to return the status to one of great power with a major role in world affairs.\textsuperscript{48} Even as early as 1999, commentators were realizing that Russia was "preoccupied with a great power status" that they no longer had and were seeking to rebuild.\textsuperscript{49} As such, increased aggression was determined by the increased capacity of the Russian military and the desire to appear like a great power once again. Others argue that there is an insatiable desire for Russian empire that drives for control over its near abroad.\textsuperscript{50}

A final school of thought argues Russian revisionism is a response to domestic factors. There are two main arguments related to this school of thought. One argument holds that increased Russian nationalism can help insulate the regime during economic troubles as they have faced and can help produce policy wins to allow for further control. Particularly in response to the 2011 protests in Russia that the regime saw as influenced by American hands, growing nationalism was needed to drive increased support for the regime and thus lead to aggression to manufacture that nationalist support.\textsuperscript{51} The premise is that the primary concern of the Russian regime and Putin in particular is how to maintain domestic power, and all aggressive foreign policy actions in the region stemmed from that desire.\textsuperscript{52} In this sense, the military mission in Ukraine was a "pressure release valve and a way to compensate for its weaknesses in other areas (including the economy)."\textsuperscript{53} Another branch of this argument focuses on how various aggressive actions taken by Russia are designed to help enrich the oligarchs Putin and the regime depend on and surround themselves with.\textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{53} Lilia Shevtsova, "The Kremlin is Winning," \textit{The American Interest}, February 12, 2015, \url{http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/02/12/the-kremlin-is-winning/}.

largely hold that aggressive actions in the near abroad are signals that the oligarchs are
depending more from the Putin regime rather than signaling greater geopolitical intent.55

Each of these theories has distinct benefits and drawbacks, but, interestingly, implicit
in many of their discussions is the role regime change anxieties play in Russian insecurity
and aggression. Fear of regime change, for instance, helps explain why control over domestic
levels of power becomes so essential because a fractious domestic society becomes an easier
target of regime change. Additionally, NATO expansion and discussions of NATO expansion
with Georgia and Ukraine become particularly threatening not because of any threat of
tanks rolling across those borders, but rather they could serve as easier outposts to start
influencing regime change behavior. Finally, as the quote from Metternich above indicates,
regime change can often be seen as the behavior of great powers onto smaller powers, and
the Soviet Union was intimately involved in regime change activities as part of its time as a
great power. Thus, status concerns over the return to great power status have something to
do with regime change as well, and do not want to be seen as a smaller power that is the one
going imposed on. Each of these theories contains some aspect of fear of external regime
change or undue regime influence and how that can affect perceptions of regime security. I
argue, rather, an underappreciated aspect helping explain increased Russian revisionism is
the regime security dilemma, and it can help explain the deterioration of America-Russian
relations as well as help link together the other theories of Russian aggression. It can also
highlight the ways in which American actions, without much consideration of how the signal
would be received, produce anxieties inside Russia and elsewhere that make regime change
appear as a key threat. Thus the deterioration of relations is a spiral that endures due to
regime security dilemma dynamics that are extremely difficult to find offramps from.

American Regime Change Intentions and Post-Cold War Regime
Security Dilemma

American regime change behavior has created Russian anxieties and harmed American in-
terests due to regime change being seemingly implicit in all foreign policy tools. The anxiety
produced by the post-Cold War focus on democracy promotion and American regime change
behavior has signaled threat to the regime security of Russia, with the power differential and
hegemonic tools available to America making the threat to the regime more tangible. It has
also pushed Russia to pursue tools to reduce the threat to their regime, but by doing so, has
made itself appear more threatening to the US, creating a regime security dilemma.

55. For a review of the development of oligarchs and corruption in Russia, see: Karen Dawisha, Putin’s
There is much evidence that the United States might be interested in regime change and possess revisionist intent for the domestic politics of rival states, such as Russia. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has focused on democratic enlargement as a key foreign policy goal. This focus stemmed from a grand strategy of primacy that focused on deterring other peer competitors from ever challenging American hegemony and seeking to extend the American-controlled liberal international order in perpetuity.\textsuperscript{56} As a feature of this grand strategy of primacy, the United States pursued a logic of democratic expansion under the logic that American security, prosperity, and national interests would be best served with a wider community of democratic regimes.\textsuperscript{57} Each of the foundational national security strategies of the first three presidents following the end of the Cold War highlights this trend. President Clinton premised his national security strategy of democratic enlargement and expanding democratic communities to enhance American leadership and protect American interests.\textsuperscript{58} The Bush administration continued this focus, albeit modified, and sought to expand and transform the political regimes that were in the democratic community.\textsuperscript{59} The Obama administration furthered this trend, especially embracing the Arab spring, but in other ways also supporting the expansion of democracy as a core feature of its national security strategy.\textsuperscript{60} The overarching logic linking this focus on democracy and security and prosperity was the belief that American interests were best achieved when it was surrounded by a community of democracies.\textsuperscript{61}

The focus on promoting regime change was driven primarily by a desire to help promote


\textsuperscript{59} As they state, "the United States will use this moment of opportunity to extend the benefits of freedom across the globe. We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world," George W. Bush, \textit{The National Security Strategy of the United States of America}. (Washington D.C.: The White House, 2002), V, \url{http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2002.pdf}.

\textsuperscript{60} Obama’s National Security Strategy phrases it as, "The United States supports the expansion of democracy and human rights abroad because governments that respect these values are more just, peaceful, and legitimate. We also do so because their success broad fosters an environment that supports America’s national interests. Barack Obama, \textit{National Security Strategy of the United States of America}. (Washington D.C.: The White House, 2010), 37, \url{http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2010.pdf}.

\textsuperscript{61} Relating to Saunders’ discussion of internal threat perceptions when carrying out military intervention, similarly in the post-Cold War period there was a belief that threats could exist due to domestic regime type and thus should be changed to promote stable and secure global community to preserve unipolarity. Saunders, \textit{Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions}.\vspace{15pt}
democracy across a variety of regions and formerly non-democratic societies, and mostly used tools of hegemonic influence to help support and prod democratic transitions forward. As Gunitsky notes, the United States’ focus on democracy promotion did not use coercion or forceful regime change initially.\textsuperscript{62} Rather, the unipolar moment meant other forms of hegemonic influence were sufficient to push regime change and promote democratization. These forms of influence included investments in quasi-NGOs, such as the NDI and IRI, focusing on USAID programs, State department diplomatic initiatives, civil society programs, political party building efforts, development initiatives, supporting international institution expansion, conditionality programs, such as through NATO accession and IMF loans, and also often focused on expanding human rights and the rule of law throughout various political communities. Importantly for Russia, these efforts also included forms of material or ideational support for the so-called color revolutions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia that saw the breakdown of old authoritarian regimes following the end of communist rule and transition to more electoral regimes following the demise of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{63} Additionally, similar support for the Arab Spring uprisings was attempted to help transition regimes towards democracy.\textsuperscript{64} Each of these tools was useful in a variety of ways attempting to help promote democratic expansion and utilized non-coercive means to support the drive to enact regime change throughout the non-democratic world and consolidate gains.

However, beyond these missions there were three main lines of American regime change actions in the post-Cold War era that signal broader revisionist intent that promoted a regime security dilemma with Russia. 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 to help build political parties, foster civil society development, and in general attempt to find ways to make Russia join the community of democracies.\textsuperscript{65} While perhaps out of noble intent, it was also designed to remove Russia as a...
threat to American security as the assumption was democratic Russia would no longer harm American interests.\(^{66}\) Regardless, it signaled American intent and interest in the domestic regime of Russia and willingness to use resources to try and foster a more favorable regime in Russia. While American involvement in Russian domestic politics evolved over time, with less direct focus on embracing certain politicians but more on help enhance civil society and clean elections, there still remains American interest in the domestic politics of Russia that has endured.\(^{67}\)

Second, as noted above, American support for ‘color revolutions’ through the various forms of support and linkages also provided more evidence to Russian elites about American regime change intentions. As Levitsky and Way illustrate, linkages with the United States and Europe were crucial factors in help the Color Revolutions succeed, and support for those missions through various US-backed offices and institutes produced more signals about American willingness to support protesters and domestic opposition groups.\(^{68}\) 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.\(^{69}\) Combined with the above history and concern over previous American role in Russian domestic politics, concerns over America having intentions of using Russian elections as potential launching pads for color revolution in Moscow were publicly discussed and feared as far back as the 2007-2008 election season and also following the 2011 election protests.\(^{70}\)

Finally, and perhaps most crucially for the regime security dilemma emerging as it has, America’s use of armed force post-Cold War in regime change wars has signaled a particular hostile intent and means to overcome resistance to their softer efforts at regime influence. The US embrace of forcible regime change operations as a tool in its kit to promote the


\(^{68}\) Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).


democratic community was particularly anxiety inducing. These missions came about to re-
install democratic leaders, overthrow non-democratic leaders, and for a variety of different
missions, but the use of armed force in Haiti, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and
elsewhere contributed to an idea that the US could use armed force when its non-militarized
forms of democracy promotion did not succeed.\(^71\) The view that American intervention
can follow after regimes crack down on protesters and rebels is particularly threatening and
shows willingness to escalate challenges to the regime.

These three factors have created a potential view of American intentions as interested
in promoting regime change, including in Russia, and willing to escalate to military force if
the regime change efforts are resisted. There is a clear pattern that emerges of the United
States then that uses these hegemonic tools to promote regime change and can use force
if resisted. The continued spread of commentary about the need for democracy promotion
and to spread democracy in Moscow has amplified this signal and help to promote a view
of American foreign policy behavior as focused on promotion and spreading their preferred
regime type.\(^72\) These signals sent a view that America was interested in muddling in the
domestic regimes of potential adversaries or other powers and became difficult to say foreign
policy tools were not designed for focus on targeting regimes seen as non-beneficial for
American security.

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 following these initial steps. While it is the case that
the US would and does not use armed force to install democracy everywhere, the use of
armed force provides a template showing a signal to Russia and others how the United
States could move from softer forms of regime change behavior to military missions, creating
anxiety.\(^73\) And in fact, the US foreign policy elite have often called for harder application of
these various tools of foreign policy for the explicit purpose of spreading democracy, which
to authoritarian regimes is the sound of forcible regime change coming.\(^74\)

\(^{71}\) In particular, the US mission in Serbia, Iraq, and Libya provided a clear intent that American ambi-
tions see removing regimes they view are problematic through force as both in their interests and possible
given their prime position in the international system. Samuel Charap, “Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of

\(^{72}\) As Fred Kagan articulates a common Washington view, “We must cajole Russia into developing a new
national identity not bound in the subjugation of a large empire and military might but rather as a peaceful

\(^{73}\) In fact, the number of cases where the US used military force to install democracy is quite small relative
to the military power it has.

\(^{74}\) Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions : America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S.
The desire for regime change is not new. The United States was interested in promoting regime change in earlier periods, and has intervened in various conflicts and imposed new leaders in many different locations since 1898. However, in these previous periods, the United States was often countermanded by other great powers trying to impose their own systems and the power differentials between the peer competitors was such that threats to the regime of another was not seen as feasible. However, in an era of American hegemony, the threat the US poses in terms of regime security is more acute and requires a more substantial defense than previous periods. Hegemony allows for American ambitions for regime change to go unchallenged by other great powers and creates more opportunities to act on regime change intent. When there are no other great powers to work with to enhance your regime security, this threat becomes much more acute and produces greater anxiety because the measures needed to ameliorate the threat do not exist. This heightens anxieties about what the pattern of American hegemony looked like and the future of democratic expansion as a threat to other regimes.

To be clear, the focus of how America has helped spread democratic expansion that has brought many benefits with development, rule of law, and more are goals that should be celebrated. One major problem however is that the United States did not realize it was signaling such revisionist. For the US, many of these signals sent to Russia about regime change intent were not seen by the American policymakers themselves as anything regarding intentions towards the Russia regime. In fact, seldom does discussion about American democracy promotion extend beyond the cases it has actively been promoted and does not look at the signals democracy promotion might send others. When the United States does not realize that these actions combined with the forcible regime change missions send signals that make them appear revisionist, it can help prompt the regime security dilemma and make it harder to find ways for the US to send countermanding signals to promote better relations.

76. For more on competition for influence in foreign elections, see: Levin, “When the Great Power Gets a Vote: The Effects of Great Power Electoral Interventions on Election Results.”
Russian Reactions to American Regime Change Capabilities Under the Regime Security Dilemma

The ways in which Russia has responded in this period towards American foreign policy provides evidence of the regime security dilemma dynamics discussed above. Chief of the Russian General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, and other Russian military voices have consistently articulated their view of Russia’s security as focused on threats to regime security. In their writing and published Russian military doctrine, they have articulated a view of American post-Cold War military doctrine, or foreign policy posture, that has been aimed at growing American influence around the world and using a variety of military and political capabilities to exert their influence over regimes and exerting influence as a piece of American regime change action. As Gerasimov articulates the view of the Russian military, “the primary threats to Russian sovereignty” are “stemming from U.S.-funded social and political movements such as color revolutions, the Arab Spring, and the Maidan movement.” Even in their interactions with other like-minded states, Russia has discussed that the principle threat emanating from the United States is the threat posed by regime change policies.

The threats seen by Gerasimov and others in Russia extend beyond a focus on American intentions and toward many foreign policy tools they view as means through which America 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. The regime security dilemma, like other security dilemmas, becomes particular acute when the intentions and the capabilities both point to regime change. Interestingly though, what counts as a capability in the discussion of regime security dilemmas is distinct from other forms of security dilemma that focus on traditional military units of power. 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 or provoke a regime crisis that mandates a militarized response. Of course the intelligence community could also theoretically serve as assets in these missions as well. However, beyond the CIA and other assets that could

81. As O’Rourke has shown, intelligence services have often been used in various ways to support regime change abroad. However, these missions are often unsuccessful and counterproductive. O’Rourke, Covert
be used for covert regime change operations, the post-Cold War capabilities inherent to American hegemony and its interest in spreading democracy helped to make the regime security dilemma with Russia acute. Understanding how these capabilities are seen by Russia in light of regime security provides a lens to view a variety of different disputes between various foreign policy issue areas and provide a holistic understanding of debates over various issues.

Initially, the most unique aspect of the regime security dilemma is how it extends the security dilemma concerns over capabilities to non-military instruments such as NGOs, civil society programs, democracy assistance and other tools of foreign policy that are not security threats or military tools but can serve as capabilities to help promote democracy or 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 abroad as a feature of American post-Cold war foreign policy. They often do great work in enhancing accountability, helping build a robust civil society, and serve other important roles abroad. However, these foreign policy tools have helped create a network of democracy builders and provided linkages to promote pressure on regimes that was not present previously. As previously noted, in the Color Revolutions near Russia’s frontier, these tools and networks were crucial in successfully changing the regime towards democracy and thus show how networks could be utilized to help spread knowledge about effective protest and strategies to promote regime collapse.

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. All of these aspects are beneficial for democracy but are also seen as potential threats to the ruling regime. And while often these programs are not targeted at overthrowing regimes but instead improving the lives of citizens, there is a chance that these programs can provide means for American influence over which preferred politicians are able to be successful in elections or other forms of candidate selection in the future. Given the linkages between civil society group and American-backed or US government programs

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84. Ironically though, Bush has argued that democracy NGOs actually have reigned in their challenges to dictators so as to maintain their ability to operate in the various countries. Sarah Sunn Bush, The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
can be seen then as a form of influence that can be exerted to help start a form of color revolution, these can be seen as capabilities that have to be defended against to protect the regime.

In Russia, these democracy promotion organizations faced a backlash from the Russian regime. As Carothers notes, Putin viewed “pro-democracy groups as a security imperative, asserting that the United States is trying to encircle Russia with pro-Western governments and subvert its political order.” This manifested in 2006 when Russia passed laws imposing new Russian controls on foreign NGOs and also in 2012 Putin 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 and threatening to the regime. Attempting to break these linkages is one way in which to break capabilities that might target Russian elites, but also provides ways in which the US sees the regime as nefarious and continues to the cycle of worst assumptions about intentions. Importantly, even if the NGOs are in no way pursuing regime change goals, the fact that America has signaled regime change intent in the past and the NGOs could be used for regime change is what prompts the fear and anxiety that drives the regime security dilemma.

Another venue and capability that is at times also seen as potential threatening by Moscow given American intentions is in the realm of humanitarian intervention. In particular, the ability for the United States to go beyond the United Nations and not be constrained by a Russian veto in 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 during the Kosovo war, armed invasion in Iraq, and then finally with the armed intervention in Libya has painted a picture in Moscow that America using 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 one day.

The Libya war in particular provides a crucial point where it seems Moscow finally realized that even their willingness to work with the idea of humanitarian intervention does

not provide a break on American regime change intentions when the capabilities exist. After allowing the no fly zone mission to be authorized by the UN Security Council in an effort to allow for protect civilians in Libya, the expansion of the mission to include the overthrow of Qaddafi confirmed in the eyes of Moscow that American interventionism for humanitarian reasons can easily expand to regime change and should be resisted. Moscow noted that the mission in Libya went beyond the UN mandate they voted for, and this sparked a realization that the US and its allies could willingly use the international institution for justification and then go beyond the limits authorized.\textsuperscript{88} The regime change operations that overthrew Qaddafi impacted Putin especially as he is said to have watched “the video of the killing over and over.”\textsuperscript{89} The Libya operation appears to be the final death knell in Russian perceptions of American humanitarian intervention and directly lead to Russian reactions in Syria and elsewhere to prevent American intervention that could lead to regime change and convince them to resist intervention everywhere. As stated in a European Parliament report, “subsequent events in Libya have persuaded decision-makers in...Moscow...to reject any similar proposal” of humanitarian intervention in the future.\textsuperscript{90}

However, 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. As the regime security dilemma predicts, Russian has moved to resist an international order or American-led international institution that is used as justification and forum for launching humanitarian intervention. As some explain, “Russia therefore uses what power it has to shape the international system (particularly its permanent seat on the Security Council) to avoid creating a precedent that could eventually be used against it.”\textsuperscript{91} It is in the ruling Russian regime’s interest to make using UN power as a means to justify an intervention or regime change mission anywhere to remove that as a viable capability that could harm Russia in the future. Russia has an incentive to find ways to remove international linkages that provide both the means for initial protests and justification for intervening on behalf of protesters.

Moving away from the non-traditional capabilities that can target regime change, nuclear cooperation and nuclear agreements can also be affected by the regime security dilemma. In particular, American missile defense technology and other nuclear modernization programs that might threaten the Russian nuclear deterrent and could be seen as a prerequisite for

\textsuperscript{91} Charap, “Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention,” 37.
potential regime change mission in Moscow. Under this logic, the Russian regime is threatened by American missile technology if it can prevent any nuclear strikes from reaching the US homeland and would not be able to deter American intervention to support protesters against the current regime. In particular, American precision guided munitions as a first strike capability in regime change missions has created anxieties over Russian military elites. American missile defense technology being developed and continued missile modernization has also caused “Russian leadership to fear U.S.-sponsored unrest (as Russian leaders believe happened in Ukraine), backed up with precision munitions supplied by the United States and its allies. The Russians think they have seen this movie before in Serbia, Libya, Iraq, and, if not for timely Russian intervention, Syria.” As some Russian participants at a Track II nuclear dialogue put it when discussing missile defense technology, “Russian complaints about strategic military problems are a verbalization of subliminal fears of a color revolution. And Putin wants a guarantee that no color revolution happens in Russia.”

The biggest threat here is the development of new technology that necessitates the Russians developing new technology that might violate treaties, such as the INF, in order to deal with their anxieties over American capabilities to target their strategic deterrent that in their mind are protecting against regime change. As some explain “Ballistic missile defense and ‘prompt global strike systems’” exacerbate “the Russians’...fear of Western technological superiority and the possibility that Western technological surprise may render their defenses obsolete.” Further, the future of nuclear arms control between US and Russia is imperiled as long as missile defense assets are not included due to the Russian fears of their use in a regime change crisis. In general, this paints a dire picture where the regime change dilemma extends to nuclear arms control talks and capabilities and creates hostile spirals between the US and Russia.

Finally, the last American capability that could be perceived as a driver of regime change is one that has received much focus related to Russian foreign policy, alliances and specifically the NATO alliance. Growing military alliances on the border might provoke traditional fears

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of conquest, surrounding, and aggressive action, but particular aspects of American alliance commitments with NATO, and their previous uses, have created larger fears about their use for regime change. Rather than a territorial threat, the regime security dilemma shows NATO expansion creates larger fears about the use of new alliance members on Russia’s borders to foment regime change rather than invade the territory. These fears created by NATO expansion in turn tie together the NGOs, intervention, and nuclear capabilities discussed above to create a unified perception that NATO could use all of these capabilities to begin a regime change mission in Moscow. As some explain, a “more recent perception by the Kremlin betrays fear of the alliance as an offensive military organization employed to meet the larger objective to dismantle Russia’s political regime.”

The expansion of American alliance commitments towards Russia’s borders can be seen as threatening due to the focus of democratization behind NATO expansion 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. Democracy activists and NGOs could be based on Russia’s border with NATO expansion and creates a larger community where domestic opposition movements could find support. As noted above, when transnational linkages get closer, then democratization becomes more likely and there are more means to use to influence domestic political events across the border. As NATO expands, it could provide greater forums for opposition leaders to meet with activists, training to occur from American NGOs, and other democracy promotion programs that are seen as threatening. Even if these actions never actually occur, the fear that expansion presents opportunities for those capabilities is sufficient to further the regime security dilemma. In particular, the NATO mission in Kosovo and NATO’s UN-authorized mission in Libya paint a picture that once opposition movements begin rising up against the regime, NATO military missions can be used to support the opposition movements if the regime attempts to crackdown on rebellion. McCabe points out that Russian military elites fear of American airpower and precision strike weapons emerge through their interpretation of American intervention behavior starting with Kosovo, and view them as targeted at supporting regime change behavior after protests have begun.98 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 military interventions.

The regime change anxiety inspired by NATO expansion has produced some unique effects in Russia. In response to American alliance expansion around Russia, there has been

increasing attempts to use economic, energy, and other ties to positioning various NATO states or potential NATO member states as more pro-Russia to subvert the means through which they can be used to promote regime change in Russia itself. In particular, Russian challenges to American alliance partners in NATO, and efforts to subvert the political regimes there provide a similar type strategy in removing potential domestic threats to the regime in the authoritarian system, namely trying to divide the potential opposition and keeping certain potential members close to the regime. In authoritarian regimes, concerns over internal threats to security lead to leaders attempting to divide the power bases of potential rivals and prevent a consolidated challenge to their rule. Knowing there needs to be a critical mass of insiders to support a coup or overthrow means that the regime can try to divide and co-opt crucial nodes. Looking at how Russia has targeted NATO and American alliance partners shows similar type dynamics where they attempt to influence these partners to prevent any consolidated action from possibly taking place.

The unfortunate upshot here is that in all of these efforts to perhaps remove threats to the regime, Russia ends up becoming even more threatening to the US and the regime is seen as one that needs to be changed, perpetuating the spiral. To respond to these perceptions, in recent years, commentators have noted that Russia has increasingly been using new types of so-called ‘hybrid war’ in an effort to advance their interests. This has included a variety of political and military tools to compete for influence and provide for security for the regime. This extends from interventions in Ukraine, interference in elections in the US and Europe, and cultivating closer ties with neighbor states and likeminded regimes. To protect against potential intentions for regime change, Russia has identified using what they perceive as similar tools that the US has used to project their influence. Unfortunately, these actions then make the Russian regime appear even more threatening to the United States and can perpetuate the regime security dilemma further.

To be clear, this is not to say that NATO expansion, status concerns, and domestic politics are not important for explaining Russian aggression or recent Russian revisionism. Rather failure to understand how US regime change policies around the world impact calculations by Moscow and how that contributes to the regime security dilemma is crucial. The traditional

99. For a review, see: Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen, eds., NATO’s Response to Hybrid Threats (Rome: NATO War College, 2015).
explanations involving NATO expansion, domestic concerns, and Russian status do not conflict with this explanation of the regime security dilemma as crucial for thinking about rising Russian challenges to US-led order. Rather it shows how all of these theories unite when Russia is seeking to find ways to ensure security due to the anxiety against US possible regime change in Moscow. Concerns about domestic politics, status, and NATO expansion and security interact not because of threat of NATO action across the Western Steppes, but rather NATO as launching pad to support potential domestic opposition challenging the Russian regime.

Implications for American Grand Strategy

As the previous sections have shown, regardless of the actual intentions of the United States and Russia, being engaged in a regime security dilemma hampers cooperation and breeds resentment and anxiety that needs to be mitigated to produce better relations. Given these regime security dilemma dynamics, what can be done with American grand strategy to prevent increased regime change anxieties but also still attempt to achieve American interests? In other words, are there any offramps to be found to reduce the regime security dilemma but maintain and interest in democracy promotion? Two options exist. First there can be an attempt to either reduce capabilities or only obtain non-offensive capabilities, but these are even harder to determine in the case of non-military capabilities that threaten the regime. Second, and more likely, there can be an attempt to show benign intentions and will not target regime change. First, reducing regime change capabilities is difficult to limit due to the non-military means that theoretically could affect regime security or are perceived to be used to affect regime security but 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 these foreign policy tools could not be used for nefarious purposes if so desired. It is not clear how to make costly signals showing that American NGOs and democracy promotion efforts will not be targeted at Russia. To do so would require America stopping to promote democracy abroad which goes against American values and public opinion.  

The second option is to try to signal intentions against regime change as a means to reduce the regime security dilemma. This is the more likely option to succeed and includes ending calls for regime change abroad. This, unfortunately, could include not attempting to change odious regimes in other locations but instead working with other foreign policy tools

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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 intentions. Instead of seeking to make statements against regimes that are producing problems, focusing on how to deal with externalities produced by odious regimes should be the focus. While some of this was attempted with the Russian reset, it ultimately failed when these interventions and focus on domestic characteristics could not be resisted.104

However, if the US continues to see certain regimes as inherent threats or see linkages between certain regimes as indications that they are a threat, this will become more difficult to do. With political commentators in America continuing to talk about certain regimes as threats, and with a decades long reputation of wanting to engage in regime change, it is supremely unclear how the United States could walk back its reputation for regime change. It could be the case that certain regimes do pose a threat to the United States and these intentions cannot be mitigated or signaled. In such cases however, the United States 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. Understanding that most US actions will be viewed in this lens is crucial and recognizing that how the US interacts with Venezuela, Iran, Syria, and others today is a part of that lens. Each time the United States threatens regime change, uses sanctions or other tools in effort to pressure regime, and tries to remove regimes they disagree with, it will be used as confirmation by other peer competitors that they need to prepare their defensive requirements for defending their regime. It signals that the United States has a variety of capabilities they can use to target regimes they disagree with and also shows they have the willingness to do so.

In general, resisting the urge to engage in armed intervention probably the best means through which to defuse the regime change anxieties. Approaching this in the context of a grand strategy of restraint would probably serve American interests best by not focusing existing European alliance commitments but reaffirming those commitments as defensive and not willing to go ‘out-of-area’ to inspire regime change and use military force to those ends. 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. This can be the first step to walking back the regime security dilemma. It could be the case that America’s interest in democracy and anxieties that

inspires in Russia cannot be reconciled. However, in a restrained foreign policy posture, at the very least relations will not deteriorate further and there can be steps taken to not lead to American interests being harmed.

**Conclusion**

The regime change anxieties produced through the regime security dilemma are an understudied phenomenon in international politics and can crucially help explain the deterioration of American-Russian relations in the post-Cold War era. While many have focused on purely Russian domestic or purely American foreign policy factors driving the deterioration of relations and the rise of Russian revisionism, this is not sufficient I contend. Rather, the linking of how American foreign policy and concerns of Russian domestic politics interact through fears of American power exerted through regime change is the crucial missing link.

It is not important, as Ambassador McFaul says, that he was “not” in Moscow 11to foment a revolution.”\(^\text{105}\) Rather, if Russia cannot know intentions of the United States and America has capabilities to help fund and promote regime protests, then you look at behavior and America public strategy documents, it becomes hard to think and assume that Russia does not have to defend against the potential threat. Couple this fear with the hard military assets, such as prospective missile defense and military alliances and bases, and anxiety is overdetermined. The regime security dilemma highlights a fear that America is seemingly pursuing revisionist behavior and is locked into competition over who is in charge in Moscow. The fundamental problem that Russia does not see the armed militarized missions as fundamentally different from supporting democratization programs under the regime security dilemma.

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