

International Institutions and Russian Security Cooperation

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Traditional approaches to international relations lead us to expect that with the loss of the Cold War's stable bipolar system, insecurity and uncertainty will prompt the great powers--Russia among them--to rely on unilateral, competitive security policies which will have the effect of threatening others and increasing the likelihood of conflict.

My research on Russian security strategies after the Cold War finds these dire predictions to be incorrect. In a study of Russia's relations with Germany--historically one of the most problematic and threatening of the great powers for Russia--I found that international institutions played an important role in Russian officials' calculations in choosing self-interested security strategies. Institutions provide information about German policies and actions, thereby reducing Russian uncertainty and insecurity, making cooperation possible.

The Effects of International Institutions

Institutions had three specific effects on Russian security strategies: monitoring activity and providing information, specifying rules and limiting bargaining, and altering the costs and benefits of different security policies.

Institutions allowed Russian officials to rely upon cooperative security strategies because they provide for monitoring mutual restraint and good behavior. Russia implemented and lived by its commitments for conventional military arms control under the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE), despite the enormous reductions in equipment and restrictions on deployment it required. Russian officials were concerned that the CFE Treaty no longer suited the country's security requirements because it had been negotiated for Cold War conditions of NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation. Nevertheless, the CFE treaty and its extensive implementation rules and verification procedures made the choice of cooperative strategies possible by creating assurance about other states' intentions and actions. Russian officials told me that if the treaty had not already been negotiated and ratified, Russia's conventional forces reductions would have been accomplished in a less stabilizing fashion and with greater fear about Germany's (and NATO's) remaining conventional military capabilities.

In specifying rules and establishing bases for cooperation, institutions narrow the range of competition and bargaining. This effect was especially important given potential instability engendered by German unification and Soviet dissolution, which threw into question issues such as the continued peaceful withdrawal of formerly Soviet forces from eastern Germany, implementation of the CFE treaty, the nuclear status of the Soviet successor states, and control of advanced weapons technology. Germany and Russia engaged in hard bargaining and pursuit of national advantages on these issues, but this bargaining more often produced mutually acceptable outcomes rather than failure to agree. The primary reason for the success of the transition was that Germany and Russia were constrained by the institutional rules of the game that made renegotiation difficult and refusal to compromise risky.

Institutions altered the cost-benefit situation to favor otherwise unappealing choices. Russia has chosen, for example, to adopt a system of technology export controls that constrains its revenues but opens access to Western high technology trade. In the area of economic relations, institutions such as the Paris Club raise the costs of defection and the benefits of cooperation by making debt negotiations multilateral and transparent. In addition to offering real resources such as access to trade and financing on the condition of adherence to institutional rules, institutions altered costs and benefits by enunciating norms which Russia would either visibly adhere to or visibly violate. Even political institutions which are not terribly constraining, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), increased the reputational and linkage costs to Russia of being the "holdout" and of violating norms.

Security institutions matter for Russian officials and they do affect Russia's choice of strategies. This does not mean Russia always chooses to cooperate: Russian officials were uninterested in multilateral strategies when they saw no common interests in restraint (for example, for restraining conventional arms sales) and when they believed that force was usable, low cost, and effective (for example, Russia's initial interventions in conflicts in the former Soviet Union). However, in other cases, where cooperation was desirable but not easy and where there were shared interests, institutions supported multilateral cooperation in managing military balances, preventing and managing conflicts, and negotiating the process of technology control and economic reform in Russia.

The Effectiveness of International Institutions

Institutions were more effective when their forms and functions matched the security tasks that confronted Russia. Where pre-existing institutions combined the promise of resources, the threat of withholding them, and clear rules of conditionality, Russia modified its policies and chose cooperation. Institutions such as the EU, IMF, Paris Club, NPT regime, and the evolving technology control regime offered Russia substantial benefits in exchange for adaptation to well-established and clear rules. Furthermore, the clarity and stability of these institutions were effective in supporting common policies by western countries. Conversely, the absence of an appropriate regime to insure nuclear

reactor safety led to failure in western attempts to get Russia to close or retrofit dangerous reactors.

In the cases of troop withdrawals and military balances, institutions were effective in supporting Russian security cooperation because they provided information and established rules which limited instability and renegotiation. More problematic for security cooperation were conflict in Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. Despite the availability of a wide variety of institutions with functions and forms for sanctioning (UN Security Council), aid in negotiation and conflict resolution (UN peacekeeping and "good offices"), and transparency (the OSCE), there were many failures to cooperate multilaterally to prevent or resolve conflicts. There were some successes, including Macedonia, the prevention of competitive intervention on the part of the great powers, and eventual Russian acceptance of international oversight of its peace operations in the former Soviet Union. These limited successes share a common element: they were successful efforts to promote transparency, assurance, and legitimacy through the looser institutions of the UN and OSCE.

Failure to sanction aggression in Yugoslavia, to prevent Russian unilateralism in the CIS, and to use effective multilateral peacekeeping in both places has been a major failure of security cooperation. However, cooperation failed not only because of the great powers' competitive interests, but for institutional reasons as well. With respect to Yugoslavia, states cannot agree on whether conflict is a matter of aggression or instability, meaning that there has never been a consistent policy of either sanctioning or conflict resolution. Part of the Russian argument for unilateral strategies in the CIS has been that multilateral peacekeeping was not effective since it required consent and impartiality, and these conditions could not be met in CIS conflicts.

The crucial relation between form and function was clear in my interviews. NATO was not useful for security problems involving risks rather than threats and deliberate aggression, Russian officials told me, because it is an alliance for collective defense and has an exclusive membership (that is, it does not include Russia). Changes in functions and increase in membership would make NATO like the OSCE (that is, an institution for joint security cooperation rather than an exclusive military alliance), a development Russians sought, partly to weaken NATO but also to insure it could not act against Russia's security interests.

Implications for Policy Toward Russia

The fact that Russia has security interests which are not identical to those of the United States is not an obstacle to security cooperation. As long as Russian-US security interests are not strictly zero-sum, Russian officials have demonstrated a willingness to pursue common gains, even if they seek at the same time the best possible deal though hard bargaining. If Russia can constructively cooperate with a unified Germany in areas of military balances, political security, and economic reform given the terrible legacy of German aggression in the East, it can cooperate with the United States.

However, pursuit of common benefits can fail without the supporting framework of international institutions. These institutions have proven effective in managing the transition from the cold war security order, despite the instabilities and insecurities created by the Soviet break-up and German unification. The key to success is to recognize that there are multiple obstacles to cooperation even when countries have common interests and mutually beneficial deals are possible.

In addition, the US has to recognize that different institutions have strengths and weaknesses for different problems. The OSCE is valuable for assurance and stability because it is loosely organized and large: it can be involved in issues (such as human rights monitoring and preparations for elections) and in countries that NATO cannot. The UN may be more cumbersome than NATO for US policy, but because the Security Council includes all the major powers, once it has resolved upon policy it has a legitimacy that NATO does not. The successful record of Russia's cooperation with Germany after the Cold War demonstrates that security institutions are assets the United States would be wise to understand and use well.

Note: This analysis is based on Celeste A. Wallander, Mortal Friends, Best Enemies: German-Russian Cooperation after the Cold War (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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