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THE BALANCE OF THREAT RECONSIDERED:
CONSTRUCTION OF THREAT
IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

Petr Kratochvíl, Ph.D.

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Introduction

The last decade has been witness to an ever-increasing relevance of identity and culture in the study of international relations, which is a reflection of the growing interest in studying the self in social sciences and humanities in general. New theories inspired by this shift have not only brought new impetus to research caught in the endless neo-neo debate by unleashing a new great debate, but they also challenged the established division of labour in IR in the security sphere where neorealism was the dominant paradigm, and the sphere of (economic) cooperation where (neo)liberal approaches prevailed.

Rejecting these *divide et impera* tactics of the dominant approaches, some constructivists focused on the traditionally realist topic of security studies, and explored the link between national security and identity (e.g. Katzenstein 1996). Their attack on the mainstream has been so successful that some believe constructivism has slowly established itself as one of the leading theoretical approaches in the field. (Guzzini 2000). Exploring the connection between culture, identity and threat has thus become commonplace in IR journals.

Yet although there are quite a lot of constructivist theories of the identity-threat nexus, few have attempted to build a comprehensive model that would cover three basic components: the identity of the self, threat construction/perception, and the reaction to threat. In addition, whereas threat construction has been explored quite thoroughly, the reaction to threat has remained seriously undertheorised in existing constructivist literature. Thus, an analysis of identity with sufficient predictive and/or explanatory power for foreign policy is still missing.

The first and foremost aim of this paper is, therefore, to present some ideas on how to build such a model that combines the insights from socio-psychological research on identity and constructivist foreign policy analysis, and that takes into account both threat construction and reaction to the emergence of threat. The second aim is to offer a case study based on the presented model in order to demonstrate its practical usability and, at the same time, its limits.
Thus, in the second part of the article, I present a case study of Russian threat politics, which is, as I believe, quite suggestive in revealing further important shortcomings of the current constructivist research into foreign policy. For instance, the analysis of Russian discourse about the self will show that the commonly used dichotomy of self/other can be as obscuring as it is believed to be illuminating. The interpretation of the terms Other and Enemy, rooted mainly in their almost synonymous understanding and even interchangeability in much of the constructivist literature (for a discussion of this problem see Waever & Hansen 2002), might be correct, but need not be. For example, the Russian attitude to the West easily escapes this dualistic categorisation and forces the researcher to accept a more comprehensive range of analytical tools. Although Europe is often depicted as Russia’s other, this does not always imply an inimical stance but rather mere difference or reference (Kassianova 2001). We can find long periods when Russia considered itself different from Europe; Europe was the main referential object but was not seen as the enemy.

To study Russian foreign policy is fruitful in another sense too: Russian studies is an area where newer IR theories have just started to take roots. Though delayed, their arrival in Russian studies was inevitable because the classic approaches to the study of Russian foreign policy seemed more and more inappropriate: Various objections have been raised against the traditional theoretical approaches; most important critique has focused particularly on the existence of new threats and their non-state nature. The contribution of the new theories to Russian studies consists mainly in re-submitting the decades-old (and even centuries-old) interest in Russian identity to foreign policy analysis and Russian foreign policy at large. As a result, the relationship between culture and identity, once obscured by the Communist system and bipolar conflict when the neorealist analysis was seemingly the best-equipped theory to deal with the Soviet foreign policy, is becoming more conspicuous again.

Today, different Russian identities play a key role in Russian foreign policy. This can be demonstrated in Russia’s attitude towards the Near Abroad, which clearly reflects Russia’s search for its own place in the radically altered international relations after the end of the Cold War. To deny the long suppressed link between identity and foreign policy seems almost absurd in this case, and one wonders how it could be possible to explore Russia’s policy towards the CIS without taking into account different Russian foreign policy discourses based on its competing identities.
The Balance of threat theory reconsidered

Interestingly enough, whereas the realist school tends to focus on the question of typical reaction to threat, i.e. on the classic realist balancing and bandwagoning, and thus neglects the question of threat emergence which is believed to be objectively given, the constructivist turn breathed new life into research into the nature and birth of threats themselves. This research was carried out most successfully by the Copenhagen School (Waever in 1995; Buzan, Waever, de Wilde 1998). Yet only few on either side of the divide have tried to take into account both threat emergence (no matter whether we conceive of threat as a reality “out there” or as socially-constructed through discourse) and the consequent reaction to it.

One of the oft-cited exceptions on one side of the cleft is Stephen Walt’s balance of threat theory, which shows how close the starting point of realist thinking is to constructivist theories. Indeed, the questions Walt asks are virtually identical to those posed by constructivist scholars. Questions like “How do statesmen choose among potential threats when seeking external support?” (Walt 1990, p. 1) would better suit a postmodern scholar such as Campbell (Campbell 1998) than someone deeply committed to political realism. The similarity is so striking that many authors pointed to the “constructivist” features of Walt’s work (Wendt 1999, p. 106; Suny 1999/2000).

On the other hand, to present Walt as a constructivist would, in spite of his frequent ambiguous statements in his opus magnum The Origins of Alliances (Walt 1990), obviously be wrong, considering his overall devotion to the realist research agenda and his own statements elsewhere (for instance Walt 1997). His state-centric perspective, which clearly does not count with the rise of non-state threats, and his simple categorisation of the reaction to threat using just two modes of behaviour further limit his contribution to current understandings of threat. Yet although Walt’s framework is quite limited, and although his conclusions are correspondingly narrow, I believe that the underlying idea of asking both about the origin of threat and about the state’s behaviour in face of the threat is an exceptionally good starting point for the construction of a model of threat politics. The basic rationale that states encounter threats and that they have to act somehow in the presence of the threat does hold in both realist and constructivist readings.

To label the encountering of threat and reaction to it “balancing the threat” is not uncontroversial, and we are aware of the special connotations of the term “balance of threat”, which is closely connected with alliance building, i.e. joining with other states to repel a potential aggressor. On the other hand, if we accept the idea that constructivism understands
threat as attack on the identity of the actor, i.e. the danger that the enemy destabilizes the order, stability and societal equilibrium of the self, to ‘balance a threat’ might be re-interpreted as to maintain the equilibrium of one’s own identity. In other words, balancing the threat is a natural reaction of the self, which strives for self-preservation. In this sense, balancing comprises a whole range of different behavioural reactions to threat, and these are deployed with respect to the internal structure of the self, including past experience with (dis)similar threats while taking into account the available behavioural options. In the following pages, I first answer the question of how a threat is created, i.e. how the self starts to recognise something or someone as a threat, and second, what reaction is chosen by the actor to minimize the damage caused by the threat.

**Identities, the self and the others**

The surging interest in identity in IR theory is an unequivocal consequence of the fruitful discussion of IR scholars with other social scientists, philosophers, sociologists and social psychologists in particular. Yet, assuming that to maintain one’s identity means to “keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens 1991: 54), grasping what exactly identity is might prove an extremely elusive task, particularly due to the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the self. Identity is, therefore, not a fixed characteristic with an exact reflection in the behaviour of the person/collective, but it is continuously constructed and reconstructed since it must endlessly recreate its equilibrium, which is disturbed by the external environment to which the self has to adapt, or which must be re-interpreted in ways compatible with the self-understanding. In fact, there is a widespread belief among identity scholarship that the concept of the self is so complex that we do not have any general theory of the self at hand yet (Stets, Burke 2002).

Many IR scholars have tried to escape the trap of the unmanageable complexity of identity by focusing on the dichotomous relationship between the self and the other (for more about this approach see Hansen & Waever 2002). In such cases, the method for discovering a state’s identity is typically the following: First, the scholar carries out the analysis of the predominant discourse in order to determine who the other is, and consequently (s)he tries to discover the most important differences between the self and the other. This is believed to lead to a distillation of the actor’s true identity, which is in turn used as the basis for analysis of its foreign policy behaviour. This method is certainly justifiable in that it can reveal much about the actor’s interests. These identity-based interests then serve as the general framework
for foreign policy decision-making. To come full circle to the construction of identity, foreign policy is seen as one of the main corrective and adaptive mechanisms through which the actor communicates with the external environment, changes its attitudes to it and reconstructs its own narrative in ways compatible with its perceptions.

Yet this approach is flawed in at least three ways. First, many analyses are seriously hampered by oversimplification of the self-other relationship. It may seem appropriate to contrast the self to the other, but this simple contrast is frequently insufficient for describing fully the actor’s identity. As Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) remind us, the symbolic interactionism (e.g. Blumer 1969) that serves as the basis of one of the dominant streams of identity theory treats the adoption of the role of the other as the basic mechanism for the construction of the self. Therefore, to present the self in the absolute terms of total difference from the other is, in terms of symbolic interactionism, incorrect, since we are more connected to the other then the *prima facie* would reveal.

To put it differently, to derive our knowledge of the self solely from the relation to the other at best deprives us of the richness of the self which is almost always defined against or in relation to a number of others, and at worst seriously distorts our understanding of the self. The relation to one other, no matter how important it is, is just one aspect of the multifaceted nature of the self. The interaction of the self and the others thus produces a number of identities, and indeed, there seem to be at least as many identities as there are others. To call Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) once more to witness, the self is regarded “as differentiated into multiple identities” and any one identity thus should not be regarded as encompassing the whole self. Although some identities may have a master status, thereby being of overarching importance, the social identity theory believes identities to be relatively discrete (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995).¹

This narrowing of the multiplicity of identities to just one identity, based on the relationship to one other that is presumed most relevant, leads us directly to the second gross error committed by many empirically grounded studies of identity in IR (for a critique of this mistake see Waever 1996). The other is usually mixed up with the term “enemy”, or indeed the two terms are used synonymously. This is, to be sure, justified in some cases, but usually conflating these two terms is conducive to further *totalisation* of the relation, and the other is

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¹ In cases when we use sources from databases such as EBSCO or ProQuest, we cannot cite pages since the information is absent in the databases too.
then presented as the absolute opposite of the self. This is empirically possible in such situations as when the self is at war with the other, or in war-like conditions (such as in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Spyrou 2002), but on the theoretical level there is no reason for an *a priori* understanding of the other as the enemy. The empirical equation of the other and the enemy is really unfortunate since there are some theoretical works showing how the other’s position might shift within a wide range of possibilities, including the positions of enemy, rival, friend, etc. (cf. Wendt 1999).

Moreover, recent research in social psychology also confirms the view that similarity to the other is needed if some social effects are to occur. By contrast, in the case of absolute absence of similarity, no effects will ensue since the other is not considered to belong to the same category like the self (Stapel 2004).²

The reliance on (social) identity theory without reflecting deeper upon the ongoing evolution of social psychology and sociology is the primary cause of the third and last mistake. Although it would be only natural for IR students to rely rather on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), since that theoretical perspective deals with the identity of social groups, identity theory (Stryker 1968, McCall and Simmons 1978, Burke 1980) is sometimes unconsciously invoked as well. The most pronounced illustration of this confusion is the term identity, which is itself used with somewhat differing meanings by the two theories. Identity theory defines identities as role-related “self-conceptions, self-referent cognitions, or self-definitions that people apply to themselves as a consequence of the structural role positions they occupy” (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995). On the other hand, social identity theory adds the element of evaluation to the identity so that the social identity accounts not only for prescription of the right behaviour, but also for the differentiation of the ingroup and the outgroups (ibid.). Yet IR theory sometimes speaks about “role-identity” (e.g. Deutsch et al. 1957) and sometimes about social/collective identity (Wendt 1999) and the two terms are sometimes used almost at will.

Although the difference between social identity theory and identity theory came to the fore only in recent decades, different conceptions of identity have a strong impact on our understanding of the behaviour of the self. Whereas the role-identity is usually understood as

² A particularly illustrative example is that given by Stapel (2004), who describes an experiment when female respondents were confronted with pictures of extraordinarily beautiful females. The respondents acknowledged then that they were less beautiful than the referential objects shown in the pictures. Yet, when the respondents were told the females in the photographs were models, the comparison effect did not occur simply because models were considered a totally different category with which “normal people” do not compare.
a less stable stance that the self adopts in certain situations (a person can be a teacher, a father, a son, and a neighbour with different intensity at different times), the social identity describes the belonging to a group, which is more or less permanently present in the self and thus influences heavily the behaviour of the self (being member of a group such as a race, gender, church, party, nation, etc.). While the inflexibility of the latter approach provides fertile ground for defensive reactions leading to ingroup-outgroup differentiation, identity theory does not make any strong conclusions about the relation of the self to the other (roles may be both complementary roles and counter-roles).

In result, those IR theorists who (as least implicitly) adopt social identity theory understand the actor’s behaviour as based on one dominant pattern, which stems from its dominant social identity. Wendt, for example, understands identity in these terms; if the actor’s culture of anarchy is a Kantian one, then the actor behaves in the same manner vis-à-vis the external environment as such (Wendt 1992 and 1999). In this vein, we might argue that the EU behaves essentially the same towards the Near East, Russia, and the United States or anyone else. This would imply the existence of one general identity of the EU, which treats the rest of the world in essentially the same way. But it is also perfectly possible to understand different behavioural modes of an actor on the basis of its multiple, often very different role identities. The role identities may be dormant most of the time and become activated only in some specific situations when their salience increases. According to this approach, Russia would behave in one manner when dealing with CIS countries, in another manner in its relations to the EU as a whole, and yet another to the Baltic states.

It is important to note here that we do not maintain that any one of the above-mentioned theories is absolutely inappropriate for IR research, but that a clear statement of how the identity is defined is a necessary prerequisite of any research on identity in IR. Moreover, we believe that we can successfully apply a combination of the two theories. On a general level, the self that is analysed in the theory of international relations is a social self, which means that the insights from social identity theory such as the ingroup-outgroup distinction are fruitful here. Yet the content of the self is played out in different forms against different others, thus coming very close to role identities. The concept of role identity can also offer a better explanation of the variations in behaviour than the monolithic identity theory. To put it differently, identity theory tends to focus only on one dominant other, or it expects similar behaviour of the self towards the external environment at large.
Another advantage of identity theory is its distinction between activation and salience, which allows for differentiation between the overall salience of the role and its activation or non-activation in specific contexts (Russia and Central Asia, as different from Russia and the Baltic) (Stets, Burke 2002). To put it simply, role identities are organised hierarchically in the self, and some are more probable for activation (more salient role identities), and some are less probable (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1968; Wiley 1991). This of course means that some role identities are more important for self-definition than others, although shifts in the hierarchical order are possible.

The tension between salience and activation is particularly helpful when discussing changes in the behaviour of the self. If a role is activated repeatedly and the other accepts the ensuing role relationship, its salience will increase. Should, however, even a salient role be (repeatedly) refused by the other, or at least perceived as such, the role identity of the self is endangered and the self has to react in order to minimize the threat, which often means modifying its role to maintain the balance between the self and the other. Thus the activation of a specific role serves as the testing ground for its ongoing salience or necessity for change. Quite naturally, the more salient a set of behavioural norms (role identity) is, the more difficult it is to change the role identity. If Russia considers its relation to the Baltic countries as more salient than the relation to the Czech Republic, it will be more willing to accept Czech NATO membership than, for example, that of Estonia.

Herein we should mention the difference between salience and sedimentation. Whereas salience answers the question as to how important the relation of the self to one particular other is, sedimentation describes to what degree the self considers a particular role vis-à-vis the other normal and natural. Thus although salience and sedimentation are two different things, their effects are mutually reinforcing. In other words, the more a role identity is sedimented and the more salient the relation is, the more difficult it is to induce a change. Consequently, an attack on a deeply sedimented and highly salient positive role identity will be seen as a greater threat than an assault on a less salient and less sedimented role.

**Graph I**

*Role identities and the relation between the self and the others*

- salience of role identities
- sedimentation of role identities
Threat construction and reaction to threats

Whereas identity theory seems to be sufficient for the elaboration of such concepts as identity or self, when discussing the emergence of threat the use of social identity theory would be of greater advantage. According to the logic of constructivism, every phenomenon that endangers the social identity of the self may be perceived as threatening. That means that threats are not only the dangers of physical annihilation of the social self, but also many subtler dangers, such as “finding oneself in a low-status group,” and “discovering that one is insufficiently distinctive from other comparison groups” (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje 1999).

Threats to the self (e.g. threats to “national security”) are basically “discovered” by the social self through interaction with the others. The social self endeavours to create a positive self-understanding. To support this self-image, the self plays a number of roles through which it interacts with the others. The self tries to enhance its status by modifying those role identities which are not considered to be satisfactory for the self and strengthen and emphasize those role identities that are perceived as advantageous. If one of the others makes
such a move that is interpreted as non-conforming with the role identity of the self, and if the hitherto relationship to the other is considered satisfactory for the self, such action is declared a threat.

Yet as some role identities become sedimented, the self gradually forgets about the possibility of change and such role identities lose their flexibility, which is replaced by the sense of “naturalness” and “objectivity”. The perception of role identities itself is not based on some objective measure but rather on the subjective evaluation of the self. It follows that the evaluation might change and a role identity that was once seen as humiliating may gradually undergo a transformation, and the enmity might turn into a mutually advantageous relationship (or a relationship seen as such), or *vice versa*. So we can speak about two different stages of the change – the deliberate efforts to change those role identities unfavourable to the self (stage I), and the usually less visible, but no less important, unintended transformation of the understanding of the relationship as a result of the interactions between the self and the other (stage II). Both of these stages of change are consistent with constructivist thinking; yet we believe that while the former stage is used deliberately by the actors, shows more clearly how a socialising change might take place independently on an even deeper level.

**Graph 2**
*Role identities change*

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ÚSTAV MEZINÁRODNÍCH VZTAHŮ
INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
To find out how important a threat will be, it is important to analyse three factors: the perceived importance of the other (to what extent does the relationship to the other influence our self-perception?), the perceived enmity (perception of the intent to disrupt one or more role identities), and the degree of sedimentation of the role identity. The perceived importance is clearly dependent on the position of the specific role identity related to the other in the hierarchy of the role identities of the self. If, for example, the Soviet discourse often spoke about the relations to the USA, or compared the position of the USSR with that of the USA, the role identity of one of the two superpowers was one of the key features of the Soviet Union, and the importance of the United States for the Soviets was high.

The perceived enmity depends on how much the other has deviated from the path desired by the self. A nice example is the relation between Estonia and Russia. Estonia has been seen as extremely inimical in Russia, since in Russian eyes Estonia grossly violated the Russian role identity as the exclusive protector of the so-called Near Abroad, and expressed its wish to escape from such a role relationship (balancing behaviour), joining both the EU and NATO. Similarly, Estonian handling of the Russian-speaking minority has been seen as non-compliance with the Russian role of the protector of Russian speakers (russkoyazychnye) abroad.

The degree of sedimentation has also a strong impact on the perceived threat. More sedimented role identities are more resistant to change, no matter whether the situation of the self would improve or not. If the other challenges a deeply sedimented role identity, its “naturalness” will cause a negative reaction by the self. And this holds even more if the identity belongs to those that are seen positively by the self. In other words, an attack on a deeply sedimented positive role identity will be perceived as threatening. The Russian perception of the belt of countries south of Russia as backward countries that are subject to a *mission civilisatrice* from Russia might be such a deeply sedimented role identity. Another example is the Russian role-identity as a great power. Therefore, any step which casts doubts on this self-perception is usually interpreted in Russia as an attack against the primordial nature of Russian statehood and national character.

Having defined the factors which underlie threat construction, we can move to the question of typical reactions to threat. Traditional international relations theory has discussed
two elementary reactions: balancing and bandwagoning. This dichotomous understanding of reactions to threat roughly corresponds with the reaction to threat (stress) in traditional psychological research. Here, the two options are labelled “fight or flight” (for an application see Ialongo et al. 1996). Since the actors in international relations cannot usually run away, they opt for bandwagoning if they feel weaker than their enemy. In realist terms, flight represents such a situation where the self accepts the superiority of the other. Similarly, bandwagoning is a method of succumbing to the stronger other with the hope that the self will be allowed to survive. Balancing, according to Walt, is „allying with others against the prevailing threat.“ (Walt 1990, p.17) Thus balancing is a refusal to accept the superiority of the other and an attempt to repel its threatening power.

Although balancing/bandwagoning is usually connected with balance of power theories, it is perfectly possible to recast these two terms (balance and bandwagon) in constructivist terms. Firstly, this means that we do not consider the mutual ratio of military power or other material capabilities as the starting point of the analysis, and focus instead on the subjective and inter-subjective perceptions of the self and other. Secondly, we do not treat the actors as utility maximisers but assume that they behave according to the logic of appropriateness. Thus the self does not defend its role identity vis-à-vis the other because of some calculated profitability of such behaviour, but because it regards its role identities a part of itself and a guide for the correct behaviour towards the others.

Thus balancing would be again analogous to fighting in socio-psychological terms because it translates into the refusal to accept the role relationship offered by the other. To balance out the other’s destabilizing attack on the self-perception, the self tries to assert its own role identity. To prevent a change in a favourable role identity, the self has, however, a broad range of instruments, the most passive of them being simple disregard of the other (although often such non-action is not possible), but the self sometimes adopts a more aggressive position, and can even physically attack the other in order to convince the other to accept the role identity preferred by the self.

Bandwagoning, on the other hand, means a reformulation of the role identity of the self in a way consistent with the other’s altercasting. The self thus accepts another understanding of the relationship that reflects the priorities set by the other. Again, the other can reach its aims more peacefully, for instance through its attractiveness for the self which then tries to emulate the other’s position, or more violently, including through war.
Clearly, both of these positions are the two extremes of a scale and, in fact, neither a perfect balancing, not a perfect bandwagoning is possible since the interaction between the self and the other continuously modifies their respective role identities, self-perceptions, and understanding of the other. Paradoxically, one of the most common situations may be found somewhere in the middle of the scale. Social learning and socialisation are most pronounced at this point since both actors are involved in an intensive self-redefinition that culminates in accepting new role identities. These new identities can, however, be quite different from the original role identities of both actors.

The model of the behaviour of the self can be simply summarised as follows: The self interacts with the environment and this causes emergence of different others with which the self compares, competes or cooperates. The ensuing role identities are in some cases perceived positively by the self (e.g. dominant position of the self, mutually advantageous behaviour, etc.), yet in other cases the self is not satisfied and attempts at a change of the role identity. This is the change of type I, i.e. deliberate change caused by one of the actors. There may be, however, also the change of the second type where the final role identity change is not a reflection of a deliberate attempt by one of the actors.
The Russian self and its threat perceptions

Russia represents particularly suitable examples of both deep changes in an actor’s self-perception and in role identities vis-à-vis others. Yet the Russian case is also relatively complicated because the traditional pictures of Russia as both a multinational tsarist empire and as a communist superpower were broken, and Russians themselves experience great difficulties when they try to (re)build it in its “original” or new shape. This renovation is further complicated by the fact that Russian identity as citizens of Russia (*rossiyanе*) is sometimes mingled with the ethnic identity of Russians (*russiye*). More to the point, large Russian speaking minorities exist in the other post-Soviet republics, nonetheless not all of Russian speakers consider themselves Russian and prefer their Kazakh, Ukrainian, or other identities.

The turmoil ensuing from the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union shattered the traditional selves and their roles, both within the Union and in relation to outside actors. The dominant threat images from the past either disappeared or were transformed into shapes more compatible with the post-Cold War era. Moreover, even though it might have been possible to depict the Russian identity in its relations with the external environment in the simplified binary form of the East-West conflict during the Cold War, this would be truly misleading in present days (Hopf 2003). Thus we must inevitably take into account the multiplicity of identities present in the post-Cold War Russia in order to understand the tensions in Russian foreign policy, and in its newly (re)constructed threat images.

Russia and the West: the eternal catching-up

We start our analysis with one of the two others omnipresent in Russian history – the West/Europe. The presence of the West in Russian societal and philosophical discourses is truly indisputable: We would hardly find any great Russian thinker who did not feel obliged to express his/her ideas on the relationship of Russia towards Europe. Berdayev, Solovyov, Chomyakov, Gertsen, or Tshernyshevskiy – they all wrote extensively about the Russian relation to the West and about the nature of the West as seen by Russians.

Yet the West has been often described as both the entity which should be emulated and the entity which is dangerous for Russia. In addition, the West has meant two different things to Russia (cf. Porter in Wallander 1996): the spiritual Europe of the enlightenment, liberalism and rationality; and the material Europe of advanced technologies and superior military and economic power. Although educated Russians including even some tsars such
Catherine the Great might have admired the spiritual Europe, much more of the attention of the ruling elites has been dedicated towards the emulation of the material strength of European great powers. Thus European military superiority generated Russian fears mixed with admiration, while the spiritual roots of modern Europe such as the Cartesian worldview, rationalism, and liberalism caused rejection on part of Russia.

And yet the West has been the treasure trove of new ideas that spread to Russia, and that often constituted the battleground on which the battles over the Russian spiritual future were fought. European rationalism was seen as inclined to violence and in stark contrast with the “orderly natural growth” of Russia (Kireevskiy 1911). But all the same, even when fighting the hated West, all Russian thinkers used philosophical or sociological weapons of European origin (cf. Neumann 1995).

The military part of the Western other was gradually elevated to a more prominent position than the spiritual one in the Russian threat discourse. Although some influential groups such as Slavophiles continued to stress the inimical character of Western spirituality, this attitude only seldom acquired official status and has almost never become the most widespread belief among Russians. This becomes understandable as soon as we look at the Russian history of the last two centuries, which were marked by the repeated attempts of technologically superior armies from the West to conquer Russia. The centuries-long emulation culminated in the years of the Cold War when Russia/Soviet Union finally achieved parity in at least some aspects of military power, be it at the expense of long-term economic development and the standard of living of its own population.

The Present day Russian attitudes to the West

Both of the extreme positions, the admiration and the fear of the West, are commonly used as explanations of Russian foreign policy. Some authors (e.g. Heikka 1999) believe that the West has become “a demonised other” of Russia since 1993 (ibid., p. 11), others are convinced that Russians have finally come to the conclusion that the West is a partner, especially in the fight against international terrorism).

To analyse the present Russian attitudes to the West, it is quite useful to explore major foreign policy documents such as the National Security Conception (Kontseptsiya nacional’noy…) or the Foreign Policy Conception (Kontseptsiya vneshney…) which reveals the official and most influential discourse, having a decisive impact on Russian foreign policy.
behaviour; and indeed, some have done so (Kassianova 2001). The discourse, though hidden behind the diplomatic parlance used in the documents, reveals at least the basic contours of the frame of reference for Russian identity and otherness construction, and its threat perceptions. For our analysis, we have chosen the three most important documents defining Russian foreign policy aims and threats to vital interests of Russia: The Foreign Policy Conception of 28 June 2000 (Kontseptsia vneshney…), The National Security Conception of 10 October 2000(Kontseptsia natsional’noy…), and the Military Doctrine of 21 April 2000 (Voyennaya doktrina…).

The use of the term West is, however, quite ambiguous, and has four different, partially overlapping, meanings:

1. First of all, the West is present in the documents in the traditional abstract form, which subsumes the whole Euro-Atlantic area. But the authors of all three documents see this area as dominated by the United States: “The second tendency manifests itself through attempts to create a structure of international relations based on the dominance of developed Western countries lead by the United States in the international community…” (Kontseptsia natsional’noy…, p. 1). Thus the West is ascribed those, usually negative, features which are generally seen as being typical for the United States: “Principal questions of international security are solved by Western institutions and forums of limited membership, which weakens the role of the Security Council of the UN.” (Kontseptsia vneshney…, p. 3) Similarly, among destabilising activities are listed “attempts to weaken (ignore) the existing mechanisms of guaranteeing international security (above all the UN and the OSCE)” or “the use of military actions as a means of “humanitarian intervention’” (Voyennaya doktrina…, p. 2).

2. The West nevertheless seems to take on new forms, or even branch off into relatively independent others. The second incarnation of the West, still including most of the Euro-Atlantic area, is NATO. It is not very surprising that NATO, in the minds of Russians still marked by the Cold War division of the world, is mentioned in almost exclusively negative terms (for a small exception see Kontseptsia vneshney…, p. 11). “In a number of parameters, the current political and military positions of NATO are not compatible with the security interests of the Russian Federation, and partially

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3 This method is used also when analysing the other relevant Russian others – for more detail see below.
they directly contradict them.” (Kontseptsiya vneshney..., p. 12) “The strengthening of politico-military blocs and alliances, above all eastern NATO enlargement” (Kontseptsiya natsional’noy..., p. 6) is even listed among the fundamental threats to Russian national security.

3. The third Western-type category is the United States. In spite of quite substantial shifts in the recent years, and particularly after September 2001, Russian attitudes to the United States are obviously worse that to the West as a whole or Western Europe (see table 1).

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<th>Table 1 Russian attitude to Europe and America</th>
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<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gorshkov 2003

More often than any of the three other understandings of the West, the United States is depicted as a military power. Considering its huge economic potential, the almost exclusive focus on military capabilities would be somewhat surprising were it not for the history of half a century of bipolar conflict. The text of the analysed documents speaks rather diplomatically when the US is mentioned explicitly: Russia is prepared to defend its different vision of the new world order, striving for a multipolar system, whereas the United States is seen as the main proponent of “unipolar world structure” (Kontseptsiya vneshney..., p. 3). The American decision on missile defence is also interpreted as an increased threat to the national security of the Russian Federation (Kontseptsiya vneshney..., p. 6).

But in cases where the United States is not directly mentioned in the text although the discussed topic clearly points to it, the documents are more outspoken: “The attempts to introduce into international relations such conceptions as “humanitarian intervention” and “limited sovereignty” in order to justify unilateral use of force without consent of the Security Council of the UN are inadmissible” (Kontseptsiya vneshney..., p. 7, for a similar statement see Voyennaya doktrina..., p. 2). Nonetheless, this is not to say that Russia considers the United States as the ultimate enemy. Russia is obviously aware that an eternal balancing of the American
role identity towards Russia is not possible: “In spite of the existence of serious, in a number of cases principal disagreements, the Russian-American cooperation constitutes a necessary condition for the improvement of the international situation and guarantee of global strategic security.” (Kontseptsiya vneshney…, p. 13)

4. The last part of the West, which is often dealt with separately, is Europe, particularly the EC/EU. Although Europe was originally synonymous with the West, it seems to have shifted to a different position in the Russian perception. Europe acquires a negative tinge only when the American dominance over Europe is stressed, otherwise the EU is treated neutrally or even in positive terms. The difference in perception between Europe/EU and the other Western others (especially NATO and the USA) can be best illustrated by the description of the two enlargement processes of the EU and NATO. Whereas NATO enlargement is repeatedly presented as one of the main threats, and the authors of the documents made considerable efforts to show their negative attitude towards the enlargement (Kontseptsiya vneshney…, p. 12), EU enlargement is described as one of the “objective components of the European development” (Kontseptsiya vneshney…, p. 11).

The use of the four different meanings of the West in the documents is not arbitrary: The perception of the Russian population of these four terms reveals the same hierarchy: Europe and the EU are the most positively evaluated others and NATO is clearly the worst (see table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive attitude</th>
<th>Negative attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Europe</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>13,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. EU</td>
<td>59,4%</td>
<td>20,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. West</td>
<td>51,6%</td>
<td>39,1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. America</td>
<td>43,3%</td>
<td>49,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. NATO</td>
<td>19,9%</td>
<td>68,9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gorshkov 2003
The role identity of Russia towards the West is also split in several more or less independent roles which seem to copy the old double perception of the West: On the one hand, we have the West in spiritual terms, which is epitomized in the EU, its peacefulness and relative military weakness; the Russian role identity could here be described in rather positive terms, as a “key partner” (Kontseptsiya vneshney…, p. 11) in this case. On the other hand, there is the militarily powerful and technologically superior United States, and NATO as its foreign policy instrument, that are seen as embodiments of the other West-image, i.e. the war-inclined, militarily strong West which represents the real danger for Russia. The role identity, as described in the analysed documents, is absolutely different this time: It is that of a wary observer who wants to preserve the relatively good ties with the US, yet who is aware of the American strength and unpredictability and of the conflicting visions of the world of both countries.

While it is very difficult to assess the degree of sedimentation of the different types of images of “the West”, it seems quite plausible that the images connected with the Cold War legacy are more sedimented, and thus more difficult to change, than those related to Europe. This is confirmed by the frequent allusions to NATO as a relic from the past, or the critique of the US for its “Cold War mentality” as compared to the dynamically evolving, yet “objectively given” developments within the EU.

The threat reaction is directly connected to the importance of the other (and the role identity) for the self and the perceived degree of threat emanating from the other. Thus the Russian reaction to the American other, which represented the militarily stronger and more unilateral West, came very close to pure bandwagoning in the second half of the 1990s, and particularly so during Primakov’s foreign policy. The doctrine of multipolarity thus became an epitomisation of the Russian balancing behaviour.

Yet with the rise of perceived Islamic threat, Russian focused on balancing this threat since its importance, sedimentation of the role identity, and the degree of inmity were much
higher than vis-à-vis the United States. This gradually led to a weakening of the balancing behaviour towards the US and, indeed, we could talk about gradual transfer to some degree of bandwagoning with the United States in the last years.

**Graph 3**

*Attitudes of Russia towards the images of the West*
Russia and the East: The fight against barbarians

The role of the second most important Russian other has not been any less controversial than the role of the West. Like the West, the East should not be understood in purely geographic terms since it was later identified with the Islamic terrorist threats from the South and, in fact, it particularly covers the territories south of the current Russian Federation. Although from a chronological perspective the Russian relation to the East has not lasted as long as the relation to the West, its tracks are deep and they are clearly visible in the Russian attitude to the “East” even today.

The most historically relevant encounter of Russians with the East was represented by the Mongol invasion, which seems to have adumbrated Russian relations to the East for several centuries. This encounter was by no means the first or the only one; “…the Eastern wave attacked the gates of Russia in every stage of its formation: Khazars, Pechenegs, Polovtsi and countless others.” (Utkin 2003, p. 51) Yet only the Mongols succeeded in conquering Russia and dominating it for two and a half centuries. In the history of the nation, the Mongol yoke is presented as a period of oppression by bloodthirsty despotic barbarians who put the development of Russia back for a long period of time and heavily damaged the greatest centres of Russian culture, including Kiev and Vladimir (cf. Kaiser, Marker, 1994). Even the folklore of the 14th and 15th centuries adduces evidence for the negative attitude of Russians towards the Mongols (cf. ibid. p. 138).

The philosophical and political assessment of the Mongol invasion and yoke has not been that unequivocal, because some of the most important Russian thinkers believed that Russia was neither a Western, nor an Eastern empire, but rather a Eurasian one, thus drawing heavily on the experiences of the nomads of Eurasia. More radical philosophers went even further, claiming that Russia was in fact an heir to Genghis Khan. Trubetskoy, for instance, (1925) shows how the Mongols positively influenced the Russian political and societal system through their nomadic ways of life and spiritual orientation, which were different from that of the settled population of Europe.

During and shortly after the Mongol dominance over Russia, a connection between two different kinds of Eastern otherness was forged. While the Mongols were originally adherents of shamanism, and were surprisingly tolerant towards other religions including the Orthodox Church, as noted even by Pushkin (Pashtschenko 2003, p. 301), they gradually converted to Islam in the course of the 13th and 14th centuries (May 2001). At that moment, the danger coming from eastern barbarians, as seen by Russians, became intertwined with the...
danger of Islamic expansion from the South. The rise and territorial expansion of the Muscovite Empire, started by the first successful battles against the Horde, went on smoothly with the fight against the remaining Islamic/Tatar eastern and southern khanates such as those of Siberia, Khazan, and Crimea, and the struggle adopted the contours of the (Orthodox) Christian fight against the infidels/Muslims. Thus the liberation from the originally non-Islamic Mongols turned slowly into the conquest of Mongol-dominated Islamic territories, and ended with the expansion of the Empire far beyond the lands once occupied by the Horde, into other Islamic regions south and east of Russia.

To sum up, following the defeat of the Great Horde of 1480, the Mongols (Tatars) lost their menacing power and were turned into an object of conquest. But the self-definition of Russians against the Mongols, conflated later with Islamic nations in the South and East, has remained valid. An omnipresent evidence of this are Russian Orthodox churches: Crescents, which are frequently found at the bottom of crosses on the cupolas of these churches, have been erected ever since Russian armies captured the Tatar city of Kazan as a sign of the Christian victory over Islam.

From that moment on, Russia took up its *mission civilisatrice*, creating a mix of conquest, superior military technology, and Christian orthodoxy. This almost unceasing expansion of the Russian Empire was the final cause of the Messianic tendencies, so apparent in the Russian thinking of Slavophiles (e.g. Kirievskiy 1911). This Messianic feature of the Russian character seems to point in two directions: On the one hand, many in Russia have believed that it is the Russians who saved Europe so many times be it from its own corruption (as the gendarme of Europe) or from the invaders from the East who exhausted their strength in Russian steppes (Zlobin 2002). The other direction is the Eastern one: Russia thus sees herself as the disseminator of civilization to the underdeveloped regions in the Far East or South. So while in Europe Russia played the role of a relatively backward country that learned more than it taught, in Asia the relation was the inverse: Russia saw herself as the master of Asia because its armies were able to beat almost any enemy ranging from Central Asia to China, and the level of its economic development was much higher than most of its southern and eastern neighbours.
Present day Russian attitudes to the East

The Russian perception of the East cannot be, like that of the West, seen as a binary relation. The East takes on multiple forms in the Russian discourse, and the differences are even greater than are those between the “Western” images. Again the analysis of the three above-mentioned documents can produce valuable insights when trying to discern these different understandings of the East in the Russian foreign policy discourse.

1. First of all, there is the broadest interpretation of the East as those countries of Asia which are beyond the reach of the present-day Russian Federation, and which have always been seen rather as far-away neighbours than objects of conquest. These countries such as China and India have played only marginal roles in Russian history, and it is difficult to imagine them as important Russian others. They are usually mentioned as a part of a “dynamically developing region” (Kontseptsiya vneshney..., p. 13). This kind of East is seen almost unequivocally in positive terms.

Most text is dedicated to China, and stress is put on the two countries’ “harmony of principal approaches to key matters of world politics” (ibid.). The positive assessment of China seems to form the counterbalance to the negative evaluation of the military activities of the US/NATO. The role of this type of the East is therefore rather to confirm Russia’s ability to have “real friends” and be “equal partners” with someone, which cannot be the case between Russia and the other types of the East, not to mention the West. The only two minor exceptions from the positive approach to Asia are Japan, which is anxiously treated in neutral terms, and the question of the spread of weapon of mass destruction (e.g. to the Korean Peninsula, India, Pakistan).

2. The second type of the East is the direct successor of the historical enemy of Russia – the Islamic danger in the South. This type is, at least in the analysed documents, not directly connected with a state, but is presented indirectly as religious extremism, ethnic separatism, and international terrorism. Interestingly enough, although these indirect allusions are very frequent in the texts of all three documents, both the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Chechnya are explicitly mentioned only extremely rarely (Kontseptsiya vneshney..., p. 14).

While all other threat sources (such as NATO, for instance) are dealt with in such a way that allows for mutual rapprochement, and sometimes even acknowledges the positive impact of the these threat sources on the international environment, the attitude towards ethnic separatists and political and religious extremists is
uncompromising. Thus, this type of the East comes closest to the conflation of the other and the enemy in its classic form: Like the Mongols, the enemy is presented as barbarian, fierce, cruel, unforgiving, or even inhuman: someone whom it is not possible to negotiate with.

Additionally, “extremist nationalist, religious, separatist, and terrorist movements” (Voyennaya doktrina…, p. 4) resemble the original image of the eastern invaders in another sense: They are seen as a danger coming from the outside, yet already present inside Russia as well. Thus these movements are considered among the most serious external, (Voyennaya doktrina…, p. 3) as well as internal, (Voyennaya doktrina…, p. 4) threats to Russian security. The sense of being surrounded by the enemy once more also finds its expression in the statement about major tasks in the border areas in the National Security Conception; the Russian Federation should not only impede the economic expansion of other countries but it should also prevent demographic and cultural-religious expansion (Kontseptsiya natsional’noy…, p. 15-16). This shows clearly that these threats are not always military in nature but rather that other threats to the national self are equally important, if not more so.

3. The third type of the East is the area of the former Soviet Union. This is a type sui generis, because it is not at all clear whether it should be considered as an “other”: Many in Russia still believe that the CIS is at best an exclusive zone of influence of Russia and at worst part of the Russian Empire which will sooner or later be re-united with its motherland. The presence of many ethnic Russians or Russian speakers also adds to the common ‘we-feeling’ in the CIS territories. In addition, the Easterness of the post-Soviet space is also not guaranteed. It also includes the Baltic states, which are obviously determined not to let Russia decide their future course; the second largest CIS member state is Ukraine, which cannot be seen as in the East either, being instead the original core territory of Russian statehood.

However, if we take into account only the former Central Asian and Caucasian republics, then we can consider this region as a Russian other. Historically, these territories belonged to the inimical regions of the second type (see above), but had been subjugated and more or less pacified, and thus became part of the Russian self. The break-up of the Soviet Union brought the newly independent Russian state to an unenviable position. But Russia pursued its role identity as the civiliser, centraliser
and benign hegemon and, with the exception of the early 1990s, strove for the re-integration of this space. These attempts were nonetheless fairly unsuccessful, since many CIS member states were not satisfied with this role identity and did not see Russian hegemony as benign. Thus this third type of the East is slowly falling to pieces and parts of it are drifting either to re-integration with the Russian self (Belarus, Kazakhstan) or to the first type, beyond Russian influence (Georgia, Azerbaijan).

The Russian dilemma about how to deal with the CIS is clearly a consequence of the imperfect redefinition of its own self and its borders. This ambiguous position is also reflected in the three documents. While the CIS is the regional priority (Kontseptsiya vneshney…, p. 10), and the weakening of the integrative dynamic is seen as a threat to Russian national security (Kontseptsiya natsional´noy…, p. 6), cooperation with individual CIS countries depends on the countries´ “openness to cooperation, preparedness to take properly into account the interests of the Russian Federation, including securing the rights of the Russian compatriots (sootechestvenniki)” (ibid.) Hence on the one hand Russia is a keen supporter of cooperation with the CIS, but on the other it imposes a number of conditions on its partners, some of which might be seen as clear intervention in their domestic affairs.

The Russian role-identity of benign hegemon also suggests the probable Russian behaviour towards these countries: as far as they respect Russian requirements, Russian attitudes towards the internal developments of these countries are very benevolent. Once a country starts to deviate from the path preferred by Russia, the Russian reaction is generally very harsh. So Russia reacted almost hysterically when some countries such as the Baltics opted to leave the space of Russian hegemony.

To sum up, the Eastern other can, like the Western one, be divided into several subgroups. One of them is the inimical other epitomised in ethnic separatism and religious extremism, which is often conflated with the Chechnya issue. The big Asian countries beyond the reach of the Russian direct influence, with which Russia maintains good relations on an equal footing, represent another type of the East. The third type is the Central Asian and Caucasian part of the CIS. The analysis of the CIS is, however, particularly intriguing, since both its otherness and its easterness are in doubt. While the role identity towards the extremist Islamic
other is pure enmity, for the non-CIS Asian countries it is partnership, and for the CIS it is benign hegemony.

The degree of sedimentation of these role identities is easier to assess than with the Western others since the Russian role played towards the CIS has not yet been settled, and is accordingly the less settled one. The Islamic/barbarian other is, on the other hand, the oldest and most deep-rooted other in the Russian relations to the East. The distribution of the different types of the Eastern other can be seen in graph 4.

The Russian behaviour to the Eastern others is also directly linked to its role identities. While Russia plays the role of an equal partner towards non-CIS Asia, its role of a benign hegemon predetermines to a great extent its behaviour towards the CIS member states. Those who comply with Russian requirements and interests are dealt with in a benign, event though patronizing manner, but those who reject this role identity and try to balance Russia, are exposed to harsh diplomatic or even military threats.

Graph 4

*Attitudes of Russia towards the images of the East*

![Graph 4](image-url)
Graph 5 summarizes the main findings, showing the different type of the Eastern and Western Russian others. But we should still bear in mind that there are also other actors which cannot be put clearly in any of the boxes, such as the Baltic states and to a degree also the CIS.

Graph 5

*Russian perception of its others*
Conclusion

The presented model tries to bring together threat perception, threat construction, and the reaction to threat. We believe that the threat construction already partly predetermines the concrete behavioural mode chosen in order to protect the self from the threat. Although our model provides for a general framework for the threat perception of an actor, it has several drawbacks that should also be mentioned. Having tried to operationalise this approach, we encountered two problems: the problem of predictive power and the problem of change.

Many structural approaches suffer from insufficient or entirely missing theorisations of change. In our model, change is seen as dependent on changing identities, which are transformed depending on the actor’s position on the balance-bandwagon scale. Although we tried to introduce change in our approach, ours is predominantly a structural approach, which makes theorisation of change rather difficult. To mitigate the overly static picture, we should always bear in mind the continuous redefinition of identities and the changing balancing or bandwagoning reactions of the actors.

The second problem is the predictive power of the model. Clearly, most constructivists prefer interpretative approaches, and in spite of some attempts at overcoming its explanatory weakness it has remained difficult for constructivism to predict the behaviour of the actors. Our model does not offer strong predictions either; but it shows the most probable outcomes in regards to where the actor will look for new threats, or what its most probable reactions to threat will be. We believe that this should be a sufficient justification of our model even for those on the explanatory side of the divide.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned drawbacks, we are strongly convinced that the analysis provides a good framework for the assessment of threat. This is, however, not to say that the analysis is perfect: Future studies should further concentrate on the operationalisation of the approach and on the introduction of further dynamic features.
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