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# CONSTRUCTIVISM REVISITED: AN EVALUATION OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND MOSCOW-WASHINGTON RELATIONS

CONSTRUTIVISMO REVISITADO: UMA AVALIAÇÃO DA POLÍTICA EXTERNA RUSSA E DAS RELAÇÕES ENTRE MOSCOU E WASHINGTON

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## Resumo

O presente artigo avalia as relações entre Moscou e Washington no contexto de um renovado antagonismo entre os dois governos, bem como busca explicar as visões de política externa atualmente empregadas pela Federação Russa e Estados Unidos (em relação um ao outro) segundo seu grau de compatibilidade com a Teoria Construtivista de Relações Internacionais. Objetiva-se demonstrar que, apesar da perspectiva Realista parecer (à primeira vista) a mais adequada para a abordagem da atual política externa dos dois países (no que concerne principalmente suas relações bilaterais), fatores ideacionais próprios da Teoria Construtivista ainda detém suficiente poder explanatório a respeito das visões que tanto Moscou quanto Washington possuem um do outro. Quanto a estrutura, de início serão abordadas algumas das principais contribuições do Construtivismo para a Teoria de Relações Internacionais e sua reinterpretação de conceitos-chave trabalhados pelo Neoliberalismo/Neorrealismo. Num segundo momento, evidenciaremos como a Teoria Construtivista fora aplicada durante o período da Guerra Fria para explicar importantes eventos relativos ao aumento/esfriamento de tensão entre Moscou e o Ocidente chegando até o período Yeltsin. Finalmente, abordaremos como algumas de suas premissas podem ser utilizadas no presente, ajudando-nos a compreender a atual visão da Rússia sobre o sistema internacional e, sobretudo, sua complicada relação com os Estados Unidos. Em termos metodológicos o artigo vale-se de uma discussão analítica (e meta-teórica) relacionado a Teoria a eventos importantes envolvendo a interação política entre os dois países, aprofundando o debate sobre a visão construtivista em RI e adotando – como plano principal - a perspectiva de Alexandr Wendt para substanciar a discussão proposta.

Palavras-Chave: Construtivismo, (Neo)Realismo, Política Externa Russa, Política Externa Americana, Relações Internacionais

## Abstract

This article presents an evaluation on Moscow-Washington relations in the context of a renewed antagonism between the two governments, and the foreign policy visions currently employed by the Russian Federation and the United States (in relation to each other) through their compatibility with the Constructivist Theory of IR. We aim to demonstrate that, although the Realist perspective seems (at first glance) the most appropriate one to approach the current foreign policy of both countries (especially on their bilateral relations), ideational factors belonging to the Constructivist Theory still hold sufficient explanatory force in regard to Moscow's and Washington's views about each other. In terms of structure, we initially set out to discuss some of the

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main contributions of Constructivism to IR Theory and its reinterpretation of key-concepts previously crystallized by Neoliberalism/Neorealism. Secondly, we demonstrate how the Constructivist Theory was applied during the Cold War era to explain important events related to the increasing / cooling of tensions between Moscow and the West until the Yeltsin years. Finally, we elaborate on how some of its premises could still be applied today, helping us to fully grasp the current Moscow's view about the international system and, more importantly, about its complicated relationship with the United States. In methodological terms, the article draws on an analytical (and meta-theoretical) discussion relating the Theory to important events involving both countries politically, deepening the debate on the constructivist vision in IR, while adopting Alexandr Wendt's perspective to substantiate the current argument.

Keywords: Constructivism, (Neo)Realism, Russian Foreign Policy, American Foreign Policy, International Relations

## 1. INTRODUCTION: A QUICK OVERVIEW OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism is an International Relations (IR) Theory whose inception dates back to the 1980s but had a significant development during the 1990s. Its first main exponents were Nicholas Onuf, writer of *World of Our Making - Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* in 1989 and Alexander Wendt with his article *Anarchy is What States Make of It* written in 1992. Originally, Constructivism emerged as a by-product of the Third Great Debate between Neorealism and Neoliberalism that took place during the 1970s and 1980s and attempted to challenge traditional approaches to IR Theory dominant at that time. In fact, until the very end of the Cold War, Neorealism and Neoliberalism - as the main theoretical frameworks for the study of IR - did not leave much space for alternative points of view. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 major changes would take place within the field of IR, once previous theories failed to predict the outcome of this ideological/political conflict that defined the 20th Century, being incapable of explaining the causes under which it ended (ADLER, 1997). This, in turn, resulted in the emergence of Constructivist theory in the midst of a crisis in the development of IR thought (BURCHILL et al, 2005).

Initially, Constructivists set out to make the sociological aspect of world politics relevant in the study of IR, openly challenging rationalist thinking embedded in previous theories, denying its materialist and individualistic view of world politics. For those writers identified with the new approach, the interests and identity of States were inherently social, thus being developed and formed through constant interaction with other States and not pre-determined as Neorealists and Neoliberals would have us believe decades before. According to previous theories material factors should primarily account for understanding States' actions and behavior, but Wendt (1992), implying the innovation of Constructivist thought, emphasized that ideological factors should not be ignored, playing a significant role as well in shaping world politics and States' political actions and motivations. In fact, for some constructivists, the very structure of world politics and the building blocks of international reality are social, as well as material (FINNEMORE, 2009; RUGGIE, 1998). Adler adds for instance that Constructivists:

Believe that the identities, interests, and behavior of political agents are socially constructed by collective meanings, interpretations and assumptions about the

world [...] [Constructivism] is interested in understanding the material, subjective and intersubjective worlds interact in the social construction of reality, and because, rather than focusing exclusively on how structures constitute agents' identities and interests, it also seeks to explain how individual agents socially construct these structures in the first place. (ADLER, 1997, p. 324, 330; our emphasis).

In fact, the mixing of material and ideational factors to explain events in IR is one of the elements lacking in Neorealist and Neoliberal thinking. Thus, according to Constructivists, previous approaches to IR were not capable to predict the end of the Cold War and the consequent processes of globalization that followed suit. Ultimately, Neorealism and Neoliberalism failed to provide a "complete structural" explanation on how States behave and act in world politics (WENDT, 1994). Rejecting exaggerated emphasis on objective facts to explain events in IR, Constructivists are more concerned with the social constructions behind those facts, pointing out that identities and beliefs are more important than rationality in understanding States' actions; the point being that individuals (as well as States) "act purposively on the basis of their personal ideas, beliefs, judgments and interpretations" (ADLER, 1997, p.325).

For Constructivists, the key structures of the international system are intersubjective, rather than material (WENDT, 1994). Notwithstanding, Constructivists also shed some (new) light upon relevant concepts present in the study of IR for decades. For the purposes of our paper, we shall look to some of these reinterpretations, discussing Constructivist's take on States' identity and interests, the concept of National Interest and the meaning of anarchy in the international system.

Firstly, in terms of States interests, there is a substantial difference between Neorealist and Constructivist's point of view regarding the topic. To start "Neorealism and Neoliberal institutionalism treat the identity and interests of actors as exogenous and given" (RUGGIE, 1998, p. 222). For Neorealists more specifically, the absence of authority above the States forces them to define their interests in terms of power and survival (WALTZ, 1979). In other words, a Neorealist point of view considers that "the international system is a forum for rivalry in which States seek to outperform one another in the pursuit of often scarce objectives such as power and status" (MAZARR et al, 2018, p.5). However, Neorealists ignore the effect of socialization among States, affirming a priori that between two actors who do not yet know each other, a conflicting relationship will necessarily ensue (WENDT, 1992).

**Figure 1 - Berlin Wall's Fall, the Cold War in its Final Days  
(The End of this Ideological Conflict provided an Opportunity for Constructivism in IR Theory)**



SOURCE: *Independent*, 2014

Constructivists argue instead that patterns of cooperation and conflict between States depend substantially on the process of identity formation drawing from interaction between them, shaping their interests and relationship. Following this logic, whenever States mutually identify in a positive – friendly – manner, due to previous historical interaction (e.g the USA and France), they tend to cooperate and reinforce their mutual trust, while those who identify themselves in a negative – or rivalry-related - manner (e.g USA and Russia) tend to keep a conflicting relationship, increasing the chances for a balance of power politics and distrust.

In other words, “States with a history of competition are more likely to engage in future rivalry or even conflict: Distrust and negative perceptions of another State are self-reinforcing constructs” (MAZARR et al, 2018, p. 42). For Constructivists, social coexistence modifies agents, meaning that States’ interests are not exogenously given (or independent from their interaction). How States fundamentally manifest their interests depend on how they define themselves in relation to the “Other”, with identities being socially formed and further solidified by their relationship. States’ interests then become “mediated by the identities of the actors, their self-understandings, and their understandings of their relationships with other actors” (ibidem, p. 15). To sum up, a State’s identity is defined by “a set of meanings” an actor attributes to itself in relation to the “Other” (WENDT, 1992), an important point yet to be addressed later in this paper.

A second concept reinterpreted by Constructivism in opposition to previous theories is that of the “National Interest”. According to Realists “States must be concerned with their survival” and thus “The content of the national interest is [...] inferred from the anarchic, self-help character of the international system” (WELDES, 1996, p.277). For Morgenthau (1978, p.5) the National Interest is “the main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics”. Nevertheless, a Realist conceptualization of the National Interest defined simply by the security and survival of the State in face of a real or “imagined threat” is highly problematic because it “is so general as to be indeterminate” (WELDES, 1996, p. 278). According to Weldes:

Rather than being self-evident, that is, threats, and States’ National Interests in the face of threats, are fundamentally matters of interpretation [...] The content of ‘the National Interest’ [...] is produced in, or emerges out of, a process of representation through which State officials make sense of their international context. The ‘National Interest’, that is, is constructed, is created as a meaningful object, out of shared meanings through which the world, particularly the international system and the place of the State in it, is understood (WELDES, 1996, p. 278-279; our emphasis)

Weldes’ critique here falls upon the Realist assumption that objective reality, manifested by an imminent threat coming from other actors, is the main factor behind State’s National Interests formulation. Instead, a proper approach would also consider matters of interpretation and the idea held by a given States (or the officials representing it) about the international system and the States’ relative position in it. Only then, according to Constructivists, can we possibly explain why some goals (and not others) are established as being integral to the National Interest of a State in the first place.

Moving forward, another important reinterpretation done by Constructivists regards the concept of anarchy, so familiar in the IR literature. In fact, Waltzian Neorealism (and Keohane-inspired Neoliberal institutionalism):

Work within an assumption of anarchy as containing a transhistorical logic [...] which, in turn, generates a number of derivative logics — a self-help system, the need for States to prioritize survival, a recurring security dilemma and the mechanism of the balance of power (LAWSON, 2010, p.206; our emphasis).

To Neorealists, living in an anarchical system with no central authority capable of maintaining order, conflict is therefore a constant for States, which, by its turn, will try to maximize their power in order to survive “in a world where the security of States is not assured” (WALTZ, 1979, p. 92). Wendt (1992), on the other hand, points out that anarchy is not the main driver of States’ actions and behavior, but rather a permissive condition under which those actions take place. Or to put it differently “anarchy has pernicious effects only in conjunction with additional forces” (DONNELLY, 2012, p.617), in contradiction with the Neorealist notion that a “self-help system” and power politics are inevitable byproducts of anarchy. For Wendt (1992, p.394) “self-help and power politics do not follow either logically or causally from anarchy [...] if today we find ourselves in a self-help world, this is due to process, not structure” with processes being capable of changing the very nature of the system.

Neo-Neo theories in fact “lack a transformative logic and, as a consequence, are unable to explain processes of change — including systems change — over time” (LAWSON, 2010, p. 206), thus “developing generalized principles of interaction that apply regardless of time and place” (FINNEMORE, 1996, p.327) as that of anarchy. Constructivists instead explain the difficulty in seeing broad systemic changes in IR due to actors (in our case States) insistence in maintaining “relatively stable role identities” (WENDT, 1992, p.411) in relation to other actors, what helps us explain, advancing to the second and third parts of this paper, why Moscow-Washington relationship is again embedded in a pattern of confrontation and mistrust, very much akin to the situation experienced by both countries during the Cold War.

Despite being considered backward, Russia is still represented by the West as a potential threat to world stability; on the one hand, if the West transcended a Hobbesian mode of thought in regard to its international relations, Russian foreign policy is portrayed as evidently Realist, concerned excessively with matters such as security, sovereignty and territorial integrity (BROWN, 2010). Continues Brown:

At core, the orthodox discourse [of the West] takes the view that there is a specifically Russian mindset or pattern of behavior to which the country inevitably reverts. While Western states are assumed to respond rationally to incentives and constraints, Russian policy is guided by some primordial instinct that has been indelibly imprinted upon its national character by the weight of geography and history. This predisposition naturally inclines the country towards expansionism, militarism and autocracy (BROWN, 2010, p. 155).

Here Brown points out to ideas held by Western scholars and politicians about Russia throughout history, a problem further criticized by the author as part of an Orientalist model of thinking, whose key features are “the exaggeration of difference, assumption of Western superiority

and resort to hackneyed forms of analysis” (ibidem, p. 157). To better understand how it is so, we shall take a brief look to the Cold War era, tracing the potential sources of those suspicions, which insist in reappear from time to time in Russia-West relations.

## 2. FROM USSR TO YELTSIN’S RUSSIA: A REVIEW OF MOSCOW-WASHINGTON RELATIONS

Security reasoning was indeed a constant in Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War. In 1945, the Red Army’s positioning in Eastern Europe, following the Soviet counter-offensive against Nazi Germany, was instrumental in ensuring Moscow with an extensive zone of influence formed by satellite-States on its Western frontiers. This policy was framed by an excessive obsession with the country’s security, due to a perceived vulnerability of the Soviet Union at that time (VAISSE, 2013). Josef Stalin, who expanded Soviet control over Eastern Europe after World War II, was probably thinking in realistic terms, with the aim to create a “security zone” around Russia (TUATHAIL, 2005).

In view of the inevitable confrontation with the capitalist world, “for ideology [...] taught them that the outside world was hostile and that it was their duty eventually to overthrow the political forces beyond their borders” (KENNAN, 1947), the goal of that Soviet (and ultimately Russian) expansionist strategy was to obtain maximum security, with Russia moving its borders further to the West as much as possible (KISSINGER, 2014). Nevertheless, the sense of threat coming from the outside (i.e the capitalist world) was not necessarily real, if one is to consider that “the menace confronting Soviet society from the world outside its borders is founded not in the realities of foreign antagonism but in the necessity of explaining away the maintenance of dictatorial authority at home” (KENNAN, 1947), something created to justify a tight control of political life inside the USSR.

In Kennan’s (1947) point of view, due to an “innate antagonism between capitalism and Socialism” in Soviet official discourse, there could never be “on Moscow’s side any sincere assumption of a community of aims between the Soviet Union and powers which are regarded as capitalist”, meaning that relations between the USSR and the West were, in theory, doomed from the start and expected to get worse with time. At the same time, Western powers, and especially the US, were highly concerned about European security in face of the Soviet expansion. Essentially:

U.S. fears of Soviet influence over Eastern Europe and Germany were compounded by their lack of trust in a leader whose ideology was based on an explicit intention to overthrow capitalism [...] Similar lack of trust on the part of the Soviet Union, largely based on ideological reasons but also compounded by Stalin’s paranoia, further widened the gap with the United States and made cooperating to manage the new international system virtually impossible (MAZARR et al, 2018, p. 10; our emphasis).

This lack of trust from side to side (something that Constructivists pay more attention to in contrast to Realists/Neorealists) was one of the reasons behind the establishment of the Cold War shortly after 1945 in the first place, with “the rivalry of the two giants” [the USA and Soviet Union] defining “most of international politics” (ARBATOV, 2006, p.37) over the next decades. In fact, as advised by Kennan (1947), the US was to regard the Soviet Union “as a rival, not a partner”, for the foreseeable future, a situation that last until the late 1980s. Nevertheless, this conflict that was expected to endure endlessly came to a close in 1991, causing surprise both in the West and in the world in general. In Wendt’s (1992) view, the Cold War ended because both Superpowers suddenly stopped viewing each other as enemies, mostly due to Gorbachev’s foreign policy changes during the late 1980s, modifying the country’s identity.

This identity redefinition, by its turn, happens whenever there is a substantial reason for a given State to rethink itself in new terms, which may eventually arise from social, economic or political changes (be it domestic or international) turning the old image obsolete (WENDT, 1992). The author enumerates the following necessary components to redefine identity:

First, there must be a reason to think of oneself in novel terms. This would most likely stem from the presence of new social situations that cannot be managed in terms of *preexisting self-conceptions*. Second, the expected costs of intentional role change – the sanctions imposed by others with whom one interacted in previous roles – cannot be greater than its rewards. (WENDT, 1992, p. 419; our emphasis)

According to Wendt, that same process happened in the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev era, when:

The Soviets were able to end, unilaterally and almost overnight, a conflict that seemed like it had become set in stone. It may be that objective conditions were such that the Soviets “had” to change *their ideas* about the Cold War<sup>2</sup>, but that does not change the fact that in an important sense *those ideas were the Cold War*, and as such changing them by definition changed the reality (WENDT, 1999, p.375; our emphasis)

Gorbachev provided an important example for Constructivists, demonstrating how ideas could influence political outcomes. The last USSR’s Secretary-General played an essential role in changing the country’s self-image, renouncing “class struggle” as its ideological basis, with some arguing that the very collapse of the USSR could have been motivated by Gorbachev’s new Soviet foreign policy orientation, *rejecting an antagonism with the West* (ADLER, 1997). In fact, moving from a logic of conflict to one of cooperation between two actors presupposes that - at least – one of them engages in a process of self-reflection that will result in changing one’s identity in relation to the “Other” (WENDT, 1992).

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<sup>2</sup> Here, Constructivists concede that Realists might be correct in saying that “Gorbachev’s foreign policy was primarily undertaken for the instrumental reason of changing the moribund economy” (SNYDER, 2005, p.56).

For Constructivists, it was exactly what happened during Gorbachev's period in power, a political move that provided a different image for the Soviet Union in relation to the West, while at the same time the image of the West started to change in Soviet's view, with the gradual improvement of relations between the two conflicting sides.

**Figure 2 – Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev  
(Gorbachev's Foreign Policy Changes provided an important example for Constructivism Debate)**



SOURCE: *The Atlantic*, 2018

Ultimately, with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Boris Yeltsin, considered a pro-Western leader (KUCHINS and ZEMELEV, 2012), became the first President of the [newly emerged] Russian Federation. Meanwhile, during the 1990s political relations between Moscow and Washington changed significantly. That decade was no longer marked by ideological competition *“largely because of the predominance of the U.S. - and Western - centric neoliberal model”* (MAZARR *et al*, 2018, p. 22), the likes of which were implemented (with Socialism now discredited by the fall of USSR) in many places around the world, Russia included. Nevertheless, in the latter's case, the State transition from Communism to a “Neoliberal” market economy became *“a catastrophe, resulting not in a liberated Russian people and economy but in mass discontentment, economic insecurity, and social instability”* (KROEKER, 2018, p.10) due to enormous mismanagement, corruption and oligarchic meddling.

After successive crisis *“Russians had grown tired of the economic turbulence felt since the fall of the Soviet Union”* (*ibidem*, p.10), and Boris Yeltsin surprisingly announced his retirement from the post of president, opening space for a new political figure (till then barely known by the overall population) in Russia to ascend to power, Vladimir Putin. Not



long afterwards, suspicions about Western powers' (and ultimately American) intentions towards Moscow resurfaced, mostly due to Putin's personality and different attitude towards Russian Foreign Policy in comparison with his predecessor. In the West Putin was seen as a pursuer of "*authoritarian revival*" (KROEKER, 2018, p.10), which "*very much in Stalin's way*" attempted "*to drape his purely offensive realistic behavior with legal and even constitutional clothes*" (ALYUSHIN; KNYAZEVA, 2018) in matters such as Syria and Ukraine. Relations with the West soured, and Russia became again a "rival" country to the US, a process that will be addressed in the third part of our paper.

### 3. IDEATIONAL FACTORS EMBEDDED IN THE MISTRUST BETWEEN US AND RUSSIA

The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation approved by Putin in 2000 acknowledged that "*the formation of international relations is accompanied by competition and by the striving of a number of States to increase their influence on global politics*", a seemingly Realist assumption<sup>3</sup>. Russia's point of view is important because competition in IR can be understood "*As a state of antagonistic relations short of direct-armed conflict between actors [...] This implies a common pursuit of power, influence, prosperity, and status at the same time when others are also seeking those things and when supply is limited*" (MAZARR *et al* 2018, p.4). At least three reasons could be mentioned to explain Moscow's current understanding about world affairs.

Firstly, in the early 2000s, with Moscow engaged in a war against Chechen separatists in the Caucasus, Russian authorities believed that Western powers were supporting the country's dismemberment, hoping to achieve the same scenario akin to the dissolution of the Soviet Union (BEZERRA, 2018). In an interview given to Oliver Stone remembering the period, Putin (2017; our translation) stated the following: "*our American partners spoke of supporting Russia [...] including in the fight against terrorism, but in fact they used these same terrorists to destabilize the political situation in Russia*"<sup>4</sup>. This idea

<sup>3</sup> For some, Russia does see international politics as a Hobbesian realm, in which a Realist/Neorealist State-centric power politics continues to be the main paradigm for decision-making (KUCHINS AND ZAMELEV, 2012)

<sup>4</sup> Translated by the author. Original in Russian: "(...) *nashi partnery amerikanskiye na slovakh govoryat o podderzhke Rossii, govoryat o gotovnosti k sotrudnichestvu, v tom chisle v bor'be s terrorizmom, a na samom dele ispol'zuyut etikh terroristov dlya raskachki vnutripoliticheskoy situatsii v Rossii*. Russia's National Interest, by its turn, involves safeguarding its territorial integrity, as well as upholding its sovereignty and Great Power status in a multipolar world (NSCRF, 2000).

of Western States longing for the dismemberment or destabilization of Russian domestic politics is, however, ingrained in the Russian mind since (more strongly than ever) the eve of 1917 Revolution, followed by the Civil War (1917-1921) that ensued between Reds and Whites to install fully control of the country. On the other hand, for the current US administration Russia represents a threat not only in a military sense but also when it comes to operations supposedly orchestrated by the Kremlin in order to exert influence on political outcomes in Western States and in the US itself (MITCHELL, 2018), a clear example being the accusations about Russian hackers having meddled with the last US presidential elections of 2016. This assumption is altogether also a lingering feature of American politics inherited from the Cold War period, when the US believed that the influence of Moscow's communism was able to reach and influence political forces inside the country and in the West (especially in places where Communist parties were somewhat significant, as in the cases of Italy and France)

Secondly, the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO)'s enlargement in the post-Cold War era was seen by Moscow as the main military threat to its security (OLDBERG, 2010). Putin himself would make the following statement, in his address to the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy:

I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, *it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust*. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? (PUTIN, 2007, our emphasis)

Taking into account Mearsheimer's (1995, p.14) assertion that NATO was "*essentially an American tool for managing power in the face of Soviet threat*", its expansion after the end of the Cold War - when the Soviet threat no longer existed - could only be explained, in Russia's view, as directed against Moscow. According to the last *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* of 2016, Russia sees the US (together with its Western allies) once again conducting a *policy of containment* against the country, mimicking anew George Kennan's 1947 recommendations about the Soviet Union. More than just a mere reflex of a looming objective threat to its territory coming from the West, Russia's perception of its self-image as a "besieged citadel" largely predates NATO's expansion during late 1990s and early 2000s. During Stalin's period in power (1924-1953) was when the Soviet Union (and ultimately Russia) became ever more concerned about Western intentions toward the country, albeit in the form of (by that time) the inevitable

conflict between the Socialist and Capitalist words. Now, with Russia itself having turned to the Capitalist camp, suspicions regarding the West turned its, now despised of their previous ideology, but instead being focused on supposedly obscure and ill-intended objectives by Western countries (and especially the US) in relation to Russia, posing a threat to Moscow through NATO.

Thirdly, Russia's strategy consists in "avoiding the consolidation of a unipolar world under US domination, based on the redistribution of world power by new emerging poles"<sup>5</sup> (FREIRE, 2008, p.6). On this note, in the 2000's *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, Moscow suggested that Washington was trying to solve complicated international issues through biased Western institutions, without resorting to UN's multilateral mechanisms. Putin's foreign policy then became strategically oriented to oppose the concept – as well as the full realization - of a unipolar world based (mainly) on American hegemony (DUGIN, 2016) and Western dominated. Moreover, Russian official documents also warned about:

Attempts to create an IR structure based on *domination* by developed Western countries in the international community, *under US leadership and designed for unilateral solutions* (primarily by the use of military force) to key issues in world politics in circumvention of the fundamental rules of international law (NSCRF, 2000, our emphasis)

**Figure 3 – Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin Meet in 2013**  
(A Long List of Grievances Throughout History Separate the Two Governments)



SOURCE: Reuters, 2013

<sup>5</sup> Evitar a consolidação de um mundo unipolar, sob domínio norte-americano, baseando-se na redistribuição do poder mundial por novos polos emergentes (original in Portuguese).

According to Neorealism for example, powerful States only abide by rules when it suits them, bending the international law whenever they chose to (WALTZ, 2000). On this note, two such examples generally given by Russia are the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003 without a UN Security Council approval and NATO's (under US leadership) bombardment of Serbia in 1999. This *judicious use of hypocrisy*, to use the words of Finnemore (2009), happens whenever the Hegemon, constrained by rules present within international institutions, usually circumvents those rules in order to achieve its political goals. This attitude however *"undermines respect and deference both for the Unipole and for the values on which it has legitimized its power"* (FINNEMORE, 2009, p. 61).

On the US side, the latest *National Security Strategy* approved by [US President Donald] Trump, mentions Russia (alongside China) as a challenge to American power, influence, and interests in an attempt *"to erode American security and prosperity"* (NSS, 2017, p.2). For the American administration, Russia is a *revisionist power* seeking to shape the international system according to values contrary to those of the US (*ibidem*), a textbook example of an illiberal and anti-democratic State (KROEKER, 2018). The US administration also mentioned Russian military investments in nuclear technology systems as *"the most significant existential threat to the United States"* (NSS, 2017, p.25).

In this account, it is important to note that both countries hold approximately 90% of the world's remaining nuclear arsenal as a legacy from the Cold War era. America, according to US officials *"has entered a period of big-power competition and [...] past U.S. policies have neither sufficiently grasped the scope of this emerging trend nor adequately equipped our nation to succeed in it"* (MITCHELL, 2018, p. 1). Moreover, speaking to the US Congress during the traditional State of the Union 2018, Trump named Russia (alongside China) as a "rival" country, again defying US interests and values. Here, declarations from both sides revolve around those "relatively stable images" actors attribute to themselves in the international system, as mentioned by Wendt. America sees its values threatened by Russia as in an opposition between "democracy x autocracy" (reminiscent from the previously acute Cold War antagonism between Capitalism x Communism), while Russia continues to behave as a counterbalancing force to the Western pole (something the country became used to in the frameworks of the USSR).

Finally, for the US *"Russia and China are serious competitors that are building up the material and ideological wherewithal to contest U.S. primacy and leadership in the 21st Century"* (MITCHELL, 2018, p. 1), while for Moscow the US (and the West in general) has

*“been waging a campaign of ideological subversion”* intended to undermine the security and stability of the Russian government (MAZARR *et al* 2018, p. 22). Moscow believes that *“the promotion of liberal values (as enacted by Washington and other Western capitals), insofar as they threaten and impose conditions on State sovereignty, violates the foundational norm of the postwar order”* (*ibidem*, p.23)<sup>6</sup>. In fact, nowadays for capitals it seems that competition and Great Power politics are indeed *“persistent, unavoidable, and demanding vigorous and at times confrontational postures”* (*ibidem*, p. 17).

Nevertheless, much of what has been written and presented in official documents from both countries are based mostly on long-held perceptions about the “Other” and in “relatively stable images” that those States insist to associate to themselves, with America as the main example among Western countries of a “liberal democracy” and Russia presenting itself as a more traditional society (albeit more autocratic) and a *Westphalian-sovereignty* advocate in world affairs. That all being said, we shall try (during our final words) to add yet some thought into how some of Constructivism’s most important tenets can be used to better understand why the current situation between Moscow and the West evolved to a renewed pattern of mistrust, demonstrating the validity of ideational factors in this particular case.

#### 4. FINAL WORDS

It seems that in today’s Russia, as well as in the West (and especially in Washington), the same old logic of mutual suspicion resurfaced with full strength. On this note, even during Soviet times, when concerns about security and survival were paramount for both sides, ideological factors have played a big role in the formulation of concepts held by each competitor about the “Other”. Once more, what we witness in today’s Washington-Moscow relationship is the difficulty in redefining *one’s self-image*, and how hard it is to let go of *old pre-conceived views* about the other side. On the one hand, Russia’s National Interest being so concerned with safeguarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity is a consequence of perceptions about a looming Western threat and the country’s geographical position and behavior as a “besieged citadel” with a high sense of vulnerability. On the other hand, the West - and especially the US - believing that Russia

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<sup>6</sup> Not only Russia but many other countries *“see the United States, with its advocacy of liberal values through example and sometimes coercive force, as the most disruptive force in the international system”* (MAZARR *et al*, 2018, p.18).

poses a veiled (and sometimes open) threat to European and American values, an idea that grew stronger after the recent accusations of Moscow's meddling in the last US 2016 elections, is somewhat unconsciously an inheritance of Cold War fears.

Again, this pattern of *mutual suspicions* and *Great Power competition* repeating itself between Russia and the US owes much of its force to the long history of rivalry experienced in the Cold War, when both sides internalized an inimical image of the "Other", a situation that only came to improve during Gorbachev's era and abnormally weakened Yeltsin's Russia. Today, seeing itself as the most important bulwark of democracy and liberalism, the US believes that its values and interests around the world are being attacked by an authoritarian and illiberal Russian government; whereas Russia, behaving as an advocate for *Westphalian-like* sovereignty (regardless of polemics involving Ukraine and Crimea), sees itself under "imminent" danger of intervention, be it in a physical or subversive form, engendered by a cynical West whose aspirations and value-related propaganda threaten its territorial integrity and domestic stability.

All the above-mentioned is not to say that other IR Theories (such as Neorealism) don't hold valuable insight in what is currently happening between Moscow and Washington, but that today's scenario of apparent *Great Power politics* and geopolitical confrontation could, at the same time, also validate Constructivism's point of view about ideas and how important ideational factors are when in explaining this complicated Russia-US relationship. And finally, if we could be left with a conclusion, that conclusion for Americans would sound like Kennan's 1947 prediction "*we are going to continue for a long time to find the Russians difficult to deal with*", while for Russians the West continues to be that front where, as advised by Alexandr Nevsky in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the country will need to "*fortify its defenses*"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *Nado krepit' oboronu na Zapade, a druzey iskat' na Vostoke* (original quotation in Russian, meaning "We need to fortify our defenses in the West, and search for friends in the East")

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