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Coffins versus cradles: Russian population, foreign policy, and power transition theory

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Abstract

In May 2006, President Vladimir Putin said that Russia's dire demographics were the biggest challenge facing Russia. We know little about how states conduct foreign policy under demographic decline but some expect Russia to become more pacifist or to turn attention inward as its internal situation deteriorates. Power transition theory (PTT), however, which considers population as a key component of power, anticipates riskier international behavior under demographic changes. PTT predicts aggression under two conditions: when a dominant power sees its decline while secondary powers are rising; and when an inferior state sees its power increase while the dominant power declines. This article interprets Russia's foreign policy actions from May 2006 through 2012 in light of PTT. I find that Russia was physically aggressive in its region when its population decline peaked, as PTT expects. Power transition theory also predicts Russia's diplomatically aggressive foreign policy at the system level as Russian leaders' perceptions of a favorable shift in the global balance of power gave them more confidence in Russia's capabilities to challenge the status quo. This study furthers our understanding of foreign policy-making in times of demographic decline, extends power transition theory, and serves as a model for evaluating demographic trends and foreign policy for other great powers.

Keywords

Aging, foreign policy, population, power, Russia

> "In the difference between the number of coffins and the number of cradles lies the existence and persistence of our Empire." Reverend James Marchant, British leader of the un-official National Birth-rate Commission (Marchant, 1917: 17)

Introduction

By most measures, Russia is in the midst of a population crisis. High rates of alcoholism and heart disease, and underinvestment in healthcare have led to high mortality (The Economist, 2008), and

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for the last 40 years economic depression and postponement of childbearing, among other things, have led to low fertility.[1] As a result, Russia's population shrank by 5.4 million people between 1996 and 2010 (Russian Federation Federal State Statistics Service, 2013a). In his annual State of the Nation address to the Federal Assembly on 10 May 2006, Russian President Vladimir Putin (2006b) focused his speech on Russia's demographic situation, calling it "the most acute problem facing our country today".

We know little about how states conduct foreign policy under demographic decline, particularly a shrinking working- and military-age population like Russia has experienced, which is relatively new and rare.[2] This study seeks to understand whether a state in the midst of demographic decline has a more or less aggressive foreign policy. The frequently cited analyses of Russia's political demography argue that Russia's demographic decline is deep and inevitable, and will negatively affect the country's domestic institutions and power capabilities (Eberstadt, 2009; Jackson and Howe, 2008). Haas (2007) argues that, mostly out of necessity, Russia will become a more pacifist state; Jackson and Howe (2008: 181) argue that Russia will be forced to turn its attention inward, and that its behavior will be "unpredictable". This article evaluates their claims by examining Russia's foreign policy actions after Putin's "dire demographics" speech, under the premise that, at least since that time, Russia's domestic and foreign policies have been made with the leadership's full knowledge of Russia's demographic situation—the speech elevated reversing demographic decline to a national priority.

I challenge the thesis that a demographically declining Russia will not engage in risky actions because population decline causes a decline in relative power. To truly understand the relationship between Russia's demographics and its foreign policy, we need a more nuanced understanding of how those demographic trends affect Russia's strategic calculus (a) vis-à-vis other elements of Russia's national power and (b) vis-à-vis Russia's adversaries and allies. This understanding comes from considering Russia's foreign policy on both the regional and system levels. Russia should be expected to act differently toward its regional adversaries—primarily the former Soviet states—and its systemic adversaries—primarily the USA (Lemke, 2002; Lemke and Werner, 1996). Specifically, I argue that we need to theoretically ground our analysis of Russia's demographics and foreign policy; power transition theory (PTT) can inform an interpretation of Russia's foreign policy behavior during its demographic changes. Power transition theorists have argued that the distribution of power in the international system or within a dyad shapes international outcomes (DiCicco and Levy, 2003: 110). Since population is an integral part of calculating military and economic power for most of these theorists, PTT is an appropriate starting point for assessing the relationship between population as an internal characteristic and foreign policy as an international outcome. PTT theorizes about the behavior of states under two conditions:

(1) A dominant power that sees its power as declining, while secondary powers are on the rise (predicts that the dominant state will act aggressively while it still can).
(2) An inferior state that sees its own power increasing, vis-à-vis the dominant power (predicts that the inferior state will act aggressively to seize a window of opportunity). Thus, PTT predicts that Russia will engage in more aggressive foreign policy against a less powerful state during times of demographic decline and will act more aggressively toward a more powerful state when Russian leaders perceive improvement in Russia's demographic situation.

To evaluate these PTT predictions, this study examines Russia's foreign policy rhetoric and actions from May 2006 through December 2012. I used English-language media accounts and secondary sources to identify key foreign policy actions and used speeches, statements and articles

by Russian Presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev from the Kremlin online archives to understand the motivations behind Russia's actions. The list of foreign policy actions reviewed here is not exhaustive, but support for PTT does not require an exhaustive list—evidence of cooperation does not negate evidence of aggression—and not all foreign policies are equally important. As for categorizing actions, Johnston (2013: 9) points out that "there is still no consensus definition of 'assertive' in the international relations literature on which to draw". Johnston uses a comparative definition that identifies whether a state has made a change in policy to have more consequences than before. For this study, as we will see, it is not sufficient to label foreign policy actions merely by their outcome. It is more useful to categorize individual actions and attempt to understand the context within which they take place—meaning, what other states are doing at the time and how their relative power is changing—and motivations behind the actions; this comprehensive assessment is necessary under PTT, which is a dynamic theory. I generally classify shows of force, territorial claims and manipulation of energy resources as physically aggressive, and cutting certain diplomatic ties or acting through international institutions to block an initiative of a rival as diplomatically aggressive. Cooperative behavior includes increasing trade or military ties or signing formal agreements.

This study furthers our understanding of foreign policy-making in times of demographic decline, gives a more prominent place to demographics in studies of foreign policy-making, and serves as a model for evaluating demographic trends and foreign policy for other great powers. It also applies power transition theory to an important, contemporary context. Russia is an extreme case of demographic decline, but many other influential states, including China, Israel and states in Europe, are following in its wake with their own aging populations. Therefore, lessons learned from Russia's behavior could be applied to those cases as well.

Theorizing population and power

Demographic decline is a relatively rare phenomenon, since for most of human history high fertility has meant that states' populations have been young and growing. Within scholarly literature, studies of the few examples of demographic decline are even more rare and most focus on describing power exchanges between states rather than on explaining state behavior in light of such exchanges.[3] In general, few foreign policy scholars put population at the center of their analysis. Why? For various reasons, scholars have tended to assume that population is trumped by other elements of power.[4] I argue that demography deserves more prominent consideration in foreign policy assessments because population is one of the building blocks of economic and military power and because of the rise of unprecedented demographic decline among the world's most powerful states. We know little about how demographic decline has affected (or will affect) foreign or domestic policy because it is so new, and this article is an initial attempt to study demographic decline and foreign policy to see if a relationship exists between the two variables and if population matters in the ways existing theories might assume it will. I argue that we can draw on PTT—which takes population seriously as a fundamental element of national power—to help us understand state behavior in this new era (Levy, 2008). Russia, which is in advanced stages of the demographic transition and faces extreme population decline, is an apt test case.

In his book, *World Politics*, Organski (1958) proposed PTT as an alternative to balance of power theory (BPT) for explaining international politics and war. Unlike BPT, which argues that power parity deters violent action, PTT sees hegemony as stabilizing. PTT posits that both structural and unit-level characteristics determine conflict or cooperation. The structural aspect is the relative power a state holds in comparison with its challengers (Organski and Kugler, 1980). PTT shares with other realist theories an emphasis on power as a central causal variable (Copeland, 2000;

Tammen et al., 2000).[5] Many scholars have pointed out that population is a key element of national power (Morgenthau, 1967; Organski and Organski, 1961) and that states have long considered the effects of population—defined as size, age distribution, health and literacy levels, etc.—on military size and capacity, economic growth and societal cohesion (DeSoysa et al., 1997; Morgenthau, 1967; Organski and Organski, 1961; Sprout and Sprout, 1945: 29). Population is one of the basic units of a state's economic and military capabilities, and thus is a building block of PTT. Neither the main theories of liberalism, which focus on institutions, nor those of constructivism, which focus on ideas, are as appropriate for accounting for demographics.

Part of the reason PTT is appropriate for analyzing foreign policy under demographic decline is that it considers the relative weight of multiple influential variables. One assumption of this study is that policy-makers take demographics seriously—an assumption formed by Putin's own words. Levy (2008: 4) argues that "One advantage of case study approaches is that they can investigate how various political leaders evaluated different elements of shifting power". In answer to Levy, this study does not just compare Russia's objective demographic situation and its foreign policy actions; it goes further and analyzes Russian leaders' perceptions of Russia's demographics, along with their views on the changing international system. While power transition theorists see population as an important aspect of power, they also emphasize the role of preferences, in particular satisfaction with the international hierarchy.

Both PTT and BPT focus on the likelihood of war. PTT argues that, at times of power transition—when there is an impending shift in the global hierarchy—a challenger dissatisfied with the status quo might attack to secure its new position. PTT is also invoked to predict or explain preventive war, which states are expected to engage in when their relative decline is certain (Levy, 2008: 5; Ripsman and Levy, 2007; Van Evera, 1999). Given the rarity of major interstate war and the deterrent function of Mutually Assured Destruction, this study focuses on different, more common forms of aggressive foreign policy, such as sanctions, vetoes and diplomatic expulsion.[6]

Recently, power transition theorists have focused on measuring and weighing the relative power of China and the USA (Chan, 2005, 2008; Ross and Feng, 2008). Scholars have also applied PTT to supranational alliances and intrastate ethnic balances (on alliances, see Kim, 1991; on intrastate balances, see Toft, 2007). Most relevant to this research, however, is Lemke's extension of PTT to the regional level. Although PTT has mostly focused on the *overall* ordering of international power, Lemke and Werner (1996) point out that the international system is a *series* of hierarchies. Lemke's (2002) Multiple Hierarchy Model expands Organski's conceptualization of PTT to include powers that are minor at the system level, but regionally dominant. As happens at the system level, the regionally dominant state wants to preserve the status quo in the region and write the rules.

As mentioned, PTT theorizes about state behavior and predicts aggression under two circumstances. The first is when a dominant power sees its power as declining, while secondary powers are on the rise (predicts that the dominant state will act aggressively while it still can). A *decline* in relative power might encourage a state to act to achieve its goals before the window of opportunity closes—that is, its declines become even more severe. Copeland (2000: 5) argues that a declining state calculates its potential actions based on two factors: (a) the degree of decline, especially compared with others; and (b) the inevitability of decline. PTT predicts that, when a state is facing a loss of relative power, it will engage in hard-line, risky actions as it declines (Copeland, 2000). This argument begets the following prediction: *Russia's foreign policy will be aggressive toward inferior states when Russia is experiencing population decline.* Evidence in support of this prediction would be Russia's aggressive behavior toward its regional adversaries, particularly the states of the former Soviet Union, when Russia's population decline is worsening.

PTT scholars have also described behavior when an inferior state sees its own power increasing, vis-à-vis the dominant power (predicts that the inferior state will act aggressively to seize the

window of opportunity), as mentioned previously with regard to Lemke's regional studies and studies of China's rise (Chan, 2005, 2008; Lemke, 2002; Ross and Feng, 2008). This argument begets the following additional prediction: *Russia's foreign policy will be aggressive toward dominant and superior powers when Russia's population decline improves and its relative power increases.* For this prediction to be correct, when and if Russia's demographic decline shows signs of reversing and its relative power position improves in general, we should observe threatening and aggressive Russian rhetoric toward its main rival, the USA. We should also observe Russia acting to counter the influence of the USA, particularly if we can show that Russia is dissatisfied with the status quo, which is a world where the USA is dominant.

One critique of PTT is that it treats power as threatening independent of context (Toft, 2007: 244). This study attempts to overcome that critique by emphasizing the context within which foreign policy actions take place and draws on the argument of neoclassical realists that how decision-makers understand their situation is important (Rose, 1998: 158). As Rose (1998: 147) states, "Foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and not elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being". It is important to recognize that the distribution of power in the international system was not static between May 2006 and 2012, nor was Russia's demographic situation, which started to slightly improve in latter years thanks to government policies. While the focus of this article is on the contribution of demographics to various elements of national power, it does take into account other indicators of and shifts in power. Analysis of Putin's and Medvedev's statements will tell us the degree to which the Russian presidents perceive these international and domestic shifts. We may observe Russia acting aggressively if it perceives the relative power of the USA declining or diffusing (and consequently its own power increasing), actions that are also expected under PTT. Overall, I argue that how Russia's leaders perceive their changing population—and thus changing power—compared with their rivals is a reliable predictor of whether an aggressive action occurs and when.[7]

Demographic background

This section provides brief background on Russia's demographic problems to set the context within which Russia's foreign policy has taken place. Why is Russia a good case study of foreign policy behavior and demographic change? First, although the populations of most of the world's industrialized states have been rapidly aging and some, including those of Germany and Japan, are beginning to shrink, Russia's demographic decline has been one of the most—if not the most—severe in the world. Russia not only provides a hard test for theories of demographics and foreign policy, but also what happens in Russia can shed light on how demographic decline is likely to affect the foreign policies of powerful, but rapidly aging, states in Europe and Asia, such as Germany and China (although the conclusion will discuss some caveats to lessons learned from Russia). Second, Russia is a great power and active internationally—what it does matters for global international relations and affects the foreign policy of rival powers, like the USA, Europe, and China.

There are certain trends that objectively strain the economic and social systems and proportion of national power attributable to population, particularly economic and military power. Here, demographic decline is defined for Russia as extremely high mortality of working-age males, shrinking or static total population, shifting age structure to older ages with more elderly dependants and fewer workers, and low numbers of births. Russia's total fertility rate has been low for decades but actually rose from 1.3 children per woman to 1.7 between 2006 and 2012. However, the next generation of childbearing women will be much smaller, so the number of births, even at this slightly higher—although still below replacement—fertility will be low (Institution of

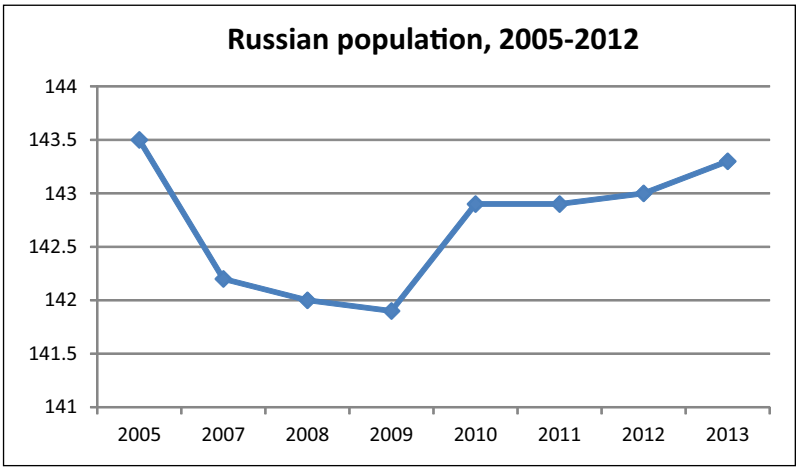

Figure 1. Russian population, 2005–2012.
Source: Russian Federation State Statistics Service (2013b).

Scientific and Social Assessment et al., 2013). Life expectancy improved during 2006–2012 as well, although a wide gap between males and females in Russia persists—women still outlive men by over a decade. In the period 2000–2005, male life expectancy was a low 58.6 years, with female life expectancy almost 72 years. It climbed to 61.6 years for men in 2005–2010, then to an estimated 63.3 years by the period 2010–2015. Female life expectancy is expected to reach 75 years during this latter period (United Nations Population Division, 2013).

Even with net positive migration, these trends combined to shrink Russia's total population after 1996 through 2009—a once unfathomable trend for a country that shaped international politics in the twentieth century. As Figure 1 shows, between 2005 and 2010, the population aged 15–59 shrank by almost a million people—991,000 (United Nations Population Division, 2013). According to one report, if no new measures are taken to reduce high mortality, by 2020 the working-age population will decrease by 8.7 million (Institution of Scientific and Social Assessment et al., 2013: 6). In the short run, the total population has slightly increased. In early 2010, Russia reported its first population increase since 1995, up to 142.9 million from 142.7 million in 2009. By January 2012 the population was an estimated 143.0 million (Russian Federation State Statistics Service, 2013b). In the wake of substantial pronatalist policies in 2007—the first of this magnitude since the early 1980s—fertility rates for older women (aged 25–50) increased and rates for second, third and higher children steeply increased. For third and subsequent children, period total fertility rate for women of all ages increased over 64% between 2006 and 2011 (Frejka and Zakharov, 2013). However, period fertility rates can be misleading because couples may react to new policies by having children earlier than they normally would, although not perhaps having more children overall by the time they complete their childbearing (Frejka, 2011). With continued low fertility overall and lagging male life expectancy, it is difficult to label these trends as a demographic rebound, although they have given Russia's leaders some confidence that the demographic situation is improving, as a following section will demonstrate.

Fears of population decline are mostly concerns about effects on the economy and military, and thus on national power and global influence (Coleman and Rowthorn, 2011). Reduction in the most productive segments of the population—working-age adults, particularly males—is feared to cause a concomitant reduction in gross domestic product (GDP) and a shrinking recruitment pool for the military. Additionally, lower GDP leaves less for military expenditures. On the global level, states

fear that their shrinking population and weakened economy and military will give them less influence, including in international institutions. These are the concerns about population decline in Russia as well. The 2009 National Security Strategy stated that one strategic goal to ensure "national security … [is] the stabilisation of population size in the medium term, and in the long term—the fundamental improvement of the demographic situation" (Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020, 2009) and in 2010, the Russian Ministry of Defense noted the quantitative and qualitative shortage of recruitment-age population and commented that 2005 marked the year the Russian Federation started its slide into a "demographic pit" (Russian Federation Ministry of Defence, n.d.). Additionally, Russia's leaders are probably fearful of decline in particular segments of the working-age population: the Slavic male population. While there is some evidence of higher fertility rates among immigrants, most immigrants to Russia are from the former Soviet states, many of whom have extremely low fertility themselves. Central Asian sending states have fertility rates of about two to four children per woman and fertility rates in the Caucasian states are higher than in Russia but declining to Russian levels. Still, Mussino and Van Raalte (2013) found that immigrants to Russia gave birth at a younger age and showed lower overall levels of childlessness (8.4% compared with 12%) than native-born Russians. Thus, Russian leaders' fears of population decline may be reflective of the larger xenophobic tendencies in Russian society.

Foreign policy

This section examines Russia's foreign policy actions and rhetoric between Putin's speech calling attention to Russia's demographic decline in May 2006 to 2012. While some might predict that a demographically declining Russia would not act aggressively in the international system, PTT expects Russian leaders to engage in risky, hard-line actions when dissatisfied with the international system and when it perceives its demographic decline as "inevitable" and "deep", as it did many times between May 2006 and 2012. Many of Russia's foreign policy actions during this phase of demographic decline were physically and diplomatically aggressive, especially toward inferior states within its immediate region. At the system level, PTT also expects Russia, as a weaker power dissatisfied with the status quo system hierarchy, to challenge rivals when it perceives an increase in its relative power. Indeed, as it perceived a general dispersal of power in the international system away from US hegemony and as its demographic situation improved toward the end of the period, Russia became more aggressive toward the dominant state—the USA—at the system level. In many instances, even when Russia cooperated with a rival, such as happened several times in 2010, Medvedev only did so after pressuring the rival to make significant concessions. Findings from May 2006 to 2012 do not support the "geriatric peace" thesis that assumes Russia will become more pacifist under demographic decline, nor the thesis that Russia will turn its attention inward under this decline (Table 1).

Regional behavior

From 2006 to 2012 Russia engaged in multiple acts of physical aggression within its region. Putin's speech in May 2006 that marks the beginning of this study was preceded in January by Russia cutting gas supplies first to Ukraine, and later, because of gas explosions on Russian pipelines, to Georgia. Although technically outside the scope of this review, these actions preceded Putin's remarks by just four months and were the first of several times during this era that Russia manipulated energy supplies.[8] In January 2009 Russia again stopped gas exports to Ukraine and disrupted energy flows to southeastern Europe for several weeks after Ukraine scoffed at Russia's attempts to raise prices. In a press conference held after the January 2009 incident, President Medvedev

Table 1. PTT predictions and evidence for Russia, May 2006–2012.

Power transition	General PTT prediction	PTT prediction for Russia	Evidence
Declining dominant power, rising secondary power	Dominant state will act aggressively while it still can	Aggressive toward less powerful states during demographic decline	Manipulated energy supplies to Georgia and Ukraine; invaded Georgia
Dissatisfied inferior state with increasing power vis-à-vis dominant power	Inferior state will act aggressively to seize window of opportunity	Aggressive toward more powerful states during demographic/power increases	Vetoed three rounds of UN sanctions against Syria; halted USAID operations

(2009c) firmly reiterated Russia's demand for higher prices for its gas to Ukraine, although he expressed mild regret for the hardships gas disruption caused to other parts of Europe. Russia was clearly willing to manipulate energy despite its demographic struggles. Russia's hard-line actions in this case fall in line with PTT, which expects a declining power to act aggressively toward its regional adversaries. Although the former republics also have declining populations in many cases, they have been growing closer to the USA and Western Europe. These alliances are a boost to power for the former republics and a direct threat to Russia's interests.

Population was not the only source of Russia's declining power during this time—although energy assets can increase power, Medvedev saw Russia's overreliance on energy as a major vulnerability. In his 2009 annual address, Medvedev focused on how Russia had fallen behind and called for Russia to move away from a raw materials economy. Russia was hit hard when oil prices fell from a high of US$147 per barrel in July 2008 to less than US$50 a barrel by late November (Mankoff, 2012: 2). Thus, Russia needed to act immediately to demand higher prices for its resource while it still had the power that comes from an abundance of that commodity. PTT anticipates that declining powers will act to seize such windows of opportunity. Without the insight of PTT, we might have predicted cooperative behavior from Moscow because it needed Ukraine and Western Europe not only as gas consumers but also as trade and security partners in other areas. Both Putin and Medvedev frequently mentioned a desire to cooperate with Europe during this time frame, but many of their actions contradict their words.

Russia engaged in several additional shows of force during this time that support the power transition prediction. On 14 July 2007, Russia suspended its implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which limits the Russian military presence in Georgia and Moldova (James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Affairs, 2011). Infamously, Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008 in retaliation for Georgia's actions against South Ossetia and announced that it recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. Russia had imposed sanctions on Georgia in September and October 2006 and expelled hundreds of immigrants it claimed were illegal in the wake of Georgia briefly detaining four army officers on spying charges. While Russia's actions were ostensibly in retaliation for Georgia's actions in South Ossetia, some consider Russia to have escalated the conflict by conducting airstrikes on Georgian targets and to have provoked Georgia in the first place. President Medvedev (2008b) defended Russia's actions and claimed they were in response to Georgian ethnic cleansing of Russians in South Ossetia.

There was also evidence of important regional cooperation between May 2006 and 2012. For example, Russia and the EU officially launched the Partnership for Modernization in June 2010, with the goals of aligning technical standards and promoting opportunities for investment. Then, in November 2011, Georgia and Russia signed a trade deal allowing Russia to finally join the World

Trade Organization (WTO). Both are evidence of Russian cooperation on the surface, but both were actually strategic decisions designed to improve Russia's relative power. Although one of Russia's major foreign policy goals is preserving its influence in the former Soviet sphere, economic modernization is one of its major domestic policy goals—as the leaders frequently remind us in their speeches—and also affects Russia's overall power capabilities. Georgia was the final WTO member needed to concede before Russia could accede—membership Russia had been courting for 18 years. Thus, we can conclude that Russia valued accession to the WTO more than diplomatic tussles with Georgia over trade flows with its breakaway republics. Russia was the last major economy to join the WTO and expected a windfall of economic investment and trade deals in light of its accession. WTO membership gave Russia a role in a key global institution and was a necessary part of Medvedev's modernization plans (Mankoff, 2012: 45). The same strategy explains Russia's plans for increased economic cooperation with the EU, Russia's largest trading partner.

PTT anticipated Russia to engage in hard-line actions toward inferior states when it saw its power decline as "deep" and "inevitable" and when it was dissatisfied with the status quo international hierarchy. With regard to the former, Russia's leaders saw the country's demographics as a major problem, as speeches by Putin and Medvedev throughout the period attest. As these same speeches point out, Russia's domestic political and economic situations were also in shambles, characterized by corruption, debt and overreliance on natural resource energy exports. Russia's presidents also directly address Russia's relative weakness: Putin in 2006 laments that Russia's defense budget is smaller than that of the USA and Medvedev in 2009 talks about how Russia has fallen behind. Yet, the Russian leaders' rhetoric and actions belied their inferior and declining position. Russia's cooperative behavior with Georgia in November 2011 is also anticipated under PTT since it helped improve Russia's relative power position by allowing Russia to accede to the WTO.

Not only was Russia's power declining, but Russian leaders were also deeply dissatisfied with the status quo. Russia's manipulation of energy to Europe, naval exercises in the Atlantic, and military action in Georgia were meant at least in part to counter the threat of NATO expansion, which Russia labels as one of the country's top two threats in its 2009 National Security Strategy, along with rivalry over energy resources. Russia also targeted the USA, as the dominant power in the international system, during this time period, which PTT does not anticipate. Yet, it is difficult to separate Russia's aggression toward Eastern Europe and the USA because of ties between the latter two. At the beginning of the period, relations with the USA were at a post-Cold War low, partly because of US support for democracy in former Soviet states like Georgia and Ukraine, and the USA was unquestionably the world's most powerful country. Still, Putin's and Medvedev's speeches attack the USA for pursuing missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic and for starting the global financial crisis. Medvedev's 2008 address was still staunchly anti-American, partly in response to American financial aid to Georgia after the Russian war there in August of that year.

System-level aggression

PTT not only expects a state to act aggressively toward inferior powers during a time of relative power decline, it also expects aggression toward superior powers when leaders of the inferior state perceive a shift in relative power in their favor. PTT is limited in its ability to explain Russia's behavior at the system level, particularly toward the USA, if we interpret Russia as a dissatisfied, declining, and inferior state throughout the May 2006–2012 period. I offer here an alternative interpretation, one of a favorable shift in Russia's relative power, based on subtle, but important shifts in Russia's demographic situation, the improvements Russia's leaders perceived in other

domestic political and economic areas, and their perception of a relative decline in US power and influence. Between 2010 and 2012, Russia acted less physically aggressively than during the preceding three years but more frequently diplomatically aggressively—its actions were less risky than when its decline was "deep" and "inevitable", but still a challenge to the status quo, which PTT would anticipate.

Russia cooperated with the USA several times in 2010, but the major agreements it signed represented diplomatic wins for Russia and forced American concessions. These wins probably served to bolster Russian confidence that a systemic power shift was occurring in Russia's favor. The strategic arms reduction agreement that Russia signed with the US in April of that year cut deployed nuclear warheads by 30% and served Russia's interests by allowing it to do some necessary downsizing, while not sacrificing parity with the USA. According to *The New York Times*, "Lubos Dobrovsky, a former Czech defense minister who presided over the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, said in an interview that 'This treaty is a diplomatic and military victory for Moscow … and I am not happy that this American defeat is being showcased in Prague'" (Baker and Bilefsky, 2010). Likewise, Russia's agreement to four rounds of UN sanctions of Iran in May came only after the USA agreed to lift sanctions against the Russian military complex and not to ban the sale of Russian anti-aircraft batteries to Tehran. The sanctions also still allowed Russia to sell S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran, although Russia was stalling this sale, possibly as a concession to the USA (Baker and Sanger, 2010).

In late 2011, Russia's diplomacy became overtly aggressive. Russia grew closer to China and became increasingly opposed to Europe and the USA on a number of important international issues, primarily Syria and Iran. In October 2011 and February 2012, Russia, along with China, vetoed a US- and European-backed UN Security Council resolution condemning Syria for oppression of antigovernment forces. Syria is a Russian ally and former member of the socialist bloc. Russia also has military and commercial deals with Syria worth millions of dollars and a naval base at Tartus, Syria (MacFarquhar, 2011). The October veto was the first time Russia and China had banded together for a veto since they refused sanctions against Zimbabwe in July 2008 (Associated Press, 2011). Then, in July 2012, Russia vetoed UN sanctions on Syria for the third time. Russia, along with several other states, including India and China, feared that the UN resolution would give a green light to intervention into the Syrian conflict as it did with airstrikes in Libya to expel leader Muammar Gaddafi (Associated Press, 2011). Russia is Syrian leader Assad's most important foreign backer and Russia wants to avoid any UN Security Council actions critical of the leader (Gladstone, 2012). Even putting aggression aside, it is predictable that a demographically weak state would be concerned with the principle of sovereignty.

In the last few months of 2012, Russia again aimed its diplomatic aggression at the USA. Russia ordered the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to stop operations in Russia in September because Putin was increasingly uncomfortable with the election monitoring, human rights and other democracy-building activities of USAID, particularly considering the previous democratic revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. Then, in December 2012, Russia banned Americans from adopting Russian children and US-funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from doing political work. Russia's latter actions were in response to the US Congress passing the Magnitsky Act, which blacklisted Russian human rights violators. In particular, the act imposed "visa bans and asset freezes on Russian officials accused of involvement in the death in custody of anti-corruption lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in 2009" (Reuters, 2012). Putin claims not to have any ill will toward Americans who adopt Russian children, but rather opposes the US system, which he feels fails to protect the children once they are adopted. In 2011, Americans adopted 962 Russian children and over 45,000 have been adopted by US parents since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union (Reuters, 2012). Given that Russia only grew by 800 people between January and October

2012, it is possible, although a stretch, to see Putin's decision as not only a diplomatic one, but also a demographic one.

During the six-and-a-half years under review, Russia acted aggressively toward its neighbors to the west and the USA—its main rivals—but cooperated multiple times with partners to the east. Articles by Russian presidents Medvedev and Putin in foreign presses between 2006 and 2012 portray Russia as desiring a deeper level of cooperation with Europe and Asia on security and trade. Much of their focus is relations with the states of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), understandable since Russia held the APEC presidency in 2012 and prepared for that role in the years leading up to its accession. In his extension of PTT, Woosang Kim (1991: 835–836) argues that PTT is applicable not only to individual powers but also to alliance structures. Challengers will take into account their power plus their supporters' power and also that of the dominant power and its supporters. When internal means of accumulating power—such as through population—fail, external means—such as alliances—may augment a state's capabilities (Gilpin, 1981; Levy, 1987; Waltz, 1979). Kim's argument may help explain Russia's increasing involvement with the other BRIC (Brazil, Russian, India, China) states, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), APEC and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). As Mankoff (2012: 178) assesses, "Cooperation with China provides Moscow with a kind of diplomatic force multiplier and an alternative to pursuing integration with the West, particularly since the Chinese model of authoritarian capitalist development holds great appeal for members of the Russian elite reluctant to embrace democratization". While the SCO is still a weak organization with limited function, it is one that excludes the USA, and thus has potential to counter US influence. ASEAN and ties among the BRIC countries are more promising forums for Russia to flex its muscles. Kim's argument can also help explain Russia's growing ties with China. As China's power rises, it can amplify Russia's power as well and help Russia counter US influence. Medvedev's first trip abroad as president was to China, a diplomatic overture that is in sharp contrast to his timing his first presidential address for the day after US President Barack Obama's election, in which he "announced that Russia would deploy Iskander ballistic missiles in the Kaliningrad enclave to counter the alleged threat posed by U.S. plans to deploy a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic" (Mankoff, 2012: 116). Kim's work on PTT and alliances begets the hypothesis that a state under demographic decline may be able to use alliances to push its agenda when it feels too weak to act alone. This is an area ripe for future research, and should be expanded to include a variety of demographically declining states.

PTT does not make predictions about the behavior of a dissatisfied, declining secondary power—in that situation, of course, there is no power transition. Most theories of conflict probably assume that such a state would not act aggressively because it is in a poor position. Yet, Russia engaged in many aggressive actions at the system level even during its demographic decline. In August 2007 Russia planted a flag on the Arctic seabed at the North Pole. Although this move was mainly for show rather than a genuine territorial claim, it reflects Russia's sense of entitlement to a large share of the Arctic, which has a suspected bounty of oil, natural gas and strategic mineral reserves, because of Russia's large Arctic territory. Russia views the use of military force as a legitimate method of dealing with competition for energy resources among countries of the Arctic region, including Canada, the USA and Sweden (Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020, 2009). Also in August 2007, Moscow resumed air patrols off the coasts of Europe and North America—a move reminiscent of the Cold War—and in January 2008, Russia conducted Atlantic naval exercises in neutral waters off the coasts of France and Spain—its biggest post-Cold War naval exercise to date. This latter show of force took place as the March 2008 presidential elections approached, so it probably targeted both domestic and international audiences. Later, in September 2008, Russia sent bombers and navy ships on missions to Venezuela. Although PTT does not

Table 2. Key aggressive and cooperative Russian foreign policies, 2006–2012.

Date	Russian foreign policy	Categorization
January 2006	Cut gas supplies to Georgia and Ukraine	Aggressive
July 2007	Suspended its implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe	Aggressive
August 2007	Planted flag on Arctic seabed at North Pole	Aggressive
August 2007	Resumed air patrols off the coasts of Europe and North America	Aggressive
January 2008	Conducted Atlantic naval exercises off coasts of France and Spain	Aggressive
August 2008	Invaded Georgia and announced recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states	Aggressive
September 2008	Sent bombers and navy ships on missions to Venezuela	Aggressive
January 2009	Cut gas exports to Ukraine, disrupting flows to southeastern Europe	Aggressive
April 2010	Signed strategic arms reduction agreement with the USA	Cooperative
May 2010	Agreed to four rounds of UN sanctions against Iran	Cooperative
June 2010	Launched Partnership for Modernization with EU	Cooperative
October 2011	Vetoed UN Security Council resolution condemning Syria	Aggressive
November 2011	Signed trade deal with Georgia, allowing Russia to join WTO	Cooperative
February 2012	Vetoed UN Security Council resolution condemning Syria	Aggressive
July 2012	Vetoed sanctions against Syria for the third time	Aggressive
September 2012	Ordered USAID to stop operations in Russia	Aggressive
December 2012	Banned Americans from adopting Russian children and US NGOs from doing political work	Aggressive

predict the behavior of a state that is both *inferior* and *declining*, as Russia was at the system level during this time, and thus these actions do not neatly fit the PTT expectations, under power transition logic, it is better for a nation with declining power to make such bold moves sooner than later.

Over the entire period under review, we see that there was a shift in the degree to which Russia was physically versus diplomatically aggressive after 2009 (Table 2). I propose that PTT can explain Russia's aggression at the system level during this time because Russia's leaders perceived a favorable shift in its demographic, political and economic situation relative to its competitors. PTT would anticipate this move from physical aggression to hard-line diplomatic foreign policy as well: it predicts that Moscow will flex its muscles as the hegemon weakens and Russia's position improves, but recognizes that Moscow does not need to engage in hard-line actions that risk war because the international system is already shifting in Russia's favor—physical aggression toward the USA would have much graver consequences than that toward any state in Russia's region. In his 2006 and 2007 statements, Putin calls attention to Russia's problems: demographics, lack of economic competitiveness and poor armed forces (Putin, 2006a, 2007). In 2008 and 2009, Medvedev (2008a, 2009b) states that Russia wants a more "polycentric" international system—another way of checking US influence. As Mankoff (2012: 19) assesses: "Worry about the overarching role of the U.S. in international affairs has been a major factor in Russia's promotion of the concept of multipolarity (*mnogopolyarnost'*) as the key to international stability". Trenin (2009) claims that "in the second presidential term of Vladimir Putin, Russia abandoned its goal of joining the West and returned to its default option of behaving as an independent great power. It redefined its objectives: soft dominance in its immediate neighborhood; equality with the world's principal

power centers, China, the European Union, and the USA; and membership in a global multipolar order". Yet starting in 2010, the Russian presidents shift their tone and laud Russia's accomplishments on domestic issues from demography to electoral reform (Medvedev, 2010). They emphasize Russia's cooperation with Europe, Asia and even the USA on strategic arms reduction and conversations about missile defense. By the time of Putin's 2012 address, Russia now claims that the international system is "obviously multipolar" (Putin, 2012). We can conclude that Medvedev and Putin believe that Russia has made great strides in modernizing the state and increasing its international role. Putin's entire 2012 address has an aggressive tone, saying that Russia should be sovereign and influential, but it echoes themes laid out by Medvedev in 2011, albeit those were delivered with a softer tone (Medvedev, 2011). Primarily, both presidents emphasized that Russia is serving an important international role through the UN as an international mediator. Based on the attention it calls to the US financial crisis, combined with Russia's economic and demographic recovery starting in 2010, Russia perceives a shift in power away from the USA, toward both Europe and Asia, including Russia individually.

Demographics seem to have played a role in Russia's shift in perception. In 2009 and 2010, Medvedev highlights Russia's demographic problems. In a seminal 2009 article, "Go Russia!", Medvedev (2009a) says, "Every year there are fewer and fewer Russians. Alcoholism, smoking, traffic accidents, the lack of availability of many medical technologies, and environmental problems take millions of lives. And the emerging rise in births has not compensated for our declining population". When in 2010 Russia's population began to grow, in 2011 Medvedev pointed out Russia's recent demographic achievements, in addition to improvements in Russia's political, economic and social realms.

Conclusion

PTT is the natural starting point for theorizing foreign policy and demographic decline because of its emphasis on both material capabilities and structural factors, since demographics should never be considered in an institutional or contextual vacuum. There is no evidence that Russia is becoming pacifist and retrenching its foreign policy in the face of demographic decline or focusing solely on internal matters. Rather, as PTT would predict, Russia has been aggressively challenging the status quo at the regional and system levels under both presidents Putin and Medvedev at least since Putin's May 2006 speech labeling Russia's demographics the "most acute problem" facing the country. I find that power transition theory explains Russia's physically aggressive foreign policy toward its neighbors during the time when Russia's leaders perceived their country's decline to be "deep" and "inevitable" because of demographic decline and other political, social and economic strains. As PTT shows, it is not in spite of Russia's demographic decline that Russia acted like a strong, great power, it is because of the decline. PTT explains Russia's diplomatic aggression at the system level after 2010 because Russia's presidents perceived a shift both in the global balance of power away from the USA and an improved domestic situation in Russia—Russia took advantage of this favorable shift in relative power to challenge the status quo.

These findings about Russia's foreign policy increase our understanding of foreign policy-making under demographic decline, which is an important area of study as population aging and shrinking become more widespread in the wake of decades of low fertility among the world's most industrialized states. However, there are limits to the extent to which Russia's case can serve as a model for analyzing or predicting the behavior of other great powers facing demographic decline. First, Russia's demographic trends are somewhat extreme. Russia is not alone among major powers in experiencing population decline: the populations of Japan and Germany are already declining, and much of rapidly aging Western Europe will soon follow; former Soviet states Georgia and

Ukraine are shrinking as well. In contrast, the USA and China are still relatively youthful and growing. The latter two states will eventually face the strains of an aging population, but compared with Russia they are in a different league. Russia's low life expectancy and loss of what should be its most productive population segments—young men—to early death sets Russia's demographic decline apart from its peers. Second, Russia's dissatisfaction with the status quo hierarchy of international power far outmatches that of other great powers. Lessons learned from Russia's case, then, might be best applied at the regional level to states that face severe demographic decline and significant external threats, and have high dissatisfaction with the status quo, such as Israel today, which faces relative decline compared with surrounding states and significant external threats. Demographics may also be driving Russia to sustain a strategic partnership with China, after discontent in previous decades, and the same for China, which, although not there yet, faces an inevitable and deep demographic decline itself.

Demographics have obviously not been the only, or even the most important, driver of Russia's foreign policy since 2006—and the cases of systemic aggression during decline suggest that there are certainly other factors at work—but population does affect several drivers of foreign policy, in addition to being a driver itself. In particular, I argue that demographic decline is a cause (and possibly a symptom) of domestic discontent, and need for domestic support is a popular cause of aggressive foreign policy, as we saw in the period before 2009 (Miller, 2012; Shleifer, 2011). What does future demographic decline mean for Russia's future foreign policy? Miller (2012) predicts a return to overt aggression in the wake of serious outcry surrounding Putin's reelection in 2012, as Putin tries to consolidate domestic support. I argue that, if power transition theory continues to hold true, Miller's prediction will probably be correct from a demographic perspective as well. Russia's leaders may have been drawing attention to the country's dire demographic situation and the population has had small gains in fertility and mortality, but the leaders have not instituted lasting reforms on a scale needed to reverse Russia's demographic decline. Alcoholism and accidents remain major problems, and Putin has resorted to gimmicks designed to encourage couples to copulate in a weak effort to increase the number of Russian babies. Honors and cash for large families may cause a short-term spike in births—and give leaders hope that the low fertility tide has turned—but they will not have lasting effects on Russia's total population numbers (Associated Press, 2007). For demographic and other reasons, Russia is likely to continue its aggressive foreign policy in the near future.

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Notes

1. Demographers debate the causes of Russia's low fertility. See Frejka and Sobotka (2008), Kohler and Kohler (2002).
2. Haas (2012) points out that global population aging is revolutionary: "Never before has humanity witnessed such dramatic, widespread aging in the world's most powerful actors" (pp. 50–51).
3. One example of power exchange is France's relative population decline compared with Germany in both the late 1800s and the 1920s (Teitelbaum and Winter, 1985: 18). In another example, Organski (1958) notes the power exchange between the shrinking British Empire and the growing USA, which he says started in the interwar period and finished when Britain lost India after the Second World War.

4. Levy (2009: fn. 4) criticizes the Correlates of War Project's measure of power, which is commonly used in international rankings, for giving equal weight to military, economic and demographic dimensions of power. He says, "My hypothesis is that in decisions regarding the resort to a preventive war strategy in response to an adverse power shift, leaders are most frequently concerned with the military dimension, occasionally concerned with the economic dimension, and rarely concerned with the demographic dimension". Geopolitical context may have shaped this thinking, since technological development has empowered demographically smaller units in international relations over the past half-century and has shown that overall population size does not always matter. There are at least two other possible explanations why our arsenal of foreign policy theories does a relatively poor job of systematically considering population. First, during the time most of these theories were developed, populations were young and growing, with rare and temporary exceptions. Thus, it may have been theoretically uninteresting to include a country-level variable with little variation except for the overall size of a country's population. Second, scholars could see how the stresses of a young and growing population could lead to volatile domestic politics, but could not make the leap to the state's foreign policy.
5. As DiCicco and Levy (2003) note, the original power transition theorists, Organski, Kugler and Lemke, reject the realist label.
6. Copeland (2000) encourages us to think about the role of nuclear weapons.
7. We are limited to how much we know about Russian leaders' perceptions of population and power so at some points I use demographic data in conjunction with leaders' speeches and actions to extrapolate perception. Full knowledge of perception is ideal but information is imperfect.
8. The demographic context was the same four months earlier. Indeed, Putin's 2005 address highlights Russia's demographic problems. This study begins with the May 2006 speech, though, because that speech elevated those demographic problems and marked them as a national priority.

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