

THE D G E



DEBATING RUSSIAN FIAT

by David M. Cheshier

Had policy debate students been arguing the Russia resolution ten years ago, I'm not sure anyone would have seriously advocated a counterplan to have Russia fix its own problems. But the gradually increasing acceptance of topical, international, and plan-inclusive counterplans has softened opposition that once would have resulted in out-of-hand dismissal. While such counterplans will likely become the specialty argument of choice for just a handful of widely traveling teams, the strategy raises interesting theoretical issues.

Whether the plan requires the United States to clean up Russia's Lake Baikal, increase assistance under Nunn-Lugar fissile material cleanup programs, organize regional Caspian Sea oil arrangements, give cash to speed development of GT-MHR nuclear reactors, or any of the other hundreds of debatable policy alterations, some negatives will counterplan by having Russia do the plan on its own. The tactical benefits to such a strategy are considerable, if the negative can defend it on theoretical grounds. Negatives can defend American leadership or political net benefit arguments (such as the Clinton popularity/impeachment and hegemony positions so much in vogue recently), and those net benefits are likely unachievable by any permutation including American action. Negatives may even evade the normal Russian reaction arguments (after all, how could nationalists backlash against a policy passed in the Duma which they control?). And, of course, the counterplan often fully captures the case advantages, so winning any disadvantage risk will win the debate for the negative.

This summer, students who first heard the idea often reacted by sputtering, and I don't really blame them given my own visceral opposition. It just seems unfair to give the negative such a position and let them get away with it. One criticism I frequently heard is that this approach allows negatives to counterplan to have soldiers lay down their guns, dictators refrain from genocide, criminals refrain from crime, and so on. It's just a short step further to conclude such counterplans obliterate affirmative ground. That's an objection to which we'll return. But try coming up with other defensible arguments against it, and you'll see why the Russia counterplan may survive despite the instinctively hostile reaction many express when hearing it presented.

Here are some arguments for the Russia counterplan. Some argue it no more abuses fiat than any other international counterplan, a claim obviously more or less powerful depending on how widely accepted international actor counterplans are in your area. Is it any less realistic to think Russia will clean up its own pollution than to imagine that Japan, for example, will spontaneously choose to throw cash at a former enemy in the midst of their own worst depression in fifty years? Or, for that matter, is it any less abusive to think Russia will beef up its own spending on fissile material security than will the American Congress? You'd probably find it easier to persuade Duma members to allocate money for warhead cleanup than House Republicans who despise foreign aid and see modern-day Russia as an aid rathole.

Others will argue the counterplan redresses the uphill battle still faced by negative teams (at major tournaments affirmatives still win well more than half of the debates). Still others will claim the Russia counterplan is well grounded in the topic literature, and justified for that reason. Affirmatives ought to have evidence pertinent to Russia's self-help ability ready at hand: after all, it's an obvious and real world objection to most American assistance proposals ("Why do they need money from us? Why can't they fix this on their own?").

The best argument for the Russia counterplan is pretty commonsensical: it forces affirmatives to justify American action, as opposed

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to the most likely alternative action (action undertaken by Russia). Lest you think justification arguments died when David Zarefsky ceased active coaching, we could phrase the claim in today's more popular jargon: "Russia counterplans test the plan." It's the same logic used to successfully defend plan-inclusive counterplans and others that manipulate the implementation process (such as the veto counterplan).

Skeptics will rightly ask whether any affirmative can survive such a test (wouldn't it always be better to have Russians solve their own problems?). But the answer isn't so clear. Arguably, the Russia counterplan forces affirmatives to defend only those proposals where American action is required, where Russian self-help either cannot fix the problem (such as cases where only American technical knowledge can work) or where the Russians can't afford the best solution (they are, after all, broke). The counterplan limits out the large number of affirmatives simply proposing to do good things for Russians, and forces a genuine case for American action.

And the affirmative is not without substantive answers as well. It isn't difficult to research a "Russian spending" disadvantage, given the fragile state of the ruble, or a "Yeltsin credibility" argument, given the precariousness of the government.

A common objection to the Russia counterplan is to assert a "subject-object" decision rule. Advocates of this argument mean simply that debaters are not entitled to fiat through the "object" of the resolution (Russian); they must be limited only to fiating against the general "subject." This brings us full circle to the "fiat Hitler" concern, since the subject-object standard would prevent students from fiating that Hitler constrain himself on a topic where affirmatives must defend a "change in American foreign policy toward Nazi Germany."

But I must confess I find this distinction a little hard to sustain, since on so many of our domestic topics "subject-object" rules would kill very widely accepted counterplans. In fact, a good many of our topics require affirmatives to fiat through the very agent (say, the U.S. Federal Government) identified in inherency evidence as the source of the problem.

A thought experiment: Imagine

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the topic required plans to have "the Russian government change its domestic environmental policy." Would we categorically vote against affirmatives who read inherency evidence proving ecological damage was the product of Russian governmental malice or neglect? Of course not. A good solvency argument (that the plan can't overcome inherent barriers to action)? Yes. But a theoretical reason to categorically reject it and all other plans? No. It's arguably no different in the counterplan case: the fact that negatives are fiating through the resolutorial object may impose heightened solvency scrutiny, but doesn't seem to justify outright dismissal of the argument category.

And there's a potential fairness problem with the "subject-object" distinction. Imagine a topic that "the Federal Government should force Georgia to more speedily clean up Chattahoochee River pollution." The perverse outcome of the theoretical decision rule would be to outlaw very real world "Georgia cleans up its own waste" counterplans, leaving affirmatives free to defend plans requiring conservative members of Congress, more sensitive about federalism that ecocide, to issue marching orders to the Speaker of the House's home state.

It's not my purpose to persuade you of the Russia counterplan's legitimacy, only to provoke your thinking. So I'll close by mentioning the still considerable arguments available to affirmatives in answering it. One can make the substantive arguments (Russian spending; diverts attention from more important IMF reforms, etc.) or the "international fiat bad" arguments mentioned earlier. Affirmatives should strenuously push their solvency objections to the counterplan. Such arguments are easy to evidence given the present and apparently chaotic situation in Russia, and the pervasiveness of aid diversion and corruption, although teams must be careful not to run solvency attacks against themselves.

Or, of course, you could avoid the whole problem by defending a plan only the United States can implement - good luck finding one!

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