58. Relations with Russia

Congress should

- encourage members to increase interaction with their Russian counterparts, thus helping the Russians to understand legislative oversight of the executive;
- shift the security focus in Europe to enforcement of human rights through the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe rather than seek to expand NATO;
- press the administration not to lobby for construction of the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline, an economically unjustified project that has needlessly antagonized Russia;
- encourage the president to negotiate an agreement for deeper reductions in the U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals;
- refuse to endorse U.S. contributions to the International Monetary Fund, which may have facilitated corruption in Russia; and
- reexamine visa procedures and regulations to lower the wall between immigrant and nonimmigrant visas.

Interaction

In the fall of 1990 the Cato Institute, in cooperation with the Soviet Academy of Sciences, held a conference in Moscow on the communist world's "transition to freedom." One of the Russian participants expressed the hope that, with the end of the Cold War, there would now be no East or West but one universal civilization, stretching from London to Paris to Moscow to Vladivostok to Los Angeles and New York.

Five years later at another conference on Russian-American relations, a journalist asked the participants to explain the rise of anti-Americanism in Russia. The head of the American delegation blamed the Russian media

for doing an inadequate job of explaining that no major issues divided the United States and Russia anymore. The head of the Russian delegation instead listed five reasons, the first of which was that Russia had still not been accepted by the West as a full member of any Western institutions.

That difference in perception of Russian-American relations persists. A common view in the United States is that we won the Cold War because of our military superiority. According to that view, the Soviet Union effectively surrendered, and consequently the Soviet leaders deserve virtually no credit for ending peacefully the long-standing confrontation. Indeed, proponents of this view sometimes express bewilderment that Russians are not more grateful for American generosity. As one American participant in a 1996 conference put it, "After all, we didn't occupy you." Silence descended on the room as the Russians stared incredulously at him, until finally one exclaimed sarcastically, "Well, thank you for not occupying us!"

For the Russians, the Cold War ended for a different reason: they began to realize that communism did not work. To his credit, Ronald Reagan recognized that Mikhail Gorbachev was different from previous Soviet leaders, and the personal relationship they established seems to have been instrumental in ending the Cold War because it helped the Russians look at the United States, not as a competitor or adversary, but as a friend and an example to emulate. "It's paradoxical, but isn't there really a similarity between this credo of an American conservative and the strategic principles of the political reform that Soviet Communists are now conducting?" a Soviet commentator asked in *Izvestia* in January 1989 on the occasion of Reagan's retirement from the presidency. "In recent years, while gradually breaking down the Stalinist and Brezhnevian stereotypes, we have been gaining an understanding of the sovereignty of the human individual and have thereby found a common language with the West on a question that we used to regard as an infringement on our internal affairs—human rights."

Having "found a common language with the West," the Russians felt they could end the Cold War because they were confident the West would accept them. Germany was reunified, the Warsaw Pact was abolished, and Soviet armed forces were withdrawn from foreign soil. Although we now take this history for granted, at the time it was extraordinary, and practitioners of realpolitik still cannot explain it. Indeed, in an amazing story, Russian president Vladimir Putin recalls a conversation he had with Henry Kissinger on this subject. "I really did think it was impossible" that the Soviet Union would leave Eastern Europe, Putin recalls Kissinger's

saying. "Frankly, to this day I don't understand why Gorbachev did that." Gorbachev did it because he had concluded that "power politics in all their forms and manifestations are historically obsolescent."

That is why actions like NATO expansion shook the Russians so much; it looked as if NATO was consolidating and exploiting a military victory rather than accepting Russia as part of Western civilization in a post–Cold War world. Although NATO officials insisted that expansion was not directed against Russia and was instead designed to rid Europe of Cold War dividing lines, Russians could not fail to notice another explanation. Prospective NATO members, Kissinger explained in 1997, want to join the alliance "not to erase dividing lines but to position themselves inside a guaranteed territory by shifting the existing NATO boundaries some 300 miles to the east."

For Russians, the correct explanation is determined by the answer to a simple question: Is Russia eligible for NATO membership? Although the Clinton administration kept that option open, that view is not universally accepted within the alliance, especially not by those who define NATO in terms of "civilization." " The Alliance," Czech president Vaclav Havel declared in 1996, "should unequivocally restate that it is open to all Euro-Atlantic countries that share its values." But this does not include Russia because it is Euro-Asian rather than Euro-Atlantic. "World peace is hardly conceivable without good cooperation between the Euro-Atlantic region and this large and influential Euro-Asian entity," he explained, using clumsy euphemisms for NATO and Russia. "NATO should affirm its desire to strive for the best conceivable partnership, but it should also stress that such a partnership can be built only when each of the parties knows its true identity and when neither attempts to dictate how the other should define itself, or whom the other may or may not accept as allies."

When Putin told British interviewer David Frost that he was amenable to the idea of Russian membership in NATO, he evoked surprise and even jubilation. Some commentators indicated that this was a softening of Russia's position, an acceptance of expansion. On the contrary, Putin was issuing a challenge: Do you accept us? Are we part of your civilization? "We are part of Western European culture. No matter where our people live, in the Far East or in the south, we are Europeans," he has asserted. But, if Russia is not accepted by the West, and in particular if it is not accepted by Western defense institutions, it will be compelled to make other arrangements. "If they push us away, then we'll be forced to find allies and reinforce ourselves. What else can we do?"

The question is perfectly reasonable, and it helps to explain the growing relationship between Russia, China, and India. "Russia, India and China have common goals—they stand for a multipolar world, are opposed to U.S. plans to build a national missile defense (NMD) and reject military diktat in international relations," Gen. Leonid Ivashov, head of the Russian Defense Ministry's International Cooperation Department, told foreign correspondents in Moscow in July 2000, just before Putin's visit to Beijing to meet China's president Jiang Zemin. "We are already kind of ideological allies who tend to form informal alliances based on shared interests," Ivashov said. In particular, the Shanghai Five (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan) arrangement (now renamed the Shanghai Forum to allow for more members) seems to be taking on characteristics of an anti-NATO grouping. "The Shanghai Five has an obvious anti-US agenda, of which opposition to Washington's development of the National Missile Defense system is but one item," observes Willy Wo Lap Lam of Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post.* "Mr. Jiang and Mr. Putin in particular see a strong Shanghai Five as a check against the eastward expansion of NATO and related efforts to spread US norms under the guise of globalization."

As this report indicates, the issue of national missile defense has now become intertwined with that of NATO expansion. The Clinton administration thought it could renegotiate the Anti–Ballistic Missile Treaty with the Russians, who also face nuclear missile threats, but its efforts have so far been frustrated. Instead, the Russians have countered with their own proposals for a boost-phase defense. More important, in apparent coordination with the Chinese, they have put pressure on North Korea to moderate its threatening posture. That represents a test for the United States, which has identified the North Korean threat as a major motivation for its missile defense program. The Russians and Chinese are in effect saying that, if they take care of the North Korean threat and the United States goes ahead with its missile defense plans anyway, they have no alternative but to conclude that, despite American protests, the NMD program is directed against them.

The repercussions in that case will be profound. The Russians already feel betrayed by NATO expansion, which they see as a repudiation of assurances they were given when they agreed to German reunification. If they conclude that the United States has also been dissembling about the purpose of NMD, a new era of confrontation is likely to begin. That is why this issue is so important. The Russians traditionally have not been

opposed to missile defenses; in fact, they still operate a rudimentary system around Moscow. Rather, American actions have given rise to suspicions about motivations. If the United States proceeds with NMD without adequately addressing Moscow's suspicions, we can expect the Sino-Russian relationship to solidify along anti-American lines. In addition, we can expect Russia's efforts to use this issue to drive wedges in America's alliance relationships, which are already showing some success, to intensify.

Members of Congress would be well advised to make an effort to meet with their counterparts in Russia. To be sure, initial meetings might be confrontational: last May, one such meeting on Capitol Hill included a warning from a Russian parliamentarian that U.S. pursuit of NMD could lead to "a new kind of Cold War." Despite such alarming rhetoric, the Russians indicated a willingness to continue discussions. "I completely agree with my American colleagues that we should never hurry in this matter," said another Russian participant. A continuing dialogue could be instrumental in alleviating fears and easing suspicions.

Such a dialogue would also serve another purpose: giving Russian parliamentarians better knowledge of the role of a legislature in a democratic society. "It is not possible to give to each department [of government] an equal power of self-defense," James Madison wrote in *Federalist* no. 51. "In republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates" over the executive. Unfortunately, Russia has no experience with an executive accountable to a legislature in other than a nominal sense, and even now Putin is consolidating power in his own hands. "Russia was created as a centralized state, and it has existed exactly this way," he told a group of Russian law students in February 2000. "Thus, we had czarism, then Communism, and now the president has appeared, the institution of the presidency." Indeed, Putin has even expressed admiration for monarchy. "The monarch doesn't have to worry about whether or not he will be elected, or about petty political interests, or about how to influence the electorate," Putin told an interviewer. "He can think about the destiny of the people and not become distracted with trivialities."

To be sure, that does not necessarily mean that Putin wants to be a monarch, but the degree to which power is being concentrated in his hands is worrisome. As we have seen, the Cold War ended when the Russians came to accept the Western concept of human rights. The guarantee of those rights is not a "good czar" but a system of government that restricts arbitrary power. Members of Congress, in meeting with their Russian

counterparts, could perform an indispensable service by illuminating the role of the legislature in a democratic system characterized by institutional checks and balances that, in Madison's famous formulation, prevent the government from implementing "schemes of oppression."

European Security

Human rights should once again play the dominant role it did in ending the Cold War. "We believe that the Helsinki process is far from outdated and that the time has come when it can become active once again," Czech president Havel urged in 1990. "The process could be institutionalized in some way or another. The Helsinki process could form a broad security background for an integrated Europe." That vision is much more appealing than the division of Europe into Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asiatic regions that Havel articulated subsequently. Given the difficulty further NATO expansion is likely to encounter, it would be desirable for Congress to initiate discussions on increasingly focusing on the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe as an institution that could safeguard European security without creating new and dangerous divisions.

Otherwise, we should be prepared for a growing backlash. Although Russia under President Yeltsin agreed to the first round of NATO expansion, it did so reluctantly, and his successors are unlikely to be so accommodating. Even the most Western-oriented Russian politicians do not accept NATO's explanations. "Mrs. Albright talks about NATO tanks as if they are really friendly things," mocks Grigory Yavlinsky, head of the liberal Yabloko Party. "I talk to my constituents about these friendly, rose-colored, flower-strewn tanks, but if there is one thing that Russians understand, it's a tank aimed at our country."

Baku-Ceyhan Pipeline

Other factors, notably the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, also contribute to Russian disenchantment with the West. When James Billington, the librarian of Congress, asked a group of Russian scholars what the United States should do to improve relations with Russia, the immediate response concerned American policy in the Caspian. "Why make the Caspian Sea situation more complicated than it already is?" asked Nikolai Shmelev, a prominent Russian economist. "The U.S. should not get involved in the Caspian Sea. . . . This is an important psychological moment. . . . You have to understand that for centuries this country had had [*sic*] a siege

mentality." This aspect of Russia's psychology is clearly not sufficiently appreciated in the West, where Russia tends to be viewed as an expansionist country. The failure to appreciate Russia's historically rooted siege mentality, especially at this moment of vulnerability, could lead to significant miscalculations in policy on both sides.

Strategic Arsenals

Russia has proposed deep cuts in strategic nuclear weapons, presumably because it is having difficulty maintaining its forces. The United States has resisted such deep cuts, claiming that it needs at least 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons to fulfill its war plans. This policy is bound to raise questions about American intentions, and may serve as further encouragement to other countries to band together against the United States for their own protection. Given American dominance in conventional weapons, it is difficult to see how U.S. resistance to nuclear force reductions can benefit the country. On the contrary, it is in our interest to reduce nuclear weapons as much as we can. Such a policy would not only be more reassuring to Russia, it would put pressure on other countries not to proliferate.

The IMF

Another factor is financial involvement of institutions like the International Monetary Fund. "Russia is not a scary place because we have nuclear weapons," argues Gregory Satarov, a former adviser to President Boris Yeltsin. "It's a scary place because 10% of U.S. paper money is held in Russia." That distrust of Russia's currency is well-founded, given the devaluation it has undergone since Russia repudiated communism. "Even Stalin never allowed himself that kind of theft; his banking changes in 1947 only took 50% of people's savings," complains Shmelev. "In 1992 people were robbed of virtually all their lifetime savings" when the ruble's value plunged as the result of hyperinflation.

The IMF was designed to stabilize currencies to avoid the consequences of competitive devaluations witnessed in the 1930s. That is why it gave Russia substantial new credits in July 1998. Questions have arisen about whether those funds were diverted in a criminal scheme. But, even if they were not, they clearly were unsuccessful in stabilizing the ruble, which was devalued in August 1998. Moreover, questions must be raised about financial assistance to stabilize a currency over a period of years, especially

to a country that is consistently running a trade surplus. In that situation, the stabilization funds may simply be supporting capital flight. If capital is fleeing because it was obtained by questionable means, currency stabilization could have the effect of supporting corruption.

In fact, some Russians are now questioning the policy of credits. "Financial credits are not the point," insists Satarov. "What we need is collaboration and cooperation—there aren't enough serious joint projects." Above all, Russians want Western "experts" to show more humility when addressing Russia's economic transition. "Very little is understood about economics," concludes Shmelev. "The Western specialists, the supertheoreticians, put the patient on the table and started operating and it turned out there was a different kind of anatomy, and we didn't know what was happening to us." The Russians resent having been the victim of those experiments, which, although they may not have caused the impoverishment that has affected the bulk of the Russian population during the past decade, certainly did not prevent it.

Visas

Finally, there is one relatively small thing Congress might do to improve Russian-American relations—and indeed, U.S. relations with much of the world. Despite all their disappointments with the post–Cold War world, Russians still harbor tremendous affection for the United States, but one problem comes up frequently in discussions with them: the difficulty in obtaining visas. Unquestionably, American consular officials have a difficult job, since they are a first line of defense preventing criminals from entering the United States. Nevertheless, the process has become so difficult—and, in the eyes of foreign applicants, so arbitrary and rude—that it is beginning to alienate people who are otherwise favorably disposed toward us (otherwise, they would not want to come here to visit or to study). Congress should review the procedures and conditions affecting visa applications to see what improvements could be made. In particular, the wall between immigrant and nonimmigrant visas should be lowered; the desire of people to immigrate here should not be viewed as the legal equivalent of sin. This is admittedly a small thing, not a matter of high politics, but its impact on how ordinary people view the United States could be powerful.

Conclusion

The new Congress will have to confront a changed relationship with Russia. The romantic embrace that characterized the end of the Cold War

has been eroded by a series of disappointments on both sides. Significantly, however, neither side wants to give up on the other. Perhaps most important, the Russians still express admiration for Western values and still yearn to be accepted into our international institutions. But the Russians will not wait forever. If we are to prevent the post–Cold War world from being just a brief interruption between two cold wars, we should find some way to accommodate the Russians.

Suggested Readings

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