

62. Relations with Russia

Policymakers should

- monitor closely the growing strategic ties between Russia and other major Eurasian powers,
- insist on a strong legislative role in U.S.-Russian diplomacy to set a good example for the fragile Russian democracy,
- not base U.S.-Russian relations exclusively on personal ties with Russian president Vladimir Putin,
- ensure that the United States does not make security promises to the nations of Eastern Europe or Central Asia that it might not be able to fulfill, and
- emphasize America's common interests with Russia in fighting terrorism and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The “honeymoon” of the immediate post–Cold War period is over. It was undermined by U.S. policies originally undertaken to contain and ultimately destroy Soviet power. Ironically, the United States now finds itself allied with Russia to defeat the very same forces Washington helped to unleash during the Cold War —specifically, radical Islamists. But this post–Cold War alliance is built on shaky foundations, without popular enthusiasm or significant institutional underpinning.

The collapse of Soviet power meant that the centrality of Russia to the United States would be diminished. Indeed, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Russia went from being a rival to a supplicant. Russians looked to America as a model for their aspirations, and they welcomed the prospect of American assistance in their transformation to capitalism and democracy. But their hopes were disappointed, and their attitude has changed as a result. “The attitude to the U.S. has dramatically worsened,” Yuri Levada, one of Russia’s leading pollsters, reported in

April 2003. Nevertheless, he was careful to add that this applied to our country and its policies, not to the American people, implying that the deterioration is not irreversible.

The turnabout in Russian opinion has been accompanied by a transformation in Russia's position in the world. When Vladimir Putin ascended to the presidency, he took over a country still recovering from a wrenching economic crisis and whose international position was just a shadow of its former one. Putin has done a remarkable job of stabilizing the economy (aided by a significant increase in oil prices). A banking crisis in the summer of 2004 was an uncomfortable echo of the past, however, indicating that underlying problems remain. Internationally, Putin has successfully used Russia's geographic position, its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and its still-extensive defense industry to make Russia the indispensable Eurasian nation—one that other leaders, including President Bush, feel they must cultivate.

Domestically, Putin has consolidated power relentlessly, particularly since the horrific acts of terrorism in Beslan, and elsewhere in Russia, in August and September 2004. He has, quite simply, crushed all his opponents. To be sure, as a result of the democratic transformation of Russia, he may still be the focus of public criticism, especially in some of the media—but that is not the same thing as effective political opposition. He is, for all intents and purposes, Russia's new tsar, albeit an elected one.

President Bush has tried to forge a strong personal relationship with Putin. Although there have been disappointments—not surprisingly, since state interests typically override personal ties—the effort cannot be faulted. The presence of Mikhail Gorbachev at Ronald Reagan's funeral and his gracious tribute to both the late president and his widow testify to the importance that personal relations can play in resolving even the most intractable disputes.

Such efforts based on personal friendships must be put on a realistic footing, however. The *Washington Post* reported that President Bush was impressed that Putin treasures a cross given him by his mother. It is understandable that President Bush, deeply religious himself, felt a bond to someone who shares a religious conviction, even if it is of another faith. Yet we must be mindful of the overture President Reagan made to the Iranian leadership on religious premises, which ended dismally.

Russia's Identity

As is the case for many European countries, Russia's identity as a state is tied to a religion. Since the beginning of the 17th century, Russian tsars had been baptized exclusively in the Orthodox faith. Following the Bolshevik takeover in 1917, Russia became officially atheist, but religion remained a strong force among the people. Following the collapse of Soviet power, the Orthodox Church was allowed to practice openly once again. The reconstruction in the 1990s of the Church of Christ the Savior in Moscow, which had been destroyed by Stalin, is a testament to Russia's change of direction.

In recent years, especially, there have been growing ties between the church and the state. When Putin met with Russian oligarchs in the Kremlin in 2004, television cameras focused on an icon of an Orthodox saint behind him—an image that replaced the portrait of Lenin from Soviet times. According to the *Moscow Times*, “The central focus that the icon has acquired in the Kremlin's official imagery also points to the essence of the Kremlin's new ideology in which Russian Orthodoxy, as the antithesis of Soviet internationalism, is becoming key.”

Samuel Huntington identified the boundary between Orthodox and Protestant/Catholic Europe as one of the areas where different civilizations might clash. The expansion of NATO and the European Union will define the boundaries of Europe, and therefore will have an effect on the formation of Russian identity (and also that of countries adjacent to Russia). Significantly the EU dividing line closely follows Huntington's civilizational divide, but if it were to follow that divide completely, it would split Ukraine in two. The breakup of Yugoslavia along sectarian lines is an ominous reminder of where such divisions can lead if they are not addressed properly.

The Orthodox Church suffered terribly under Soviet rule—it is estimated that 200,000 people lost their lives because of their religious convictions. The ability of believers to practice their religion without fear of persecution is one of the great benefits of the collapse of communism. It would be doubly tragic, therefore, if the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the communist-capitalist divide were to be followed by the reemergence of an age-old religious divide. Unfortunately, there are indications of a struggle for influence in the region surrounding Russia—what the Russians call the “near abroad”—that has overtones of long-simmering historical tensions.

Russia and Its Neighbors

When the Cold War ended, Russia effectively abandoned the idea of global competition with the United States. It withdrew from many of its foreign bases, which had become too expensive to maintain. In recent years, however, it has intensified an effort to reintegrate the Commonwealth of Independent States (the 12 non-Baltic states that formerly were part of the Soviet Union). Putin himself underlined the importance of this effort in a speech to his Security Council in July 2004:

I believe that we have approached a decisive moment in the development of the Commonwealth. Basically, there is only one choice: either we essentially strengthen the CIS, and create a working, globally influential regional structure, or this geopolitical area will inevitably erode and, as a result, will lose any attractiveness for its member states. The latter scenario may not take place. Russia's role in increasing the influence and authority of the CIS is today extremely important.

For the United States there would appear to be two primary areas of concern. One—already noted—is Ukraine (and to a lesser degree, Belarus). There has been the appearance, at least, of a tug of war between Russia and the United States over Ukraine. For example, when Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma said in July 2004 that Ukraine would attempt to “deepen relations” with the EU and NATO, there was immediate speculation that he had abandoned efforts to seek membership in those organizations. Although that interpretation was immediately disputed by Ukrainian officials, the controversy those few words generated is an indication of the sensitive nature of this relationship.

The other area of concern for the United States is Central Asia. Ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union, there has been competition for influence in this region, in particular for its energy resources. The United States, for example, pushed for the construction of a pipeline from Baku, Azerbaijan, to Ceyhan, Turkey, which would bypass both Russia and Iran. The Russians, unsurprisingly, have pushed back and now seem to be enjoying some success. According to a report in the Indian paper, the *Hindu*, “Russian experts are convinced that Kazakhstan's long-term commitment to use Russian, Chinese and Iranian routes for its oil exports will make the U.S.-pushed BTC pipeline a money-losing project.”

Competition over Central Asian energy resources has been complicated by the war on terrorism. Some observers were impressed with Putin's cooperation with the Bush administration following the September 11

attacks, but there was no reason for him to oppose U.S. efforts since both countries are fighting the same enemy. Russia is wary, however, of any American effort to create a permanent presence, especially if it is designed to counter Russian influence. Some observers have speculated that Russia is teaming up with China to build a security belt in Central Asia and the Caspian to counterbalance the U.S. presence in the region.

The deepening integration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a particularly noteworthy manifestation of this development. “After the September 11 terror attacks, the United States started to deploy military forces in Central Asia; it gained a geopolitical advantage by overthrowing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and dealing a big blow to such religious extremist groups as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan,” *China Daily* explained in January 2004, implying that the establishment of a secretariat for the SCO at that time was designed in part to counter that geopolitical advantage. According to the *Hindu*, “Analysts in Russia said the Shanghai grouping was emerging as a counterweight to growing American presence in Central Asia.”

The United States must be careful not to overplay its hand with Putin and Russia. So long as the United States requires access to Afghanistan, and so long as access through Iran is out of the question, the goodwill of Russia will be required. A quick look at the map will suffice to explain. Afghanistan is landlocked; in addition to Iran on its western border, its neighbors are Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The three latter countries are all former members of the Soviet Union, and access to Afghanistan through the territory of any of them would be difficult to sustain without (at least tacit) Russian consent. (China has a small border with Afghanistan, but it is too remote and mountainous to provide access in any meaningful sense.)

This situation provides Russia with exceptional leverage—which would be enormously enhanced if the political situation in Pakistan were to change for the worse. To be sure, since Russia and the United States are on the same side in the war against terrorism, there is no reason for Russia to obstruct U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. But if Moscow were to become convinced that Washington was using its presence in Central Asia to consolidate a position in the region, it would have ways of making its displeasure known.

The United States, unfortunately, does not have good options here. The war against terrorism is also a war for democracy, but the reality of geography means that to prosecute the war in Afghanistan, the United

States must occasionally cooperate with undemocratic regimes. To the extent that cooperation with any one of them (e.g., Iran) is politically unacceptable, cooperation with the others becomes even more important. So long as success in Afghanistan remains a priority for the United States, cooperation with Russia is essential, and it would be unwise for Washington to give Moscow any reason to believe that the United States has a hegemonic agenda for the region.

The Democratic Transformation

When the Cold War ended, there was widespread expectation that Russia was on its way to democracy. Indeed, some Russians publicly acknowledged that they had been wrong to protest Western criticism of the human rights situation under Soviet rule. “One of the most profound ideological and practical divergences between us and the Western-type democracies was our different view of the relations between the state and the *individual*,” a commentator wrote in *Izvestia* on the occasion of President Reagan’s departure from the presidency in January 1989. “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.”

Language praising the “sovereignty of the individual” has been absent from Russian political discourse for some time now, and Moscow once again bristles at criticism of its human rights situation. In July 2004 Russia and eight other former Soviet states condemned interference by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which “does not respect such fundamental principles . . . as non-interference in internal affairs and respect of national sovereignty” and focuses “exclusively on monitoring human rights and democratic institutions.”

That is dispiriting language, and it is not the only disappointment in Russia’s democratic evolution. Although Russia’s economy has recovered well from its dire situation in 1998, that recovery is highly dependent on energy prices, since energy accounts for approximately a quarter of Russian GDP. Such lack of diversification has political as well as economic implications, since accountable (democratic) government thrives only when political leaders must go to the people for money to fund the operations of government. A lack of diversification leads to unhealthy collusion or confrontation between the powerful economic magnates and the govern-

ment, which in Russia has manifested itself in the relationship between the oligarchs and the president. The arrest and trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the head of the giant energy firm Yukos, was yet another chapter in this saga.

To be sure, setbacks were to be expected in Russia's transformation to a full-fledged, stable democracy. For example, it is impossible to diversify an economy in just a few years. Such an evolution requires time and investment—notably, in the training of people in skills valued in an international economy. Yet some observers worry that the trends might be more ominous. “The resurgence of [Vladimir] Zhirinovskiy's [political] party and the blending of confiscatory socialist and ethnic nationalist slogans under the tranquilizing label of ‘motherland’ raise anew the possibility of a Nazi-type movement developing within a façade of democratic institutions,” warns James Billington, the librarian of Congress and a leading authority on Russia. “More likely would be the unintended evolution into some original Russian variant of a corporatist state ruled by a dictator, adorned with Slavophile rhetoric, and representing, in effect, fascism with a friendly face.”

Conclusion

We can certainly hope that Billington's concern is unjustified, but we must take it seriously. The question, however, is what the United States can do. Unfortunately, our options are limited. Ironically, given our position as the “sole superpower,” Russia has leverage over us because of our difficult position in Afghanistan. Although Russia has an interest in assisting us—after all, it will also suffer if we fail—its interest in our success is not greater than ours. Putin has demonstrated a mastery of diplomacy, quietly forging ties with other countries while America's energy drains into conflicts that show no signs of ending. The first requirement for U.S. policy, therefore, is to abandon the rhetoric about American hegemony and recognize the degree to which international power relationships have shifted in the last few years.

Recognizing the limits on our ability to influence events in Russia in the short term, we need to concentrate our efforts on the long term. And here, historically, we find that our best leverage has come from the power of our example. “Ever since its political emergence the United States has been a model for Russia,” Max M. Laserson, an official in the 1917 provisional government, wrote in 1950. Indeed, the 1825 Decembrist uprising was inspired in part by the American example. Testifying before

the Committee of Inquiry, which investigated the revolt, one of its leaders, P. I. Pestel, acknowledged that “all newspapers and political writings have so much extolled the growing prosperity of the North American United States, which they attributed to their state [i.e., federal] organization, that this seemed to me to be a clear proof of the superiority of the republican government.”

Something similar happened when the Cold War ended and Russians embraced their former adversary. They now feel that we did not return their embrace but instead have sought to consolidate a position of victory. In addition, they feel that we are no longer a good model, which helps explain why they are increasingly returning to their traditions and history to reassert their identity.

If we are to be an inspiring model, we must examine our own policy. The alienation of Russians from the United States is not unique; it tracks attitudes toward the United States elsewhere in the world. If we emphasize our power and the importance our power gives us, the lesson the rest of the world will learn is that of the need for power. We should not be surprised, therefore, if Russia and other like-minded countries increase their military power and create “strategic partnerships” while questioning our efforts to promote democracy.

The situation in which we find ourselves now is very sad, especially compared with the hopes that existed 15 years ago. It recalls a previous moment that also proved fleeting: in June 1917 the minister for foreign affairs in the Russian provisional government addressed a delegation sent to Russia by President Woodrow Wilson.

These two great peoples, the free people of Russia and the free people of America, the great people of the United States, the oldest, strongest, and purest democracy, hand in hand, will show the way that human happiness will take in the future.

That is an inspiring vision that, regrettably, was not realized because of Lenin’s triumph a few months later. With the end of the Cold War, we were given another opportunity to achieve it. Let us hope it is not too late.

Suggested Readings

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