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# US-Russian Relations: Between Realism and Reality

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CELESTE A. WALLANDER

Late summer and early autumn have set a series of striking markers in the evolution of US–Russian relations: the failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 12 years ago that put in motion the final steps leading to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war; the October 1993 attacks that Boris Yeltsin ordered against reactionary opponents in the Duma, which made it clear the Russian transition to liberal democracy and a market economy would be far more sporadic and problematic than US policymakers had assumed; and the meltdown of the Russian economy in August 1998, which led to debt default because of irresponsible macroeconomic policy, a weak currency, and Potemkin reforms.

What do the events of the autumn of 2003 portend for US–Russian relations? Will they lay the foundation for more counterterrorist and counter-proliferation cooperation, as was exercised this August in a joint Russian-American sting to thwart the smuggling of a Russian missile launcher into the United States? Will they establish great power cooperation through the United Nations Security Council for a robust, internationally based force to secure and build a new Iraq following the attack in late August on the UN headquarters in Baghdad? Or will US–Russian relations founder on the Bush administration’s failure to deliver Russia’s release from cold war–era trade restrictions because of pressure from American domestic poultry exporters?

The answer is that cooperation between the two countries will continue in core areas related to common security interests. Cooperation not only supports a constructive and cordial relationship between the United States and Russia; it also strengthens broader global stability. The US–Russian relationship over the next decade likely will prove a model of realist foreign policy, serving basic security interests. The relationship will fall far short of a strategic partnership, however, because realism is not enough to support it. A global strategic partnership can be built only on a strong foundation of common purpose and stable domestic support, which is lacking in both countries.

Russia and the United States can be allies in the best traditions of far-sighted traditional great power diplomacy, but the realities of domestic constraints and the imbalance of their national power will prevent their alliance from meeting the requirements of deep security and economic integration in the first decade of the twenty-first century. If only realism could prevail, one is tempted to hope, the United States and Russia could work together to meet their common interests in security, stability, and prosperity. Reality, however, just keeps getting in the way.

## RETURN TO REALISM

Realism has a general appeal—who would want to be unrealistic in foreign policy?—but as a concept in international relations it has a specific meaning: in the conduct of foreign relations, national interests defined in terms of power and security guide national leaders. According to realist thought, a country’s leaders should not be misled by moral imperatives, driven by cooperation for cooperation’s sake, or unduly constrained by international institutions if such policies would cause the leaders to neglect balance-of-power calculations or the rational pursuit of national interests. Leaders should not be misled by the belief that the political or economic composition of other countries—whether they are liberal democracies or market economies, for example—will or should significantly affect foreign policy choices. By implication, a responsible leader should not base foreign policy on whether a potential ally or partner state is democratic; rather, cooperation is possible when states have common interests and when policies are shaped to take into account the realities of their capabilities.

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The Bush administration came into office articulating a clear realist premise for its foreign policy, particularly toward Russia. It criticized the Clinton administration's emphasis on engagement and reform of Russia's domestic political and economic order and declared that it would seek cooperation where interests coincided, but would not shrink from confronting Russia in areas where interests diverged, such as nuclear technology sales to Iran. Bush administration officials stated early on that the United States would not seek or adhere to arms control agreements merely for the sake of the habit of cooperation. The new administration said it would withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty if it could not achieve modifications that would allow the United States to develop and deploy new systems to provide defensive coverage of the American homeland. Most important, Russia was to be downgraded from its preeminent role in US foreign policy in accordance with its decline in power: Russia was not viewed as irrelevant, but simply one among the ranks of other great powers, meriting neither constant high-level attention nor special status.

Similarly on the Russian side, President Vladimir Putin appeared to base his new foreign policy pragmatism on a cold assessment of his nation's strategic interests. Russia's foreign policy concepts and national security doctrine were reformulated to identify Russian weakness as the greatest threat the country faced, and to support development of a vibrant and successful economy as the main foreign policy task. Terrorism supplanted the United States and NATO as the main external threat to Russian security, reflecting Russian preoccupation not only with the war in Chechnya, but also with transnational criminal and terrorist networks—often although not exclusively with Islamic links—extending from Central Asia through the Caucasus. Even before the terror attacks of September 11, Putin's foreign policy rhetoric was characterized by a startling degree of self-critical realism: looking at the country's weaknesses unflinchingly and finding Russia wanting and vulnerable.

It certainly was possible that a more forceful Putin regime, waging a brutal war in Chechnya and bent upon asserting its own national interests, would set back US–Russian relations when joined with a confident Bush administration dismissive of sentiment in its Russia policy. Yet, by mid-2001, the relationship looked better than it had in years, seemingly bolstering realist prescriptions. On the two security issues that dominated the agenda and on which the two countries seemed headed toward confrontation—US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and NATO's plans for a second round of enlargement—Putin declared that Russia did not agree with the American position, but would not become “hysterical” or sacrifice its relations with the West in a vain attempt to block US policy.

Instead, Putin made a priority of economic reform and integration, seeking US support for foreign investment and Russian membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). He found a receptive partner in the Republican, business-oriented American president. Faced with growing European criticism and concerns that it preferred unilateral action to cooperation, the Bush administration shifted its focus as well. The administration

sought Russian acceptance of its preferred policies on missile defense. It negotiated a strategic arms agreement based on deep cuts in deployed weapons. And it attempted to engage Russia in a special relationship with NATO.

## PILLARS OF PARTNERSHIP

The realist groundwork for focusing on common strategic national interests was thus already laid when Al Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. The attack made transnational terrorism—a terrorism rooted partly in Russia's Eurasian borderlands—the core threat to American security. This common strategic interest with Russia was not abstract: Al Qaeda was based in Afghanistan, and the Taliban regime that harbored it was viewed as a threat to Russia and the newly independent Central Asian states. Many within Putin's government opposed the Russian president's decision to accept US military bases in Central Asia and to support the US military mission in Afghanistan with intelligence and aid to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. But Putin's motives were far from altruistic. Russians had viewed the Taliban as a major threat throughout the 1990s, but had not been successful in eliminating it. By supporting the United States, Putin achieved a significant security objective that Russia had been unable to achieve alone. And by working with Russian intelligence and the military, the United States was able to adapt a creative and unexpectedly effective military strategy that resulted in the relatively swift collapse of the Taliban regime.

Likewise, the early common interest of the United States and Russia in the securing, storing, and disposing of Russia's inherited arsenal of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) took on new dimensions and urgency after 9-11. Russia and the United States suddenly had a very large and very serious common security agenda in the combination of terrorism and WMD that former Democratic Senator Sam Nunn has labeled “catastrophic terrorism.”

Along with terrorism and WMD, common strategic interests include a third pillar: economic concerns. Russia clearly sees economic growth and international integration as necessary for national power and security, but what is America's strategic interest in an economically successful and integrated Russia? One consideration is that an enfeebled Russia invites the spread of terrorist bases and networks in Eurasia and increases the chances of WMD proliferation. As national security adviser Condoleezza Rice has suggested, Russia's weakness, not its strength, is the greater threat to America. It is in America's strategic interest to support Russia's economic development so that the government can improve conditions for Russian citizens—including those who work in WMD-related industries and who might be led by a lack of alternatives to sell their knowledge or access. It is also in America's interest to foster an economic environment in which the Russian state can build competent institutions that will support security and stability in the region. Yet another strategic economic interest stems from Russia's position as the world's second-largest producer of oil. Russia's future productive capacity could support a diversification in

energy resources that might reduce the dependence of the United States and its allies on Middle Eastern oil.

At a summit meeting this June in St. Petersburg, Russia, both Putin and President George W. Bush portrayed the basis of their countries' strategic partnership in terms of common interests in these areas. They signed the Treaty of Moscow at the meeting, limiting each country's strategic nuclear arsenal to between 1,700 and 2,200 deployed warheads. They announced plans for cooperation in research on missile defense, agreed that North Korea must dismantle its nuclear program, and said that Iran must comply with its obligations under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Both highlighted the potential of Russian energy supplies to support a far-reaching strategic relationship. President Bush pledged again to work for Russian membership in the WTO, and to remove Russia from the provisions of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, the cold war legislation that denies Russia most-favored-nation trading status. They agreed that the US-Russian relationship had emerged intact after Russia's opposition to America's use of force against Iraq and the US decision to act without a UN Security Council resolution. Unlike German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who was perceived as personalizing his opposition to President Bush, and unlike French President Jacques Chirac, who was perceived as actively leading the opposition to US policy in Iraq as a pretext for resisting American hegemony, Putin was seen as advancing legitimate Russian interests in a professional manner and was thus "forgiven."

## REALITY AND THE RELATIONSHIP

But appearances can deceive. While the two countries' presidents enunciate the strategic rationale for a partnership rooted in common interests, four aspects of reality undermine a US-Russian strategic partnership forged solely in realism.

First, despite acknowledgement that stopping terrorism and WMD proliferation are the two core strategic interests held in common, there is little agreement on the concrete nature of each problem and how to prioritize the threats. Although the Bush administration recognizes Al Qaeda's involvement in the war in Chechnya and does not strongly or publicly criticize the Putin leadership for ongoing human rights violations, it continues to draw a distinction between international terrorists and Chechen separatists, angering Russian officials and limiting the degree to which the countries can cooperate. Domestic critics in the United States limit the extent to which the administration can ignore Chechnya even if the White House sought such leeway. Similarly, Russian critics point out that the US focus on state sponsors of terrorism conveniently neglects American allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and centers attention on countries such as Iran and Iraq, which had developed lucrative commercial relationships with Russia.

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The United States and Russia also have different priorities when it comes to the nations that each believes must be a focus of nonproliferation efforts. Russian policy on North Korea has shifted during 2003 to more closely support the US view that a firm and united line must be taken against North Korean nuclear programs. Yet, while highlighting Russian and US agreement that Iran must comply with its international commitments for inspections of nuclear facilities, Putin has not entirely conceded that the key issue with Iran is the proliferation danger. At his St. Petersburg summit appearance with President Bush, Putin said Russia seeks to cooperate on Iran, but also expects the United States not to use nonproliferation efforts to unfairly compete in international markets for nuclear reactor technology.

Without agreement on the primary terrorist or WMD threats, it is difficult to see where the United States and Russia can turn their strategic partnership to operate as effectively as it did against the Taliban. That achievement may have been the high point rather than the model for future cooperation. This brings us to the second reality that checks the US-Russian partnership: the imbalance of power between the two countries and the mistrust this nurtures. Russian officials welcomed the US military presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus as temporary and tied to specific counterterrorist missions. But they suspect that the United States may intend a long-term presence to limit Russia's own political and military influence in both regions, and they will consider their suspicions justified if Americans settle in for a long stay. One scenario they fear is US pressure on Chechnya. Another is active support of the present or a successor government in Georgia. A third is US military protection of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline under construction that will enable Azerbaijan to ship oil without relying on Russian pipelines. Russians focus on the potential of US military pressure in the region to undermine Russia's strategic and commercial interests through political pressure backed by superior military force.

The Russian government has also made clear that it views the potential relocation of US bases in Europe from Germany to Poland as contrary to Moscow's interests. It sees the potential as a violation of commitments made not to expand NATO's military eastward under both the 1990 agreements on German unification and the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, as well as a likely violation of limits on national deployments allowed under the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. If the United States and Russia deeply held common values and understandings of one another's motivations, the imbalance of power between them would not be a source of mistrust. But this is where reality confronts realism: many Russians continue to fear and resent US power, and Americans continue to view that resentment as evidence of ill will.

The reality effects of Russian weakness and American preponderance were largely behind the near confrontation on Iraq. Russia had clear financial interests in preventing the US attack in March 2003, but these had been discussed and could have been addressed to Russia's satisfaction by post-conflict contracts and energy deals. In joining with France and Germany to try to force the United States to work through the UN, Putin was responding to domestic pressure to resist US power and wield

one of Russia's few remaining great power instruments: its permanent seat on the Security Council and the veto power it carries. This was clear in Putin's repeated appeals to the United States to abide by international law and his call for "multipolarity" rather than American hegemony as the basis for dealing with terrorism and WMD threats. His appeal was answered by national security adviser Rice in a speech in London, in which she reminded her audience that multipolarity led more often to conflict, and had in fact led to World War I; multipolarity was "a necessary evil," no longer required among partners with common interests and common values. The United States as a preponderant power that can choose to cooperate with like-minded partners when it wants to—but will rely on itself when it must—has been unwilling to be constrained by international law when such constraints prove inconvenient in securing priority objectives. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this reality in limiting Russia's whole-hearted commitment to strategic partnership with the United States.

## ENTER THE BUREAUCRATS

Even more important in limiting realization of a strategic partnership is a third reality: the weight of domestic politics and bureaucratic inertia. Both presidents appear to have a genuine commitment to a deeper bilateral relationship, but this does not implement or fund programs, and it does not resolve competing viewpoints on the relationship within both governments. Presidents Bush and Putin can get along famously at their summits and agree to an ambitious menu of initiatives, but the most rational and strategically self-interested national goals can be undermined by the realities of bureaucracies or domestic interests that do not care, or worse, do not agree.

It is no secret that the Russian military continues to view the United States as a threat to Russia, either out of genuine belief or to protect perks and budgets. As long as senior Russian officers continue to see America and NATO as a threat, they go through the motions of military-to-military programs mandated by the civilian leadership to create "trust" and the bases for joint operations without achieving the trust and cooperative capacities. It is well known that officers who participate in international exchanges or tours of duty, such as in Kosovo, return to Russia to find their careers effectively over. Others tasked with leading cooperation in the strategic relationship can hardly be thinking seriously about common terrorist threats when they are planning to counter the perceived threat posed by the United States.

The civilian leadership of the US Defense Department is also widely perceived to have a more skeptical view of the field of common strategic interests than does Bush, national security adviser Rice, and Secretary of State Colin Powell. Since Russian military and defense officials are more likely to deal with representatives from the Defense Department who themselves see Russian presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia as evidence of Russia's pressure on its weaker neighbors, mutually reinforcing assumptions of conflicting rather than common strategic interests have prevailed.

It is not only wary military officials who are responsible for dragging the potential partnership through the mud of non-cooperation; the US Congress also has played a role. President Bush has called repeatedly on Congress to lift Jackson-Vanik Amendment restrictions on granting Russia permanent most favored nation status. The amendment was enacted in 1974 to sanction countries that did not permit free emigration. Russia has been certified by the US government as permitting free emigration for years, and has been granted waivers of the sanction, but Congress has used the sanction as a way to punish and pressure Russia on unrelated issues. The situation is a source of embarrassment and annoyance in a relationship that is supposedly leading to a strategic energy partnership and that is meant to facilitate Russian membership in the WTO. Congress currently seems unlikely to approve Russia's "graduation" to most favored nation status because of a combination of domestic lobbying efforts to punish Russia for restrictions on importing US meat and for Russia's opposition to the United States on Iraq, and as leverage in negotiations with Russia on its terms of membership in the WTO.

The signature case of internal obstacles to realizing vital strategic interests is implementation and funding of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program. Battles within the Congress have limited funding for programs to secure and dismantle Russia's WMD arsenal. In addition, implementation of this core program in the strategic relationship has been delayed and constrained by battles among US players in the legislative and executive branches on whether Russia can be certified as living up to its arms control obligations. In some cases there are legitimate concerns about Russia's commitment, and about activities of Russian recipients of CTR support that may actually contribute to proliferation. In other cases, however, the process has been used by those who oppose the CTR program's premise and objectives to stall its implementation. On the Russian side, officials have consistently thrown up obstacles by preventing access to US personnel required to monitor use of the funds and implementation of the programs on grounds that the facilities have security restrictions.

The fourth reality impeding a strategic relationship is that common interests between countries are rooted not only in strategic security issues, but also in commercial business ties, and these ties are minuscule between the United States and Russia. Russia accounts for less than 1 percent of total US trade, and the United States accounts for less than 5 percent of Russian trade. Cumulative US foreign direct investment in Russia is only \$6 billion.

If the Russian economy continues to perform well, if more Russian firms move to international accounting standards and transparency in their corporate governance, and if the Russian legal system enforces contracts in accordance with the rule of law, these numbers will surely increase. Although it is unlikely that Russian oil exports will create solid commercial or economic interests for US private industry or the government (since oil is sold on international markets and is rarely customer-specific, unlike natural gas), it is likely that American energy firms will increase their investment and presence in Russia. As trade and investment ties grow, US interests and stake in the relation-

ship will grow as well. America's relations with strategic partners such as Germany and Japan are rooted in a mix of security and commercial interests, which helps to base support for relations with those countries in wider constituencies within American society.

In short, a robust strategic partnership between the United States and Russia would need more engagement of national interests beyond the narrow if important areas of vital security. Realism might recommend a strategic partnership, but the reality of limited common interests matters more in day-to-day policy.

## REALITY CHECK

A realist conception of US-Russian relations in the twenty-first century provides a clear understanding of just where the strategic security and economic interests of the two countries overlap. Without this basis, there are no joint objectives for a partnership to target. Similarly, a realist approach focuses on getting the structure of the relationship in place so that it is more than a house of cards to be blown over in the first crisis to test the relationship's commitment and capabilities.

But a foreign policy that stops with realism will not be very productive, nor is it likely to address the broad array of issues that confront states in the modern world. It was enough in the nineteenth century to conduct a spare foreign policy based on national power and interests because states interacted primarily in the military and political spheres, and their societies and economies were not very integrated or interactive. Foreign policy bureaucracies were small and managed a limited set of requirements that focused on diplomacy.

In the modern world, countries interact much more intensively in official and private contexts. Mobility, technology, and integration have supported economic growth through trade, more efficient global production, and global investment. They have also created the capacity for the transnational terrorism and global military reach that globalize vulnerability and the potential to defend against it. Realism is spare and elegant, but the US-Russian relationship has to embrace the realities of the

twenty-first century. The sense that many observers express that US-Russian relations are cordial but hollow arises from a failure to seize the challenge of the realities.

Among the most important of these realities for US-Russian relations in the next decade is the failure of domestic constituencies and institutions in both countries to support the overall structure of strategic objectives. The problem with a US-Russian strategic partnership is not at the strategic level, but within the competing domestic interests, divergent domestic views, and mismatched political and economic systems. The onus in this respect is on Russia to create a functioning democratic state that is accountable politically and subject to societal oversight, including a free media. It is also a parallel obligation to continue economic reforms and to establish market institutions to encourage American business interest and investment.

The United States for its part also could improve the coherence and accountability of executive agencies responsible for implementing the president's policy, but the focus of US efforts to build a partnership should be different. American leaders should reread the classics of realist theory to remind themselves that one of the consistent conclusions of theorists from Thucydides to Kissinger is that hegemonic powers ultimately fall when they fail to build reliable alliances (or in modern terms, partnerships) based on common strategic interests. Self-interested cooperation is more likely than reflexive self-reliance to succeed. It is less likely to create fear and hostility among potential competitors, which historically have fueled their efforts to build capabilities to protect themselves.

The United States can do little about the imbalance of power that creates uncertainty and concern about US intentions, but it can do more to establish self-interested partnerships for the pursuit of national interests. While Russia builds its democratic and market capacity for a real partnership, America can build a strategic partnership with Russia as a showcase of a responsible realist foreign policy deeply rooted in reality.

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