

An Interactive Planning Approach to Shaping U.S.-Russian Relations

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U.S. policy toward Russia, as toward the rest of the world, tends to be highly reactive. Analysts and policy-makers usually spend their time discussing what the Russian government might do in the future and how the United States will (or should) react. This is not actually a useful model for foreign policy planning. Over thirty years ago, Russell Ackoff, one of the pioneers in operational planning research, described reactive planning as walking into the future while facing the past. In his words, a reactive planner “has a good view of where the organization has been and is, but no view of where it is going.”¹ In this memo, I will describe the three forms of planning outlined by Ackoff and make the case for the advantage of developing a Russia policy based on the principles of interactive planning.

Three Types of Planning

In his article, Ackoff describes most planning as a form of “ritual rain dance performed at the end of the dry season to which any rain that follows is attributed.” Rather than having some effect on subsequent outcomes, it makes the planners feel better about any future successes that come their way, while allowing any failures to be attributed to externalities or unforeseen circumstances. The main reason for this lack of impact is that while most planning is designed to address existing or expected problems, problems as such do not exist in the real world. Rather than face finite and well-defined problems, decisionmakers confront what Ackoff calls messes – systems of problems in which all the problems interact with each other. With such systems, solving each problem only creates new ones and may only make the situation as a whole worse.

¹ All quotations in this memo are from Russell L. Ackoff, “The Corporate Rain Dance,” *The Wharton Magazine*, winter 1977. My thinking about this topic was greatly stimulated by Peter Perla, “Beyond alternative futures: Thinking about designing the future Navy,” CNA Quick Response Study, CQR D0024818.A1, March 2011

The most common type of planning is of the reactive or retrospective variety. Policymakers who use this form of planning are focused primarily with "identifying and fixing up bad situations." The goal of reactive planners is to try to maintain the status quo as much as possible. Government action officers generally spend the vast majority of their time in this mode, dealing with crises that in one way or another imperil the functioning of the programs for which they are responsible. In large part because of limits on time and resources, they are preoccupied with tactical questions and ignore strategic issues.

Prospective planning is the second type of planning commonly used by policymakers. This approach consists of attempting to predict what the world will be like at some point in the future and then preparing to deal with that future. In Ackoff's words, "it doesn't try to buck the tide, but rides on its leading edge, so as to get where the tide is going before anyone else does." The key tools of prospective planners include forecasting and scenario building. While reactive planners focus on short-term issues, prospective planners focus on long-range programs that attempt to optimize a particular set of policies given a set of assumptions about the external environment at some future point. While this approach is less commonly used in government, it does feature in departments that focus on long-range planning. An improvement over reactive planning, this approach suffers from two critical problems. First of all, the scenarios used by prospective planners are generally based on some combination of past experience and current trends. However, as any stock market analyst can tell you, past results are no guarantee of future performance. The only time that the future can be forecast accurately is when it is completely determined by the past. As Ackoff points out, that is also the condition under which no amount of planning can change the situation. Second, it makes no effort to affect the external environment, assuming that this is not something that can be influenced by policymakers.

This willingness to change the external environment is what sets apart the interactive planner. He or she "believes that the future is largely under an organization's control" and depends largely on actions and events that occur going forward than on the events of the past. Therefore, the goal of planning is to design a desirable future and invent ways to bring that future about. Ackoff calls this type of planning "the art of the *impossible*." He argues that the goal of planning should be "to convert what is initially considered to be impossible into what is subsequently accepted as possible." The most effective way of accomplishing this is to change the environment in a direction that makes the preferred future end-state more likely to come about. Unfortunately, this approach to planning is hardly ever used by the policymaking community because they feel they will be able to deal with the future simply by doing a better job of predicting it and preparing for it.

In order to make the impossible possible, Ackoff advocates starting by developing an idealized vision of the future as the planners would like to see it, "if they were free to replace the current system with whatever they wanted most." The only constraints on this "idealized redesign" are technological feasibility and operational viability. The idea is to stop planning away *from* a current state and start planning

toward a desired state. Ackoff is careful to note that he is not advocating trying to design a future utopia. In his words, an idealized design “is built on the realization that our concept of the ideal is subject to continuous change...” Therefore, the planners have to include a capability for the system to be able to adapt to shifts both in the environment and in the policymakers’ preferences.

Once an interactive planner has developed a vision of a desired future, she or he can work backwards to find potential critical juncture points that can help change the current environment in a direction that would bring it closer to the ideal state. Some of these efforts will succeed, while others will fail. As a result, the conception of the ideal state is likely to change over time and the planning process has to be sufficiently flexible to take such changes into account. But the end result is that planners stop focusing on how to modify the existing world at the margins and start thinking creatively about how to bring about their ideal future.

Building toward an Idealized Redesign of U.S.-Russian Relations

The current diplomatic agenda for both Russian and U.S. policy makers appears to be permanently stuck in reactive mode. Residual fear of the other side’s intentions, seemingly left over from Cold War days that ended 20 years ago, continues to exert an influence on policy planning in both countries. Many American policy planners continue to worry about the possibility that Russian leaders harbor aggressive intentions toward the other countries that became independent when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991. Russian planners, in turn, still seem to genuinely fear the possibility of a NATO invasion of Russian territory, at least if one were to take at face value documents such as the 2010 Russian military strategy.

As a result, policy planning on U.S.-Russian relations usually revolves around an agenda based on the past. The dominant issues – NATO-Russia relations, nuclear arms control and proliferation, even missile defense – would be completely familiar to policymakers working in the 1960s and 70s. The few truly new areas of cooperation, such as transit of supplies to Afghanistan via Russian territory and intelligence sharing in counter-terrorism, are often treated with suspicion by analysts and politicians on both sides.

There have been some efforts to engage in prospective planning in the relationship. This has primarily taken the form of efforts to adapt existing institutions to new realities. In some cases, these efforts have had some positive impact, such as the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council as a step to prevent the creation of new dividing lines in European security. Similarly, arms control efforts over the last twenty years have led to fairly significant cuts in the two countries’ nuclear weapons arsenals. And planners on both sides continue to look for ways to reduce distrust and increase cooperation in the bilateral relationship, including through the well-publicized attempt to “reset” the relationship after the 2008 elections in both countries. The various bilateral commissions set up by President Obama and President Medvedev are relatively successful aspects of this effort.

But these efforts, while laudable, suffer from the faults common to all prospective planning. They take the current environment as the starting point and attempt to build the relationship from there. They also focus cooperative initiatives on dealing with the threats that exist today or that seem likely to exist in the future based on current trends. In doing so, they are inevitably doomed to do little more than modify the existing relationship at the margins. What is needed instead is a new paradigm for the bilateral relationship, akin to the ideas that in the aftermath of World War II envisioned a full partnership between the Allied states and Germany and led to German participation in NATO just ten years after its defeat in the war.

What might such a new paradigm look like? The rest of this memo is obviously speculative, and presents a personal point of view of what an ideal Russian-American relationship might look like twenty or thirty years in the future.²

1. Russia and the United States would be partners in a new European (or perhaps even worldwide) security architecture. They would cooperate with other states in ensuring stability and strengthening governance in potentially unstable parts of the world.³
2. The nuclear relationship between the two countries would be similar to that of the United States and Great Britain. In this environment, bilateral nuclear arms control would no longer be relevant. Instead, Russia and the United States would focus on counter-proliferation and multilateral nuclear arms reductions that include all states that possess nuclear weapons.
3. Both countries would be working together to adjust the international security system to deal with China's rising power. The ideal would be to incorporate China seamlessly into existing international security structures or to establish new structures in which China is a full partner.
4. Russia and the United States would be partners in developing technologies to intercept long-range ballistic missiles that could threaten international security. This partnership would be extended to other potential partners, including the European Union and perhaps China and India.
5. Both countries will work together to stem the potential danger from transnational threats such as terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and smuggling. They will also cooperate in dealing with the potential security effects of global climate change.

² Due to space constraints, I focus here only on security issues. A full analysis would also look at economic relations between the two states.

³ Based on current trends, such areas might include Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, but of course the zones of instability might be in completely different areas by that point in time.

Given this set of aspects of an ideal security relationship between the United States and Russia, policymakers could work backward to develop a set of policies that could shift the world in a direction that would make some or all of them more likely to occur. For example, it may turn out that thinking along these lines leads to the realization that maintaining NATO in its current form is actually damaging to European security in the long run, leading to efforts to replace it with another organization that includes a broader range of states and does not carry the burden of NATO's Cold War legacy. On the other hand, Russian planners may realize that their country does not face any threat from the West and can therefore transfer their military forces away from European borders and toward more likely security threats on its southern borders. Both of these scenarios seem to be completely unrealistic given today's security environment, but interactive planners may find that they provide the best way to maximize their countries' security in the long run.

Again, in this brief memo I have simply sought to provide some illustrative examples of this approach. The main point is not to focus on the specifics of the particular ideal state of the relationship but to make the case that an interactive planning perspective will more likely to lead to improvements in security for both the United States and Russia. Current planning approaches are still based on a combination of continued mistrust due to Cold War legacies and piecemeal efforts to adapt existing institutions to new realities.