

The Security Dilemma and “Two-Level Games” in U.S.-Russia Relations

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The Domestic and the International

U.S.-Russia relations today reflect a classic case of the security dilemma. Mutual suspicion between Moscow and Washington go beyond natural concerns about each other’s build-up of offensive capabilities. Each state considers the other’s enhancement of defensive capabilities (and international defense commitments) threatening. For example, Moscow views the U.S.-led ballistic missile defense project as a threat to Russia’s nuclear deterrent capability, while Washington and Europe consider military exercises in Russia’s westernmost regions and in Belarus in 2010 and 2011 as rehearsals of suspiciously harsh reprisals against neighboring NATO and neutral states.

The security dilemma is a widespread political phenomenon in international relations. With regard to U.S.-Russia relations, the dilemma results from a set of factors, including post-Cold-War differences in Eurasia policy, the highly controversial logic of nuclear deterrence, and a legacy of deep mutual distrust. While this memo does not discuss the sources of the U.S.-Russia security dilemma at length, it explores the consequences of “two-level” negotiating games between Washington and Moscow on the dilemma. In a seminal 1988 essay, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” political scientist Robert Putnam noted the difference between international interactions among chief negotiators (such as presidents and their plenipotentiary representatives) and domestic interactions on foreign policy among legislatures, assorted interest groups, and the general public. A successful round of negotiations is one that ends with an agreement championed by lead negotiators with broad endorsement (“ratified”) domestically.

Within the United States, the domestic side of foreign policymaking in security-related discussions is highly visible. The U.S. Congress and business lobbies weigh in strongly when agreements affecting U.S. security interests are discussed between

¹ The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the MacArthur Foundation.

representatives of Washington and Moscow. Relatedly, if not at the domestic level, is another constituency whose opinion the U.S. president needs to respect: U.S. allies both within and outside NATO. Given the U.S. commitment to NATO as a key collective security mechanism, the White House seeks broad endorsement by European NATO members on major U.S.-Russia security and cooperative initiatives.

Identifying a clear-cut domestic level in Russian foreign policymaking is more difficult. Since the parliamentary elections of December 1999, the Russian legislative branch has rarely, if ever, voiced disagreement with the Russian president on foreign policy (or other) issues. The range of options available to the Kremlin in its relations with the United States would appear to be only limited by public attitudes and the inclinations of the political elite: as of the summer of 2011, 26 percent of Russians considered the United States a threat to their country, while at least the same percentage of the Russian public did not consider the United States to be a friendly nation.² This, however, does not really create a predicament for the Kremlin: few observers doubt that the Kremlin can simply ignore or purposefully shape the general opinion of the Russian public using major media outlets and the authoritative pronouncements of popular national leaders. This lack of independence of the Russian legislature and public opinion from the Kremlin has at least three negative consequences for Moscow as it engages Washington on security matters.

First, a stronger dependence of domestic views on the preferences of foreign policymakers in Russia often makes Moscow's negotiating position more vulnerable than Washington's. The Russian executive effectively forgoes the opportunity to tie his demands to an expected, but independent, posture of his legislature (when this posture conforms to the position of the president). Second, as long as Russia's chief negotiator cannot make a credible reference to the opinion of independent representatives of the Russian people, his ability to anchor positions in his country's democratic choice becomes constrained. Finally, the Kremlin finds itself hard-pressed to demand more "side payments" (to use Putnam's language) or concessions from the White House, out of concern that the incumbent or next U.S. Congress will scrap many of the benefits that Russia has been able to secure for itself in negotiations.

The Impact of the Game

Even in the presence of such institutional asymmetry, the logic of "two-level games" exacerbates the security dilemma in U.S.-Russia relations. Such games increase uncertainty about negotiators' motives and their ability to deliver. They also reduce the credibility of commitments taken before foreign policymakers submit agreements for domestic "clearance." Even stronger uncertainty surrounds the pattern of future interplays between the domestic and international levels on each side. Given the low degree of independence between Russia's chief international negotiator and domestic constituencies, this uncertainty may be more acute for Moscow than Washington.

² According to the results of a public opinion poll by the Levada Center—one of Russia's two independent pollsters (http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2011/07/14_a_3695649.shtml)

Furthermore, according to some reports, Russian negotiators usually have a less-than-perfect grasp of U.S. domestic politics and its influence on foreign policymaking. This does not help the Russian side manage uncertainty during international talks and generates suspicion about the integrity of U.S. negotiators (What if we agree to a deal that is likely to be domestically challenged, if not rescinded?).

As mentioned, a different two-level structure on the U.S. side consists of the interaction between the U.S. administration and NATO allies in Europe. Both NATO's institutional design and historical objectives imply that Washington needs to secure endorsement by NATO for any major moves in its relations with Moscow. Coordination of policies vis-à-vis Russia remains one of the cornerstones of the Alliance. Thus, any U.S. administration would strive to avoid an impression of concluding agreements with Russia at the expense, or even "behind the back," of any NATO allies. For example, the White House sought public declarations of approval for the New START strategic arms control treaty from all of NATO's East and Central European members (securing them in all cases but Lithuania). In its turn, the Russian side had a decent grasp of NATO politics and made attempts (if at times incoherent) to reduce adverse affects on the U.S.-Russia relationship.

The current missile defense controversy between Russia and the United States illustrates the impact of U.S. domestic politics on U.S.-Russia relations. The interaction between the Obama administration and Congress has left Moscow with no other choice but to accept limitations imposed on the White House by conservative senators who uncompromisingly demand a missile defense system out of conviction that the United States (and its allies) must be reliably protected against all security threats, including ballistic missile attacks. At the same time, it is difficult for Moscow to prove that the missile defense program undermines Russia's interests as long as the United States has a legitimate right to honor the demands of its NATO allies for the development of collective defense capabilities without specifying the source(s) of potential threats.

In conjunction, the interaction between the United States and NATO is played out in European security architecture debates. While Moscow persistently favors "pan-European institutions" and the United States can be seen exploring options for engaging Russia, a group of NATO states tends to present such moves as unwarranted appeasements of Moscow. This inevitably narrows down the range of "win-sets" available to any U.S. administration on many European security issues.

Further aggravating the U.S.-Russia security dilemma is the fact that domestic and international politics are potentially interchangeable in the U.S. context. It is always a possibility that incumbent lawmakers will become international negotiators. Once in the White House, say, Republican politicians could be reluctant to continue cooperating with Russia on security issues – a course they have been consistently criticizing from the bench. As long as a change in U.S. administrations can sharply turn Washington's Russia policy, the feeling of the security dilemma on the Russian side becomes perpetual and plays into the hands of those in Russia who argue that any "reset" with the United States is an aberration that will give way to a "traditional" adversarial U.S. approach toward Russia.

Indeed, Russian politics provides no better guarantees against an unfavorable shift in Moscow's approach to relations with the United States. One only needs to watch the powerful domestic constituencies who argue that, for assorted reasons from historical determinism to geopolitics to mysticism, Russia and the United States are "doomed" to be competitors and who advocate outright opposition to U.S. influence in the world. Washington also has to heed the possibility of radical nationalist forces (active outside the Duma) seizing power in Russia, resulting in heavy negative implications for Russia's policy in the areas of primary concern to the U.S.

Reversing the Dynamic

When a security dilemma exists in a bilateral relationship, such as the one between Moscow and Washington, such "two-level games" make it more acute. However, in the absence of a security dilemma, they can serve to prevent its onset. In this case, a domestic lawmaker or defense contractor might seek to qualify, if not contain, any attempt by the executive to modify attitudes toward allied or friendly states on key international issues. Indeed, such states usually have powerful lobbies that make themselves heard within both the U.S. and Russian government.

For example, domestic opinion in the United States, as reflected in Congressional views, acts as a powerful brake on the development of a potential – if indirect – security dilemma in the U.S.-Israel relationship. Such a dilemma could materialize should the view prevail among U.S. policymakers that the strengthening of Israel's security potentially jeopardizes some U.S. national security interests by eliciting radical Islamist responses against the United States. In Russia, a similar mechanism affecting policymaking and public rhetoric may very well be preventing the rise of a security dilemma from becoming a stark reality in Russia-China relations, despite a clear and steady increase in China's economic and military capabilities over the past two decades.

The security dilemma-reinforcing effects of the two-level-game dynamic on U.S.-Russia relations can decrease as a result of several developments, none of which can be orchestrated or happen overnight.

First, a credible but sufficiently flexible domestic constituency may emerge in Russia at a certain point. For the time being, Russian public opinion is not fully fit for such a role because it is considered by U.S. policymakers as malleable and susceptible to manipulation. To begin with, a credible discussion of foreign policy options, taking place within the Russian parliament, could provide the necessary reassurances to members of Congress. As a result, the opposition of U.S. legislators to confidence-building measures with Russia in the security field might gradually diminish.

Should powerful parliamentary factions unambiguously independent from the Kremlin materialize in Russia, they could move on to establishing a cross-domestic dialogue with their U.S. congressional counterparts. In the course of such interaction, these factions may gain a certain influence over the positions of U.S. domestic policymakers by pointing out the constraints that the Russian parliament can place on Russian international negotiators.

Second, costly signals – “expensive” unilateral moves to demonstrate good intent – that both sides could send each other might help to alleviate domestic pressure on negotiators. One Russian signal – the cancellation of the shipment of S-300 missiles to Iran in September 2010 – played a key role in tilting the balance in the Senate in favor of ratifying the New START treaty later that year. This ratification, in turn, served as a reciprocal costly signal from the U.S. administration.

Finally, convincing evidence of positive spillover from one area of U.S.-Russia security engagement to another, including (but not limited to) arms control, cooperation on Afghanistan, or coordination on Iran, could soften the domestic opposition to the Obama administration’s security policy decisions affecting Russia.

Conclusion

Should the security dilemma recede from the forefront of the U.S.-Russia relationship, the two-level-game dynamic will become a tailwind for U.S.-Russia ties. U.S. lawmakers and allies alike could then develop interest in preserving the positive momentum and help cushion any divisive security shocks that may derive from the executive branch in either country (or externally). The sheer thought that this could indeed be a possibility may generate a push to change the outdated security dilemma-ridden pattern of U.S.-Russia relations.