

# Russian-American Relations in the Post-Cold War Environment

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October 1997

PONARS Policy Memo 16  
Moscow Public Science Foundation

Five years into the brave new world ushered in by the collapse of the Communist system and the dramatic reshuffle of global geopolitics there has emerged a novel paradigm of Russian-American relations. This paradigm is no longer predominantly rooted in adversarial competition of the Cold War period, but neither may it be interpreted in terms of well established partnership and genuine cooperation, notwithstanding occasional official declarations to this effect on both sides.

Current US-Russian relations are marked by increased mutual tolerance, but at the same time a certain aloofness and desire to preserve equidistance. Ambivalence in intentions and attitudes is far from surprising. After all, what is a short half-decade of relative truce compared a half century spent in a near-death hostile embrace? Yet is it possible that progress already achieved in bilateral interaction will become the foundation for a long-term relationship that could perhaps be even more durable than the endless Cold War rivalry? The purpose of this article is to identify some of the elements of current Russian-American relations that appear to be not only sufficiently benign but also benignly sufficient to guide both countries toward the infinitely tempting but so far vaguely unspecified "real partnership."

## **The Wisdom of Crisis Avoidance**

A most noteworthy accomplishment in US-Russian relations, particularly of the last year or two, was the ability of both sides to prevent a serious crisis in bilateral relations despite potential dangers and risks.

On numerous occasions since late 1993 the prospect of the end of the Russian-American fragile post-Cold War "honeymoon" has loomed large. Perceptions at least on the Russian side would become so somber that on occasion Moscow would start talking about the inevitability of a period of Cold Peace between the two nations.

However, the ups and downs in Moscow's rhetoric to a large extent reflected its internal situation. Faced with an ever mounting challenge from various opposition forces, which had somewhat eased only as the result of President Yeltsin's reelection in July 1996, the ruling regime could not ignore pro-nationalistic attitudes espoused by large segments of public opinion. Clearly it had to react one way or another every time it was accused of "docility in the face of Imperialistic encroachments." Similarly, in a unique set of historic circumstances, after the 1994 mid-term congressional elections, Bill Clinton, Boris Yeltsin's favorite partner among Western politicians, suddenly found himself faced with compatible domestic challenges and criticism for

allegedly being soft on Russian quasi-Democrats and excessively "Russia-centric" in his foreign policy to the detriment of other Newly Independent States.

However, in a most extraordinary way there seems to have occurred little if any visible, qualitative deterioration in the two nations' relationship. Indeed, at the worst junctions in these relations (e.g. after the notorious Yeltsin-Clinton encounter in Budapest in fall of 1994 or when NATO started its air-strikes against Bosnian Serbs without prior consultation with Moscow) both sides were able to bounce back, minimizing the negative impact of specific tensions. The real reason was not only the understandable fear of losing positive momentum in the short term, but an apparent mutual desire to abide by new rules of the game that by now included belief in the value of conflict avoidance as a method of managing long-term bilateral relations.

Paradoxically, domestic opposition pressures worked to create this situation by creating reasons for each leader to make life easier for the other. If it was not surprising that the Clinton White House came out in favor of "Boris-the-friend" after the 1993 State Duma elections given the resounding success of Russian ultra-nationalists under Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, or after the Communist victory at 1995 Duma elections, then Clinton's ability to close his eyes to numerous cases of Yeltsin's heavy-handedness (such as physical elimination of the Supreme Soviet opposition in 1993 and military invasion of the secessionist Chechen Republic in late 1994) was truly amazing, given the American tradition of support for democratic and human rights norms.

The Administration remained visibly untouched by the progressive elimination of self-avowed Democrats around Yeltsin, such as Anatoly Chubais and Andrei Kozyrev. Moreover, even Russian steps that could be construed as inimical to Western interests, such as CFE unilateral revision or failure to ratify START II, were met with indulgence. The US continued to support the Yeltsin government despite all this and other provocations. It used its influence in the IMF to release a new credit line for Russia, and Clinton's trip to Moscow in April 1996 in the midst of the Russian presidential campaign was still another outstanding demonstration of his continuous personal support for Boris Yeltsin.

For its part, Russia under Yeltsin never really tried to challenge the US on matters that were important for Washington. Especially during the Kozyrev-led Russian-Western honeymoon which lasted well into 1995 despite raging protestations from innumerable Russian nationalists of all shades, Russia demonstrated unprecedented self-restraint, verging on isolationism, particularly in dealings with Third World regimes known for their anti-Western inclinations, as Russia proved receptive to American wishes and even demands in the conduct of its relations with specific developing countries. While trying to forge a partnership with Iran--a southern neighbor that may have crucial importance in terms of Russia's relations both with Muslim-oriented New Independent States and the larger Islamic World--the Yeltsin government was extremely cautious not to cross a line that would displease Washington. Likewise, having been virtually eliminated from the center-stage of the Middle East peace process, Russia made no attempt to get back through resuming its support for radical Arab regimes and political factions.

In terms of its behavior in international conflicts the RF almost totally aligned itself with the predominant Western position. A clear example was the Bosnian crisis and attempts at its resolution through the UN Security Council and at Dayton. It is quite noteworthy that siding with

the West in the Bosnian case was particularly painful for Moscow since as a result it had to act against Russia's "Slavic brethren," going against a historic tradition.

### **National Self-Interest Behind "Enlightened" Mutual Attitudes**

Russian foreign policy sympathetic to the Western and American agenda was predicated not on a sheer desire to please friendly Western leaders, nor even the need to court the West for financial aid and additional international legitimacy (e.g. resulting from access to the Group of Seven). There were other motivations. For instance, a relatively cautious approach to Iran might well be explained by Moscow's strategic calculation of the future balances of forces in the Gulf/South Asian region, and by an understanding that Iran may at some point turn into a hegemonic power not necessarily friendly to Moscow. Along the same line, and apparent disinterest in resuming any competition with the US in search for regional clients in the Middle East results from a realpolitik recognition of at least transient Russian weakness in the pursuit of active regional policy, and of the fact that the majority of former Soviet Middle Eastern allies, with whom the Russian Federation could contemplate improving relations, were clear regional losers. In a similar way, the pro-Yeltsin approach taken by the Clinton Administration was not necessarily rooted in any exalted "Russophilia." Washington gave warm support to Yeltsin because of numerous US agencies' analyses indicating Yeltsin could be counted upon as a guarantee of the irreversibility of the big and small victories gained over the former Cold War antagonist.

The surprisingly smooth and shock-resistant mode of US-Russian relations during last few years may also be due, paradoxically, to the diminishing importance of each side to the other. With Russia preoccupied by its uneasy competitive-cooperative relations with other CIS countries, and the US focused primarily on places like Bosnia, the Middle East and China, both nations have clearly diverging foreign policy agendas. When playing their games at different tables, Russian and US leaders may have the luxury of being tolerant and even indulgent toward each other.

### **How Durable Will the New "Modus Operandi" Be?**

One can conclude that the Clinton-Yeltsin period in the evolution of US-Russian relations helped accomplish at least one important goal. If under Gorbachev-Reagan and Gorbachev-Bush relations were "de-demonized," then under their successors they were "de-dramatized." Both sides realized that the drama of the Cold War did not necessarily have to be followed by a fiery "entente cordiale" worthy of the international status of the two players. Gradually since 1992 there has emerged a not entirely spectacular but decently workable status-quo in Russian-American relations apparently representing an optimal minimum that satisfies both sides for the time-being. As long as they avoid real large-scale attempts at change, and therefore guarantee themselves against resounding failures, the current Russian and American leaderships may even claim that they have achieved a "Golden Age" in bilateral relations. Such a basically self-serving position may be exactly what both governments need, given the intricacies and challenges of their domestic environments.

An interesting question then arises: can this become a viable long-term alternative for both nations? After all, why should the two giants of Western and Eastern hemispheres, separated by thousands of miles and unique cultures and traditions be doomed to compete? And if for the same kind of reasons that make them different, and perhaps intrinsically incompatible, they cannot become close partners, why should they not simply live and let live? If such an eventuality becomes a reality then the Yeltsin-Clinton times and the current relaxed if lackluster style of managing these relations will become a model for the future. However, too many "ifs" prevent this idealistic, though perhaps perfectly common-sense, model from being a truly operational one, especially if looked at from a long-term perspective.

### **Trouble In The Future?**

From a Devil's advocate perspective, the existing status-quo is not sustainable because it is based on a number of mutual illusions and misperceptions or, what is even worse, on narrowly defined personal and institutional interests of particular actors in the White House and the Kremlin. If real problems are ignored or put on a shelf, then all attempts by Moscow and Washington to pretend that they can go on living in a business-as-usual atmosphere forever will only aggravate a potential real clash if and when it becomes a reality. The fact that we have not yet seen such a clash will have then to be explained by pure luck, rather than alleged wisdom of top political leaderships.

Despite consistent attempts by the two governments to prove that real Russian-American rapprochement is taking place as the result of mutual accommodation, so far there has emerged no serious social base for sustained amicable relations between the two nations. In the Russian context, even though there are active ideologically motivated proponents of better relations with the US, no real "American lobby" exists that could generate different public attitudes or have a permanent influence on the policymaking elite. Those who do business with Americans or profit from positive US-Russian relations in other tangible ways as a rule prefer not to get involved in politics and even try to keep as low a profile as possible.

It would be even less justified to speak of any significant or viable "Russian lobby" in the United States. Though the number of Russians in the US continues to grow, only a tiny minority of them ever tries to do anything about US-Russian relations; the "Russian community" in the US is fragmented, politically divided and clearly does not constitute a meaningful factor in the US politics. Attitudes toward Russia among the majority of Americans usually depends on an occasional cover story or event reported in mass media. Otherwise Russia and the state of US-Russian relations is a "non-issue" for the American public, which means that actual American policy toward Russia may easily be defined by a very narrow circle of politicians or other opinion molders.

In the Russian context the same kind of situation pertains, though for other reasons. The Yeltsin government's US policy, despite personnel changes in the foreign policy decisionmaking apparatus, remains extremely partisan. As a result, no single individual or even a special interest group plays the role of an "absolute guarantor" of continuity and stability in US-Russian relations. The comfortable status-quo could easily vanish, since in all probability it has emerged

simply as the result of unimaginative strategic thinking in both capitals and not of any substantive changes in public attitudes, national philosophies and doctrines, traditions and modalities of practical interaction in economics, global and regional politics, and other stable factors. Seen from this perspective, it becomes obvious that certain key unresolved or outstanding issues between the US and the Russia may suddenly create serious problems for Moscow and Washington, if left unattended under the premise that postponement of a solution is the best way of avoiding potential trouble.

## **Possible New Approaches**

In three areas--arms control, NATO, and economic integration--concrete steps can be taken to move from this fragile illusion of cooperation.

### I. Arms Control

- 1) It will be easier to achieve progress in multilateral negotiations if their goals are specified as strictly arms control and not disarmament, given the fluidity of the role of nuclear deterrence in security and domestic opposition in Russia to policies that appear to weaken its defense.
- 2) Multilateral arms control could be directed primarily not at reductions and even limitations of existing forces, but at coordination of their modernization as well as confidence-building measures.
- 3) The expected involvement of third parties in currently bilateral Russian-American negotiations should be gradual and flexible. As a first step one can imagine, for example, multilateral risk reduction centers instead of existing bilateral and multilateral launch notification agreements.
- 4) All players should contemplate combining negotiated agreements with unilateral actions. If current tendencies in Russian-American relations continue, unilateral restraints in strategic sphere may outpace even revised and accelerated arms control measures. To avoid Russian-American strategic "decoupling" it becomes important to make these unilateral steps parallel and, when possible, coordinated. Such coordinated unilateral actions may be particularly helpful in avoiding potential pitfalls of the ratification process. In the past both the USSR and the US would turn to unilateral steps that had no legal power but were still politically binding and played an important role in curbing the arms race (SALT II is just one example). "Soft" arms control measures of this sort may be fairly attractive to third parties, especially those that are not ready to participate in classic arms control negotiations.

### II. NATO Expansion

Ambiguities as to the actual timing, shape and substance of NATO's expansion toward the East, as well as potential Russian responses, do persist and may sooner or later cause a serious real crisis in bilateral relations. American officials should recognize the important alternatives in Russian policy discussion:

#### *A) The "New Yalta" Option.*

The decision to enlarge is interpreted in this context as a tacit Western proposal to Russia to divide Europe into spheres of influence. Since former Soviet republics (with the possible exception of the Baltic states) are not perceived as candidates to join NATO in the foreseeable

future, they are expected to remain within Russia's strategic zone of influence by default, while Russia recognizes NATO expansion as a manifestation of Western victory in the Cold War. In exchange, the West should recognize Russia's special interests and role throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union. The "new Yalta" option, if accepted, might lead to the following Russian activities:

- Active promotion of a collective security system to encompass most former Soviet Republics (e.g. Russia will increase efforts to implement the Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security of May 15, 1992);
- New efforts will be undertaken to supplement the existing strategic alliance with Belarus by similar arrangements with Ukraine and Kazakhstan and, if possible, Georgia and Armenia (in the process Russia may take wide use of economic "sticks and carrots," and rely heavily on Russian-speaking minorities to make above-mentioned countries more cooperative);
- Attempts to reach a CIS consensus on the PFP program and coordinate positions of CIS states toward NATO in general will follow, as may negotiations with NATO on division of responsibilities in peacekeeping, entailing explicit or implicit Western recognition of the leading role of Russia in the CIS;
- Within this context Russia would unambiguously renounce the CFE Treaty as outdated and contradicting the new strategic situation in Europe; and
- It may also go as far as demanding that NATO exempts the territory of Baltic states from its activities and preserves the Kaliningrad region status quo.

#### B) *The "OSCE versus NATO" Option*

This implies that Russia is still be able to prevent NATO from monopolizing the security agenda in Europe. Allegedly since it is not an all-European structure, NATO cannot claim legitimacy and unconditional support of all European states. Russia should concentrate on building the broadest possible coalition of nations interested in promoting OSCE mechanisms. The prime goals of Russian policy in this regard include:

- To assure that all peacekeeping in Europe falls under exclusive jurisdiction of the OSCE, while NATO is deprived of any sweeping mandate in conducting police operations. This may be accompanied by an invitation to OSCE to increase its role in conflict resolution on the territory of the former Soviet Union;
- Under these circumstances, Russia will likely attempt to use the OSCE mechanism in order to revise the CFE Treaty on a new non-block basis (new CFE-2 Treaty to replace alliance with national levels);
- Turn the OSCE into an all-European arms control mechanism, thus preventing NATO from substituting the first basket within the OSCE process with its own institutions and mechanisms; and
- Assure that it enjoys a special status within new enhanced OSCE structures (e.g. Russia gets a permanent seat in the European Security Council and a corresponding veto right, much as in the UN Security Council; Russia receives an appropriate number of votes in OSCE bodies to reflect its size, power, and stature in European politics).

#### C) *The "Membership-Through-Partnership" Option*

This option seems to be the most favorable to NATO. It means active Russian policy aimed at strengthening and deepening cooperation with NATO. The idea is that if such cooperation takes

root and covers areas of crucial importance for both Russia and the West, at some point the whole matter of NATO expansion becomes irrelevant. In this case, even staying formally outside the alliance, through the Russia-NATO Council Russia will be in a position to exercise serious influence over NATO decisions, especially those related to her own interests. The self-gratifying idea of those who back this option is that after all Russia is more important to NATO than smaller Central European states that may formally join the alliance. Proponents of this option suggest that Russia concentrate on the following:

- Get an official commitment from NATO that the latter will not take any military decisions that may negatively impact Russian security (related to deploying nuclear weapons or building major military bases in the territories of its new members);
- Promote such an evolution of military-technical and operational plans and postures of NATO that would not be threatening to Russia;
- Negotiate with NATO a non-discriminatory access of Russia to European (and other) arms markets, so that it may take full advantage of the forthcoming modernization of Central European armies;
- Insist on considerably expanded cooperation between Russia and NATO in defense conversion and coordination of military-industrial policies; and
- Create practical mechanisms of on-going high-level political and military consultations between Russia and NATO.

Given the highly volatile character of contemporary Russian politics it is hard to imagine that Moscow will soon make an ultimate choice between these options. Most likely, it will continue to fluctuate within the above described "triangle," gravitating to this or that option depending on specific internal and external circumstances. Needless to say, Western policies will be crucial in defining particular accents and nuances in the Russian position on NATO expansion and other related issues.

### III. Economic Interaction

American policy presumes that by helping Russia enter the market economy the US will be able not only to assure the irreversibility of the process of democratization, but also provide impetus for the development of the entire post-Soviet zone in a similar direction. However, the expected boom in bilateral trade, investment, and other forms of economic cooperation never really materialized. Consequently the solid economic foundation for Russian-American relations is still lacking. There are many reasons for this disconcerting situation: Russian reforms were more difficult than originally anticipated, rapid industrial decay in Russia severely limited collaboration, the formerly unquestionable reliability of Moscow as a trading partner was severely undermined, and the US was very slow in lifting Cold War trade restrictions and limitations like the notorious Jackson-Vanick amendment.

At this point, integration will be aided if the US can address Russian fears that:

- The US is only interested in exploiting Russian natural resources and not in modernizing its industrial base, since the latter would simply help Russia to emerge as a serious global economic competitor;
- As a result of some questionable deals, Russia is becoming a "dumping ground" for US inferior, outdated and even hazardous goods and materials (e.g. foods contaminated with chemicals, low quality alcohol, tobacco and drugs, as well as all kind of wastes--from

industrial to nuclear). Moreover there is a wide-spread feeling that imports from the US (particularly food products, textiles, cars, and consumer electronics) undermine domestic production;

- Americans are involved in a large-scale secret brain-drain operation against Russia (e.g. Soros Foundation activities). Similarly, any US involvement in the conversion of the Russian defense sector is seen by many as a disguised attempt to obtain Russian military secrets and undermine Russian security; and
- The US has no intention to open its own markets to Russian goods, and is moreover trying to squeeze the Russian Federation from other international markets (especially of arms and advanced technologies).

Despite all these grievances and disappointments it has to be admitted that bilateral trade grows as well as does US investments in Russia. However the main channel for these beneficial improvements is the private sector. It may only be hoped that political changes in Russia, or for that matter, some arbitrary protectionist US measures will not reverse this process.

### **Contradictory Mutual Perceptions**

It has to be underlined again that the two societies retain generally aloof attitudes, misperceptions and even biases toward each other which will complicate matters if government policies do deteriorate. Many Americans regard Russia--along with other CIS countries--as almost irrelevant to the US in the post-Cold War environment. The US public is easily shocked by bloody tragedies in Chechnya, Tajikistan, Abkhazia or Nagornyi Karabakh, if the US media gives them prominence. But such shocks tend to have only transient effects, especially since they are usually overshadowed by similar occurrences elsewhere.

On the Russian side, the single most important sociological phenomenon that affects attitudes toward the US and any other foreign country is almost total preoccupation with the internal situation and resultant apathy toward international issues. A growing number of citizens do not care about international politics at all. In this sense, Russia is paradoxically gravitating more toward a self-centered and complacent American model, rather than the much more internationalist and cosmopolitan Western European model.

As far as grassroots anti-Americanism is concerned, its origins in Russia are perhaps similar to what may be found in many other societies--at the psychological level it represents a blend of envy toward the more fortunate, fear of domination, self-pity and other excruciating emotions that have forever tormented the Russian soul. More serious is the uneasy and painful feeling increasing in the Russian intelligentsia that was traditionally pro-American. Currently many of these people (whose views are still very important for molding the general public sentiment) are asking themselves very hard questions: What has the US really done to promote democracy and market reform in Russia? What has been done by the "civilized" world to moderate the authoritarian and bellicose instincts of Russian rulers? The epitome of the tragic rift between their expectations of benign American influence and actual US disinterest was the deaf ear Washington turned on Russian human rights activist Sergei Kovalev's pleas to the US regarding government atrocities in Chechnya. By now many Russians who really care are of the impression

that America's only concern in terms of the Russian internal political situation is to keep their man in the Kremlin, regardless of repressive policies--in effect ruining prospects for real democracy in Russia.

To conclude, US-Russian relations of the last few years may be called a success story only if gauged against the bitter existential confrontation of the Cold War era. Seen from other perspectives they represent a serious failure to take advantage of a historic opportunity to create a solid, positive base for stable and mutually beneficial bilateral interaction. Unfortunately the two countries approach the new millennium without a clearly defined agenda for such interaction and without important political, economic and social groups that might have a vested interest in development and pursuit of this agenda.

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