

# Clinton's Moscow Mission

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When presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin meet in Moscow next month, issues such as START II, NATO expansion, trade with Iran and Iraq, and Russia's new draconian law on religion are likely to dominate the agenda. To historians of US-Soviet relations, this agenda should sound familiar as arms control, European security, regional conflicts, and human rights were the main components of most summit agendas between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This old agenda suggests that the promise of a new post-communist strategic partnership between the United States and Russia has not been realized. Especially as Russia continues to struggle in reforming its economy, many in the US have now concluded that engagement with this "basket case" is not worth the trouble--better to walk away from the failing project of internal reform and prepare instead to contain future external aggression.

This is a premature conclusion. The Soviet communist system and not Russia as a country or Russians as a people threatened American national interests during the Cold War. As long as Russia continues on the path of democratization and marketization, Russian-American relations hold the promise of moving beyond these old issues of division and confrontation. After all it was the collapse of communism, not skilled diplomacy, that triggered the greatest progress in all of these Cold War issues earlier in the last decade. Consequently, US national interests in the post-Post Cold War era are tied intimately to the fate of Russia's new political and economic system. Clinton cannot go to Russia again seeking to come home with a few, inconsequential "deliverables" on the old agenda. Rather, he must do what he can do to recharge Russia's commitment to democracy and capitalism.

Russia's market economy and electoral democracy are once again under siege. With IMF assistance, the Russian government narrowly averted a major devaluation of the ruble in July, but many believe they will not be so lucky this fall. If devaluation occurs, the scenarios being spun by Russian liberals, nationalists, and communists alike are dire. A sudden rise in prices triggered by a devaluation would trigger mass social unrest. In the panic, trade union officials and Communist Party leaders fear that they might lose the support of their constituencies who would turn to more radical political groups in times of crisis. For the first time in many years, the buzzword for Moscow's chattering class is fascism; analogies to Weimar abound. Even Yeltsin appeared to be worried about these extremists when he issued a warning in the early part of July to potential non-democratic challengers that his regime had enough military force to defeat any coup attempt.

In this highly charged atmosphere, Clinton pronouncements about the importance of START II, the necessity for Russians to pay higher taxes, or the evils of trading with Iran will look trivial.

Likewise, visits to "success story" projects funded by American assistance or photo-ops with "new business leaders" will make Clinton look like he is "out of touch" with Russian reality.

Instead, Clinton has to focus on the big picture: the future of capitalism and democracy in Russia. Regarding Russian economic reform, the Clinton Administration demonstrated leadership in responding aggressively to Russia's latest financial crisis. Though imprudent as an economic decision, the bailout helped to prevent a political exposition in Russia that would have made everyone worse off. Clinton must now follow up this bailout package with a tough-love message that no future bailouts will be forthcoming. For years, the Russian government has avoided taking the hard steps of enterprise restructuring--a process that must include massive bankruptcies, unemployment, and the wresting of assets from the hands of Soviet-era enterprise directors and into the hands of those that seek profits, not rents. Further delay is out of the question. The state must also sell the stakes it still holds in hundreds of enterprises.

After delivering this hard message to Yeltsin and his government, Clinton should consider delivering a softer more sympathetic message to the Russian people who have not experienced the rewards of reform. At a factory or veteran's club outside of Moscow, Clinton could try to explain why the United States still believes that economic reform in Russia will succeed and then announce a new assistance package aimed specifically at helping those hit hardest by Russia's economic depression. To date, the West's efforts at building a social safety net in Russia have been embarrassing. While expensive, a new social assistance initiative would not only demonstrate a renewed Western commitment to Russian reform, but it would also help to get Russian enterprises out of the social welfare business and into the production/profit-making business.

Clinton's "heavy lifting" regarding Russian democracy is even more important. When in Moscow, Clinton must deliver a private but firm message to Yeltsin and other Russian elites about the negative consequences of circumventing the democratic process. During the after dinner chat on the dacha porch one evening, Clinton should urge his counterpart to follow the example of George Washington and establish a precedent for the peaceful transfer of political power through an electoral process. As such a transfer would be a first in Russian history, no single event is more important for the consolidation of democracy than Russia's upcoming presidential election. He also could gently remind Yeltsin of the sorry legacy of other "founding fathers" throughout the world who thought they were too vital to their country to step down when their time was up.

Clinton should even consider holding a televised seminar with Russian nationalists, communists, and liberals on the virtues of democracy and the market. Liberal ideas are on the wane in Russia today. They need to be re-energized, and no one would be a more effective communicator about the importance of being on "the right of history" than President Clinton.

After Clinton leaves Moscow, the US must remain engaged in promoting democratic institutions in Russia. For years, Russian reformers and their Western backers wrongly believed that economic reform had to precede political reform. American assistance programs adopted this logic and devoted the lion's share of American aid to Russia into economic reform while only a fraction went to promoting democratic institutions. Empirically, however, the record of reform in

the post-communist world has demonstrated that the fastest democratizers also have conducted the most successful economic reforms.

Russia still lacks many of the basic institutions that constitute a liberal democracy. Programs that provide expertise regarding the development of these institutions--i.e. programs that promote parties, federalism, the rule of law, an independent media, and civil society--should be expanded, not curtailed as is presently planned. The United States also can do more in fostering basic democratic values in Russia by providing civic text books, funding public policy programs, developing higher education courses on democracy, and continuing student exchanges. While the market creates incentives for Russians to learn how to become entrepreneurs, Russians today have few incentives for learning how to be good democrats.

Many Americans have grown weary of Russia, as achievements have been few and headaches many. However, now is not the time to give up on Russia. Only seven years since the Soviet collapse, Russia's revolution has by no means ended. While Russia's current leaders are still committed to developing a market economy and a democratic polity, and to joining rather than threatening the community of democratic states, it is in the vital national interest of the United States to ensure that this trajectory continues. Continued engagement of Russia's reformers, sustained promotion of Russian liberal market and democratic institutions, and gradual integration of Russia into both the world capitalist system and the international community of democratic states are the policies that will prevent Russia's transition from turning belligerent. Containment, isolation, and neglect of democratic and market institutional development within Russia are the kinds of policies that will help transform Russia's evolution into a security threat both to democratic states in the West and especially to democratizing states closer to Russia.

No one has a greater interest in promoting the consolidation of democracy and capitalism in Russian than Bill Clinton. If Russia eventually succeeds in becoming a member of the international community of democratic states, Clinton will secure his place in history as an important foreign policy president. If Russian markets and democracy collapse, no one will remember that Clinton succeeded in getting START II signed during his September 1998 summit.

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