

# Who Won and Will Win Russia?

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According to conventional wisdom, the United States "lost" Russia in the 1990s. This assessment can be found on the pages of *The Nation*, *The Washington Times*, *The New York Times* magazine, or foreign policy issue papers prepared for presidential candidate George W. Bush. These attacks fall into two contradictory categories. One school holds that the policies pursued by the United States over the last decade have failed to establish capitalism and democracy in Russia, and instead have fueled corruption, crime, and ill will towards the United States. The other school argues that the United States was wrong to try to engineer domestic change within Russia in the first place.

Never have so many people been so wrong about such an important issue in US foreign policy. First, Russia is not lost. On the contrary, despite real setbacks regarding reform and integration, Russia still aspires to build a democratic polity, consolidate a market economy, and join the Western community of states. The basic trajectory of reform in Russia and in US-Russian relations is still in the right direction. Second, even if Russia does take an anti-systemic turn away from markets, democracy, and the West, this change will not have resulted from the policies pursued by the Bush and Clinton Administrations in the 1990s. On the contrary, those who aspire to contain or ignore Russia (now that Russia is "lost") are more likely to produce such a shift, as they erroneously believe that Russian domestic politics do not directly influence US-Russian relations. Finally, however, the policies that were appropriate yesterday to help Russia pursue domestic reform and international integration with the Western community of states may no longer be appropriate today. As conditions in Russia change, so too should US policy toward Russia. The 2000 presidential elections in both the United States and Russia offer a propitious moment to reframe the bilateral relationship.

## **Russia is Not Lost**

At the beginning of this decade, the Soviet Union represented the antithesis of the American way of life. The Soviet empire subjugated dozens of nations within its borders and controlled several other nations in Eastern Europe. The Communist Party dictatorship denied Soviet citizens basic human rights, let alone a real voice in choosing the country's leadership. This same dictatorship also controlled the entire economy through a rigid command system that made illegal the market exchange of goods, labor and property. In part as a consequence of these internal features of the Soviet political and economic system, the USSR was America's greatest enemy in the world. Of course, thousands of

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nuclear weapons, a two million-man army, and a sizable military industrial complex also served to make the Soviet Union our rival. But it was not simply raw power that threatened the West. It was also communism--i.e., the motivation to use this power against Western interests--that made the Soviet Union our adversary.

A decade later, Russia's capacity to project military power has vastly weakened. Russia's army could not subdue a rebel republic within its own borders, let alone invade Europe. Russia's military industrial complex is a shadow of its former self. Russia's only real military asset is its nuclear arsenal, although even this symbol of superpower is eroding.

Yet, this erosion of Russian military firepower did not end the Cold War and suspend international rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Rather, it was the collapse of communism within the Soviet Union and then Russia that ended the Cold War and fundamentally reshaped the international system. And in place of Soviet communism, Russians did not erect a fascist, imperialist, or neo-communist regime. On the contrary, nearly a decade since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is remarkable that none of these nightmarish scenarios have unfolded. Russia has not attempted to resurrect the USSR through the use of force. Most Russians now believe that Russia must develop a market economy and adhere to the principles of electoral democracy. No serious political force in Russia today advocates the restoration of the command economy or one-party dictatorship. Finally, most Russians still believe that integration with the West is in Russia's national interest.

Obviously and thankfully, Russian political leaders, economic elite, and common citizens still debate what kind of capitalism is best for Russia, what kind of democracy is most appropriate for Russia, and what level of international integration best serves Russia's national interests. That these debates occur and that their scope has narrowed considerably in the last decade are positive signs for Russia's long-term trajectory.

Of course, Russia has hit major obstacles along the way to economic and political transformation at home and integration abroad, including the bombing of the parliament in October 1993, the invasion of Chechnya in December 1994, NATO expansion, the financial crash in August 1998, and the NATO war with Serbia. Moreover, the kind of democracy, the kind of market economy, and the kind and degree of integration fall short of what could have been. Russia still lacks the basic institutions of a liberal democracy and a liberal economy. And it is a tragedy that the Russian mafia has outpaced the non-criminal sectors of the Russian economy in integrating into the West. Russian political or military integration into European institutions is still a distant goal. Rather than use these setbacks to justify a return to communism or the building of an alternative political or economic order, however, the majority of Russian politicians instead have used this evidence of setback to generate increased demand for "genuine" and "better" reform. Russia may have meandered, but the country certainly is not lost.

## **Evaluating the Clinton Strategy Toward Russia**

The second flaw in arguments about "who lost Russia" is that the inquisitors are looking for their criminals in Washington and not Moscow. In an age of unrivalled American hegemonic power, it is not surprising that we Americans think we control the destinies of all countries around the world. Though unsurprising, however, this assumption is still wrong. In the great drama of our day--the end of communism--the United States played only a marginal role both for good and for ill. It is silly when a commentator or columnist blames the Clinton Administration for Russian lawlessness, economic depression, or the war in Chechnya. It is equally silly, however, when an AID press release claims that the United States privatized 100,000 enterprises; when a US consultant returns home triumphantly to declare that he (and it was a he) rewrote the Russian constitution; and when Time magazine devotes its cover to celebrating how three US campaign consultants saved Yeltsin from defeat and orchestrated his 1996 reelection comeback. At the end of the day when we can finally make a determination if Russia has been won or lost, it will be Russians who should be blamed or praised, not Americans.

At the margins, however, the United States has played a positive role in helping domestic reform in Russia. And it was the right decision to attempt to provide such assistance. This strategy was grounded by the belief that it matters to the United States if Russia is a democratic or communist regime. It matters if Russia has a command economy or a market economy, and it matters if Russia seeks to integrate into the West or destroy the West. If Russia succeeded in dismantling communism at home, Russia would also become less of a threat abroad, both to the United States and to Russia's neighbors.

Russian domestic reform and US-Russian relations are intertwined. American foreign policymakers will have an easier time in reaching agreement with their Russian counterparts on issues of arms control, regional conflicts, nuclear safety, or international terrorism if Russia has a democratic polity and a market economy. Market institutions help to enforce rationality in foreign policy behavior by creating domestic groups with tangible interests in economic integration. Democratic institutions compel national leaders to justify their policy actions to a voting public. Public opinion polls demonstrate conclusively that the Russian population as a whole is much less interested in aggressive foreign policy behavior than are Russian elites. The greater the voice of the public in foreign policy, therefore, the less threatening Russia will be.

Ironically, it is the success of Russian reform, however limited, that now allows these critics to assert that the Clinton Administration has given too much attention to Russian internal reforms. Had Russia reverted to communism or fascism, would Republicans be so bold in asserting that the internal composition of the Russian state does not matter for US-Russian relations? Ronald Reagan most certainly thought otherwise in his approach to the Soviet Union. Those who frame international relations as a game of balance of power with no reference to the internal organization of states remember fondly the nineteenth century, but seem to have forgotten the twentieth century. It was German fascism and Soviet communism, not simply German power and Soviet power that threatened the United States in the twentieth century. China was "lost" when Mao erected

a communist regime internally. The Clinton Administration rightly believed that the success of Russian domestic reform had direct consequences for US security interests. Because Russia did not revert back to communism or construct a fascist regime, we in the West are now liberated from thinking about worst-case scenarios and can begin to think about ways of recasting the bilateral relationship along more traditional lines of state-to-state relations.

### **A New Strategy and Agenda for US-Russian Relations after 2000**

Policies that worked in the past may not always work or be necessary in the future. As the conditions within Russia develop and the foreign policy issues that face US and Russian leaders change, US policymakers must also rethink basic strategies and assumptions behind the strategies that constitute US policy toward Russia. Presidential elections in both Russia and the United States in 2000 provide the right moment to make these policy adjustments, no matter who wins the White House or the Kremlin.

Most importantly, US foreign policymakers must realize that three central debates that consumed Russians in the 1990s are now nearly over. Since Russia's 1996 presidential election, the deep lines dividing Russia's elites and its society have begun to fade. Although the majority of Russian citizens still lament the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is no longer a serious political force in Russia that believes it can rebuild the empire. Nor do serious political leaders and parties believe that it is possible to roll back market forces. While Russians are still unsure about what sort of market economy is best for Russia, few support a return to Communism. Russia's political class is no longer polarized between "communists" and "anti-communists." Consequently, US foreign policymakers must stop viewing Russian politics through the old, bipolar lens that distinguished between good guys and bad guys, and instead focus on policies that will help to improve the quality of democracy and the quality of capitalism in Russia. Moreover, with the specter of fascism and communism now waning, US policymakers can begin to disengage from Russia's domestic politics and focus on those issues of immediate interest for US national security.

Over the long term, Russia's size, natural resources, educated population, and strategic location in Europe and Asia ensure that Russia will emerge again as a power in the international system. Whether Russia makes this re-entry as a member of the international society of core Western states, or as a rogue state seeking to threaten this international society, depends in large measure on the kinds of institutions that shape economic and political activity within Russia in the years to come. Several years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is still a chance that Russia will develop a market economy and a democratic polity, and that Russia therefore will join rather than threaten the community of democratic and capitalist states. That this window of opportunity is still open is surprising considering all that Russia has endured, including a sustained economic free fall, a threat of fascism, two civil wars (in October 1993 and in Chechnya), and the expansion of an alliance system aimed ultimately at keeping Russia out of the

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West. It is in the vital national interests of the United States to ensure that this window of opportunity remains open. The costs of it closing are too high.

Now is not the time to give up on Russia or abandon the strategy of engagement. Though more powerful than any time in the last decade, anti-Western forces in Russia do not enjoy a monopoly over policymaking in either domestic or international affairs. While pro-Western forces still exist in Russia, the United States should pursue foreign policies that encourage their development and avoid policies that promote their rivals. Disagreements between Russian and American diplomats over Iraq, Iran or Serbia, or past failures regarding aid programs are not arguments for abandoning engagement, but evidence for the need to improve the policy.

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