

# The Dynamics of US-Russian Relations: A Critical Perspective

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I would like to suggest--and I don't know if this goes against the grain or with the grain--that we've very badly mismanaged US-Russian relations. I will focus my remarks on the political and security field. Specifically, I will:

- explain what I think was the basis for our policy towards Russia in the last decade;
- offer some observations on why that policy failed;
- argue that Kosovo and Chechnya are intimately linked and interrelated;
- briefly discuss the new Russian National Security Concept; and
- suggest where we might go from here, despite the doom and gloom that I mostly focus upon.

What was the basis for our policies in the 1990s? I would emphasize that this was not merely Clinton Administration policy, but policy rooted in the Bush Administration's initial approach to the breakup of the Soviet Union. I think American policy was based on the premise that Russia could be integrated into the Western-based international system, and that this would have two positive effects. The first effect was that the system itself--a set of economic, political, and security institutions--would serve as an incentive for reform and transition toward a market and democracy. The opportunity to join those institutions and the resources--not just financial, but political and security resources those institutions offered--would provide Russia an incentive for adjusting to the existing Western system during its transition.

The second effect was that through integration, we would influence Russian internal societal and economic interests that would seek to profit from and have a stake in international cooperation in joining with the West. In doing so, Russia's definition of its national and security interests would be shaped in such a way as to develop a large degree of overlapping common interests with Western countries: cooperation between the West and Russia would not be based upon a struggle to get the countries on either side to adjust their policies resentfully and unwillingly. Instead, natural areas of cooperation would emerge over time as Russia internally adjusted its priorities and interests in the international system.

Because I am going to be quite critical of actual policy, I want to emphasize that I think these policy premises were exactly the right premises, and they remain so today. The problem is not with the objectives and the focus on integration. The problem is what we actually did in the short term. I also want to emphasize--based upon my understanding from talking with Russian officials and from following Russian politics during this decade--that these were Russian expectations as well. That is, Russian officials and political figures believed that the program was about integration into Western structures, not merely Russia being a dependent recipient of financial resources and subject to Western whims and criteria at every turn.

What went wrong? First, on the economic side, we focused on the wrong basis for international economic integration. We should have emphasized Russian access to international trade, because it was the promise of trade and competition in the international system that would create those domestic societal and economic interests that would have a stake in looking outside the old Soviet system, or a stake in something more than internal rent-seeking and corruption. Instead, we focused on the issue of debt, primarily on IMF programs that were designed to help Russia cope with its debt problems and its short-term financial problems, rather than on opening Western markets, and in particular European markets, to Russian trade. As part of this strategy, we included a package of very specific economic reforms that were not supported by a broad base of social and political actors in Russia itself. Our aid packages, our negotiations, and our advice about what kinds of economic reforms needed to be at the forefront of Russian efforts were focused on a narrow elite within the Russian government. This elite group did not enjoy broad societal support and used its access and support from the West and these narrow sets of policies to beat out political opponents whenever they could. This is one of the reasons our policies are so implicated in the corruption that Russians have known about long before the Bank of New York scandal and in the inequities they see in the form of privatization and who has suffered from the implementation of IMF programs.

Second, our failure in the policy came about in the political and security field because of our focus and reliance upon NATO as the most important political and security institution in the post-Cold War world. If the premise of our Russian policy was integration, political and security integration, and if Russia was one of our major security priorities, then NATO should have been the last institution that we were going to rely upon and focus on in thinking of security in Europe and Eurasia. Or, if we love NATO so much and just can't let it go, our priority should have been on thinking about how NATO could integrate Russia within its existing or adapting structures.

I suggest that the United States loves NATO. We dominate NATO, we know how it works, we're comfortable with it, and we think we can do a lot with it. We're dismissive of other political and security institutions, such as the OSCE and the United Nations. So what we did in the 1990's is that we invested--and I don't mean that we invested money, although we did that too--our diplomatic efforts, political efforts, and a lot of our relations with European countries in ensuring that NATO did not disappear, and that

NATO would adapt to deal with certain kinds of security problems in Europe. We did not make those kinds of investments in the United Nations--particularly in the United Nations Security Council--and we especially wrote off and didn't pay particular attention to both European and Russian calls to develop the OSCE as the center of a post-Cold War European security structure.

The problem is that NATO is not the place where you can most easily integrate and adapt Russia. Thus, we had this mismatch between what we said was our goal--Russian integration--and the actual focus of our efforts, which was NATO: NATO enlargement and NATO's adaptation of missions after the Cold War. I'm not going to belabor the point about NATO's 1997 enlargement. You know the arguments why NATO enlargement was and remains a bad idea in this period. But perhaps I will surprise you a little bit, for I am going to argue right now, today, thinking about our relations with Russia in the next decade, that enlargement of NATO's membership is not the problem, and it's not the problem that Russian security analysts and elites focus upon today. That's the good news. The bad news, though, is what they are focusing on--enlargement of NATO's mission. That is, the development of NATO's military capabilities and its aptitude for missions other than collective defense, and the emphasis on missions other than defense of Article Five territory. This was a source of concern in Russian analysis for several years, but it all came to the fore and was, in the Russian viewpoint, justified with NATO's war against Serbia in Kosovo.

It's clear now to Russians and most academic security analysts outside of government in the United States that NATO is the security instrument of American foreign policy. We are going to rely first and foremost on NATO whenever we can and not be as preoccupied with the niceties of international law. NATO is enabled as a military alliance under the UN Charter, so NATO should be subject to international law as embodied by the UN Charter. With Kosovo, we flipped the priorities in that long-standing relationship. So NATO is no longer restricted to its collective defense function. It's not subject to the UN Charter for international law, because Kosovo was a mission outside of a UN Security Council resolution. In American policy, NATO is not even limited to security threats to members of the alliance. It is now an instrument of guaranteeing Western views of when, where, and how human rights are to be enforced.

Russian concern, to the extent that it was military, about NATO's membership enlargement was about traditional conventional military problems in Central and Eastern Europe: Kaliningrad and the use of NATO to possibly pressure Russia on the Baltic states. From the Russian military point of view, Kosovo and NATO's mission enlargement is an even worse nightmare because it looks possible that it could be directed at the Caucasus and the Caspian. This is why Kosovo and Chechnya are very tightly linked in Russian thinking.

The Caucasus and the Caspian, from the Russian point of view, is a region of serious and multiple ethnic conflicts and disputes. The Russians have a strong awareness of Western and particularly American interests in Caspian oil, and the Caucasus as the route by which Caspian oil will get to international markets if the Iranian option is ruled out, as it

is in American policy. So Kosovo and Chechnya are closely related, and the link is NATO's mission enlargement. Russians think that--if NATO intervenes on behalf of an ethnic Islamic group embroiled in a conflict for independence against a central government without a UN Security Council resolution and against Russian warnings--why not in the Caucasus, where the US has clear economic and geostrategic interests?

Heightened Russian concern about security, instability, and vulnerability in the Caucasus is linked to Kosovo via NATO. Combine the following factors and you have Chechnya:

- incursions into Dagestan and the summer bombings of apartments in Russia;
- years of lawlessness, kidnappings, and murders in Chechnya;
- the enhanced role of the Russian military and security services over cooperation-leaning elites within the Russian government (also a result of Kosovo); and
- the Kosovo model of a low-casualty air campaign strategy, even at the cost of civilian lives (what we call "collateral damage") to delay the emergence of Russian societal opposition that ended the first Chechen war in 1996.

The ironies of our complaints about the Russian military strategy in Chechnya are multiple. Let me just suggest a few. One is that we threaten to cut off IMF credits, thereby completely removing any pretense whatsoever that the IMF is an independent economic institution. Even more ironically, we threaten in retaliation for Russian tactics in Chechnya to cut off IMF credits that would be used simply to pay off the Russian interest that is due. So we would be hurting perhaps the IMF and ourselves as much if not more than the Russian government. What else do we have to threaten to cut off? We could threaten to cut off Nunn-Lugar assistance, but, again, we hurt ourselves much more than we hurt Russia, or at least as much as we hurt Russia.

I think another irony of our dilemma in dealing with Russia and Chechnya is that what we tried to do in Istanbul, is to use the OSCE as a forum for calling Russia to behave according to its international legal commitments. This is the same OSCE in which we have invested nothing in the 1990's and never turned to as strongly as we did to NATO during the 1990's. We're calling on Russia to live up to its international legal commitments when we were very happy to finesse our legal obligations in Kosovo. So these calls are falling on very deaf ears in Russia, in part because of our previous policy.

This brings me to the new Russian National Security Concept. What I think has happened is that the previous National Security Concept--which emphasized internal sources of threats to Russian national security interests and the need for internal solutions to Russia's national security dilemmas--proved to be problematic in the face of the enlargement of NATO's mission and the perceived relationship of Kosovo to Russia's problems in the Caucasus. The new Security Concept opens, in contrast to the 1997 Concept, with the proposition that the main tendency of the international security environment today is one of attempts to establish a unipolar world against the natural formation of what is really a multipolar world. In other words, the Concept argues that the United States throws its weight around and acts unilaterally rather than through multilateral procedures that

recognize multiple powers in the international system. And it opens with the observation that under the guise of multilateralism, there is a strengthening of the position of "certain Western countries" to dominate international society through American leadership. This is being done through unilateral measures and the use of military force to solve problems that should be the purview of international law. In the section on identifying external security threats to the Russian Federation, the first security threat is international terrorism, which, again, is linked directly to the problem in the Caucasus and is exemplified by Chechnya.

The Concept identifies efforts to undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia with "the possibility of direct military aggression against her." If you will recall, from the Russian perspective, what NATO did against Kosovo in March, April and May was military aggression, because it was not a mission of collective defense and it was not authorized by the United Nations Security Council. The concern here is exactly that--through its unilateral approaches and using the instrument of NATO--the US might intervene in the Caucasus, even to the extent of getting involved in issues that are related to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Russian Federation. This is a very big change from the 1997 Concept.

Let me end on a positive note. The good news about the National Security Concept is that it continues to emphasize that there are internal sources of threats to Russian national security--primarily its barrier to developing a proper set of economic reforms, to take care of Russian society and to build a rule of law--areas that we know have been important in Russian policy in the last decade. When it talks about how Russian security might be realized, it does not turn (as I feared it might) first to military instruments, but emphasizes that Russian security will be achieved primarily through the proper use and reliance upon international law and Russian participation in dealing multilaterally with threats to international security, including proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism. It emphasizes that "the realization of the national interest of Russia can only be achieved by the development of Russia's economy within the perspective of a long-term integration of the Russian Federation into the world economy and cooperation with its international economic and financial institutions."

So what does this mean? In conclusion, this means that there remains hope, despite the mistakes that we've made in the 1990's, that the initial premises of integration of Russia into the Western-based economic, political, and security system and institutions remains possible and remains the aspiration of at least this Russian leadership. But in order to realize that ambition and its premises, which are still open on the Russian side, we have to understand that we are at a turning point in how we manage the crisis in the Caucasus, because this is perceived within the Russian security elite as a direct threat to Russia's most important core national security interest. We have to solve the problems and formulate a policy based on integration. The "carrots" we have are the promise of being integrated into the international trade system and systems for political cooperation among the major powers, rather than reverting to the kinds of exclusionary and dismissive policies I think we've emphasized too much in the course of the 1990's.

*This policy memo is based upon the remarks of Dr. Celeste Wallander at the Secretary's Open Forum "The Dynamics of U.S.-Russia Relations" on December 3, 1999, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C. The Open Forum website is located at: <http://www.state.gov/www/dept/openforum/index.html>*

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