

# New Challenges to US-Russian Relations

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The end of the "honeymoon" period between the United States and Russia has left US-Russian relations in a state of volatile ambiguity. The two countries need to quickly work out new principles upon which to base their relationship.

Unfortunately it has become common to talk about the necessity of a new strategy and agenda for US-Russian relations. In reality, we are witnessing the usual debate between optimists, pessimists, and isolationists in America, and between Westernizers and Eurasianists in Russia.

## **American Viewpoints on Bilateral Relations**

Optimists in America are convinced that Russia can become not only a democratic country with a free and liberal economy, but also a partner. They prefer to avoid discussion of the Chechen war, humanitarian issues in the Caucasus, criminal scandals, and the multiple economic failures of the government.

Pessimists, quite the reverse, declare that Russia is in disarray, unpredictable, and is a potentially hostile country. They pay attention to the dangers of "emerging imperialism" in Russia. They also worry about potential regional fragmentation of the country, and as a consequence the spreading of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons or technologies. Pessimists believe that the United States must be vigilant: Russia cannot be dealt with like other states, and with cooperative regimes like the Missile Technology Control Regime (MICR).

Adherents of US isolationism call for greater American distancing from the events in Russia. A large number of conservatives evidently believe either that it is not in the power of the West to ensure a peaceful Russian evolution or that the cost would be exorbitant. Even isolationists, however, agree that it remains in the US national interest for a friendly regime to remain in power in Moscow.

## **Russian Viewpoints on Bilateral Relations**

In Russia, the traditional Westernizers are losing their popularity. Those who advocate a Western orientation for Russian foreign policy are on the periphery of the Russian

political spectrum. Nonetheless, those who insist that Russia historically belongs to Western civilization occupy the Kremlin. It was not a secret that a future administration would offer a foreign policy strategy of partnership with the West and joining Western economic, political, and military institutions--including the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Recently elected Russian President Vladimir Putin has proven this notion true, even reviving the possibility of Russian membership in NATO.

There are significant obstacles to this. Westernizers--former prime minister and leader of the Union of Right-Wing Forces party Sergei Kirienko, the famous "liberal knight" and defender of democracy Grigory Yavlinsky, Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov and others--seem unable to act as a united political force. It has become evident that the US is not truly responsive to Russia's demands in economic and financial assistance, and often ignores Moscow's position with regard to important security questions. It is very difficult in Russia to advocate a "pro-Western" policy, given NATO enlargement, the war in Yugoslavia, and Western reaction to the war in Chechnya. That is why Western politicians should not expect pleasant words and comments from Russian politicians, although in reality official foreign policy will remain rather western-oriented.

Eurasianism is the modern political-philosophical approach that became popular as a counterweight to liberal pro-Western foreign policy at the beginning of the 1990s. They argue for positive relations with the East due to its geopolitical position. They also favor a thesis about Russia's special Eurasian mission. In terms of regional priorities, they stress the role of former Soviet republics in Russia's security, economic, and political conditions.

### **The Road Ahead**

In any event, we should not exaggerate this classification of views in talking about new challenges to US-Russian relations. Americans must realize that Russia is no longer the easy partner it used to be in the 1990s. Russians must understand that American interests differ from their own. We are not adversaries as during the Cold War--which neither party desires--although elites in both countries may use some version of Cold War rhetoric for domestic purposes. So the main challenge to US-Russian relations is to resist the temptation to create the seemingly needed foe.

Unfortunately, the US and Russia have not achieved friendly coexistence in the post-Cold War world. It is now obvious that America will abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty if it cannot achieve Russian agreement to revision--and Russia will ignore Western complaints about humanitarian issues in the North Caucasus. Americans should be very careful advocating democracy-promotion abroad as the "cheapest, most cost-effective way of advancing national interests" (as has Larry Diamond). With a broad bipartisan consensus that human rights should be part of the US foreign policy agenda, Washington faces the danger of overstressing its own resources by engaging in regional conflicts on a moral basis.

The United States and Russia have built their relationship during a time when there are no great powers on the international scene in the classic European mold. There is no country now that can use force to intervene in any situation of its choosing--there are domestic and international restrictions. Peaceful existence within these limitations challenges US-Russian relations, something both Washington and Moscow must realize. There is another factor that must be recognized. Russia has a new leader, who is young, energetic, well-educated and in good health. He will likely restore control over the entire Russian territory and stabilize the very fragile Russian Federation--and this coincides with American interests.

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