

Why the United States Should Cede its Russia Policy to Europe

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The usual criticism of American policy toward Russia is that it is somehow wrong or misguided. I argue the problem is far more fundamental than that: the United States would do better ceding control of its policy to Europe. This is so, not because the Russian government has become increasingly suspicious of American intentions since Kosovo (although it has), but because popular and elite conceptions of what Russia is and should become exclude the United States from that image. Instead, it is Europe that is increasingly thought to be Russia's future, not the United States. The consequence is that American policy preferences on, say, expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or war crimes tribunals in the Balkans, or pipeline policy in the Caucasus, are all reflexively treated in Russia as yet another effort by Washington to extend its unilateral domination of Russia, and the globe. Since European policy toward Russia is more or less 90% equivalent to US policy, Washington deferring to European leadership on the Russian question would be far more effective than continuing to invoke Russian hostility and fear.

The International Sources of and Remedies to Russia's Problem with the US

To a certain extent, the US is a victim of its own Cold War victory. Stuck as the only remaining superpower on the globe, it is expected to provoke the hostility of those who would like to see a more equal distribution of international authority. But the US has a choice. Indeed, this choice was pointed out by none other than Governor George W. Bush in his debate with Vice President Al Gore on foreign policy, when he made the case that the United States must not "appear arrogant" in its exercise of hegemony.

There are, simply speaking, two ways for the US to exercise its superpower status. The first is through the wielding of its superior economic and military power whenever it feels it has an interest it wishes to pursue or defend. Presumably, this is the "arrogant" way declaimed by Bush. And it is also the way most likely to end US hegemony by provoking challengers who feel their interests are not being considered at the big table of international politics. Russia is experiencing precisely such a feeling now. While realizing it is completely impotent materially vis-à-vis the US, Russia hopes that the US will learn to exercise its hegemony the second way, through the operation of legitimate consensual authority.

The latter strategy would prolong US dominance of the post-Cold War world, but at the cost of actually having to convince other states, Russia included, to support what Washington considers to be its interests. Under these conditions, the US might not achieve a consensus, in which case it must not act unilaterally, if it is to preserve its legitimate authority. Or it must accept a compromised version of its interests, and so pursue a policy that it originally would have rejected.

Not surprisingly, the US has not opted for the second strategy of preserving its hegemony. Its foreign policy actions since the end of the Cold War: in the Gulf War, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere reveal a crucial common thread: the US consults, but if there is no consensus, operates unilaterally in any case. The not unexpected outcome is a growing consensus in Russia, both at the popular level and among foreign policy elites, that the United States is an "arrogant" hegemon that pursues its own narrow self-interest, regardless of the concerns of allies (let alone Russia).

Ceding control of its Russia policy to Europe would go some way toward squaring the seemingly unsquarable circle of Russia's desire for a legitimate, authorized hegemony and the American preference for unilateral action.

- From the US perspective, European policy on issues of interest to the US--such as Russian use of force in Chechnya, Conventional Forces in Europe treaty revisions, NATO expansion, the Balkans, and domestic economic and political reform in Russia--is so close to that of the US that having Europe take the lead on all these issues would not significantly alter substantive outcomes;
- Having Europe take the lead would require the US to consult constantly with its European allies on policy toward Russia, in a far more comprehensive and serious manner. The result should not only be more collectively legitimized policy, but also better policy;
- Ceding control does not, and could not, strip the US of the reserved right to act unilaterally if it cannot reach a consensus with Europe to its liking. But at least the default has been changed from unilateral definition of an interest and finding allies to help implement it, to the collective development of interest and policy supporting it; and
- Finally, for reasons I turn to next, Russia would prefer to deal with Europe than with the US.

The Domestic Basis of Russian Preferences for the West Without the US

One might think that the West is understood by Russians as the US plus Europe, but in fact Europe has become the West for Russians, and the US is in a category by itself. Over the last decade, as Russians have groped toward a new identity for themselves, becoming the West has always been an option, but today, the West is differentiated between the far less appealing US part of that identity, and the far more attractive European variant. It is important to note that as of yet, this popular differentiation--as reflected in daily

newspapers, detective and romance novels, middle and high school history textbooks, and how-to manuals on raising your children--has not yet manifested itself as clearly in Russian policy actions. This is yet another reason to transfer responsibilities to Europe before the Russian government responds to its social base. Broadly speaking, there are three views of the West in popular Russian discourse these days.

New Western Russians

Mostly represented among the middle class, the rich, and the oligarchy, New Western Russians are most supportive of American versions of democracy and market economics, though they are not critical of European variants in any way. New Western Russians are stigmatized at home by their connection to the widely-reviled oligarchs and their implicit connections with the US. Indeed, even in the non-leftist press, politicians who apparently represent these interests, such as Yegor Gaidar and Grigory Yavlinsky, are branded as agents of the United States. Moreover, the failures of market and political reforms--to the extent they are understood as mostly American products--further undermine support for those who identify the US as the future. The erosion of positive identification with the US makes an effective US policy toward Russia far more difficult to achieve.

New Soviet Russians

What has come to be called the Left in Russia, the Communists and the agrarians, identify neither with the American nor the European alternatives of the Western market and democratic order. New Soviet Russians of course condemn market reforms in Russia today, but their remedy, a return to elements of Soviet economic practice, leaves them isolated politically.

Liberal Essentialists

These are the swing group in Russian identity politics today. They believe in an authentic Russian identity that can be recovered through a close study of Russian history, culture, and sociology. But they further believe, in a more liberal vein, that the world is full of examples from which Russia should borrow to create some kind of hybrid identity. Therefore, European versions of both democracy (though less individualistic) and capitalism (more social) are preferred to those of America, as are East Asian versions of the same. One can see their potential to ally with New Western Russians over Europe and commitment to a market economy, or with New Soviet Russians over hostility toward the American identity and elements of the Soviet experience that are still valued by all--its great power status, emergent democratic features, high mass culture, and regard for the country's youth. Liberal Essentialists express an ideology for the intelligentsia, middle class, and the rich.

What all this adds up to is not just a problem for US policy, but an opportunity for the West. With the exception of the Left, there is an appreciation that the West is not the United States, and that Europe is a more palatable alternative present and future. This

allows for a shift in thinking about where the locus of US policy toward Russia should be.

What a US Cession of its Russia Policy Might Actually Imply

It is worth pretending that we know that Europe and the US agree on what they want in Russia: a prosperous secure neighbor who participates in issues of not just regional, but global governance. If this is actually the case, then, at least theoretically speaking, the US should sacrifice very little in turning over its policy to Europe.

- Clearly one of the first and unintended consequences of transferring US policy to Europe would be the rapid institutionalization and empowerment of European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and Council of Europe (CE) mechanisms, procedures, and offices for managing the West's relationship with Russia. It could end up providing a much sought-after test of the capacity to have a common EU foreign and defense policy on a critical issue.
- What will also become formalized and institutionalized are Russian and US bilateral relationships with the relevant European players. Both the US and Russia will end up working through Europe, rather than with each other directly--quite a change, but not unlike a host of international negotiations wherein parties use trusted interlocutors, rather than engage in direct, and unsatisfying, contact.
- A process of socialization should ensue. On the American side, the US might learn that being an authorized legitimate hegemon pays off more in the long run than acting "in an arrogant fashion" around the world. For example, it might find that listening to European interpretations of Russia's interests in the pipeline politics of Central Asia, the Caspian, and the Caucasus (and Europe's own interests) might result in US acceptance of a policy that was not entirely directed at reducing Russian influence in these three regions. Instead, US policy could be based on interests of commercial payoff, environmental stewardship, and economic rationality. Not least important, it could reassure Moscow that the West, especially the US, no longer identifies Russia as a state against which the US deliberately adopts policies to diminish its influence in any region of the globe, and certainly not on its borders. This could go a long way toward teaching Russia that the US is not the arrogant bully most Russians think it is these days.
- Socialization on the Russian side could result in Russia recovering its identity as a great power. As I mentioned above, New Western and Soviet Russians, and Liberal Essentialists all agree that a worthy achievement of the Soviet Union was becoming a great power, and there is a broad desire to retain or reacquire that identity. Working through Europe could result in Russia achieving great power status, but without the military accoutrement that the rest of the world has already found so threatening. If Russians discover, for example, that acting in European institutions results in Russia's interests in Central Asia, the Caspian, and the Caucasus being genuinely respected--even if not fully conceded--Russia could

obtain an identity as a great power whose central element was participation in the creation of consensus on issues of global governance, rather than the unilateral assertion of interests, as the arrogant do.

Conclusion: Why Not Give it a Shot?

The suggestion offered here is of course outrageous. But why not give it a shot? If my reading of Russian domestic identity politics is accurate, then the US is in for a long period of Russian resistance, animosity, hostility, fear, and anger. At the very least, perhaps the US should simply choose one issue from the rather long agenda of Russian-US relations, and execute a test of whether Europe can do a better job in advancing US interests than Washington can.

In fact, we can even stipulate, and indeed predict, that in another decade or so, if the US has pursued this cession honestly, Russian understandings of the West might again include the US, hence making the policy irrelevant.

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