

An Overview of Bush Administration Policy and Priorities on Russia

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To provide an overview of Bush administration policy on Russia, in March and April 2001 I interviewed individuals responsible or soon to be responsible for formulating US policy toward Russia. The interviews were on background: I agreed not to identify the individuals or their positions, nor to quote specific statements. In addition, I researched the speeches and articles of newly nominated or appointed officials for their views on Russia and broader foreign policy. The analysis that follows is my own assessment of likely policy based on these sources, not an official statement.

US Assessments of Russia

The baseline assumption guiding US policy is that Russia is weak, and will remain so for some time to come. Russia's vast natural resources, human capital, and Eurasian presence are sources of potential greatness, but that potential has not been realized and will not be realized in the short to medium term. Russia's political and economic systems have not succeeded in translating this potential into an effective economy that provides sustainable growth, and changing these systems takes time. Furthermore, Russian weakness has been exacerbated by the nation's ambivalence over its priorities and values during the post-Soviet transition. Unlike countries in Central and Eastern Europe that prioritized Western integration and chose to bear the short- and medium-term costs for that long-term goal, Russia has avoided costly choices and made little progress. As a result, it will continue to struggle with its weakness for some time to come.

This weakness is one reason why the country will play a less central role in US policy under Bush than it did in the 1990s. A major difference from Clinton policy is the Bush administration's diagnosis that there is little--given the current realities of Russia's politics and economy--that the US can do to radically transform Russia. Russians are responsible for their own choices, successes, and failures. The administration still sees Russian integration as the ultimate objective that is best for both American interests and for the Russian people. The administration welcomes Russian progress in moving toward World Trade Organization (WTO) membership, but emphasizes that meeting the criteria and implementing the rules is in the hands of the Russian government. Furthermore, integration entails not only the international economy, but international political and civic norms that are basic to democracy and human rights. To be very clear in this regard, Chechnya matters in the Bush administration's Russia policy.

The administration is currently undergoing several reviews of foreign and defense policy (as well as a review of US nuclear assistance programs), which means it has yet to identify specific priorities in its Russia policy. However, the framework within which Russia will fit is clear: Russia represents neither a central threat to American interests, nor a clear opportunity for achieving them across the board. Russia's place in US policy often emerges in the context of other issues or relationships, and administration policy on Russia will be shaped more by US policy toward these. Russia is a part of various problems and potential solutions, but it does not by itself define them.

Russia and Nonproliferation

The most important administration priority in which Russia plays a large role is nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missile technology. Only through its possession of an enormous nuclear arsenal is Russia arguably a great power. Even in that case it is due to Russia's *potential* as a source of proliferation--intentional or through weakness--that American interests are engaged. With the passing of the Cold War, this administration believes that the structural (that is, bipolarity) and ideational (that is, communism) sources of head-to-head, zero-sum competition are part of the past. This means that Russian nuclear weapons themselves no longer pose the threat to American security that Soviet weapons did, so the logic of nuclear balances and competition no longer determines relations. Instead, the priority has shifted to preventing proliferation. This can be positive for US-Russian relations insofar as both countries wish to cooperatively insure the safety, control, and dismantling of Cold War arsenals. The Bush administration's review of US nuclear assistance programs, officials insist, is focused on their effectiveness in achieving that objective, not on downgrading the issue or Russia's status.

However, Russia's role concerning nonproliferation can also be negative, given the administration's view that Russia is in a position and has a responsibility to prevent dissemination of WMD and missile technology. US officials believe, for example, that Russia's technical adherence to the nuclear nonproliferation regime while helping Iran build civilian nuclear plants at Bushehr is insufficient. American officials are convinced both that Iran plans to use that reactor to develop nuclear weapons, and that Iran's possession of nuclear weapons threatens US national security and that of its vital allies. Furthermore, officials believe that the Russian government either *does* know this or *should* know it from US-Russian work on this issue during the 1990s. By the same token, were US-Iranian relations to improve and were Iran to take credible measures to disavow pursuit of nuclear weapons capability, Russian-Iranian relations would cause less strain in relations between Russia and the US.

The view that technical adherence to the nonproliferation treaty cannot be allowed to facilitate Iran's actual violation of that regime is consistent with administration skepticism of the value of arms control rules that are inconsistent with immediate and top-priority American national security interests. In other words, arms control agreements and

regimes are useful only insofar as they protect US national interests. That does not mean that the administration will violate its commitments. In the case of missile defense, however, it means readiness to use legal procedures--e.g., abrogation with six month notice--to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty. In the case of nonproliferation, it means urging countries to adhere to more stringent standards in providing civilian nuclear technology than those provided for by the NPT regime. In the case of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), it means not retaining Cold War habits of negotiating limits and procedures when unilateral reductions can better achieve a more cost-efficient and militarily effective nuclear deterrent capability. The Bush administration remains interested in discussing security, nuclear, and defense concerns with Russia. Given the passing of Cold War confrontation, however, it does not believe that arms control must be preserved at all costs as an instrument of transparency and reassurance.

Russia and Eurasia

Due to its Eurasian presence, Russia plays a role in a second set of issues important to the US. Across the space from the Barents to the Bering Sea, however, whether Russia is a factor or major player in US policy is strongly influenced by US relations with other countries. Russian cooperation with European countries, for example, is little cause for concern as long as transatlantic relations remain close. Russian progress in its relationship with the European Union (EU) and in coping with EU enlargement is consistent with US interests insofar as the EU advances the goals of promoting integration throughout Europe and Europe's global engagement. Even Russian cooperation with a European defense force, should one be established, is a problem for the US only if that force proves problematic for NATO and the American stake in that alliance. The administration views NATO enlargement as a priority, with solid bipartisan support (although which new members and when remains undecided). While Russia will be involved in the discussions and will be informed of developments, the Bush administration's priorities are the alliance and the European candidates. Russia is not a major factor driving enlargement, nor in doubts that may arise about it. The fact that NATO activity does not predetermine negative US-Russian relations is illustrated by continuing cooperation between the alliance and Russia in the Balkans, and the potential re-emergence of the Contact Group as a major player for resolving conflicts there. Russia has played a legitimate, constructive role in the region, and it is hoped this can continue.

How administration policy on Russia is shaped more by outside priorities is illustrated well by comparing administration views of Russia's relations with India and China. The Bush administration does not see the US in great power competition with Russia in its relations with these countries, because Russia is not much of a great power. Its inability to project conventional power or offer much beyond arms sales limits its positive influence with India and China. In terms of negative influence, the potential is greater in Russian-Chinese relations because of the possibility of a "strategic partnership" driven by mutual weakness. However, whether that relationship is a problem for the US is seen largely as a function of US relations with China. If China and the US continue to manage

their differences, if China enters the WTO and its integration with the Western international economic system proceeds, then a substantial Russian-Chinese relationship is probably unlikely, or at least non-problematic for the US. While administration officials differ on how substantial is the basis for a Russian-Chinese partnership, they consistently view the US-China relationship as determinant.

In contrast, the view on India is consistently positive. The issue of proliferation and South Asia's nuclear future remains a concern that could involve US Russia policy. However, because President Bush has articulated a positive policy recognizing India as a large democracy making progress in integration with the international economy, Russian-Indian relations are also viewed in positive terms. The administration recognizes that the relationship is based on long-standing ties that are in large measure economic, including outside the sphere of arms sales. Since India's future as a regional power is not perceived as threatening important US allies or interests, the development of Russian ties with India does not imply problems for the US.

Russia's Relations with the Newly Independent States

Russian relations with countries of the former Soviet Union remain a major concern of US policy for two reasons. The first reason is the principled stake the US has in the independence and sovereignty of these countries. The effects of the Soviet breakup have been costly and painful, but where democratic processes and free speech prevail, the citizens of those newly independent countries have consistently embraced their rights as sovereign nations. This principled interest is reinforced by the second, very practical one: Russia's democracy and market reform are inconsistent with the subjugation or even domination of its neighbors' economic and political affairs. Respecting its neighbors' independence reinforces Russia's positive transition from its Soviet past, and should steer the country toward opportunities for integration. This is the Russia the US wants to see develop, so it supports countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Latvia as they assert their right to define the terms of a mutually beneficial relationship with Russia.

Therefore, while the Bush administration recognizes that Russia has important interests involving stability and security on its borders, it cares how Russia pursues those interests. The administration would be reluctant to cooperate with Russia to cope with terrorism, crime, and conflict in Central Asia, for example, if Russia's preferred methods replicate its approach to Chechnya. Indeed, as long as Russia continues to conduct itself in Chechnya in a manner that disregards international standards of respect for human rights, especially given the population's Islamic identity, there will be serious obstacles to such cooperation in the Central Asian region.

International economic cooperation to develop and transport oil and gas from Central Asia and the Caspian need not be a point of contention in US-Russian relations, however, as long as Russia's neighbors are not being forced to agree to Russian terms. Most recently, the administration has praised Russia's positive role in Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations to solve the decade-long war in Nagorno-Karabakh. In sum, where Russia

recognizes states' sovereignty and international norms, the US and Russia can work constructively. Where Russia uses its power regionally to interfere or to undermine neighbors' independent choices, it creates points of contention with the US.

Conclusion

In thinking about dealing with the new US administration, Russia's leadership should view its position in the broader context of US priorities as an opportunity to make progress where interests are complementary. Too many issues important to American interests are affected by Russia for the country to be dismissed. Administration officials want to engage Russia on strategic issues and regional issues, arenas in which Russia's role is important and its policies can contribute to solutions. The priority placed on nonproliferation may mean conflicting policies over Iran and missile defense, but since Russia per se is not the focus of concern, progress in other areas is not ruled out, as it often was during the Cold War when global commitments were linked and the stakes were high everywhere. Most importantly, the shift in administration policy from an assistance-focused Russian economic strategy to one that encourages Russia to take responsibility for economic integration opens the door to a relationship based on equivalent status of sovereign states, which seems entirely consistent with the Putin leadership's priorities and approach

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