

What Happens When Russia is the West's Ally? Some Historical Geopolitical Regularities

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Georgi M. Derlugian
Northwestern University
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History

The geopolitical history of balance of power suggests that Russia is simply too big to be the West's ally in normal times. In a pattern that has held for more than 300 years, Russia has been an ally to the West only in times of serious trouble in world governance:

- In the early 1700s Peter the Great attacked expansionist Sweden, to the delight of many Europeans.
- In the world-wide conflict known in the United States as the French and Indian War and elsewhere as the Seven Years war, the Russian armies took Berlin for the first time and were briefly the wonder of Europe.
- Western Russophilia reached its apex during the Napoleonic wars, when the Cossacks were admired as the romantic liberators of Paris.

Between these brief instances of military cooperation, Russia always receded into reclusion. The first "cold war" between Russia and the West dates back to the 1820s–1880s. For Europe, this was a period of long peace under British hegemony (Pax Britannica). Geopolitical rivalry was safely pushed into the spheres of ideology (as Russia became regarded as the despotic Bear) and symbolic confrontations in the contemporary Third World, namely Russo-British wrangling over the frontiers of Inner Asia (including the buffer zone of Afghanistan.) Toward the 1890s, however, with Wilhelmine Germany rapidly overcoming Britain in industrial and military prowess, Russia once again became a dear ally.

- 1890s–1918, under the new entente cordiale, France and Britain invested heavily in the railways and industry of the Russian empire hoping to bolster its less developed but militarily significant ally. Germany did the same for its Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman allies. In the end, the two opposing alliances ground each other into rubble. The result was global chaos that created opportunities for a long series of revolutions, starting with Russia in 1917 and continuing after 1945 and into the 1970s when the last European dependencies in Africa gained their independence.

- In the 1920s, a new cold war developed when the Bolshevik USSR becomes a rogue state alongside Kemalist Turkey.
- 1932, the reversal: Hitler takes power in Germany, and the United States establishes relations with Moscow. Washington begins, at first tacitly, to participate in the development of Soviet military industrialization. (The famous T-34 tank grew from Ford's technology.) During 1941–1945, U.S.-Soviet cooperation was overt, more massive in material terms than one might assume, and reached deeply into popular friendly perceptions.

Then after some initial uncertainty as to the direction of relations in 1945–1946, Russia's relations with the West again turned to hostility:

- 1946–2001, the Cold War.

Marking the ending year of the Cold War as 2001 is deliberate. The Cold War could fairly be said to have continued until then despite Moscow's repudiation of communist ideology and the demise of the USSR. Geopolitical concerns, not ideological ones, still defined relations through the end of the Cold War. This is another example of the continued importance and relevance of geopolitics.

The New Global Threat

In 2001 an unprecedented situation developed when for the first time ever capitalist hegemonic power was challenged not by an alternative state intent on imperial conquest—like Habsburg Spain in 1557–1648; France in 1795–1815; Germany in 1914–1945—but by an international revolutionary nonstate actor. The centerpiece of Marxist strategy was the rejection of terrorism in favor of organizing and reconstituting states along activist and socially redistributive lines. (This is why George Kennan saw the possibility of peaceful containment.) By contrast, Al Qaeda, like all militant anarchists, seeks to bring down the existing order by committing what in the 1860s Count Mikhail Bakunin annunciated as “propaganda of the deed.” The attacks of September 11 marked a new historical epoch, but were nothing new in the social and psychological background of revolutionaries or their choice of subversive strategy.

The first response of the United States was not new either. After suffering on September 11 a major loss of what Max Weber called the state's power-prestige (*Machtprestige*), the sole remaining superpower was forced to do something quickly and demonstratively. This is exactly the response that Al Qaeda sought in order to transform U.S. hegemony into visible military domination and thus to create targets and psychological incentives for further terrorist attacks. A century earlier the Russian empire acted identically when the radical wing of *narodniki* unleashed their long campaign of demonstrative assassinations. The reprisals by Russian secret police were ruthless and tactically effective (recall the fate of Lenin's elder brother, Alexander). Nevertheless, between 1883 and 1914 the Russian *boeviki* waged one of the most protracted terrorist campaigns in history, killing eight thousand “servants of Tsarism”, from Tsar Alexander II down to street policemen. And that was without airplanes or weapons of mass destruction.

Contours of the Global Future

A world-wide war has just begun. Like all wars, it started with military action. Like all wars it will have to end with a set of new international institutions, as happened in the past great wars: in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia; in 1815 with the Concert of Europe; in 1945 with the United

Nations. If the past is any lesson for the future, then it should be clear that coercion alone will not achieve a durable peace. Then what?

The sensibilities of human rights or global media did not constrain the nineteenth-century repression of revolutionary terrorism. The Russian, Austrian, or German police saturated the revolutionary underground with double-agents and spies. Yet this strategy failed on all counts. What really contained the terrorist wave of the late nineteenth century was the major redistribution of welfare and democratization. It was, after all, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck who initiated *Staatssozialismus*. The parliamentarization of protest channeled the grievances into a more constructive mode and the recognition of social movements and the social reforms gave hope to masses.

Can we replicate this historical success at a global level today? Immediately the question arises as to what could be the political agency of global reform.

War is better waged unilaterally. From a purely military standpoint, military action is better executed by one line of command than many. Today Russia is at best a redundant ally to the U.S. military. Consider tomorrow's policing however. It will have to be global and indeed very multilateral if it is not to appear a superpower regime of naked domination, as Osama Bin Laden evidently hopes. It must be not just a broad coalition but a durable and permanently functioning security system including the European states, Russia, and pivotal states like Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, China, or India.

This idea is, frankly, a utopia. Today most of these states present a combination of rampant corruption with some degree of clientilistic authoritarianism, which forms a vicious cycle with low legitimacy and overall inefficiency. The Russian army and police in Chechnya are so brutal not because uniformed brutality is a Russian monopoly or because presumably a cultural chasm exists between the Russian occupiers and the predominantly Muslim population. It is because the Russian servicemen, from generals to soldiers at roadblocks, have been utterly deprofessionalized, demoralized, frustrated, and often they have come to regard their mission as a private, profit-making opportunity. And Moscow seems wary of confronting these ills. Recently yet another military prosecutor was killed by the soldiers whose misdeeds he had been apparently investigating.

Democratize in Order to Discipline

In our arguments for democracy, we put perhaps too much stress on liberal values and not enough on the disciplining powers of public dialogue and popular democracy. A functioning democracy means a multiplicity of controls: state, public, and, increasingly, international. Enough information must be available on an ongoing basis to give warning when outrages occur—whether corruption, police brutality, crime, or bureaucratic mishaps. The biggest achievement of the post-Soviet period was the creation of such conditions, or glasnost (at least until they were recently rolled back). However public uproar, domestic and international, will end in frustration unless institutional recourse and the possibility of punishing the wrongdoers exists. This is the key battlefield.

Let me reemphasize the main point. Russia is not a valuable military ally. Generally, the traditional military-diplomatic enterprise of gathering together a wartime coalition will not achieve the ultimate goal of reinstalling world security. This war must end with the creation of

durable and democratically accountable international policing. In this strategy Russia will be a crucial ally. To achieve that, however, Russia must first transform itself from a decaying superpower, a worthy goal supported by the long series of historical precedents. One way or another, the West has always played a major role in Russia's internal transformation. This time it must be not a circumstantial alliance that merely punctuates periods of Russian isolation and hostility to the West, but a durable alliance.

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