

A Fresh Start in U.S.-Russian Relations?

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Considering September 2001 as the turning of an important political page not only for U.S.-Russian relations, but also for general international relations as well is tempting. So far, though, the United States and Russia have exchanged many promises and optimistic interviews instead of making real agreements. Obviously, the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington affect the United States' priorities as a state and its engagement with countries around the world. Russian foreign policy, on the other hand, will not be affected in quite the same way. Undoubtedly Russia has shown itself as a country attempting to become a part of West. The one real consequence of this is that Russian foreign policy has become Western oriented. This means sharing not only common values and principles with Western governments, but also sharing common threats and enemies as well. More importantly, this means working together as a team. The United States quickly returned to work after the tragedy. As President George W. Bush said a few days after the attacks, "Today millions of Americans mourned and prayed, and tomorrow we go back to work." Russia also began engaging in the same work, but the question is for how long.

Back to work means rewriting national strategy and revising foreign policy. Those who like paradoxes can find similarities between the presidencies of George H. W. Bush and his son George W. Bush. Both Bushes had to start their presidency facing new international realities without "traditional" threats to U.S. society. George H. W. Bush had to deal with a dead Warsaw Pact. George W. Bush, on the other hand, had to face a "new" old threat—terrorism, which has shown itself to be all too real and all too close to the lives of ordinary U.S. citizens.

With the recent transfer of political power in the U.S. and in Russia just two years ago, two relatively new teams in the Kremlin and in the White House are looking for new approaches to the issues facing both countries in general and U.S.-Russian relations in particular. This political fact assures some experts and analysts of the existence of a fresh start in relations between the two countries. Some analysts, however, have doubts about this new start in relations. These analysts are not saying that we will see a continuation of past tension and conflict, but they also do not see a real basis for partnership, strategic or tactical. The main basis for these new relations, they claim, is primarily psychological.

Challengers to U.S.-Russian Relations

Due to the uncertainty of the current international system, Russia is having difficulty in its relations with United States. During the Cold War, bipolarity was more or less clear. It was easy to differentiate friends from enemies. The current situation is very different. Despite interdependence with the United States on security policy, Russia has its own interests in the North Caucasus and in Central Asia that sometimes conflict with U.S. interests. Even now we can see that Washington and Moscow have different allies in Afghanistan and different preferences regarding the main players in any postconflict Afghan government. This means that Russia and the United States have to work to overcome a new geopolitical challenge.

In geopolitical terms, U.S. interests are directed primarily at North and South America while Russian interests are concentrated more in Europe. Russia wants to be a Pacific power, but competitors in that region do not wish to see Moscow in a strong position there. The interests of the United States in the Western Hemisphere have grown dramatically in the last decade. This does not mean that the United States will become more of a regional power and less of a global one, but taking into account the Republican presence in the White House, some sort of isolationism in U.S. policy would not be entirely unexpected. Instead, this means that Washington, despite its superpower status, will resist acting unilaterally due to domestic forces.

Economically, Russia focuses heavily on its relations with Europe and is very interested in preserving its dominant position in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Unfortunately for Russian interests, the CIS continues to be economically unproductive. Former Soviet republics, now independent states, are looking for more reliable trade and economic partners. Conceivably U.S. and Russian interests might not coincide in this realm. Another challenge to U.S.-Russian relations is energy. Oil plays an extremely important role in the Russian economy, but falling oil prices in November 2001 showed that its international image means more for the Kremlin than budgetary and economic stability. U.S. dependence on imported oil for its energy needs affects U.S.-Russian cooperation because the two countries need different oil prices. Some experts blame the Russian government for waiting too long (until the end on the President Vladimir Putin's official visit to the United States) before replying positively to OPEC's recommendation to sell less oil on the world markets.

The energy riches of Russia produce both mutual interest and friction with the United States (one example—the Caspian pipeline dispute). Russia is very interested in receiving new foreign investment. Western firms are reluctant to invest, however, as long as the legal basis for cooperation between the countries remains in doubt. Western firms are very interested in mineral resources, while Russian wants to attract investors in manufacturing and production. Despite the political elites' support of aid to Russia, U.S. public opinion has long favored leaving Russia to solve its own problems. In the current situation, joint counterterrorism operations will help to create a more positive attitude in the U.S. toward Russia. The task of politicians is not to miss a unique chance to improve economic relations between Russia and the United States.

Can the United States and Russia Work Together?

Some results of cooperation between Russia and the United States can be found in the areas of space exploration, science, and nonproliferation. The Shuttle-Mir Program taught both states how to work across international boundaries on complex human space flight operations, improved understanding of the effects of long-term living in space, and contributed to the

success of the International Space Station through reduced risk and more efficient assembly techniques.

Cooperation in the peaceful use of space is important to both countries. Equally important is mutual cooperation to ensure the prevention of the militaristic use of space, such as missile proliferation. Nonproliferation in all its aspects is an area of great importance to the United States and Russia. Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their missile delivery systems, according to official U.S. statements, pose a direct and serious threat to U.S. national security. The United States and Russia currently work together as members of the Missile Technology Control Regime to halt the transfers of missiles and missile-related technology.

The United States pursues programs in the former Soviet Union, especially Russia, to help these states control and dispose of massive quantities of WMD and missile materials. One such program is the International Science and Technology Center (ISTC), which promotes nonproliferation. A 1992 agreement between the European Union, Japan, the Russian Federation, and the United States founded it. The center gives weapons scientists from the countries of the CIS opportunities to use their scientific expertise in pursuit of peaceful science. It also offers opportunities for foreign scientific and commercial organizations to propose projects that gainfully employ weapons scientists.

Despite a number of disagreements, the United States and Russia have been working successfully in the area of disarmament and nonproliferation for more than 30 years. The treaties in place and the effectiveness of complicated verification systems testify to this success. Now presidents Bush and Putin want to create a new sphere of partnership in counterterrorism. However terrorism is a very specific threat. Up to now the international community has had problems defining terrorism due in part to conflicting interests. The best that can be hoped for is a definition of terrorism that is acceptable to both social science analysts and the politicians, lawyers, and human rights activists, and those who consider themselves the defenders of freedom and civil liberties. Terrorists rarely use the word terrorism at all when referring to their own activities. From a legal point of view, an undefined enemy is an unacceptable base for defining terrorism.

Another aspect raising concern is that terrorism has no territory. The United States' current counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan should not become the precedent of how to deal with international terrorism. Imagining a future scenario in which members of the international community, provided with top secret information, begin bombing a third country supposedly accused of harboring or training terrorists is not difficult. That is a dangerous trend, as bases for terrorism can "be found" in many countries, depending on your definition of terrorism. Without an international standard defining terrorism, terrorism could divide the world as it once did 50 years ago. If countries have different geopolitical interests, they look for threats in different places. An issue that must be addressed is whether countries view fighting terrorism as an instrument to achieve "old" goals in a "new" world?

If it can be agreed that the current distribution of power reflects multipolarity, then the United States will sometimes be a partner with Russia and sometimes an adversary. Although Russia and the United States have become closer psychologically, both countries still carry wounds from the past. Current geopolitical and economic interests, as well as a change in the balance of power, may yet produce conflict. Both sides need to be realistic in their expectations. A fresh start in U.S.-Russian relations is unlikely if the two sides continue to speak in different

languages and define key issues differently. It is apparent that neither the United States or Russia is quite ready for the mutually advantageous and sustainable partnership that recent events and statements have encouraged.

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