

# **The United States and Russia Today**

## **A Practical Partnership**

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U.S.-Russian relations today can be characterized best as pragmatic. But this pragmatism is a very specific one. The partnership between Russia and the United States is driven by expediency rather than principle or ideological interests, and its primary motivation is to enhance state security in the face of mutual threats: international terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Each side recognizes that the two countries are partners, not allies; their partnership is not built on an ideological basis but on the careful calculation of its strategic merits. The United States is a world power assured of achieving its ambitions and goals by its various resources: economic, political, natural, technological, military, and so on. Russia is in fact a junior partner in this relationship, a partner with great potential but limited means to have a real impact.

### **Russia's Potential to be a Valuable and Coveted Partner**

Russia is a self-sufficient country and one of the richest in the world. According to a report prepared by G. Osipov, the country has the following attributes:

- Russia is home to 2.4 percent of the world's population and encompasses 10 percent of the world's territory, allowing it to provide a sufficient standard of living for 450 million people (three times the number currently living on Russian territory) and making Russia the only country with such a "margin of safety."
- Russia houses 21 percent of the world's natural resources, including 45 percent of the world's natural gas, 13 percent of its oil, and 23 percent of its coal.
- Russia possesses 0.9 hectares of arable land per inhabitant (80 percent more than in Finland and 30 percent more than in the United States).
- Russian/Soviet scholars and scientists have greatly contributed to the development of science and technology, and the Russian education system is still one of the best in the world (37 out of every 10,000 Russians are scholars or engineers—the same level as in the United States).

- The geographical and geopolitical location of Russia is unique. With its current borders, Russia is the junction where North, South, East, and West all meet.

Good management of these significant resources coupled with wisely articulated aims should allow Russia to create and execute an independent and pragmatic foreign policy that allows the country to work effectively as a partner to the United States in pursuit of shared goals. Ultimately, to understand Russian foreign policy, however, one must also understand Russia on its own terms, in its own circumstances, and in the context of its own culture and political institutions.

As Russian foreign policy is shaped by its unique circumstances, the same holds true in the United States. U.S. society is incredibly diverse and pluralistic, and U.S. foreign policy is very responsive to domestic political pressure. This pressure has become institutionalized, so that U.S. foreign policy is greatly influenced not only by those government branches charged with a significant foreign policy role, primarily the president and Congress, but also by private groups and institutions. U.S. foreign policy is thus every bit as “privatized” as the rest of U.S. society. U.S. foreign policy is a product of a democratic political processes and must be flexible enough to shift directions quickly in ways that may run counter to Russian foreign policy.

Unlike in the United States, there is significant predictability in Russia’s foreign policy decisionmaking process. Russian foreign policy is determined by the president. The State Duma has only limited influence on foreign policy, and public opinion does not play nearly as important a role in Russia as it does in the United States. The Russian foreign minister is relatively isolated from what the public thinks about foreign policy issues. The creation of foreign policy in contemporary Russia is highly dependent on individuals, not institutions. There is an abundance of bright, well-educated, and trained experts and specialists who comment on foreign policy issues in Russia, but Russia possesses few institutions and organizations that go beyond representing the position of Russia’s leadership to articulate and defend the government’s policies based on a set of ideological principles and ideas. It is not easy to find well-established think tanks that have a significant and persistent influence on the foreign policy decisionmaking process. In a country where there is a very strong and popular president and a public that always agrees with official policy, it is difficult to develop independent foreign policy expertise.

At the same time, however, new foreign policy actors are emerging, including big business, the Ministry of Atomic Energy, the Ministry of Defense (and the General Staff), and the Russian Orthodox Church. The very complex process of the “privatization” of Russian foreign policy has begun recently, and rules and procedures are being developed. “Privatized” Russian foreign policy will be different and more complex and diverse in the future, and considerably less predictable.

In terms of international relations theory, it is evident that President Vladimir Putin subscribes to a realist world view. He sees the world in terms of the balance of power and admires military power. His main focus is on Russian interests and security issues rather than ideology. Interesting parallels exist between Russia’s (and, primarily, Putin’s) foreign policy viewpoint and that of the Republican Party in the United States.

Traditionally, Republicans in the United States are very pessimistic about the efficiency of international organizations and, in particular, of multilateral military operations.

The current Republican administration has already followed the appeals of Republican politicians regarding the National Missile Defense (NMD) Program. Withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was considered the only way to convince other countries to refrain from attempts to develop inter-continental ballistic missiles that could threaten the territory of the United States. The approval of such a program, in the opinion of conservatives, would signal to foreign leaders that the United States is fully committed to protecting its security interests. It appears that U.S. foreign policy experts believe that rogue states respect traditional military strength but are not always deterred by it. These countries will not act and fight according to internationally adopted rules, and U.S. visions and values do not agree with those of the rogue states.

Despite an apparent convergence of world views, the Russian government has been aggravated by the United States's internationalization of some conflicts, especially in the Caucasus. Both the U.S. and the Russian governments would prefer to have a list of conflicts that are in their own spheres of influence rather than open to multilateral involvement.

In Russia, strategic forces are the main guarantee of national security. Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov has said that strategic forces are the key instrument of deterrence. It seems that both countries prefer to protect their national security by maximizing internal resources and military power.

In September 2002, the new U.S. National Security Strategy was announced. The "new" thesis of this strategy is the justification of preemptive attacks. At the time of Putin's meeting with top military officials at the end of September 2003, Minister of Defense Ivanov stated that the Russian army should be prepared to engage in preventive attacks when national interests are at stake. The first reaction among Russian journalists and experts was quite reserved. In reality, however, this is a revolution in Russian military strategic planning. With currently limited financial, technical, and operational resources, we should hardly expect this policy to be realized in the near future. However, this does mean that, at least in principle, Russia, like the United States, has reserved the right to act unilaterally in accordance with its national interests. The only question that arises is from where these two countries see threats emerging. Because both leaders have now agreed that international terrorism is a threat to their security, it is now important that they reach an agreement on the definition of "international terrorism" and develop criteria for unilateral or joint counterterrorist actions.

The difference in the threat assessments of the two countries lies in the geopolitical realm. The major threat to U.S. security is associated with so-called rogue states (renegades, outlaws). Russia and the United States, however, do not share the same idea of what constitutes a rogue state. This, in turn, means that Russia and the United States will not necessarily welcome every anti-terrorist operation conducted by the other.

Russia is currently less pro-Western than it was in the 1990s. The most popular foreign policy idea in Russia today is that Russia rely primarily on itself to ensure its security and place in the international community. Some experts believe that Russia has the potential to become a regional power once again but, at the same time, Putin has

stated repeatedly that Russia should integrate into western security structures to protect its interests. Thus, Russian participation in these institutions is important not only because Russia shares the same set of values and principles as the West, but also because membership in these organizations will help Russia meet national interests. This means that the partnership between Russia and the United States should be based on pragmatic calculations of benefits for each country rather than on ideological agreement between them.

## **Signs of Moscow's Pragmatic Approach to the United States**

The underlying pragmatism of Russian foreign policy was demonstrated by Russia's silent agreement to the U.S. presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus as part of the anti-terrorism campaign after September 11, 2001, its calm reaction to the U.S. unilateral abrogation of the ABM Treaty, and its participation in the anti-terrorist coalition in Afghanistan. Russia even adopted a fairly restrained position and even somewhat controlled rhetoric regarding the actions of the United States and Great Britain in Iraq. The public displays of friendly relations between Putin and President George W. Bush (e.g., Bush's visit to St. Petersburg on the city's anniversary and Putin's visit to Camp David and the Crawford Ranch) give further credence to a pragmatic and workable relationship.

Neither country is extremely interested in long-term, ideologically based coalitions. The United States and Russia instead seem to prefer to cooperate in temporary, ad hoc coalitions created for dealing with specific issues and with limited purposes. U.S.-Russian cooperation in the first Gulf War and the recent and ongoing counterterrorist campaign in Afghanistan are two prominent examples.

According to its national security strategy, the United States should be ready to act alone even without approval from the international community or a UN resolution. Due to the support it receives from many countries, the United States will not be isolated on the international stage even if it acts without international institutional authority or approval. Possessing the most efficient armed forces in the world and having implemented an approach to the military stage that is based on forward military bases, the Pentagon does not need military allies. As can be seen by the aftermath of the U.S. military success in Iraq in 2003, however, the United States does in fact need international support for its nation-building programs.

As Defense Minister Ivanov recently stated, Russia has chosen to follow a military affairs doctrine that is similar to that of the United States by reserving the right to act unilaterally to protect both national interests and Russians living abroad (including in the former Soviet republics). Military officials of both countries want to train their armies to fight two regional conflicts simultaneously. Russia and the United States thus have similar attitudes regarding certain basic security issues.

## **U.S. Potential to be a Pragmatic Partner**

The current Republican administration is more comfortable with the primacy (not to be confused with hegemony) of the United States in the world. Even while being skeptical

about the efficiency of international organizations and recognizing the ability of the United States to act unilaterally, some U.S. politicians and experts believe that the United States should not go to war alone, whether to enforce non-proliferation or fight terrorism. Republicans have traditionally advocated an active role for the intelligence community. Taking into account Putin's KGB/FSB background and the increasing power of U.S. intelligence organizations, the two countries should use this similarity to establish a closer relationship between their intelligence communities, at least on select issues.

Russia needs to strengthen its role in the international arena. To do so, it must overcome resistance from certain countries and international organizations hesitant to see an active Russian foreign policy. The United States should not base its foreign policy toward Russia on the assumption that Russia's power is declining. The Iraqi crisis has demonstrated to the U.S. government that, even with limited resources, Moscow can be a pragmatic and rational partner. What Russia needs now is to see some signs that the U.S. attitude toward Russia is changing. For example, the United States could achieve this by revoking the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, simplifying the visa process for at least some categories of Russian citizens, and rethinking the reduction of state-funded programs in Russia.

The current U.S. administration's indifference toward domestic policy in Russia makes it all the more easy for the United States to engage more with Russia. That the Bush administration is not as concerned with human rights or freedom-of-the-press issues as the U.S. government was during the 1990s essentially gives Moscow a free hand to deal with domestic problems. Russia has chosen a democratic government, a market economy, and values and norms that are in concert with those of the United States. Now, Russia needs the international community to understand that democracy building takes time. Especially in light of the difficulties involved in solving the Iraq crisis, Russia has the potential to be an essential partner to the United States, rather than a partner of convenience.