

The Challenge of an Undemocratic Russia

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As weakened as it has been by its prolonged and poorly executed transition from central planning to a market economy, Russia remains a key player in international security. Geographically, Russia lies astride Europe, the Middle East and the Far East, and plays an important role in every region of critical strategic importance. Russia remains the most potent military power in the center of Eurasia, a region where weakness and instability generate the greatest potential for civil and international conflict. Russia is a major player in the international oil market and an important exporter of cut-rate military equipment; it remains the country that poses the greatest danger of becoming a major exporter of WMD. Furthermore, Russia is emerging from its long slide, and appears poised to gradually rebuild its economic and military strength. Russia looks much as it did eighty years ago in 1924: its empire shattered, its economy weakened, but firmly on the road to rebuilding itself as a world power. In the 1920s the United States failed to devise a strategy that took into account the role Russia would play in the world in twenty years, and it would be wise to avoid repeating that mistake.

Russian Democracy and U.S. Foreign Policy

In the years following the end of the Cold War, American policy makers treated the fostering of democratic institutions in Russia as a primary U.S. foreign policy objective. The George H. W. Bush administration mobilized international donors to come to the aid of the new Yeltsin government, and the Clinton administration intervened repeatedly with the International Monetary Fund to unblock loans that had been suspended because of economic policy missteps. During the first Clinton administration, Russia policy weighed heavily in U.S. grand strategy, delaying NATO expansion and intervention in the civil wars in the Balkans. Important U.S. objectives were compromised because the overriding priority was to avoid destabilizing Russia's fragile democratic system. This emphasis gradually ebbed when Clinton prioritized NATO expansion, and vanished entirely after the dramatic collapse of the ruble in 1998 revealed the true extent of Russia's weakness. In his second administration Clinton was willing to intervene in the Balkans regardless of Russian preferences, and issues such as Iran's nuclear program and pipelines across the Caucasus were given higher priority than Russia's security and economic concerns. The George W. Bush administration continued this trend, moving towards a slow-motion confrontation with Russia until September 11, 2001. Suddenly,

the momentum changed, and Putin became a valued ally in the effort to unseat the Taliban.

Along the way, however, the American view of Russia's role in the world had shifted from intrinsic to instrumental. Russia might be a useful ally or an annoying obstacle to immediate U.S. policy objectives, but Russia itself was no longer a focus of those objectives. Washington quickly internalizes shifts in the balance of power and redirects its attention accordingly. Russia was no longer viewed as a country with the capacity to represent a substantial military threat—nuclear weapons notwithstanding—and the emphasis on Russian democracy that had been so strong in the 1990s was now gone.

Meanwhile, the character of Russian democracy rapidly changed. The first election of Vladimir Putin in 2000 by public acclamation and without the emergence of any credible competitor was troubling, and it laid the basis for a rapid centralization of power in the Russian presidency. The formerly fractious parliament became strikingly obedient, and reform legislation that had languished for years was rushed through with minimal debate. The freewheeling Russian press was brought to heel, and coverage of the president took on fawning overtones of the Soviet past. Even great wealth provided no protection against the displeasure of the Kremlin, as oil magnate Khodorkovsky discovered. A new round of parliamentary elections in 2003 and another plebiscite on the president consolidated power to the point that there was no longer any independent source of opposition in Russia. The weak resistance to Putin's subsequent move to strip governors of their independence was evidence of the sea change in Russian politics. There is no effective opposition to Putin. Russia is now an authoritarian country that holds elections.

This is a setback, not the end of the story. Many authoritarian countries hold elections, and many countries of this sort make the gradual transition to—or, as in Russia's case, back to—democracy. Mexico was long the classic example of an authoritarian country legitimized by manipulated elections, and those elections eventually created an opening to democracy. It would be a significant improvement in international security if Russia followed this path, since democracies cooperate more effectively than non-democracies and rarely engage in conflict with each other. American foreign policy should put enough weight on Russia's long-term role in international politics to invest in efforts to promote a democratic transition in Russia.

Influencing Russia

The ability of the United States to pursue a strategy of hard incentives is at present very limited. Russia does not need access to financing from international financial institutions at a time when it is running record current account surpluses and high oil prices ensure that federal coffers are full from the excise tax on record values of petroleum exports. The other major source of leverage over Russia was its long-standing drive to join the WTO. The Bush administration traded its leverage on this score for cooperation in Afghanistan, and Europe traded its support for Russia's agreement to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. There is little more that Russia immediately wants from international institutions, or that they can offer. Russia has an intense interest in collecting Iraqi debts to the former Soviet Union, and in access to the rebuilding effort in Iraq, and those

dimensions could represent leverage for U.S. policymakers. So far, however, Iraq has added irritants to U.S.-Russian relations rather than lubricants.

In any case, it is unlikely that hard incentives would be effective in promoting Russian democracy. There is little evidence that international aid or economic sanctions promote democratic transitions, and U.S. foreign policy cannot unilaterally transform the domestic politics of other countries in the short run by peaceful means. Neither appeasement nor threats nor economic pressure is likely to bear fruit within the political lifespan of a single president. On the other hand, there is a lot of evidence that democratic transitions are more likely across the board during periods when the international environment is permissive. The frequency of transitions to democracy is higher during periods when all of the leading states are democratic. Gentle persuasion, soft incentives, and the long-term activity of international institutions and non-governmental institutions nudge leaders to embrace softer versions of authoritarianism, to tolerate more diversity of opinion, and to give greater respect to human rights. This makes it possible for alternatives to government elites to emerge within civil society, which in turn increases the probability that democracy can emerge when a crisis arises to shake the status quo.

In order to pursue an effective strategy of suasion, however, the United States will require a high level of cooperation, or at least tacit coordination, with Europe. The essence of such a strategy is to give Russian leaders—Putin and those who succeed him—non-specific reasons to want to improve their image in the West. They should be made to see their popularity in Western public opinion and the respect they garner in Western capitals as important resources, even when they are not linked to specific objectives or tied to specific conflicts. These commodities should come to be seen by Russian elites as important political capital, a form of non-monetary international reserves that are not to be spent lightly. This is only effective, however, if Western leaders take a long-term view of creating incentives for good behavior: they must be stingy with praise unless it is well deserved; they must be quick to defend core democratic values when they are transgressed.

Unfortunately, this is not currently the case. The European Commission's response to the Khodorkhovsky case is a striking illustration. The Commission made a bold effort last spring to forge a common EU foreign policy around a critique of Russian human rights abuses, focusing attention on the Khodorkhovsky case, the long-standing abuses in Chechnya and concerns about the independence of Russian media. This was supported by many of the smaller EU members, and was strongly supported by the new entrants from the former Soviet bloc. The largest countries in the EU, however, quickly distanced themselves from the Commission's statements, and have since competed with each other to reaffirm their unwavering support for the Kremlin. This is in part a symptom of fractured trans-Atlantic relations, which have sent France and Germany scrambling for Russian support on the issue of Iraq. It is also explained in significant part by commercial rivalries, as the European countries compete for Russian contracts. In either case, it is a challenge for American policy, which must reestablish a robust form of cooperation with our traditional allies in order to create the united front that is necessary for a gentle strategy of long-term suasion to succeed.

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