

A Velvet Divorce

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In 2005, it became clear that the recent cooling of Russian-Western relations does not represent a short-term phenomena, and might dominate the foreign policy landscape until Russian and U.S. presidential elections in 2008. Several factors have contributed to the end of the honeymoon, which began immediately after September 11, 2001.

The absence of major terrorist attacks against U.S. targets has reduced the urgency of international cooperation in the fight against terrorism. The system of international relations that was shaken by September 11 is slowly returning to its traditional pattern. The Russian-Western rapprochement, which was based upon a common interest in combating non-traditional challenges that emerged from the Greater Middle East, has become overwhelmed by traditional competition over influence in many areas of the Eurasian landmass.

Second, the dual wave of enlargement by the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has moved the Western space far to the east, up to Russia's western borders and to states that Moscow considers vitally important for a broad set of political, military, economic, cultural, and historical reasons. The competition over Ukraine in late 2004 dramatically highlighted the scale and depth of different actors' conflicting interests in that country. Given continuing instability and divisions in Ukraine, as well as in Russia's other western neighbors in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), conflicting interests might play a significant role in Russian-Western relations.

Incorporation of the Baltic states into the EU and NATO transformed traditional points of Russian-Baltic disagreement (such as the civil rights

of ethnic Russian minorities in Latvia and Estonia, responsibilities and compensation for Soviet occupation, and transit to Kaliningrad) into disagreements between Russia and these Western institutions. Unsettled arms control issues and confidence-building efforts in the region remain a source of potential suspicion. Bottlenecks in Russia's access from St. Petersburg to the Baltic Sea will continue to be a source of incidents involving the violation of the airspace and territorial waters of regional states. For both the EU and NATO, it will be difficult to abstain from tackling emerging problems between Russia and some of their new member states. As a result, additional irritants in the Russian-Western relationship could arise.

Third, uncertainty about the goals and timetable of the U.S. military presence in Central Asia has revived Russian opposition to that presence, and it has increased suspicions that the United States and NATO intend to remain indefinitely in the region in order to squeeze Russia out. Some are also concerned that the West's continued presence in the region and Western support for corrupt and repressive local regimes will contribute to the further rise of Islamists and a real prospect of radical Islamic revolutions. A third concern is that Western support for short-term democratization might instead destabilize local societies that are not ready for democracy. Local states could collapse, or much more brutal regimes could come to power.

In broader terms, many in the Kremlin have started to consider the West as an entity that is working to prevent Russia's current regime from surviving in power after 2008. The color revolutions which took place from 2003-2005 in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan are perceived not only as an attempt masterminded by the West to undermine Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space, but also as one directed at supporting a transition of power in Moscow and the promotion of a weak, pro-Western, and possibly even shrunken Russian confederation. The recent prosecution of Russian officials accused of corruption in the United States and elsewhere has further contributed to a growing feeling that the West is becoming a direct threat to the wealth and safety of an influential part of the Russian elite.

Furthermore, troubling statistics on the recent economic performance of some central European states on the eve of their accession to the EU has created doubts about Western-promoted economic reforms. This is exacerbated by Russia's own negative experience with such reforms, which, in the opinion of many, led to the 1998 default and economic crisis. One frequently hears in Moscow that Europe is developing too slowly, and so Russia has to look instead at other models, the Chinese one in particular.

The proliferation of controversies in relations with the West has coincided with improved economic performance for Russia. Under

Vladimir Putin's administration, average economic growth has been 6-7 percent a year. It is expected that Russia's gold and hard currency reserves, already at historic highs, may exceed \$200 billion by the end of 2005. Russia has been able to allocate more funds to revive its military and defense industry, to implement political projects such as those in the post-Soviet space, and to resume large-scale television and radio broadcasts for foreign audiences.

In an era of high oil prices, it is becoming difficult to ignore the demands of one of the world's leading oil and natural gas producers and exporters. Russia's dependence on the West has dramatically decreased since the 1990s. An independent Russian foreign policy is becoming a factor in international affairs. During the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow was brave enough for the first time since the collapse of the USSR to directly act against important common interests of the United States and the EU. Moscow has declared that Russia is ready for future competition in the post-Soviet space.

Despite recent efforts, relations inside NATO, and transatlantic relations more generally, probably remain weaker now than at any other time since the end of the Cold War. EU enlargement has prevented the organization from playing a more active role in international relations, as was remarkably demonstrated by the collapse of its Iranian initiative. Continuing chaos in Iraq and Afghanistan further limits the field for maneuvering of Western nations and thus widens opportunities for others to circumvent and even openly challenge Western interests.

A shift of U.S. attention toward the Greater Middle East, together with the continuing rise of China, has affected the U.S.-led system of security alliances in the Far East as well. Uncertainties over the nature of Japan's status, the future and scale of the U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula, and disputes over North Korea's nuclear program (as well as its unpredictable future and regional impact) all weaken the United States in the Western Pacific.

Also, rising developing nations are more openly challenging the global governance system that emerged since the end of the Cold War. Their rapid economic growth allows them to play a more important role in a variety of different areas, from oil prices to United Nations reform. In some respects, Russia is closer to these states than to its G8 partners. This further increases opportunities and strengthens bargaining positions for Russian diplomacy.

As in the late 1990s, China and Russia are pursuing rapprochement in various areas. They possess common attitudes regarding the need for plurality in global governance, and they share similar security concerns over developments in Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. This entails suspicion of the U.S. role, especially in Central Asia and Iran. However, it would be a mistake to think that Moscow and Beijing develop

their relations solely with an eye to third parties. They have a growing direct interest in each other. In recent years, Sino-Russian trade has increased and diversified significantly and no longer depends on arms sales. Moscow has realized that with efficient management of migration, China could be a key to developing the underpopulated Far East and eastern Siberia. While Beijing is looking for alternative energy resources, particularly those that do not require delivery by sea routes (still dominated by the United States), Moscow is increasingly unhappy with its dependence upon exports to the EU and seeks to diversify its energy export market. Unprecedented bilateral military exercises last summer demonstrated that China and Russia understand the need to be able to react together, in the event that a crisis were to emerge in a region that borders both powers.

In sum, an increasing number of potential irritants in Russian-Western relations are likely to lead to a continuous chilling of the relationship. Russia's improving economic performance, the relative weakening of key Western institutions and alliances, and an increasing challenge from significant developing nations creates opportunities to pursue an independent Russian foreign and security policy.

At the same time, this independent policy need not necessarily challenge Western interests. The emerging divorce will unlikely bring relations either back to Cold War standards or to a new cold peace. Russia and the West, especially the United States, still share important interests in countering global terrorism and other new security threats, in stabilizing the Greater Middle East, and in transforming global governance and consolidating key international institutions and regimes. Under these circumstances, it will be difficult to downgrade the Russian-Western relationship to that of mere coexistence. Cooperation is necessary; the question is how limited this cooperation will be.