

Normalizing U.S.-Russian Relations

by Eugene B. Rumer and Richard D. Sokolsky

Key Points

Ten years after the Cold War, the United States is still looking for an organizing principle to guide policy toward Russia.

Because of its systemic weakness, neither partnership nor competition is an appropriate concept. Washington should put aside its search for a comprehensive concept in dealing with Moscow and pursue a case-by-case approach rooted in specific U.S. interests.

Priority interests involve a redefined strategic relationship, including Russian acquiescence to national missile defense; collaboration by Moscow in combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and other destabilizing technologies; and inducing Russia to base its behavior on respect for the international norms to which it is committed. The United States should be prepared to deemphasize other issues, such as conventional arms sales, that do not threaten core national interests.

The Bush administration needs to communicate its intent to respect Russian interests, while making it clear that a productive relationship will depend primarily on Russian willingness to adhere to the values shared by the United States and other democratic nations. The choice of what kind of relationship Russia wants is largely in its own hands.

However, Russia's chaotic policymaking and the mismatch between its ambitions and capabilities preclude resolving key bilateral issues. Therefore, prospects for engaging Russia constructively appear dim and the United States will have to go it alone in areas where Russian acquiescence is lacking.

Ten years after the end of the Cold War, mutual hopes that a comprehensive partnership would replace containment as the major organizing theme in U.S.-Russian relations have not been realized. The record of the 1990s has left both Russia and the United States unsatisfied. Russia looks back at the decade with bitterness and a feeling of being marginalized and slighted by the world's sole remaining superpower. It is also disappointed by its experience with Western-style reforms and mistrustful of American intentions. The United States is equally disappointed with Russia's lack of focus, inability to engage effectively abroad, and failure to implement major reforms at home. A comprehensive partnership is out of the question. Renewed competition or active containment are also not credible as organizing principles. Russia's economic, military and political/ideological weakness makes it an unlikely target of either U.S. competition or containment. Not only is Russia no longer a superpower, but its status as a regional power is in doubt.

Current thinking about Russia is divided among four basic approaches: *Forget Russia*, *Enfant Terrible Russia*, *Evil Russia*, and *Russia First*. The *Forget Russia* view holds that Russia is too weak, too corrupt, and too chaotic to matter. After 10 years of trying to help Russia, the United States should focus its resources and attention on more deserving and important world issues.

The *Enfant Terrible* view holds that, although Russia has been an irresponsible and irritating partner, it is too weak to hurt the United States and therefore need not be feared in earnest. President Vladimir Putin's visits to Cuba and North Korea, courtship of Slobodan

Milosevic, and welcoming of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami to Moscow are of little strategic consequence and thus not worth our attention. This view presupposes the existence of an important U.S.-Russian bilateral agenda and the need to protect it from childish and irresponsible Russian grandstanding.

The *Evil Russia* view holds that Russian courtship of Cuba, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea is a deliberate effort to undermine U.S. influence in the world and recreate the Soviet empire. Analysts embracing this view take less notice of Russia's diminished capabilities than of ambitious rhetoric by Russian politicians. Given Russia's evil purposes, the United States is already on a collision course with it and might as well do everything it can to box Russia in.

The *Russia First* view holds that Russia still is the most important issue on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. It accepts the premise that the two sides have shared interests and that Russia, once reborn as a stable, prosperous democracy, can be a U.S. partner and ally. Therefore, the United States should actively assist Russia in its transformation and engage it in a broad and intense relationship with renewed vigor and creativity.

There are shortcomings in all of these approaches. Notwithstanding its precipitous decline, to *Forget Russia* is clearly not an option: the country's geographic expanse, nuclear arsenal, and proliferation potential simply make it impossible for U.S. policymakers to ignore. The *Enfant Terrible* view fails to take Russia seriously and ignores the very real problems that exist between the two countries. The

Evil Russia view risks inflating the threat and making the myth of evil Russia a self-fulfilling prophecy. The *Russia First* view is not grounded in reality. After a decade of failure, it should be clear that neither the specter of Russia's past nor the promise of its future warrants a position near the top of the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Need for Normalcy

Russia's external weakness and internal problems have left the United States without an effective interlocutor, either as partner or competitor. Thus, the United States should deal with Russia on a case-by-case basis to advance our interests, in much the same way we deal with most other countries. This path will sometimes lead toward partnership with Russia and at other times toward competition. It may even result in a situation where Russia and the United States find themselves as partners and competitors simultaneously in different parts of the world or on different issues.

Given its size, history, strategic nuclear capabilities, and future potential, one is tempted to overstate the importance of relations with Russia and put them at the top of the U.S. national security agenda. Except for geography and nuclear weapons, however, there is little at this stage to justify making relations with Russia a top priority. Undoubtedly, Russia can inflict unacceptable damage on the United States. But fear of Russian nuclear weapons should not be the driving element of the relationship. The hostility and ideological differences that divided the superpowers during the Cold War are gone. The prospect of Russia consolidating and rebuilding itself under a militant authoritarian, nationalist regime is remote. Therefore, fears of a deliberate surprise attack on the United States are unjustified.

Despite a number of bilateral undertakings outside the Cold War-style security agenda, ranging from regional diplomacy in the Balkans to investment, U.S. engagement with Russia, with the notable exception of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Initiative, is limited. American investment in Russia is a fraction of what it is in Europe or China, trade rarely exceeds a few billion dollars a year, and political and cultural relations are limited at

best. In other words, beyond traditional Cold War issues, the United States has an extremely narrow relationship with Russia, let alone enough of a stake in it to merit a special place on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. Nonetheless, while Russia is not a major player in Europe or Northeast Asia, its proximity to Europe, Japan, and China make it a focus of U.S. policy.

New Security Agenda

Throughout the 1990s the nature of U.S. strategic interests in Russia shifted considerably. With the demise of the adversarial relationship, strategic stability has become a secondary or even tertiary concern for the United States. By contrast, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—and Russia's role in aiding and abetting this trend—has emerged as a preeminent national security challenge. U.S. security concerns with Russia, therefore, are increasingly related to Russia's weakness and loss of control over its WMD, rather than deliberate nuclear threats. The

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challenge is preventing and controlling problems that stem from Russian weakness.

With the declining relevance of mutual assured destruction (MAD) as the basis for both the U.S. nuclear posture and U.S.-Russian strategic relations, defense against long-range ballistic missile attack has emerged as one of the most prominent bilateral issues. Currently, no issue on the U.S. national security agenda is more important than national missile defense (NMD). There is a broad national consensus on the necessity of building a defense against limited ballistic missile attacks. The question facing U.S. policymakers is not whether to proceed with NMD deployment, but how and when. Thus, U.S. policy toward Russia will be greatly affected by decisions in NMD. No administration official—past or present—has articulated this sequence,

but its logic is inescapable, based on the national consensus about missile defense and the declining importance of Russia on the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

Accordingly, security policy toward Russia needs to be adapted to new priorities. Pursuing a new agenda will require adjusting our view of Russia and how much it matters to us and in world affairs. The United States cannot allow fears of Russian nuclear capabilities to drive its nuclear doctrine and force posture. Russia is neither a superpower nor our enemy. In consequence, the United States should stop sizing and structuring its strategic forces to implement a targeting strategy based on Cold War arithmetic. Likewise, the Cold War approach to arms control, which focuses on negotiating legally binding treaties that codify numerical parity and perpetuate the MAD principle, is no longer relevant to U.S. strategic priorities.

Efforts to maintain this anachronistic process are a distraction. Worse still, they make it more difficult for the United States and especially Russia to agree on NMD and the future of the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. In particular, both countries need to stop allowing considerations of preserving MAD, strategic stability, and numerical parity to drive their policies.

Bringing Russia to terms with NMD policy will be the key challenge facing the Bush administration in its Russia policy. Politically and strategically, reaching a compromise with Russia on a future NMD system that will allow Moscow and Washington to preserve the ABM Treaty is preferable, because it would help the United States avoid the domestic and international fallout that would attend a unilateral decision to withdraw from the ABMT. Thus, to gain Russia's acquiescence in NMD plans, the Bush administration will need to reassure Russia of its benign strategic intentions and demonstrate with concrete actions that an NMD system is not designed to give the United States a first strike capability against Russian strategic forces. Such steps could include:

- reducing strategic forces, unilaterally if necessary, to 1,000–1,500 deployed warheads;
- reducing the alert status of strategic forces;
- allowing Russia to retain intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) with multiple, independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), which would allay Russian concerns about NMD deployment's impact on its retaliatory capabilities and allow it to sustain its

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strategic force posture in the most economical way possible;

- helping Russia to revitalize its decaying early warning system;
- looking for ways, without compromising its effectiveness, to adjust the size, capabilities, and architecture of a prospective NMD system to make it less threatening to Russia;
- pursuing a cooperative approach with Russia, both globally and in Europe, to deploying missile defenses; and
- engaging Russia in a strategic dialogue to promote better understanding of each side's nuclear policies.

Even if the administration were prepared to take this path, it would still need to brace itself for a Russian effort styled after the early-1980s campaign to derail deployment of *Pershing II* and ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe. Leaving no doubt that an NMD deployment decision is unstoppable is a necessary, but perhaps not sufficient, condition for securing Moscow's agreement to amend the ABM Treaty. For a variety of reasons—Putin's uncertain control of the military, the fractiousness of national security policymaking, and the lack of clearly articulated foreign policy priorities—the Putin government is likely to temporize on a negotiated solution to the NMD/ABM Treaty problem for as long as possible. It is also likely to continue its international campaign to build pressure against a U.S. deployment decision. Indeed, given the domestic political context, Putin may be reluctant to invest his political capital and prestige in a difficult fight to overcome the opposition to NMD within the Russian military and security establishment.

Thus, the possibility remains that, even if the new administration succeeds in creating an aura of inevitability around NMD deployment, the Putin government will maintain its opposition to changes in the ABM Treaty and force the United States to bear the onus of withdrawing from the treaty. If this were to occur, Russia would likely retaliate, although the precise nature of its response is difficult to predict in large part because economic constraints will limit the options available to Putin. More importantly, the Russian response will be constrained politically and strategically by the refusal of the United States to engage in renewed competition.

Russia will almost certainly take whatever measures it deems necessary to maintain an effective strategic deterrent in the face of NMD deployment. However, U.S. decisions on the

future of its strategic force posture could significantly affect the nature and scope of this effort. Under any conceivable circumstances, the Russian military response to NMD deployment is unlikely to trigger a renewed U.S.-Russian arms race. The United States will not increase the size of its strategic offensive forces or missile defenses in response to Russia's reaction; and Russia's tiny defense budget and the shrinkage of its missile production infrastructure cannot sustain significant increases to a force structure that is rapidly obsolescing.

Russia has threatened to withdraw from other arms control treaties should the United States decide to deploy NMD and withdraw from the ABM Treaty. Whether Moscow would carry out these threats, which are intended to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies over NMD, is an open question. Leaving aside the question of resources that might be available to the Russian leadership to pursue

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these retaliatory options, it is worth noting that Moscow gains advantages from these treaties, especially information on Western military forces from inspections, data exchanges, and other verification arrangements. In addition, the practical military significance of Russian repudiation of these treaties is limited, unless Moscow takes the provocative but unlikely step of deploying new intermediate-range nuclear missiles in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which would undermine relations with Europe.

More problematic from a U.S. perspective is whether a unilateral NMD deployment decision will have a negative impact on Russian nonproliferation behavior. Russia is already behaving badly in this area, and its assistance to Iran's nuclear weapons and missile development program is a major impetus to NMD plans. More importantly, Russia's proliferation policies are driven to a significant degree by domestic considerations rather than external

threat perceptions. These include commercial gains, personal profit, the continuing influence of the Russian defense industrial complex and the relevant Russian security ministries, and government unwillingness or inability to rein in freewheeling Russian enterprises. Consequently, failure to reach agreement on the NMD/ABM Treaty issue is unlikely to have an appreciable impact on Russian nonproliferation policies, although Moscow could provide countermeasures technologies to help states of concern overcome missile defense.

Russian Behavior at Home and Abroad

The U.S. experience of the 1990s in trying to engineer Russia's internal evolution has left a legacy of dissatisfaction and mutual suspicion in both countries. That experience demonstrated the limited U.S. ability to provide effective support while respecting Russian sensitivities. It has also showed that Russian reform and political and economic development is best left to the Russians. Still, the United States cannot turn a blind eye to Russian domestic conditions. At the very least, no U.S. administration can afford to do so for political reasons, since crime and corruption, freedom of religion, the well-being of various ethnic groups, and other such issues command strong grassroots support in the United States. Indeed, the efforts of Russian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote democratic reform in Russia have produced an NGO constituency in the United States whose views cannot be disregarded. Russia's internal political climate will endure as a U.S. concern.

Russia's neighbors in the former Soviet Union represent another area of concern. While none has emerged as an important U.S. partner or a major threat, Washington has repeatedly endorsed their independence and provided them with material and political support. Through its actions and official statements since 1991, the United States has created a perception that it is the de facto guarantor of their independence. A reversal or erosion of their independence as a result of external interference—Russian or otherwise—would run counter to U.S. interests and reflect negatively on the United States. Moscow's continuing problems in Chechnya make it clear that it has neither the resources nor the vision necessary to play the role of the security manager in the former Soviet Union. Nor can the United

States acquiesce to the Russian aspiration for a *droit de regard* over its neighbors—which Moscow considers a legitimate interest—without compromising their independence and sovereignty.

Russian respect for these two U.S. concerns—human rights and relations with the former Soviet states—will not be easy to secure. Given the limited nature of U.S. interests in much of the former Soviet Union, the United States has two effective levers at its disposal. It can offer financial support to programs that further human rights and the independence of the former Soviet states. In addition, in the event it disapproves of Moscow's actions in these areas, Washington can keep high-level political contacts to a minimum, thus in effect downgrading the bilateral relationship with Moscow. In most other areas—cutting off CTR funds, for example—the United States would run the risk of undermining its own interests.

Engaging the Allies

Managing the U.S.-Russian relationship will require close coordination and consultation with our European allies, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The United States and its European allies see Russia in very different terms. Growing U.S. perceptions of Russia as a former superpower in terminal decline are not shared in Europe, where Russia is given better odds of making a comeback. Still, Europe's geographic proximity to Russia means that it poses a major security concern either as a failing state or as a regional power on the mend. Coupled with European nervousness about NMD, Europe presents Russia with an opportunity to conduct its anti-NMD diplomacy and attempt to rekindle transatlantic tensions.

Consulting with the allies on Russia, therefore, will be a crucial element of U.S. policy toward Russia and Europe. The United States will need to make clear that it has no desire to weaken or isolate Russia. At the same time, the Bush administration will need to dispel allied illusions about Russia and its prospects either as a partner or as a problem. Indeed, the Bush administration should underscore that its NMD policy must not be seen in isolation but rather as part of a much broader, forward-looking vision—to move beyond Cold War-era strategic doctrine and force structure and to address the real security threats to the United States and its allies, notably the proliferation threat that stems from Russian weakness.

Focusing on NMD

The importance of NMD on the national security agenda of the United States means that the new administration will need to be selective in engagement with Russia. While the United States can ill-afford to ignore major security issues, such as WMD proliferation and CTR, it

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should not burden the agenda with complaints about Russian conventional arms sales and unilateral sanctions that have little hope of deterring or punishing Russian behavior.

Russia's inclination to sell the cheap and reliable systems its industry still can produce is not likely to be affected by U.S. demarches, since these sales are seen by Moscow as a major source of export revenues. In the longer run, Russia's ability to develop, manufacture, and sell highly sophisticated conventional weapons is likely to erode due to the deterioration of the defense industrial sector. Thus, the United States should not become overly preoccupied with Russian sales of small arms, relatively unsophisticated artillery systems and infantry equipment, or current-generation fighter aircraft. In short, the United States should adopt a more discriminating approach to Russian arms sales, which would also enhance the credibility of U.S. demarches to Moscow in key areas that really matter to U.S. interests.

While seeking to convince the Russian Government of the extent of its commitment to NMD, the administration will need to underscore to Russian elites that the United States is ready for engagement on a host of issues. These include strategic arms reductions, whether unilateral, parallel, or negotiated; cooperation in developing missile defenses and modifying the ABM Treaty; talks about Russian

accession to the World Trade Organization; and expanding cooperation on regional and transnational issues ranging from terrorism to stability in Central Asia. However, only a few of these—such as Russian cooperation in promoting stability and reducing threats in North-east Asia and the Persian Gulf—merit a prominent place on the high-level agenda between the two governments and can be handled at the expert level.

The Bush administration faces the challenge of convincing Russian leaders and political elites that the key to a successful relationship with the United States is in their hands, that only they can make the right choice that will put the two countries back on the path toward cooperation and partnership. That challenge also entails communicating to Russia that a positive relationship with the United States calls for a certain comfort level with Russia for the people and the leaders of the United States. And this will depend to a large degree on Russian willingness and ability to abide by the principles and values the United States and its allies share at home and abroad. Russia's position in today's world does not entitle it to a special relationship with the United States. Russia is in decline, its population shrinking, its economy in tatters, its government in disarray, and its leadership unable to articulate a realistic vision for renewal and a clear sense of national identity. In light of these conditions, the United States cannot force Moscow to embrace democratic principles and values, including respect for human rights, press freedom, and sovereignty of one's smaller neighbors. Nor does the United States have the leverage to force Moscow to abandon its fondness for regimes that are hostile to the United States. But the United States should not compromise on important interests or principles and should be ready to confront Russia when its actions threaten these interests.

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