RUSSIA AND THE U.S. COOPERATION OR COMPETITION IN A CHANGING WORLD?

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INTRODUCTION

For over forty years, relations between Washington and Moscow were so hostile that the mere possibility of an attack from the other side fueled predictions of a globally devastating nuclear war. Schools had regular drills to prepare for a nuclear attack. Communities prepared underground shelters stocked with months of provisions. Leaders from both sides carefully crafted each speech and diplomatic move, fully aware that their counterparts on the other side of the world were paying close attention to their words and actions. It was a disturbing and tense time, and those who lived through it carry the memories of that experience with them to this day.

During this time, Russia was part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The Soviet Union’s military might and arsenal of weapons of mass destruction were clear threats to global security. The fear of direct conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, the world’s two superpowers, dominated the daily decisions of foreign policymakers.

In contrast to the current state of the world, the Cold War depicted a defined enemy of the United States: the Soviet Union. Its ideology was specifically defined as communism. The risks were clear—any confrontation could result in a war of unprecedented proportions. The conclusion of the Cold War was clearly marked, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 into fifteen independent republics. Today, especially with the war on terrorism, the "enemy" may be a state, a well-organized terrorist group, or a handful of extremist individuals. Ideologies and true motivations are not clearly defined, and no clear resolution for ending the war on terrorism is conceivable at this time.

At the end of the Cold War, U.S. leaders were optimistic, but remained concerned about the security of Russia’s uncontrolled supply of nuclear weapons, the future of the Russian political and economic systems, and the suffering of the Russian people. Uncertainty about Russia’s future continues today, and concern about instability within Russia remains a key emphasis of U.S.-Russian relations. U.S. relations with Russia has a lot to do with the choices Russia makes through this transition from communism to democracy and a free market economy.

The U.S. and Russia no longer view each other as adversaries. In many ways, the two countries are valuable partners in a complicated world. There is much to be gained through cooperation; however, differences of opinion remain, and the resolution of such differences will have a profound impact on the rest of the world, and specifically the future of the U.S.-Russian relationship.

The goal of this paper is to explain the status of Russia’s transition and its implications for U.S.-Russian relations in a changing world. First, we will examine the internal transition in Russia in political, economic, and social terms. We will then turn to the new relationship between the U.S. and Russia and highlight some of the major issues confronting their mutual relations today.

CONDITIONS WITHIN RUSSIA

To gain a sense of what life in Russia has been like in recent years, consider the following statement by Judy Woodruff, the CNN anchorwoman who introduced Russia: Facing the Future, a video documentary and study from the Carnegie Corporation of New York:

"From this side of the world it’s hard to put ourselves in Russian shoes. But just imagine for a moment that in the space of three years the U.S. lost its superpower status, that over a dozen states seceded, becoming independent countries and taking almost 40% of the population with them. Imagine that our allies switched their allegiance to our former military rival. Then imagine that the dollar became worthless, that factories closed, that most people lost their life savings, and that social security was abolished. That might begin to give you an idea of what ordinary Russians have experienced in this past decade.”

If such changes were to occur in the United States, you can imagine the political and economic chaos, the social tensions, and the psychological disillusionment that would ensue. Since the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991, this is exactly what has occurred in the Russian Federation, the largest and wealthiest republic out of the fifteen republics that once made up the Soviet Union.
Russia has been redefining its political identity, reforming into a market economy, and struggling to provide public services, such as health care and education, that were once widely available to the Russian people under a socialist system.

Russia’s transformation is far from over. Its political system is somewhere between a democracy and an authoritarian state. Its economy is market-driven, yet corruption and a black market economy continue to thrive, thereby stifling broader economic growth. The health and well-being of the Russian people continue to decline, and the shrinking Russian population gives rise to concerns about its ability to provide for its own security and prosperity. As we examine the progress and limitations of Russia’s transition, keep in mind that it has been just over a decade since these changes began. Such a major transformation will take many more years, and it will require a great deal of patience and cooperation from Russians who are living through this difficult and important time.

DEMOCRACY AND LEADERSHIP IN TODAY’S RUSSIA

An important part of Russia’s transition is the significant political change that has occurred since the fall of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet era, only the communist party was legal; now half a dozen political parties have substantial representation in the State Duma, one of two legislative bodies in the Russian government. Russia’s new constitution guarantees freedom of ideology, movement, private ownership, and economic activity. These guarantees have created political and economic opportunities that were impossible only a few decades ago.

Despite the presence of such freedoms in official policy, reality tells a different story. Crime and corruption have caused the government to take a hard-line stance, resulting in continued restrictions on individual freedoms. Attempts by the government to gain control of a chaotic country have resulted in human rights abuses, military conflict, and the suppression of independent media sources.

An interesting way to examine the political situation in Russia is to take a look at its current leader, President Vladimir Putin. Putin is a former agent of the state secret service, known as the KGB. He has focused on rebuilding Russia’s economy, security, and national pride. His top priorities include consolidating the central government, resolving the situation in Chechnya, and encouraging market reform. Putin is a popular president among Russian citizens, and is expected to easily win the elections scheduled for the spring of 2004. In a recent poll from a Russian public opinion source, Putin ranked first among all of Russia’s political leaders since 1917. He is considered to be a pragmatic leader who supports modernization, defends Russian national interests around the world, works closely with the United States and Western Europe on certain foreign policy issues, and encourages economic growth in Russia. At the same time, Putin is often seen as a leader who uses strong-arm tactics to stabilize his country—exerting military force and controlling election results in Chechnya, limiting the power of wealthy leaders in control of Russia’s main industries, thwarting political opponents, and closing independent media sources with unfavorable views of the government.

A leading expert on Russia, Michael McFaul of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University recently addressed the complexity of Russia’s government in his September 2003 testimony for the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations:

“Russia is not a dictatorship. The regime in place in Russia today is radically different from the one-party autocracy that ruled the Soviet Union for seven decades….Russia, however, is moving in an autocratic direction. The regime in Russia never met all the criteria of liberal democracy…Putin inherited a political system with weak democratic institutions—the balance of power between the president and the legislative branch was skewed too far in favor of the president, rule of law had only begun to take root, and the political party system as well as civil society was underdeveloped. Since coming to power, Putin has done little to strengthen democratic institutions. Instead, most of Putin’s political reforms have served to strengthen his political power without undermining formally the democratic rules of the game. Putin’s advisors have a term for this transformation—‘managed democracy.’”

Lila Shevtsova of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace refers to Putin’s presidency as a “work in progress.” She claims that “it remains uncertain whether the Russian president will transform the way his country is governed, or whether the nation will revert into a state of stagnation.” She argues that there is a sense that Putin is preserving a status quo, that Russia’s elite is dissatisfied with the pace of political and economic reform, and that Putin’s popularity is based solely on his poll results and high oil prices. She warns that “if Putin does not follow the reformist path which he is fully capable of taking, he will squander not only an historic opportunity to change Russia, but also the chance to liberate himself from the constraints which have bound so many other Russian leaders.”

Putin’s strongest critics put out an advertisement in American newspapers immediately before the Russian president’s September 2003 visit to meet with President George W. Bush. They posed seven questions to Bush “about his friend President Vladimir Putin,” pointing out Putin’s suppression of democratic institutions such as the parliament, courts, media, and the new constitution, the Russian government’s war crimes and genocide in Chechnya, suspicious actions of the Russian secret services, and the presence of Putin’s former KGB
CONFLICT IN CHECHNYA

Daily media reports tell the stories of suffering refugees, terrorist attacks in Moscow, and human rights abuses on both sides of the Chechen conflict. What is going on in Chechnya and why is it important?

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the republic of Chechnya has sought independence from the Russian Federation. There are about one million people living in Chechnya, and although Russians also live in the area, the Chechens are considered to be a different ethnic group and traditionally practice Islam.

Two wars in Chechnya have occurred in recent years as Russian military forces have fought to keep the breakaway republic part of Russia. In each case the poorly equipped Chechens have fought back with guerilla tactics that have caused humiliating defeats for the Russian military.

The latest war began in 1999. Russian troops were sent into Chechnya after militants invaded the neighboring Russian constituent republic of Dagestan, and after a series of bomb explosions in Moscow and elsewhere, killing hundreds, were attributed to Chechen extremists. Putin was elected the following year, intending to finally resolve the conflict.

Putin has attempted to give Chechnya some autonomy while remaining a republic within Russia. A referendum in March 2003 gave Chechnya autonomy under Russian governance, but alleged corruption involved in the vote has provoked more controversy than peace.

In recent months independent television stations have been shut down—the last remaining independent television station was closed in June 2003. At the time, a CNN article reported that Russia’s Information Ministry claimed that the station “failed to meet the demands of quality broadcasting and that ‘a decision had to be taken to defend viewers’ interests and take account of legal issues.’” Such closures were apparently for financial reasons, although many suspect it was a concerted effort to silence government opposition during the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. Transparency International noted in their Global Corruption Report 2003 that “there is evidence that access to information in Russia has deteriorated since Putin came to office. It is far more difficult to report events in the Chechnya conflict or to access state information.”

In October 2003 the Chechens had another opportunity to vote in the election of a new Chechen president. These election results were also controversial. Media sources believe the election, which brought a Kremlin-supported candidate to power, was a complete sham. Although the new president, Akhmad Kadyrov, is viewed as a puppet leader, he has criticized the Russian government on certain policies, he was a former guerilla fighter against the Russians in the 1994 war, and he has called for more economic freedoms and greater access to the region’s oil revenues.

Although the Chechen conflict has less to do with religion than their painful history of oppression, Chechen extremist groups with links to Al Qaeda have been terrorizing Russians. Suicide bombings have increased in the past few years, and dramatic events such as the hostage crisis in the Dubrovka Theater in October 2002 have increased the visibility of the Chechen struggle and the Russian government’s inability to handle the situation.

Meanwhile, Russian forces have suffered an increasing number of casualties and have allegedly committed serious human rights violations. Russian soldiers have been accused of torture, summary executions, bombing villages, raping Chechen women, and inhumane treatment of prisoners of war. All of these actions violate international laws and agreements, including the Geneva Conventions, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

The Chechens claim that Russia has always oppressed them and wants to keep the tiny republic under its control because of its oil resources. Russia sees the Chechen region as a strategic location, in close proximity to its European neighbors. Russia also sees the Chechen terrorists and their international links to Al Qaeda as major threats to the safety of Russian citizens.

Some believe that another reason for Russia wanting to preserve Chechnya in the Federation may be that Russia prides itself on being a multiethnic and multinational state. Russia hosts 160 nationalities, and it has not lost a single people or ethnic group since 1989. This diversity is a key part of Russia’s identity, and it does not want to encourage other ethnically-based regions to seek independence.

Whether or not the situation in Chechnya is resolved in upcoming months will have major implications for Putin’s credibility, as well as Russia’s relations with the United States and other countries. If the violence continues on both sides, Putin will fail to keep one of his main campaign promises, and may have difficulty being reelected. Although Putin has high poll ratings in general, his approval ratings on handling Chechnya are much lower, and Russians are greatly concerned about the increase in suicide bombings in Russian cities. Putin has also linked his war in Chechnya to the broader war on terrorism.

It remains to be seen whether Putin’s policy of giving the region some autonomy will work and whether he will be able to maintain American support despite reports of human rights violations by the Russian military.
**PROGRESS OR STAGNATION –
THE NEW RUSSIAN ECONOMY**

Along with all of the political changes and turmoil since the fall of the Soviet Union came a complete economic overhaul. The Soviet system had been based on a command economy, where the government owned all major industries and controlled everything from the number of jobs available to the number of goods produced and how much each item would cost. One of the largest parts of the Soviet economy was the defense industry, which equipped the large Soviet military during its Cold War competition with the United States. The defense industry in particular employed millions of Soviet citizens, and provided not only jobs, but also substantial benefits such as housing, social services, health care, and education to the workers and their families.

The economic transition in Russia has been a long and arduous process in the move from a command economy to a market economy, similar to that of the United States. Although some economic reforms began before the actual collapse of the Soviet Union, and have continued in the past decade, there is still much progress to be made. In order to privatize the economy, individual investors were permitted to purchase the once state-owned industries. State-owned enterprises that had controlled oil and natural gas resources, steel and textile mills, and communications companies were sold off at bargain prices to whoever had the money.

With privatization and international competition, the inefficiencies and poor quality of these industries became unavoidable. In many cases complete restructuring was necessary. Some of these industries were bought up by the same individuals who had controlled them during Soviet times, and that contributed to the problems of corruption and the success of the black market. According to Transparency International’s *Global Corruption Report 2003*, Russian businesspeople pay $30 billion a year in bribes. Government statistics in Russia estimate that the underground economy accounts for about one fourth of Russia’s gross domestic product (GDP), the total market value of all goods and services produced.

Despite these obstacles, some of the formerly state-owned industries have become so successful that their owners have become the richest people in Russia. These wealthy individuals are referred to as “oligarchs,” and they have a great deal of political and economic influence in Russia today. The oligarchs enjoyed a high level of influence in the administration of former President Boris Yeltsin. This wealthy elite has been less influential with President Putin, who has actually taken steps to limit their power.

The situation of the Russian oligarchs is an interesting one because of its political, social, and economic implications. To give a recent example of the complexity of this situation, consider the October 2003 arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the wealthiest man in Russia and owner of Yukos, the country’s biggest oil company. Khodorkovsky was arrested on charges of tax evasion, fraud, and forgery—charges which his company claims are completely false. The Yukos company has been investigated in the past; however, many suspect that Khodorkovsky’s arrest came with specific approval from Putin. Some analysts allege that Khodorkovsky’s arrest was politically-motivated, as he is an out-spoken critic of Putin and has contributed money to opposition parties.

Why is this story important? Russia has had to prove to businesspeople that it is becoming a safe and stable place to invest. Russian businesspeople have tended to invest their money elsewhere due to their government’s unpredictability. Russia’s economy has been growing since a major collapse in 1998, and investment firms have given Russia high rankings as an emerging market. Russia has seen unprecedented economic growth in the past year. Their 6.9% growth in GDP in the first half of 2003 is comparable to that of China, the fastest growing economy in the world.

Domestic consumption and investment are up, and there is a sense that this growth could help Russians in the long term. The United States formally designated Russia as a market economy in 2003, a status that may help the country join the World Trade Organization in the next few years. Putin himself has tried to improve business laws in order to encourage foreign direct investment in Russia, and to provide the government with more revenues. Yet when Khodorkovsky’s arrest occurred and $14 billion of his assets were frozen by the government, it was so worrisome to other investors that the Russian stock markets plummeted immediately.

The political and economic influence exerted by oligarchs in charge of such major industries has also caused tensions within Russian society. With a widened gap between the rich and the poor in Russia, there is resentment against those who have succeeded while others have suffered. There is a great deal of distrust and negative sentiment among Russians when looking at the successes of the wealthy oligarchs. One popular joke published in *The Economist* a few years ago highlights this reality, referring to the wealthy elite as “new Russians.”

*A new Russian is in a car crash. Climbing out of the wreckage, he wails: “My Mercedes! My Mercedes is smashed!”

“How can you worry about your car,” asks a passer-by, “when your arm is ripped off?”

*The new Russian looks at his stump, and bawls: “My Rolex!”*

Although the presence of a new upper class in Russia has created some entertaining jokes, serious problems have also developed. The Rosbalt News Agency claims that wealth disparity has reached crisis proportions: the difference in income level between the richest and the
poorest is now 20 to 1. This is a major shift from communist times when salaries were more equally distributed, and although communist party officials often reaped benefits unavailable to average citizens, the displays of wealth and privilege were not as visible or substantial as they are today.

Another criticism of Russia's wealthy is that they have not contributed much to strengthening their country's economy. During the 1990s, the newly rich Russians preferred to spend their money on luxury boats on the French Riviera rather than reinvesting in the uncertain and unstable Russian market. In addition, current estimates suggest that Russia loses about $60 billion every five years due to illegal capital flight. This substantial sum could provide the necessary capital to maintain and update Russia's ailing industrial, transportation, and communications sectors.

**RUSSIAN SOCIETY – STRONG BUT SUFFERING**

The rapid pace and residual problems of Russia's political and economic transition have disillusioned the people's initial enthusiasm for democracy and a free market economy. The Pew Global Attitudes Project for 2003 reveals some interesting statistics about how Russians feel about what is happening in their country. The project report explains that "in Eastern Europe, there is clear evidence that the political mindset formed during decades of communist rule has yet to completely dissipate."

In a recent *World Values Survey*, Russians ranked as one of the "least happy" groups of people in the world, along with their neighbors in Eastern Europe; meanwhile huge majorities in poorer countries such as Nigeria, Mexico, and Venezuela claimed to be happy and satisfied with life.

Why are Russians so unhappy? Wasn't the fall of communism supposed to be a good thing? With the end of the communist system came adjustments in prices, salaries, and jobs, and 40% of Russians now live in poverty. Among many Russians there is a sense of hopelessness and a lack of rewarding educational and professional opportunities. Services that were once widely available during the Soviet Union have disappeared. Inadequate access to health care and poor living conditions have contributed to a declining life expectancy. Russia is the world's third-largest polluter, and many illnesses and deaths are attributed to the dangerous environmental conditions in the former Soviet Union.

Such depressed conditions have led many Russians to seek solace in alcohol and drugs as an escape from their society's problems. According to the Moscow Institute of Psychiatry, alcohol consumption in Russia is the highest in the world, with an average of over 14 liters consumed per person per year (in the U.S. alcohol consumption is about 9 liters per person). Alcoholism and associated diseases are the third-leading cause of death in Russia, behind cardiovascular diseases and cancers. Alcohol consumption is a particular problem among males: two-thirds of men aged 20 to 55 who have died in the past few years were drunk at the time of death. Drugs are widely available from Central Asia, and estimates of drug users, abusers, and addicts are in the millions. Intravenous drug use is popular, and shared syringes have contributed to another major health crisis brewing in Russia: HIV/AIDS.

Russia now has one of the most alarming and fastest growing rates of new HIV/AIDS cases in the world. The total number of people who have contracted the illness is far lower than the epidemic proportions in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean; however, official statistics predict that within the next few years there could be 5 million cases of HIV/AIDS in Russia. Since health care is inadequate in Russia, those with full-blown AIDS will not have access to treatment and will therefore contribute to a quickly declining Russian population.

Due to an elderly population and the major health problems mentioned above, the death rate now exceeds the birth rate in Russia, which means the population numbers are actually falling. According to the RAND
Corporation, a non-profit think-tank with a branch in Pittsburgh, the shrinking population in Russia ranks as one of “ten international-security developments that aren’t getting the attention they deserve.” According to their estimates, Russia has suffered an absolute population decline in the past decade, greater than in any other nation in the world. Analysts predict that the Russian population may shrink by one third to about 100 million people by 2050. If you imagine what the U.S. would look like if it lost 100 million out of its current 290 million people, you can begin to imagine what Russia is facing today. This shrinking population could have major implications for Russian economic and security interests.

As Judyth Twigg of Virginia Commonwealth University explains, “if people are dying young, if people are unhealthy throughout for most of their lifespans, if a majority of the adult male population is suffering from some kind of problem with alcohol or drug abuse, then Russia increasingly becomes a country of widows, a country of children who are suffering from malnutrition and stunted growth, a country that cannot populate its military effectively, and therefore may lead to a disgruntled and even more politically charged military in the future. And perhaps most importantly, you have a country that does not have a labor force that can contribute to reforming productive market economy in the future. Every day that goes by that those issues aren’t addressed effectively is another sort of piece of debt in the bank that will have to be paid off sometime in the future.”

Kate Schecter, a program officer at the American International Health Alliance, emphasizes the resilience of the Russian people despite years of hardship: “I always felt that this is a very passionate people. I think these are people who’ve encountered terrible hardship, and I don’t think that that’s any different now than it was twenty years ago...You cannot try to change everything from the top down. It has to come from the bottom up, it has to come from people who get very very involved and who really feel this, and they act with their entire lives... Life was very very difficult then, and it remains so now, and it brings out, in many ways, the best in people.” The problems faced by Russians today and in the future will require creative ideas, long-term commitments, and considerable patience.

Russia’s traditional engine for change has been its top leadership. Yet as Ms. Schecter points out, effective change can come from the bottom up. Although decades of socialism seem to have eliminated vestiges of civil society in Russia, support for non-governmental organizations and other grassroots efforts could develop a social safety net for Russians that the government has been unable to provide.

The complexities and changes inside of Russia have implications for U.S. policies and international relations. A Russia that has strong democratic institutions, a free market economy, respect for human rights, an interest in cooperating to combat threats to global security, and where Russians feel hopeful and optimistic about contributing to the future of their country, could be a strong and long-term partner for the United States. A Russia that continues to suppress political opposition, limit press freedoms, and harm civilians in Chechnya, and where Russians feel increasingly dissatisfied with their lives, could be an unstable force in the world, and may even become a threat to U.S. security.

Michael McFaul argues that “the future of Russia’s democracy is the most important issue in U.S.-Russian relations today. If Russia consolidates a liberal democracy at home, then I have no doubt that Russia will develop into a reliable and lasting ally of the United States in world affairs. If Russia fails to consolidate liberal democracy at home, then Russia may still be a cooperative partner of the United States occasionally and sporadically, but always with conflicts. If Russia lapses back into dictatorship, U.S.-Russian relations will become strained, competitive, and possibly even confrontational again as they were for most of the twentieth century.”

Whether Russia should ultimately be viewed as a cooperating partner or a competing power to the United States is a debate that has lasted for as long as the two countries have interacted in any significant way. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his famous Democracy in America, predicted in the 1830’s that the U.S. and Russia were destined to be rivals as two great powers in the world. After the Russian Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, most saw the new Soviet Union as a threat, although some saw in the new ideology certain principles with which the U.S. could work. From 1941 until 1945, the Soviet Union was an ally in the global struggle against fascism, yet some would mark the beginning of the Cold War as early as 1943 as policymakers in both capitals began to think about a world after Hitler’s defeat.

After World War II, there were likewise many who believed that engaging with a weak Soviet Union could, in the words of then Ambassador Averill Harriman, “entice the Soviet Union to play a more constructive role in world affairs.” Yet, by 1947, the U.S. government had concluded, as George Kennan (under the pseudonym, “X”’) put it in his famous Foreign Affairs article, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” “[It must continue to regard the Soviet Union as a rival, not a partner, in the political arena” and recommended “a policy of firm containment...."
Such concerns did not wither easily as the Soviet Union disappeared. Pictures of Boris Yeltsin on the barricades in Moscow in 1991 preaching the virtues of a new democracy in Russia prompted sympathetic responses, and the U.S. government quickly declared Russia as a "newly independent state" and an "emerging democracy." Yet as radical nationalists such as Zhirinovsky and General Lebed sought political power in the mid-1990’s while the country seemed to be falling apart at the seams, Russia-watchers were reminded of Germany in the 1920’s and the conditions that gave rise to Adolf Hitler.

Thus, while communism seems to be defeated and discredited in Russia, and speeches about democracy and free markets are plentiful, there remains a lingering fear that instability will throw the country back into a hostile mood. Within the relative stability of the post-Cold War world, the debate continues on how the U.S. should view Russia—as a partner or competitor—and how this perspective will define U.S. policy goals and objectives.

**Perceptions of Each Other**

When President Bush and President Putin first met in June 2001, the two leaders established an immediate connection, and confirmed that their countries are no longer enemies. Bush claimed that he had found a trustworthy colleague and a friend with mutual interests. These ties were greatly strengthened after September 11, 2001, and continued despite disagreements over Iraq. During their September 2003 meeting at Camp David, Bush responded to a question from the press that "Vladimir and I had some very frank discussions about Iraq. I understood his position. He understood mine. Because we've got a trustworthy relationship, we're able to move beyond any disagreement over a single issue. Plus, I like him, he's a good fellow to spend quality time with."

Putin agreed with Bush’s statements and added “we had differences over Iraq, in terms of practical ways on how to resolve this problem, but we had understanding on the essence of the problem...fundamental interests of our two countries are much more solid, are much stronger that the developments that you have just mentioned. And in our actions, we wish to be guided by these strategic interests of our two countries, without excessive emotions or ambitions.”

Although Putin has a good relationship with Bush, how does Russia in general view the United States? In an article from The Economist titled, “Russia: Still Mourning Stalin?” one staunch supporter of Stalin expresses a feeling that is probably common among Russians today. According to the article, he says that “foreigners used to treat Russia with the respect it deserved. It was ... the first country to put a man into space, the first where doctors performed open-heart surgery, the top of the league of mathematicians and physicists. Now, outsiders are only interested in Russia’s mineral wealth. ‘They are laughing at us and despise us for our fall.’” In part due to the Cold War legacy and the recent conflict over war in Iraq, the Pew Global Attitudes survey explains that only 36% of Russians today have a favorable view of the United States. 71% of Russians say that the U.S. does not take their country’s interests into account in making policy decisions, and 78% of Russians think that their way of life needs to be protected against foreign influence. There are differing views between older and younger Russians in regards to the positive influence of globalization and American culture; however, it is clear that Russians want to regain their world prestige of the past and be respected for their accomplishments and contributions.

Consider Russia’s current position in the world. In the past few centuries Russia was an impressive empire, and for decades during the Cold War it shared superpower status with the United States. Russia is the largest country by landmass in the world, it has one of the world’s largest populations, and it controls 15,000 to 20,000 nuclear weapons. It has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, which gives it veto power on important issues worldwide. Russia is recognized as a partner to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was originally conceived to combat the threat of the Soviet Union. Russia is also an eighth member of the Group of Eight (referred to as the “G8”), joining the seven wealthiest nations in the world to shape important economic decisions. Russia has large reserves of oil and natural gas. Russia also has a long and proud history, a rich culture, and a strong society of educated and hard-working people.

All of these elements give Russia today the impression of being a great power as it was before. Nevertheless, Russia’s weaknesses and its current transitional state put it on the verge of being a “developing” nation. Despite recent growth, its economy is comparable to that of a small European country such as the Netherlands. As discussed earlier, its people are suffering from poverty and disease so much that the population is actually shrinking. Its military, although large, has antiquated equipment and has suffered humiliation against Chechen rebel fighters. Freedoms are mentioned in official documents, and things have improved since the days of communism, yet in practice political and economic rights are continually limited by the central government.
If Russia seems to want to be considered an equal partner and a respected member of the international community, how does the U.S. feel about it? How does the U.S. view Russia today? Is the U.S. willing to look at Russia as a normal nation state, or does the U.S. continue to be suspicious of Russian intentions, thinking they may harbor imperial aspirations and may become a power competitor again one day? Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State in the Nixon and Ford administrations, has supported over several years a cautious view of Russian motives. In 1991, just before the fall of the Soviet Union, Kissinger voiced a then-familiar theme that continues to be a powerful perspective among some U.S. foreign policymakers today:

“We cannot know exactly what is going to happen in the Soviet Union over the next ten years. One thing one knows, however, if you look at Russian history for four hundred years, they have been expanding in all directions. They started out in the area around Moscow; they wound up in the center of Europe, at the shores of the Pacific, and at the gates of India. When a nation has done something for 400 years, you could say it has a certain proclivity in that direction.”

Meanwhile, The New York Times foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman, in his recent book, Longitudes and Attitudes: The World in the Age of Terrorism, counters Kissinger’s arguments with the following: “I have never believed in the Henry Kissinger-Zbigniew Brzezinski line about Russia—that it is immutable, destined to be aggressive, expansionist, and America’s enemy…A Russia that for the first time in its history is governed by an elected president answerable to a parliament, with a limited free press and an unlimited free market, is simply a different Russian… Change the context in which people live and you change the way people look at themselves, the world, and their own government.”

**MAJOR INTERNATIONAL ISSUES FACING THE U.S. AND RUSSIA**

Despite the end of the Cold War and over a decade of reforms within Russia, there remains great uncertainty regarding Russia’s future and whether Russia will work with or against the United States. Suspicion remains on both sides, and experts who have studied U.S.-Russian relations for decades continue to ponder what could happen in the next five to ten years and how major international challenges will be managed.

Although the United States has unprecedented power in the world, the flexing of this power has been at times unpopular within the international community. The U.S. does have the most powerful military in the world, the strongest economy in the world, and is also highly influential in world politics, but these assets do not mean that other countries will agree with whatever the United States says and does. In the case of Iraq, the United States was not able to gather as broad a coalition as it would have liked, and many nations criticized the U.S. for acting unilaterally rather than in a more multilateral fashion.

Current leaders in Russia feel that the best way to maintain global stability—and, perhaps, to check U.S. power—is to cooperate multilaterally, through international organizations such as the United Nations. In advance of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, Russia took the side of its Western European colleagues, France and Germany, to advocate a more cautious approach, involving additional weapons inspections and further diplomatic measures. The quasi-alliance of France, Germany, and Russia did not prevent the U.S. from continuing its plans in Iraq, but it did cause substantial damage to U.S. relations with these countries. Interestingly, more criticism was directed towards the opposition of France and Germany; despite Russia’s opposition to the war, President Bush’s National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice has been quoted as saying, “punish France, ignore Germany, forgive Russia,” and this perspective seems to be guiding current U.S. policy of continued cooperation with Russia.

Should the U.S. seek in its relationship with Russia the kind of partnership that could play a substantial role in world affairs, or should the U.S. remain cautious in what might be a friendship of convenience? And depending on how that question is answered, what kinds of policies should the U.S. pursue in specific circumstances?

**Reducing U.S. & Russian Strategic Nuclear Weapons**

The most serious international security concerns related to weapons of mass destruction directly involve U.S. and Russian interests and therefore necessitate each country’s active engagement. During the Cold War, the U.S. and Russia each developed thousands of nuclear weapons, which were aimed at their opponent and prepared to fire at a moment’s notice. As the Cold War was coming to an end, the U.S. and Soviet Union signed the START I Treaty to cut their deployed strategic arsenals in half—from 12,000 each to 6,000 each. Although signed, the START II Treaty (brining levels down to 3,000-3,500) was never ratified by Russia, in part because Russia wanted to reduce the numbers even further because of the costs of maintaining that size of an arsenal. Destruction of Russia’s strategic forces under the START Treaty continued successfully, supported in large part by U.S. funding under the Nunn-Lugar program.

At the same time, the U.S. was increasingly determined to develop a ballistic missile defense system against threats other than Russia, but the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—considered by Russia as a cornerstone of its strategic relationship with the U.S.—stood in the way. Moscow argued that withdrawal from the ABM Treaty would destroy progress on reducing strategic nuclear weapons.
Yet, the improved political climate after September 11, 2001, between Russia and the U.S. laid the foundation for a resolution of these issues. In December 2001, the U.S. announced that it would withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; nonetheless, six months later, on May 24, 2002, Bush and Putin signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) which calls for each country to reduce their total number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads to between 1,700 and 2,200 by the year 2012.

Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction

Beyond efforts to limit U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons, there has been great concern that an unstable Russian transition could fuel the proliferation of weapons and technology to rogue states or terrorist organizations. Within Russia itself, several programs funded by the U.S. government have tried to keep Russian scientists suitably employed so they would not find themselves looking for the highest bidder from others looking to acquire their expertise related to nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons.

With respect to proliferation of nuclear weapons to other countries, two cases in particular—North Korea and Iran—highlight the difficulties and complexities of this relationship.

In the case of North Korea, Russia and the U.S. each have special interests. Russia is expected to have some influence with the communist leadership in Pyongyang, as a former ally. Russia and the U.S. have been involved in multilateral talks with South Korea, Japan, and China in order to convince North Korea to halt its nuclear program. The U.S. has maintained thousands of troops on the de-militarized zone between North and South Korea since the end of the Korean War, in hopes of preventing a catastrophic military conflict. Security in Asia is of major importance to both Russia and the United States, and the resolution of the current crisis in North Korea will depend to some degree on their cooperation.

In Iran, Russia has helped the Iranian government develop a nuclear reactor project, and the potential uses of nuclear technology in Iran are of great concern to the United States. Russia has major financial incentives for helping Iran develop a nuclear program for peaceful civilian energy purposes. The U.S. and other countries are concerned that once Iran has developed a nuclear energy program, it could speed its ability to gain weapons-grade nuclear material and develop a nuclear weapon of its own, which would destabilize the Middle East region even further. Iran has reportedly decided to yield to calls from the international community to limit its nuclear activities, to allow more intrusive inspections of its nuclear sites under the United Nations’ International Atomic Energy Agency, and to suspend its activities to enrich uranium. It remains to be seen if Russia’s technological support for Iran will develop into a larger conflict of interests between Russia and the U.S. sometime in the future.

The War on Terrorism

After the September 11th terrorist attacks, President Putin was the first world leader to contact President Bush to express his condolences. During the removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Russia allowed the American military presence in Central Asia, which would have been impossible without Russia’s consent.

Historically, Central Asia has been a region within Russia’s sphere of influence. Russia has begun to reassert its presence in the region. Coalition forces were permitted to use military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan for the duration of the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan. The Russian Foreign Ministry has said that the use of the Central Asian bases by international forces is no longer necessary. Russia also recently signed an agreement with Kyrgyzstan to establish a military air base that would become Russia’s first new overseas military base since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, Russia has reminded American policymakers that it has been fighting its own war against international terrorism in Chechnya. The Chechen separatists’ links to Al Qaeda and Islamic fundamentalism have demonstrated that Russia and the U.S. may face common enemies. European organizations, non-governmental organizations, and even U.S. State Department reports have highlighted major human rights concerns facing the Chechen people, and President Bush had earlier raised concerns about human rights abuses in Chechnya.

Following September 11, 2001, however, the Bush administration has condemned Chechen terrorists while limiting criticism of Russian actions in Chechnya. The joint communiqué following the September 2003 Bush-Putin meeting at Camp David noted, “Russia and the United States are allies in the war on terror…. Terrorists must be opposed wherever they spread chaos and destruction, including Chechnya….” Clearly, the war on terrorism has brought to both presidents a new sense of shared interests, perhaps enabling other issues that divide them to be somewhat set aside.

European Security

European security has been a major part of U.S. interests in the last century. Through two world wars and a Cold War, the United States helped European countries to remain free and stable. By the end of World War II, major cities in Europe had been completely destroyed, and people were without resources to survive. The United States played a major role in rebuilding Europe, through financial aid for reconstruction in the Marshall Plan, and maintaining
security forces in the region as the Cold War began. NATO was established in 1949, as a cooperative security apparatus in Europe, and its primary goal was to combat the threat of the Soviet Union.

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO also had to redefine its role in European and global security. Part of that redefinition included enlargement to include new member states from the former Warsaw Pact in Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe—three of them in 1999. For years, Russia protested that this simply increased “the West’s” threat to Russia’s security. In 1997, however, the NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security made Russia a virtual “equal partner” with NATO. Although Russia is still not a full member of NATO, it is involved in some joint military activities, has played an important role in NATO’s operations in the Balkans, and enjoys a special political relationship with the Alliance in which it has “a voice, but not a veto.” The theory is that, over time, Russia will come to view a strong and enlarged NATO as a source of security throughout all of Europe, strengthening Russia’s security as well.

Oil and Trade

With the war in Iraq and conflicts in the Middle East jeopardizing much of the world’s oil resources, Russia has emerged as an oil power, and the United States is especially interested in Russia’s resources. While the Russian economy is currently benefiting from this position, a shift in oil demand or supply could make or break the Russian economy.

Russia’s oil and gas industries make up 40% of its exports. According to David G. Victor and Nadejda M. Victor in their “Axis of Oil” article in Foreign Affairs, “[e]very $1 shift in world oil prices translates into about $1 billion for the Russian state budget.” Iraq also has an “oil debt” to Russia, which must be resolved during the Iraqi reconstruction process, and Russian oil companies plan to continue with business contracts to drill Iraqi oil fields that were negotiated with Saddam Hussein’s government before his removal from power.

Russia’s relationship with important industrialized countries has changed tremendously in the past few years. Trade between the United States and Russia, although currently miniscule, has increased, and the governments are working to lower trade barriers and encourage mutual investment. Russia’s economic ties to Europe are much greater, and are expected to grow as the European Union continues its own plans for expansion and consolidation. Within a few years, it is likely that Russia will gain entry into the World Trade Organization. In 2002, the G8 agreed to accept Russia as a full member, with plans to assume the rotating presidency and to host the annual summit in 2006. These are major accomplishments for a country that was in economic ruins under a command structure not much more than a decade ago.

The relationship between the United States and Russia is incredibly complex and it will continue to change through Russia’s transition, both domestically and globally. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, there has been optimism on both sides that Russia will rebuild itself into a valuable participant in managing global security and economic prosperity. Nevertheless, suspicions on both sides prevent U.S.-Russian relations from moving too fast. Russia is still far away from a liberal democracy, open society, and free market economy. Although the current U.S.-Russian relationship is remarkably improved, there are doubts that Russia will evolve into a real “ally” of the United States.

Celeste Wallander of the Center for Strategic and International Studies explains that there is great value in potential U.S.-Russian cooperation; however, it is unlikely that a lasting partnership will be formed while tremendous differences remain. She writes in a recent article in Current History that “Russia and the United States can be allies in the best traditions of far-sighted traditional great power diplomacy, but the realities of domestic constraints and the imbalance of their national power will prevent their alliance from meeting the requirements of deep security and economic integration in the first decade of the twenty-first century. If only realism could prevail, one is tempted to hope, the United States and Russia could work together to meet their common interests in security, stability, and prosperity. Reality, however, just keeps getting in the way.”

The future of Russia’s transition and of its relations with the United States remains to be seen. Nonetheless, this relationship is likely to continue to be one of the most important strategic relationships in the world. The nature of U.S. engagement with Russia will continue to be an exciting, complicated, difficult, and controversial debate for future leaders.
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