BOFIT
Online

2000 • No. 13

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Bank of Finland
Institute for Economies in Transition, BOFIT

ISSN 1456-811X (online)
20.12.2000

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Institute for Economies in Transition (BOFIT)
Helsinki 2000

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Key words: USA, Russia, international relations, George W. Bush

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Troubled Relations

One of the primary primary foreign policy challenges President-elect Bush will face when he takes office January 20 will be repairing U.S. relations with Russia. Despite - or perhaps because of - its deep socio-economic malaise and strategic weakness, Russia will remain critical to our security and prosperity well into the future. Its nuclear arsenal, location in the heart of Eurasia, veto on the UN Security Council, and vast natural resources and human potential guarantee that. Repairing relations is not going to be easy, for today they are at one of their lowest ebbs since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Over the past two years, senior Russian government officials have talked about the United States using rhetoric that has not been heard since the end of the Cold War. Russian national security documents now clearly portray the United States as a threat, as seeking to build a unipolar world where force, not law, would be the preferred instrument for resolving international disputes. U.S. Department of State polling has tracked a steady decline in the percentage of Russians with a favorable attitude toward the United States from nearly 75% in 1993 to under 50% at the moment.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the image of Russia as an aspiring democracy has given way to an image of a hapless land mired in deep, pervasive corruption, where organized crime operates unrestrained. The American political establishment is suffering from a severe case of Russia fatigue, and the "Forget Russia" school is gaining adherents in the Congress. This school would not gratuitously harm Russia, but it is not prepared to spend much time, energy, or money to nurture good relations with Russia. It simply believes that Russia does not matter much any longer in the world. Even the Clinton Administration, which entered office with Russia as its top foreign-policy issue and spoke enthusiastically of building a "strategic alliance with Russian reform," has disengaged and degraded Russia within its overall priorities. Decisions on Nato enlargement, Iraq, and Kosovo, for example, demonstrate that the Administration is prepared to give precedence to many other issues over Russia.

Over the past two and a half years, three events, in particular, soured relations: The Russian financial crisis of August 1998, Kosovo, and Chechnya.

The financial crisis marked the failure of the grand project of quickly building a vibrant democracy and robust market economy in Russia along Western lines and with substantial Western assistance. For many Russians, it confirmed suspicions that the West was not trying to help their country rebuild but rather to turn it into a third-rate power. In the United States, we began to take a more sinister view of Russia. Because we tend to think there is something natural about the emergence of democracies and market economies, many Americans see the problems in Russia as a sign of some profound moral flaw in Russia's national character. This moralistic streak is also the reason many Americans seized upon the Bank of New York scandal last year as evidence of the endemic corruption in Russia that, they thought, doomed our effort to help them rebuild.

The Kosovo conflict, at a time when NATO was adopting a new strategic doctrine and adding new members, confirmed Russians' worst fears about the Alliance. Moreover, Kosovo underscored just how little Russia's voice mattered in the world, even in Europe, a region of vital significance to Russia. At the same time, Russia's failure to condemn Milosevic and to admit what Americans saw as clear evidence of massive, inhumane ethnic cleansing in Kosovo reinforced their convictions that Russians were indeed morally deficient.

Finally, Chechnya dramatically underscored the gap between Russians and Americans. While Americans were appalled by the brutality of Moscow's military operation, Russians cheered it as necessary to putting an end to the alleged terrorist threat emanating from Chechnya,

restoring order to a Russian territory, and safeguarding the country's territorial integrity. Against the background of what Russians saw as an illegal and inhumane NATO air campaign in Kosovo, they took Western criticism of their Chechnya operation as evidence of a double standard, of a refusal to treat Russia as an equal, and of an unwillingness to appreciate the depths of the problems Russia confronts, problems, moreover, that many Russians believe arose out of their following Western advice.

Earlier this year, there was a hope - certainly in Washington and, perhaps to a lesser extent, in Moscow - that Putin's assumption of power would halt the deterioration and begin to put the relationship back on track. And indeed there was a certain thaw, as President Clinton declared Putin a man we could do business with. But the hopes quickly faded as it become clear that the two countries were deeply divided over the issue of national missile defense and concern grew in Washington about Putin's commitment to democratic principles, especially press freedoms. Moreover, Washington was disturbed by Putin's efforts to sow discord between the United States and our European allies on the issue of national missile defense, as well as by Putin's reaching out to countries we once called "rogue states," such as Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and the former Yugoslavia.

In fairness, we should admit that U.S.-Russian relations have not been in great shape for many years, despite official rhetoric on both sides to the contrary. The past two and a half years only mark an acceleration in a basic trend that dates back to the mid-nineties. Ironically, the high point of the relationship was probably the late Gorbachev and early Yeltsin period, when the barriers that had divided the two countries since the end of the Second World War came down with astonishing rapidity. That was a time of great expectations, when it seemed possible that Russia could be swiftly integrated into the West and that the United States and Russia could together take the lead in building a new world order around democratic values and market principles. In 1992 President Yeltsin addressed an enthusiastic joint session of the American Congress, declaring that Russia "was extending its hand in friendship to the people of America" and inviting the United States to join Russia "in partnership in the quest for freedom and justice in the twenty-first century."

By 1994, however, after the ultranationalist Zhirinovskiy's shocking victory in the Duma elections, doubts emerged about the short-term possibilities for U.S.-Russian relations. In Washington, Russia was increasingly seen as a country intent on destabilizing Moldova and Transcaucasia, suspicions grew concerning the nature of its contacts with Iran on nuclear matters, and differences over how to deal with the former Yugoslavia deepened. At the same time, the Russian political elite was disturbed that the West was tardy in delivering the assistance it had promised to Russia's transition and niggardly in the amounts it was prepared to offer. It viewed with concern an increasingly activist U.S policy toward the states of the former Soviet Union, an area it saw as one of vital interest and where some Russians thought Russia still had exclusive rights.

The Clinton Administration did not address this change in mood directly. Instead, it largely ignored it, because it decided that it could work with Yeltsin and a small group of so-called "radical reformers" around him to get what it wanted on security matters (no matter what the Russian political elite thought). In crude terms, it assuaged Yeltsin's ego, trading symbolism for substance, to persuade him to agree to U.S. initiatives. So Yeltsin was hailed as a major world leader - despite his at times clownish behavior and Russia's diminishing clout - in exchange for his acquiesence to NATO expansion, the United States' Balkan policy, or its demands on nonproliferation issues.

But this approach fueled resentment within the Russian elites, which increasingly saw U.S. policies as efforts to take advantage of Russia's weakness. The elites also resented the disrespect for Russia that was implicit in our increasingly overt manipulation of a mentally and physically challenged Yeltsin.

No Agenda

So relations have been on a downward trajectory for some time, and the question I would raise now is whether there is any real substance left to them. What is striking is how little the United States and Russia have to talk about. This year, President Clinton and President Putin have met face to face four times and talked frequently by phone, but they have accomplished little. The agenda has been thin. Part of the reason, of course, lies in the fact that Clinton is the lamest of lame ducks, and the Russian side rightly judges that there is little to be accomplished with this outgoing president. But neither is the American side particularly eager to engage.

One does not have to look far for the reason. The Administration has lost confidence in its earlier Russia policy. From the time it entered office until the Russian financial crisis of 1998, the Clinton Administration had devoted great energy to transforming Russia into a democracy and a market economy. To be sure, considerable time was also spent on traditional security concerns, and not without some success - for example, the withdrawal of Russian troops from Central Europe and the Baltics on schedule and the withdrawal of Soviet weapons from Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan to Russia for dismantling.

But the Administration's real enthusiasm, and particularly that of Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, the chief architect of the Administration's Russia policy, was for transforming Russia domestically in the belief that a prosperous, democratic Russia would be a key support for U.S. security and a key partner in maintaining global peace and stability over the long term. The Administration talked boldly of forming a "strategic alliance with Russian reform." The goal was - to use one of Talbott's favorite locutions - to help Russia become "a normal, modern state - democratic in its governance, abiding by its own constitution and by its own laws, market-oriented and prosperous in its economic development, at peace with itself and with the rest of the world." For several years, the Administration spoke as if Russia - with substantial Western assistance - was making rapid progress toward that goal.

In August 1998, the Administration's policy failed. It watched in anguish as the officials it had staked its hopes on, Anatoliy Chubays and other so-called "radical reformers," were dismissed from key positions and distanced from the halls of power. The Administration made a lame effort to defend its policy in the fall of 1998, pointing largely to the successes on the traditional security agenda. It also pointed to some limited progress on democratization and marketization, while expressing concern that much of it could be undone by the more conservative government that had replaced the radical reformers. Most tellingly, it rediscovered the truism it had so long ignored while it appeared its policy was succeeding, namely, that Russians themselves will ultimately decide what type of Russia is to be built. In other words, it laid blame for the failure of the Administration's policy squarely on the Russians themselves.

Surely, the Administration shares the blame, but just as surely it is right that our ability to influence domestic outcomes in Russia was always on the margins. That has been the great lesson of the 1990's, which should have been obvious at the very beginning. Russia is simply too large and too complex and our understanding of the processes underway there too limited

for it to be otherwise. Now, in sharp contrast to the situation just a decade ago, the Russians are not particularly eager for our assistance in their domestic transformation. As a result, many of the items that had animated U.S.-Russian relations during the better part of the Clinton Administration disappeared from the agenda some two years ago.

Asymmetry

Beefing up the agenda today is not going to be easy, for we have followed radically different paths over the past decade, something that has lead to a gaping and growing asymmetry in power, attitudes, and fortunes.

The United States is enjoying the longest period of economic expansion in its history. Russia has suffered a socio-economic collapse unprecedented for a great power not defeated in a major war. The U.S. economy grew by over 30 percent in the 90's, while Russia's plunged by over 40. Today, Russia's economy is a tenth the size of United States', and Russia lags years behind the United States in mastering the possibilities of the information-technological revolution.

The United States exudes self-confidence and optimism about our future; Russia is mired in self-doubt and an identity crisis. The United States talks of itself proudly as the indispensable nation. It is indeed the paramount power in the world with no threat to its security looming on the horizon. Russia, meanwhile, uses the rhetoric of a great power and demands to be treated like one, but such behavior masks profound disquiet about Russia's standing in the world. As national security documents released earlier this year indicate, Russia sees multiple threats to its security both at home and abroad.

The United States welcomes globalization; Russia sees it as a threat. The United States wants to ride the wave of globalization to build an international order that will perpetuate its preeminent position and prosperity well into the future. Russia wants to postpone the consolidation of any new world order to a time when it will hopefully have regained its power and therefore be in a better position to shape that order.

The United States enjoys a surfeit of power and possibilities; the challenge before it is to use that power wisely. Russia's power is eroding and its choices narrowing; the challenge before it is to stop the rot, begin to rebuild, and eventually close the gap with the world's leading powers.

In short, Americans and the Russians live in radically different worlds, and their leaders are intent on taking radically different paths, at least in the short run.

The Post-Cold War World

Moreover, not only have the United States and Russia changed dramatically, but so has the rest of the world. Although the Cold War ended a decade ago, we are now only beginning to break out of the frameworks inherited from it. During the Cold War, U.S. relations with Russia (in the guise of the Soviet Union) determined the very nature of the international system. In the early years of the Clinton Administration, Russia was given a priority that indicated that the Administration was having difficulty breaking out of the bipolar framework of the Cold War. Likewise, Yeltsin's Russia saw the United States as its chief international partner and point of reference.

Much has changed. Today, the United States no longer views the world through the prism of its relations with Russia. On the contrary, Russia is viewed through the prism of other problems, be they European security, nonproliferation, Caspian energy resources, or China. For this reason, the United States no longer has an integrated Russia policy. Rather, it has a Russian section to its policies on other matters, and often these sections are not smoothly related one to another.

And, indeed, the solutions to many of the problems that bedevil U.S.-Russian relations are to be found elsewhere than in Moscow, or better, we cannot solve these problems by talking only or even primarily to Moscow. Normalizing relations with Iran is the key to easing the United States' concerns about Russia's nuclear relationship with that country. Getting its China policy right is the key to easing U.S. concerns about growing Russian-Chinese military cooperation. The solution to the former Yugoslavia lies with America's European allies and the Balkan states themselves, not with Russia. Moreover, I would stress, even the one relationship that looks bipolar at this point - the strategic nuclear balance - will become increasingly less so as Russia builds down its forces, China builds up, and other countries gain the capacity to build nuclear weapons.

Russia too is slowly realizing that we can no longer be its primary interlocutor in international affairs. We are simply in different weight categories. And so the task for Russia in dealing with us is to build coalitions on specific matters to influence our behavior. Hence, Russia's growing focus on Europe and China, not simply as counterweights to the United States, but as countries in a league to which Russia can reasonably aspire.

The Future of the Relationship

So where do all these considerations leave U.S.-Russian relations as a new administration prepares to take office in Washington? Let me begin by stressing that Russia will remain a key country for the United States, even if it no longer occupies central stage in our concerns and competes for attention with other countries and regions, notably Europe, Japan, China, and India. This is not going to change with the new Bush administration. Its strategic goal will remain the one that has animated our Russia policy from the late Gorbachev period - Russia's democratization, marketization, and integration into the West - although obviously the way in which, and the intensity with which, President Bush pursues that goal will differ from President Clinton's.

The watchword for the Bush administration will be pragmatism. Gone will be the romanticism of the early Clinton years and the pretense of the later years. Russia will not be considered a strategic partner, but neither will it be deemed a strategic adversary or threat. Rather, the Bush administration will seek relations with Russia that are a combination of cooperation, competition, and indifference, that is, similar to relations the United States enjoys with most countries around the world. Russia will be treated with respect, and it will be expected to vigorously defend its national interests, just as the United States will, both in cooperation and in competition with Russia.

The respect will be evident in Bush's approach to Russia's domestic affairs. No longer will the United States be intimately involved, seeking specific kinds of political arrangements or pressuring the Russian president to retain or dismiss certain government ministers, as the Clinton administration in fact did on a few occasions. Like earlier administrations, the Bush administration will pay close attention to the state of the basic human rights in Russia - and it will criticize sharply any egregious violations and consider sanctions, as demonstrated

during the campaign by Mr. Bush's call to stop lending to the Russian government as long as it was engaged in the brutal military operation in Chechnya. It will also be concerned about corruption and organized crime in Russia, in part because both pose threats to the United States, and it will be prepared to work with the Russian government in combating both. But the Bush administration will be less concerned about the details of Russia's domestic political arrangements, including executive-legislative relations, federal structures, and the party system, than the Clinton administration was.

Similarly, on economic matters, the Bush administration will continue to facilitate Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization, assuming that Russia indeed wants to join, but it will interfere less in Russia's domestic economic policies. The assumption will be that the Russian government knows what needs to be done to rebuild Russia and that it must show the political will to take the tough, unpopular measures necessary to turning the country around. Moreover, for the Bush administration, investors, both foreign and domestic, will be the best judges of whether Russia has gotten its economic policies right.

As for foreign and security matters, there are a range of issues on which the Bush administration will engage Russia, along with other countries. Let me focus on two that are perhsps the gravest causes of concern in Moscow: Nato expansion and national missile defense.

On Nato, the Bush administration will be committed to further expansion eastward, as President-elect Bush made clear during the election campaign. But the Bush administration will not rush into a second round. It will want to assure itself first that the new members from Central Europe - Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic - have been sufficiently integrated and that further enlargement poses no serious threat to Nato's cohesion and integrity of the Alliance or its ability to carry out its core security functions. Even then, a second round is likely to be limited to Slovenia and Slovakia, while the sensitive question of the Baltic States is postponed until the middle of the decade. Consequently, there will be considerable time to work out he modalities of Baltic membership in ways that do minimal damage to U.S.-Russian relations.

On national missile defense, widespread fears in Russia to the contrary notwithstanding, the Bush administration's approach will open up opportunities for improved relations with Russia for three reasons. First, its commitment to a more robust system means that the administration's first year - and perhaps more - will be devoted to determining exactly what type of system to build and what series of test to undertake to prove the technology. An early withdrawal from the ABM Treaty is unlikely, although that option will of course be held open. Second, the system the Bush administration is likely to opt for - boost-phase - could also conceivably be used to defend Europe, including Russia. That would create opportunities for cooperation with Europe and Russia in developing and deploying such a system. Third, the Bush administration will review the United States' nuclear posture, with the goal of bringing down unilaterally the number of warheads to the minimal level required to meet our security needs. That number will be well below current levels, as well as START-2 levels. As President, Bush will challenge the Russians to make parallel, unilateral cuts. That approach promises to accelerate the building down of forces worldwide, something that should improve the atmosphere for the hard negotiations over national missile defense and the ABM Treaty.

* * *

If I am right about the Bush administration's policies, then we are on the eve of a new departure in U.S.-Russian relations, one that will offer the opportunity for significant improvement. Much, of course, will depend on whether Putin's Russia is prepared to seize the

opportunity. It takes two to tango, after all. Will Putin's Russia have sufficient confidence in its own strength to engage the United States constructively? Or will doubts about its capabilities and wounded pride lead it to seek to work at crosspurposes to the United States, as it has in the recent past? That is an open question.

If Russia is prepared to engage, then the next few years could witness small, but significant, steps toward reparing U.S.-Russian relations. To be sure, there will be little of the drama that transfixed us in the immediate post-Cold War period. There are no historic missions to be accomplished. Rather, we will find ourselves engaged in the less glamorous work of repairing relations step by step. That is ultimately for the good, for only by lowering our expectations and avoiding grandiose talk of partnership, only by looking more realistically at the state of U.S.-Russian relations and their possibilities, can we begin to restore the trust between the two countries that has suffered so greatly over the past decade and begin to rebuild a relationship that promises great benefits to both countries if only we can get it right.

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