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59. U.S.-Russian Relations

Congress should

- monitor closely the growing strategic ties between Russia and China,
- insist on a strong legislative role in U.S.-Russian diplomacy to set a good example for a fragile Russian democracy,
- urge the president not to base U.S.-Russian relations on personal ties with Russian president Vladimir Putin,
- insist that no commitments affecting U.S. security in regions near Russia are undertaken by the president without congressional approval,
- ensure that the United States not make security promises to the nations of Eastern Europe or Central Asia that it might not be able to fulfill,
- urge the president to proceed cautiously on the issue of Kaliningrad, and
- oppose any action that suggests that the United States believes Russia belongs to a different civilization.

When the Bush administration took office, it was very suspicious of Russian president Vladimir Putin. “Anyone who tells you they have Putin figured out is blowing smoke,” President Bush told *Time* magazine during the presidential campaign. But after a few months in office, his view changed. “I want to look him in the eye,” Bush said shortly before their first meeting, “and see if I can see his soul.”

President Bush liked what he saw, and the two leaders have developed what appears to be a remarkably close personal relationship that seems to be based on absolute trust. “I looked the man in the eye and shook his hand,” Bush said with regard to a strategic arms agreement. “And if we need to write it down on a piece of paper, I’ll be glad to do that.”

Unquestionably, good relations between leaders are to be preferred to bad relations. In addition, the support the Russian government has given to the United States since the terrorist attack in September 2001 has been extremely helpful and a marked change from the hostility that characterized relations during the Cold War. Yet Putin is not the first Russian leader to turn toward the West. It may be significant that Putin has a portrait of Peter the Great in his office. Peter also thought that Russia should learn from the West, but Peter was an autocrat whose reform effort, observes historian Bernard Pares, “grew out of the needs of his army.”

Russia is no longer a superpower, but it still controls a vast landmass in the center of Eurasia. Although Russia no longer has a global reach, it still exercises considerable influence along its periphery. And it is along that periphery that we must look to understand Russian foreign policy.

Shifting Alliances

With the end of the Cold War, the putative object of both East and West was to heal the division of Europe and, indeed, of the world. Former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev spoke of a “common European home,” while Western officials spoke of a “Europe whole and free.” But disagreements about how that objective was to be achieved and about the future role of NATO soon emerged. For most observers, the abolition of NATO at the moment of its triumph was unthinkable. Leaving it as it was similarly appeared unthinkable, because that would simply preserve the division of Europe that characterized the Cold War. By default, then, the only remaining option was expansion.

Expansion, however, raised the question of Russia’s potential membership. The Clinton administration left this possibility open, but others foreclosed it. Writing in the *Washington Post* in May 2002, Czech president Vaclav Havel stressed that “it would make no sense to consider Russia for membership in NATO, even though its location and civilization are not far distant from the West.” But to say that Russia is not eligible for NATO membership because its civilization is not quite close enough to ours is to risk a dangerous reaction. “Ukraine is not a western country but belongs to Slavic civilization and Orthodox culture,” argues Victor Chernomyrdin, the former Russian prime minister who is now ambassador to Ukraine. “Nobody awaits either Russia or Ukraine in the West. They’ll try to be friends with us, they’ll promise a lot to us, but they’ll never declare us as their natural partners.”

The danger is not just to the reunification of Europe. A true Russian-NATO partnership, Havel has insisted, “can be built only when each of the parties knows its true identity and when neither attempts to dictate how the other should define itself, or whom the other may or may not accept as allies.” But if we tell the Russians they cannot be our allies, we are in effect telling them to find allies elsewhere. In 2002, at the same time Russia was being admitted as a “junior partner” in NATO, it was also consolidating relations with its other big neighbors. On June 5 at a summit in St. Petersburg, Russia, China, and four Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) signed the Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, solidifying its formal international legal status. In addition, the Indian ambassador to Russia indicated that his country was interested in joining the SCO, an overture that Putin said was “positively viewed” by Russia.

When the idea of a Russian-Chinese-Indian triangle was broached several years ago, it was widely ridiculed as unrealistic. Now that assessment might have to be reexamined. Besides expanding the role of the SCO, Putin was also a principal force behind the creation of a new Eurasian security organization, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, which had its inaugural meeting in Kazakhstan in June 2002.

Thus, at the same time Putin was convincing most experts of his tilt toward the West, he was quietly expanding Russia’s diplomatic clout in other directions. Significantly, only Russia has a seat at the table of all three organizations: NATO, SCO, and CICA. Given the limited resources he has to work with, Putin has demonstrated remarkable diplomatic skill.

Russia and China

An example of that skill can be found in the Sino-Russian relationship, especially in the aftermath of President Bush’s decision in December 2001 to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. At the time, the absence of any thunderous denunciations from Moscow or Beijing was taken as proof that they were “yielding to pressure.” At the end of the month, however, the Itar-Tass news agency reported that Russia had agreed to sell China two *Sovremenny* destroyers, which are armed with cruise missiles designed to counter the U.S. Navy’s Aegis air defense systems. “The US withdrawal from the ABM treaty made the mainland feel even more vulnerable. Beijing was forced to move closer to Russia,” wrote Lau Nai-keung, a delegate to China’s People’s Political Consultative Conference.

Since then, Russia's arms sales to China have continued. Last June Russian sources reported the sale of eight Kilo-class diesel submarines, which will be armed with long-range anti-ship cruise missiles. Even more significant is the sale of the naval variant of 30 advanced Sukhoi fighters. "The Americans won't be roaming in the Taiwan Strait [after this deal]," observed Konstantin Makiyenko, deputy head of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies. People who would argue that Russia has made a decisive turn toward the West and abandoned the idea of an Eastern counterweight to NATO and the United States must explain these arms sales and the statements justifying them.

Central Asia and the Caucasus

Central Asia and the Caucasus is a region in which the interests of Russia, China, India, and the United States intersect, especially after September 11. Although many observers were surprised by Putin's acceptance of the U.S. presence in the region, he evidently viewed the American war against terrorism as support for Russian strategic objectives, since Russia had been supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. Even so, Russia (and China as well) has indicated that it would be less willing to accept a permanent U.S. military presence in the area.

One major concern here is the struggle for oil routes. The United States has pushed for a pipeline from Baku, Azerbaijan, to Ceyhan, Turkey, in order to bypass both Russia and Iran. This initiative has provoked some irritation in Moscow, which may view the U.S. presence with more suspicion if it becomes extended. According to Alexei Arbatov, deputy head of the Russian parliament's defense affairs committee, "if relations develop toward struggle for influence and control over oil and natural gas pipelines in the region, the U.S. presence would be very bothersome."

A special problem exists in Georgia, which Russia accuses of sheltering terrorists from Chechnya. It is unclear how much authority the Georgian government exercises in the border region, and the U.S. government has provided some military assistance to Georgia to help it cope. Russian-Georgian relations have been exceptionally strained since the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the United States needs to tread carefully here. Russia and Georgia will be neighbors forever, while the United States is far away with a lot of other issues demanding attention and resources. Since it is unlikely that the United States will be in Georgia forever, Washington should be careful about making promises it will not be able to keep.

Kaliningrad

If the triangular diplomacy among Russia, China, and India bears watching, so does a growing problem in the West: Kaliningrad. In the aftermath of World War II, East Prussia was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union. Although that arrangement was supposed to be temporary, over time it became effectively permanent. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Kaliningrad became separated from the rest of Russia, much as Alaska is separated from the contiguous 48 states.

So far this situation has not presented any particular obstacles. The expansion of NATO and the European Union to include the Baltic States presents a problem, however, because Kaliningrad would then be effectively cut off from the rest of Russia. “What we hear today is worse than the cold war, because it divides the sovereignty of Russia,” President Putin declared last June with regard to the visa requirements the EU would impose on Russian citizens wishing to cross EU territory to travel from Kaliningrad to the rest of Russia. “We will never agree to the division of Russia’s sovereignty.” Similarly, Russian defense minister Sergei Ivanov told a Finnish newspaper that if the Baltic States join NATO, “Russia will then be forced to review not only its own military positions but also the entire spectrum of international relations, both with the alliance as a whole and with the mentioned Baltic States.”

Such statements should be viewed in the context of the strategic triangle already discussed. Moreover, the emotional content of the Kaliningrad issue should not be dismissed. In this regard, the EU visa requirement seems to resonate even more than NATO expansion, at least for the moment. “We are not savages here. We are part of European civilization,” exclaims Vitaly P. Zhdanov, director of Kaliningrad’s economic department. Although there is little the United States can do about the EU’s attitude, it should be mindful that Putin can use these issues to drive wedges among the Western countries: indeed, last summer Putin won a more accommodating stance during a meeting with French president Jacques Chirac. Given the growing number of issues dividing the United States from its European allies, such a policy could prove very attractive.

Public Diplomacy

In a speech to the Foreign Ministry on January 26, 2001, Putin expressed dissatisfaction with its efforts in the area of public diplomacy. A campaign of public diplomacy is designed to go over the heads of political leaders

and reach the people themselves. The Bush administration itself has emphasized the need for public diplomacy, establishing an Office of Global Communications in the White House to coordinate U.S. efforts. But whereas the American effort seems designed primarily to affect public opinion in Arab countries, the intent of the Russian effort appears to be to influence Western public opinion.

A good example of this approach occurred immediately after President Bush announced that the United States would withdraw from the ABM Treaty. On December 15, 2001, the *Financial Times* published an interview with Putin, in which he indicated he would have been willing to renegotiate the treaty but the United States refused. Putin stressed that the United States was within its rights and that Bush never misled him, but he indicated that the issue was not a bilateral one between the United States and Russia. “I believe the US-Russian bilateral relationship is of major importance for our two nations. But it is also of great importance, taking into account that these are two leading nuclear powers in the world, for overall international security,” he stressed. “If relations between Russia and the West, Russia and NATO, Russia and the US continue to develop in the spirit of partnership and even of alliance, then no harm will be done.”

Or put it another way, if the other countries of the West do not correct the American tendency toward unilateralism, then harm could be done. In phrasing the issue in this way, Putin exploits the unease already evident in some European circles. “Tension and distrust now are the most important factors in America’s relations with its European allies,” William Pfaff stressed in the *International Herald Tribune* last July. “Sooner or later the European powers will have to deal with the consequences of U.S. unilateralism.” Perhaps Putin’s remarks were not meant to take advantage of this situation, but given his knowledge of European politics—he lived in East Germany during the Cold War and speaks fluent German—some thought should be given to the possibility that his policy is more calculating.

Russia and Western Civilization

If some of the trends mentioned here are troubling, others are more reassuring. For example, Putin has vigorously denounced the rise of right-wing nationalist and anti-Semitic movements in Russia. He has pointed out that nationalism and intolerance also affect “so-called developed democracies,” and in using that language he put forth a challenge to the United States to be true to our democratic principles. It is a challenge the Congress needs to take up, not only because it is fair, but because it

resonates with the history of the 20th century. In the interwar years, the Western democracies did not pay sufficient attention to the erosion of democracy in Germany. We should not make that mistake again, and to the extent our example establishes a model to be emulated, we should be conscious of the example we set.

In this regard, particular attention should be paid to the tendency to divide Europe along civilizational lines. “Europe ends where Western Christianity ends and Islam and Orthodoxy begin,” writes Samuel P. Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. “The identification of Europe with Western Christendom provides a clear criterion for the admission of new members to Western organizations.” As we have seen, this argument is being used to justify the division of Europe. Such a division would be nothing short of a tragedy, a betrayal of the hope generated by the end of the Cold War after a century of bloody conflict. Americans, in particular, should be aware of the danger. We should recognize from our own history the hypocrisy of asserting that there are two parts to Europe’s bus, that Russia and other Orthodox countries belong in the back of the bus—which, of course, is just as good as the front, only different. No people with any dignity or intelligence will accept this argument, and although no American administration has adopted this position, Congress should be aware that it is influencing the debate over NATO expansion with potentially catastrophic consequences.

First, for most Russians it would signify a betrayal. As far as they are concerned, they ended the Cold War not because they were defeated militarily but because they realized communism was inherently flawed. The Warsaw Pact was abolished and they withdrew their military forces to their own territory, expecting their actions would be met with goodwill. For NATO to reciprocate by expanding to Russia’s borders—especially if it excludes Russia from equal status because it supposedly belongs to a different (read inferior) civilization—is bound to enrage ordinary Russians. Congress, if it is asked to approve further NATO expansion, should be aware of this issue and take it into consideration in its deliberations.

Second, Congress should be aware that alliances provoke the formation of counteralliances; that, after all, is the logic of the balance of power. The SCO and the CICA have not received the attention they deserve. To be sure, they are not alliances like NATO, but they could form the basis of something more if Russia feels alienated.

Perhaps most important of all, however, Congress has to make it clear that diplomacy is not the exclusive domain of the executive branch. As

Alexander Hamilton wrote in *Federalist* no. 75, “The history of human conduct does not warrant that exalted opinion of human virtue which would make it wise in a nation to commit interests of so delicate and momentous a kind, as those which concern its intercourse with the rest of the world, to the sole disposal of a magistrate created and circumstanced as would be a President of the United States.” And history has continued to vindicate Hamilton’s argument. “I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word,” British prime minister Neville Chamberlain wrote his sister after meeting Adolf Hitler in September 1938. It did not take long for Chamberlain to be disabused of his optimism.

We can hope that President Bush has more insight into the human soul than Chamberlain did, but as Hamilton pointed out, the security and safety of the United States cannot be left to the discretion of a single individual. In addition, personal diplomacy raises the question of what endures after the persons leave the scene. Agreements between countries should have some institutional arrangements binding the countries, and agreements between individuals, even if well meant, do not meet that standard. Even worse, they risk recreating the era in which the state was identified with a single individual, or sovereign.

“In republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates” over the executive, James Madison wrote in *Federalist* no. 51. One of the most disturbing elements in Russia now is the effective sidelining of the legislature. Russian history resonates with tragedies flowing from the excessive concentration of power in the hands of a single individual, and it is in the fundamental American interest to ensure that this situation is not repeated. Consequently, it is critical that Congress set an example for Russia—and, indeed, for the rest of the world’s aspiring democracies—of how a republican government operates. It is no exaggeration to say that the future of democracy itself hangs in the balance here. Congress, therefore, must insist that the executive be accountable to the legislature for its activities and, above all, that any agreement affecting the security of the American people be submitted publicly for its approval.

Suggested Readings

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—Prepared by Stanley Kober

