

U.S.-Russia: My Enemy, My Partner?

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The aspiration to raise the level of relations between the U.S. and Russia to strategic partnership was declared by political elites of both states almost immediately after the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Later, the initiative was labeled an American-Russian “reset.” The reset was in effect a package of agreements on joint actions against contemporary challenges, as well as a mutual reduction of offensive nuclear arms. The fundamental causes of undertaking the reset initiative from America’s and Russia’s perspectives are something we will discuss later in this work. For the time being, we would just mention, however, that from a psychological point of view, the timing for working out a new strategy of relations was chosen perfectly. The relatively young politicians who came at that time to the White House and Kremlin Palace belonged to the new formation of statesmen—free from complexes and phobias of the Cold War, inclined to compromise, and, as they often declared, strongly committed to democratic values.

Of course, for many of those familiar with Russia’s political life, President Medvedev is the subordinate figure in Russia’s ruling tandem (Putin and Medvedev); and it is hardly plausible that Mr. Obama’s team responsible for foreign policy—which includes outstanding and experienced professionals—underestimated this fact. However, it did not shake Washington’s determination; rather, the fact of Putin’s dominant position in Russia’s politics was recalled by Americans in explaining another stage of cooling of relations with Moscow.¹

Nonetheless, the new American-Russian foreign policy initiative became embodied in a set of documents and continues to be implemented despite the obstacles and even failures (similar to the policy of *détente* in the 1970s). But even a cursory glance at the list of initial measures on improving American-Russian relations (suggested by the Commission on United States Policy toward Russia to the U.S. president and Congress) shows that in the two years since the reset was launched, the implemented points are mainly those that were considered necessary to the U.S. and few that Russia wanted to achieve. In particular:

- The Jackson-Vanik Amendment has not yet been lifted from Russia.
- The stationing of antiballistic missile systems in Poland and Czech Republic has not ceased and continues to be implemented at a somewhat fast pace. Moreover, stationing of similar systems will soon commence in Romania.²
- Although Russia gave approval for transporting NATO’s (nonlethal) cargo through its territory to Afghanistan, any substantial prerequisites for stabilizing the situation in that country are scarcely observable. In addition, NATO forces, which control relatively large territories in this country, proved unable to prevent both the strengthening of the Taliban movement and the tremendous growth of narco-production and trafficking.

To its credit, the reset has seen:

- Conclusion of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START),

¹ Andrey Shleifer, Daniel Treisman, *Why Moscow Says No*, Foreign Affairs, January/February 2011, Stable URL: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67044/andrei-shleifer-and-daniel-treisman/why-moscow-says-no> (accessed November 17, 2011).

² This was by all means a critically important point for Moscow, without implementation of which the whole “reset” initiative makes little sense for Russia.

- A time-out in negotiations regarding Georgia's and Ukraine's NATO membership,
- Russia's vote in the UN Security Council for sanctions against Iran, and
- Russia's membership to the WTO.

As for other points of cooperation envisaged by the reset—joint struggle against terrorism, proliferation of WMDs, narco-production and trafficking, arms smuggling, control over energy consumption, global warming, and so forth—all continue to remain nominal. Meanwhile, the issues of strategic importance, which the partners mention rarely but always refer to, remain deadlocked. These are primarily large-scale energy projects overtly supported by Washington (such as the Nabucco gas pipeline project and others aimed at bringing Central Asian energy to European markets through the South Caucasus) that are aimed at depriving Russia of its monopoly in gas supplies to Europe and which Russia is resisting by any means. Another issue is Russia's aspiration to dominate economically, politically, and militarily in the post-Soviet space, which faces active and rather successful opposition from the United States.³

It is no accident that many Russian analysts insist that America continues to pursue a policy of “winning” in regard to Russia.⁴ They argue that depriving Russia of its military might and political influence, and finally even her partitioning, are the genuine goals of this policy.⁵ Even after eliminating Russian experts' obvious manipulation and speculation, one argument remains immutable: *American political circles may not overlook the fact that Russia remains the only state capable of destroying the United States.* Hence, it is quite natural that Washington's policy toward Russia is aimed at neutralizing the remaining threat. Not less important, as American experts put it, is that “the US is strategically interested in impeding Russia's...domination in the region that connects Europe, Asia and the Middle East...and supporting independence and sovereignty of the states there.”⁶

Does this mean that among the most likely scenarios in the development of U.S.-Russia relations, we should be prepared for the worst one, namely a military-political confrontation between Washington and Moscow all over the world, i.e., a new cold war? If the answer were affirmative, we could put a full stop right here. The article itself would have become in this case a fact statement sheet, and would not have had any analytical value.

Nonetheless, the situation is not that unambiguous or hopeless. Many factors favor another more realistic scenario: *constructive and productive relations based on common interests between the U.S. and Russia, despite*

³ Взгляд в будущее (*Foresight*), 06.23.2009, Stable URL: http://www.stoletie.ru/ekskliuziv/vzglad_v_budushheje_2009-06-23.htm (accessed November 17, 2011).

⁴ Nikolay Leonov, (01.22.2011), *В кольце угроз, Чего Россия должна опасаться в ближайшем будущем* (In the circle of threats. What Russia has to fear in the nearest future), *Kommunar Press*, Stable URL: <http://kommunar-press.ru/content/view/1723/55/> (accessed November 17, 2011).

⁵ Tatyana Shakleina, (01.22.2011), *Россия и США в полицентричном мире* (Russia and the U.S. in polycentric world), ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ, Stable URL: http://www.perspektivy.info/oykumena/amerika/rossija_i_ssha_v_polichentrichnom_mire_2011-01-22.htm (accessed on November 14, 2011).

Alexey Fonenko, (09.07.2009), *Пределы перезагрузки. Что мешает российско-американскому партнерству?* (The limits of the reload. What hinders Russian-American partnership?), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Stable URL: http://www.ng.ru/politics/2009-09-07/3_kartblansh.html (accessed October 18, 2011).

Alexander Shustov, (10.26.2011) “Арабская весна” в Центральной Азии, (“Arab spring” in Central Asia), Центр Азия, Stable URL: <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1319638800> (accessed November 4, 2011).

⁶ *Правильный курс стратегии США по отношению к России*, (The right course of the U.S. strategy toward Russia) (03.29.2009) *POLIT.RU*, Stable URL: http://www.polit.ru/article/2009/03/27/usa_russia/, (accessed October 13, 2011).

*the diversity in values of the two countries.*⁷ The identification of these interests, which we will accomplish by examining expert opinions and world development trends, is a critical task of this work.

Economic interests

In terms of economic interests, the Russian analyst Dmintri Trenin's statement after the dramatic events of August 2008 (the five-day war between Georgia and South Ossetia) is quite appropriate: "Thanks to the financial crisis for extinguishing the geopolitical one."⁸ It should be remembered that the world financial crisis started barely a month after the five-day war in the South Caucasus. Trenin's seemingly paradoxical statement makes perfect sense. Indeed, it was a financial crisis that forced politicians in Washington, Moscow, and other capitals to comprehend the following:

- a) All significant economies of the world are deeply interconnected in the age of globalization.
- b) Every move motivated by politico-ideological concerns and not by common fundamental interests may bring about destruction of both national economies and the whole world's financial-economic system.

These understandings apparently compelled U.S. and European powers in the autumn of 2008 to give up the phantom called "Russian expansionism and revanchism" and kept them from undertaking measures aimed at curbing "unruly" Moscow. As for Russia, she also learned lessons. The financial crisis did not let her fall into euphoria over "a victory over the West." Moreover, Russia gave up attempts at returning to a mobilization type of economy (typical of Cold War times) for good and declared a course of modernization, also realizing that in this process she definitely needed the help of the United States, a leading world power in such areas as science, technology, education, and management.

Neither Russia nor the United States, however, considers economic ties as a priority area of cooperation in each other's relations. The U.S. is far from being a significant consumer of Russia's energy. In the last five years, America purchased 2%–4% of Russia's oil exports and almost did not purchase gas.⁹ At the same time, 67% of Russian gas exports and 69% of oil exports have gone to Europe. In general, as statistics suggest, barely 3% of Russian exports go to the U.S. (less than Russia exports to Poland). As for the United States, its share of goods in the Russian market accounts for just 5% of the total. The situation with investments is even worse: the United State's share of total foreign capital investment in Russia constitutes only 2.5%, less than Russia's investment in the American economy.¹⁰

At the same time, Russia's economic ties with European countries and China are intensively expanding and strengthening. The European share of Russia's exports already account for 52%, while European imports into Russia are approaching 45%. Fourteen percent of Russia's imports come from China, while in 1995 they accounted for only 2%. Concurrently, Russia's share of total exports to China constitutes 6%, and this index will rise steadily given China's growing need for Russian energy.¹¹

⁷ Andrey Terekhov, *Ростом России хотят управлять из США*, (*Russia's growth wanted to be controlled from the U.S.*), (05.19.2009), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Stable URL: http://www.ng.ru/world/2009-05-19/7_usa.html, (accessed November 4, 2011).

⁸ Dmitri Trenin, *Непрактичный прагматизм*, (Unpractical pragmatism), (03.23.2009), POLIT.RU, Stable URL: <http://www.polit.ru/article/2009/03/23/trenin/>, (accessed October 1, 2011).

⁹ Andrey Shleifer, Daniel Treisman, *Why Moscow Says No*, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2011, Stable URL: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67044/andrei-shleifer-and-daniel-treisman/why-moscow-says-no> (accessed November 17, 2011).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

What might American analysts and politicians be uncomfortable with under these circumstances? These are definitely not utilitarian considerations such as “the more natural resources Europe and China draw out from Russia, the less of it will remain for the United States.” The U.S. is not only blessed enough with resources but also enforces hegemony over parts of the planet that are very rich in energy resources (particularly Central and parts of South America, Iraq, etc.).

What the United States may be genuinely concerned about is the emergence of new strong actors in the international arena that are capable of maintaining economic and, consequently, political rivalry. Today, Washington most likely understands an obvious fact, that freezing or sharp reduction of economic ties with Moscow may drive the latter toward closer association with united Europe and China. Underpinned by Russia’s natural resources, Europe or China will soon find themselves capable of challenging the United States’ economic might and depriving it of its monopolistic standing as the only world superpower.

In order to preclude the above-mentioned scenario and prolong its dominant world status, Washington has obviously opted for a policy of “preemptive strike,” as it always has done in modern history. The essence of this policy is to give approval to the new “polycentric” world order, where Russia has (or continues) to be one of these power centers.¹² The status of the “power pole” in the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe will inevitably force Moscow to view leading European powers, primarily France and Germany, but also China, as strong rivals in its traditional areas of domination rather than as trade/economic partners. On the other hand, one should expect a similar reaction from Europe and China once the United States gives Russia a kind of *carte blanche* for providing almost unimpeded policy in the mentioned regions. The European powers and Beijing will immediately activate their efforts to restrain Moscow’s ambitions on the continent.

We have already witnessed such activation from the European side in the not-distant past. The reluctance of the Bush administration in the summer of 2008 to undertake concrete measures to curb Russia’s “aggression” against Georgia resulted in immediate interference by France and Germany, which was successful enough and actually prevented further escalation of the conflict. As for China, it’s developing economic ties with Central Asian states—an area of strategic importance for Russia—and therefore the strengthening political influence of Beijing in this region is undoubtedly a worrisome issue for policy makers in the Kremlin. All these points provide us enough ground to assert that once the United States starts developing closer ties with Russia, changes in the nature of the latter’s relations with united Europe and China (from partnership to rivalry) will be in the observable future rather than in the long-term perspective.

Thus, by proposing Russia a political dominance in the regions strategically important to Moscow, Washington significantly reduces the likelihood of Russia’s alignment with any power center in Eurasia (be it Europe or China) and therefore reduces the likelihood of any emergent power center to become capable of challenging the United States’ current world status. In other words, Washington makes serious concessions in order to split up the forces of the Old World.

Roughly 10 years ago, Washington’s consent to Russia’s dominance in the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe was unthinkable. The United States felt no threat to its world dominance in economic, political, or especially military spheres. However, dramatic economic growth and rising defense expenditures in the European Union, China, India, and Brazil (which have become comparable with America’s), as well as growing concern by American analysts over inevitable future (and already observable) heightened tension with the U.S. as the only world superpower, dictated to policy makers

¹² Tatyana Shackleina, (01.22.2011), *Россия и США в полицентричном мире* (Russia and the U.S. in polycentric world), ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ, Stable URL: http://www.perspektivy.info/oykumena/amerika/rossija_i_ssha_v_policentrichnom_mire_2011-01-22.htm (accessed on November 14, 2011).

in Washington the only way out: to attract the most powerful (both economically and militarily) states to global regulation and grant them the function of adjusting their regional subsystems.¹³

By this move, the United States solves two problems: (1) It lightens the burden of global management that Washington has assumed, and (2) it strengthens the rivalry between other regional power center aspirants in the future multipolar world.

It is worth mentioning that according to some Russian analysts, the above-mentioned scheme of U.S.-Russia relations is not anything new in the post-Soviet period.¹⁴ They suggest that there was a somewhat informal agreement between the Clinton and Yeltsin administrations in the 1990s recognizing Russia's dominance in the post-Soviet area. This sounds plausible, taking into account Yeltsin's success in freezing the conflicts of the South Caucasus, Tajikistan, and Transdnistria.

Nevertheless, as Russians assure, the administration of George W. Bush broke the above-mentioned "gentlemen's agreement" by organizing so-called colored revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine in the beginning of 2000 and by destabilizing the political situations first in Uzbekistan and then in Kyrgyzstan. This reportedly resulted in the transition of U.S.-Russia relations in the post-Soviet space from partner-oriented to conflict-oriented.

Geopolitics

All this is in the past, official Washington says. As President Barack Obama put it in 2009 during his visit to Moscow, America wants to see Russia strong, peaceful, prosperous, and self-confident, because the United States needs exactly this kind of partner in the twenty-first century. The words of U.S. Ambassador to Russia John R. Beyrle on the same subject are even more emotional: "We are not interested in weak Russia. Weak Russia is the worst nightmare for the US. We understand perfectly what challenges we are faced with...and we must cope with them in alliance with strong partners. Thanks to its geostrategic position, immense resources and human capital, Russia may be exactly...such a partner".¹⁵

Indeed, Russia has the historical experience, the human and material resources, and the political will necessary for controlling and even managing regional processes. However, is Russia comfortable with the role of "regional regulator" after being a global actor for 150 years? Most probably it is. First, it has learned to assess its capabilities realistically, especially in the economic sphere, and it understands perfectly its subordinate position compared to other rising powers of Eurasia, let alone the United States. Secondly, it has not only offered to coordinate the situation in the post-Soviet space, but also to become a rightful (in some cases even irreplaceable) mediator in solving the most acute problems with neighboring regions (the Middle East, Central Asia) and states (Iran, North Korea, and others), which contemporary Russian strategy considers extremely important in terms of the country's national security interests. Furthermore, under the circumstances, when Russian political thought continues

¹³ Jones Bruce, *How Do the Rising Powers Rise?*, Survival, Vol. 52, No. 6, December 2010/January 2011. Michael Mendelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower*, N.Y., 2010.

Andrew J. Basevich, *Limits of Power. The End of American Exceptionalism*, N.Y. Holt Paperbacks, 2009

¹⁴ Alexandrov, M. (2007) "Perspektivy uregulirovaniya Gruzino-Abkhazskogo i Gruzino-Osetinskogo konfliktov" (The perspectives of Georgian Abkhazian and Georgian-Osetian conflicts resolution), *Caucasus without conflicts and terrorism: dialog of civilizations in Caucasian Crossroads*, Yerevan, pp. 112-120.

Skakov, A. (2006) "Rossiya i strani Yuzhnogo Kavkaza: 2004," (Russia and the South Caucasian states: 2004), *The Caucasus Yearbook*, Yerevan Caucasus Media Institute, pp. 146-181.

Panarin, I. (2006) "Doktrina Novoy EvroAzii (Ot Parizha do Pekina, ot Mosckvi to Deli i Tegerana)—stabilnost Centralnoy Azii" (The doctrine of New EuroAsia [from Paris to Beijing, from Moscow to Deli and Teheran]—the stability in Central Asia), *Mirovoy obshchestvenni forum, "Dialog tsivilizatsiy" // Vestnik*, N° 1/2006, pp 288-296.

¹⁵ Русская Америка, *Слабая Россия—это кошмар для США*, (Weak Russia is a nightmare for U.S.), Interview with the U.S. Ambassador in Russia John R. Beyrle, (18.10.2011), Stable URL:

http://www.therussianamerica.com/web_NEWS/articles/7961/1/ (accessed November 17, 2011).

searching for a new geopolitical identity, even the role of regional regulator not only satisfies Russia's imperial ambitions but also facilitates the realization of the post-Soviet area integration project within the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC).¹⁶

However, the question arises, why does the United States need Russia to realize its imperial ambitions? The most obvious reasons are as follows:

First, Russia is capable and willing to assume the role of regional regulator. Throughout the last 20 years (i.e., after the collapse of the Soviet Union), Moscow has *de facto* played the role of regional coordinator, despite Russia's economic chaos, political reorganization, weakness of its central government, and demoralization of its armed forces in the 1990s. Russia continued holding the keys to resolution or at least freezing of regional interethnic (the South Caucasus, Transdnistria) and civil conflicts (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan) in the post-Soviet area. Moreover, the states that have had acute conflicts with the West (e.g., Iran, North Korea) were always more willing to have contact with Russia rather than other powers; even the most radical movements of the Arab East continue maintaining contacts with her.

Today, when Russia has overcome (although with tremendous material, moral, and political losses) one of the most difficult periods of her history—when the power vertical has been rebuilt, significant financial recourses have been accumulated allowing the country to proceed with economic and technological modernization, and the armed forces are reviving—it is more beneficial for the United States to have Russia as a partner rather than a rival in the extremely complicated region of Eurasia.

Americans have not forgotten the many unexpected problems they were faced with after the demise of the USSR: the WMD proliferation threat, uncontrolled trade of conventional weapons, separatism, illegal drug trafficking, terrorism, human trafficking on an immense scale, and so forth. Most of these remain serious issues even today. Among all countries pretending to regional leadership, only two have enough historical experience and appropriate capabilities for solving these problems—namely, Russia and China. However, China still refrains from partaking in solving such issues (perhaps except through mediation in negotiations with North Korea). Some experts insist that this is because Beijing is still mainly focused on expanding its potential.¹⁷ As for our judgment, perhaps arguably enough, Chinese political culture is less predisposed to expansionism, whereas it still dominates in Russia. This is exactly the reason the role of regional “gendarme” suits her mentality very well, as it in essence remains imperial.

Second, economically, Russia is much weaker than the European Union or China. Given this fact, the United States' desire to see Russia in a position of regional political manager appears quite logical. Given its economic and technological weakness, Russia in the foreseeable future will not be able to compete with the U.S. on a global scale. Meanwhile, Europe and China can definitely do so.

As for Russia's nuclear potential, which is still comparable with America's, it is hardly a source of serious concern for the only world superpower. In contrast to the nervous “dilettantes” that are present on the nuclear scene, Moscow has been a tested, predictable, and responsible partner-adversary since Cold War times. For this reason, it is much more beneficial and also easier for Washington (and acceptable for Moscow) to channel their military might—the world's biggest arsenals of nuclear arms—toward deterring such dilettantes instead of exerting pressure on each other. If such consensus between

¹⁶ Sergey Tolstov, *Перспективы евразийского интеграционного проекта*, (The perspectives of Eurasian integration project), (10.31.2011) Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Stable URL: http://www.ng.ru/courier/2011-10-31/11_perspective.html (accessed November 17, 2011).

¹⁷ Tatyana Shakleina, (01.22.2011), *Россия и США в полицентричном мире* (Russia and the U.S. in polycentric world), ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ, Stable URL: http://www.perspektivy.info/oykumena/amerika/rossija_i_ssha_v_policentrichnom_mire_2011-01-22.htm (accessed November 14, 2011).

Washington and Moscow is achieved, Russia, with its nuclear potential, may acquire a new function: as a balancing force between Eastern and Western, and Northern and Southern parts of the vast Eurasian continent.

Conclusion

In sum, America is entering a period of great dilemma. On the one hand, Washington has to lighten the burden of globally assumed issues in order to focus on domestic problems, which grow steadily. In this, the United States can by no means avoid “delegating” some international issues to other powerful political actors, thereby broadening the latter’s spheres of influence. On the other hand, maintaining its status as the world’s only superpower remains a top imperative of the U.S.’s foreign policy, which becomes harder given the rising power centers of Eurasia. Under these circumstances, strengthening ties (and even alliance) with Moscow appears to be the most rational choice for Washington. Making Russia an ally and actually “granting” her a role of regional coordinator in the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe will intensify the old acute geopolitical contradictions between Moscow on the one hand and united Europe and China on the other. Intensification of the rivalry between the mentioned power centers may damage Russia’s further economic association with Brussels and Beijing significantly, which otherwise (if backed with Russia’s natural resources) would soon be capable of challenging America’s monopoly in terms of world economic, political and military domination. In addition, what makes Russia an attractive partner/ally for the United States on the Eurasian continent is mainly (1) its historical experience and capabilities of dealing with the regional issues, as well as (2) its economic and technological backwardness in comparison to Europe and China. The latter guarantees that Moscow will not be capable enough in the foreseeable future to threaten the U.S.’s domination on a global scale, while the former assures that it will cope with the role of stabilizing force in the indicated regions perfectly. From Russia’s perspective, Washington’s non-interference in the sphere of Russia’s “traditional” interests is one of the top priorities of Russia’s foreign policy, which Moscow has striven to achieve since the demise of the USSR. Furthermore, alliance with the United States will grant Russia the status of a balancing force, or center of gravity, on the Eurasian continent-something that matches Russia’s geopolitical ambitions completely.