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Russia and America: Destined for Conflict?

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THE NEXT American president will face the most serious challenge from Russia since the end of the Cold War or, for that matter, since the early 1980s, when the United States and Yuri Andropov's Soviet Union actively confronted one another around the globe. Russia today is increasingly an angry, nationalist, elective monarchy, and while it is still open for business with America and its allies, its leaders often assume the worst about Western intentions and view the United States as the "main enemy"—indeed, a new poll finds that 72 percent of Russians consider the United States the country most hostile to Russia. Worse, Moscow has been prepared to put its money where its mouth is in proceeding with a massive military modernization. The Russian government is simultaneously tightening domestic political and police controls and seeking new alliances to balance pressures from the United States and its allies and partners.

It is important not to oversimplify this situation. It is not a reenactment of the Cold War; history rarely repeats itself so precisely. Vladimir Putin's Russia is not a superpower and its top officials are realistic about their country's military, geopolitical and economic limitations. Russia does not have a universal ideology predicated on the West as an enemy. In fact, Putin and his associates regularly profess interest in resuming cooperation with the United States and its allies—on terms acceptable to the Kremlin. The Russian government is eager to obtain foreign investment and access to Western technology, which requires normalcy in relations with the West.

We cannot be sure how Putin and his associates would respond if the United States and its allies were prepared to reshape their policy towards Russia by defining their interests more narrowly, being less categorical about Russian domestic practices, putting a premium on avoiding confrontation and, when possible, even engaging in cooperation with Russia. All that can be said at this point is that Russia's trajectory is alarming, but probably not yet irreversible.

ONE REASON for avoiding a sense of inevitable confrontation with Russia is that Moscow's truculence is primarily a function of what America does rather than who it is. To the extent that Russia has an ideology, it is an assertive nationalism that allows cooperation with any nation that does not challenge Russian geopolitical interests or its system of government. Russia thus maintains good relations with authoritarian countries like China and Qatar, and with democracies like India and Israel. In part because its leaders are pragmatic rather than messianic, Russia's authoritarianism is still relatively soft and incorporates many democratic procedures including meaningful if not entirely free or fair elections, a judicial branch that is autonomous most of the time and a semi-independent media. Transitions to democracy in other countries are only a problem for Russia's live-and-let-live foreign policy when the Kremlin sees them as either destabilizing (as in some cases in the Middle East) or anti-Russian (as in some cases in its immediate neighborhood).

While a U.S.-Russian conflict is not inevitable, Russia's estrangement from the West after the Cold War probably stemmed from the unrealistic and contrasting expectations held on both sides. When Mikhail Gorbachev and his liberal allies like Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, Central Committee Secretary Alexander Yakovlev, and foreign-policy aide Anatoly Chernyaev began articulating and implementing Gorbachev's "new thinking," which emphasized universal human values at the expense of national interests, they assumed that the Soviet Union could cease being a global superpower, give up its system of alliances, rely increasingly on foreign economic assistance and still benefit from others' deference to Moscow

as a key player in world affairs. If Soviet leaders had consulted Russia's own history, they would have realized how profoundly unrealistic their expectations were.

Sergei Witte, who became Russia's first constitutionally appointed prime minister under Czar Nicholas II following the country's humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, would have immediately foreseen what was to come. "It was not because of our culture or our bureaucratic church or our wealth and welfare that the world respected us," Witte wrote.

[The world] respected our strengths, and when they saw to an exaggerated degree that we were not as strong as they thought, that Russia was "a colossus on clay legs," then the picture changed immediately, domestic and foreign enemies raised their heads, and the indifferent stopped paying attention to us.

Of course, the Soviet Union did not suffer a military defeat in the 1980s like the Russian Empire's loss in 1905. Nor did the changes in Russian government, policy and philosophy follow a domestic rebellion; instead, they were imposed from the top by a leadership that decided it was on the wrong side of history. Notwithstanding the motives of Gorbachev and, later, President Boris Yeltsin, Western officials showed little gratitude for their roles in destroying the Soviet empire once it became clear that a Russia collapsing upon itself was unwilling to use force and had very little remaining economic leverage. Similarly, while most Russians not only counted on massive Western assistance but even thought of themselves as Western allies in destroying the USSR, most in the West, particularly in central Europe, determined that the time had finally come to act on historical grievances against Moscow or felt that a weak, corrupt and unstable Russia did not deserve to be taken seriously, much less accepted as an equal partner with the United States and the European Union.

The clash of expectations could not have been more consequential. Russia's experiment with democracy went sour almost from the beginning, when the Clinton administration pressed Boris Yeltsin to accelerate radical and painful economic reforms. Masterminded by young, pro-Western economists who had neither experience operating within a democratic system nor compassion for ordinary citizens, these dramatic changes required authoritarian means precisely because they impoverished the vast majority of Russia's population. The Clinton administration and other Western governments consistently told Yeltsin he had no choice but to stick with free-market reforms.

Neither Yeltsin's de facto coup d'état in 1993, which culminated in tanks shelling a Russian parliament elected under the same perestroika-era system that brought Yeltsin to power, nor the demonstrably fraudulent 1996 presidential elections diminished the Clinton team's enthusiasm for nation building in Russia. As a power-hungry former Communist Party secretary, Yeltsin didn't need much encouragement to continue on a course that consolidated and expanded his authority inside Russia. Nevertheless, he got all the encouragement and support he needed for an unholy bargain under which the Clinton administration willingly turned a blind eye to his transgressions at home while Yeltsin himself ensured that Russia would defer to U.S. foreign-policy preferences. Yeltsin increasingly relied on media manipulation, new constraints on the legislative branch through a revised constitution and growing power for domestic security agencies. When an ailing Yeltsin appointed a little-known former KGB officer and newly minted

director of the Federal Security Service named Vladimir Putin as Russia's prime minister, the more vigorous de facto successor had all the tools he needed to rule much more firmly.

When it became clear in early 1996 that Boris Yeltsin was extremely unpopular and had little chance of reelection, a coalition immediately emerged to prevent Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov from coming to power. It included new tycoons who benefited from Yeltsin's corrupt privatization, the security services (whose authority and prestige Yeltsin restored) and the bulk of the media, much of which was owned and operated by Russia's oligarchs expressly as an instrument of political influence. Russia's media portrayed the unreformed Communists as a mortal threat to democracy that only Yeltsin's reelection could avoid, ignoring the fact that Yeltsin's opponents also included a democratic candidate: Grigory Yavlinsky from the generally pro-Western Yabloko Party. With financial and media support, and a helping hand from Washington (which was managing IMF disbursements to aid Yeltsin), Yavlinsky could have had a chance. Yet the market-oriented democrat Yavlinsky opposed radical reforms because of their devastating impact on the Russian people. He also opposed the corrupt tycoons and criticized U.S. interference in Russian domestic affairs and NATO's intervention in the Balkans. Yeltsin was reelected with massive electoral fraud after suffering a heart attack hidden from voters that left him unable to perform his duties. Western support for ill-conceived and damaging economic reforms and Western disregard for Russian democratic procedures helped the West lose its moral authority in Russia.

More fundamentally, Russia was unprepared for democracy. Russia had not managed to build organized democratic parties with mass support among the population. In Russia's history and culture, a strong czar was viewed as a protector against abusive boyars—wealthy nobles who would otherwise exploit ordinary people. Many Russians saw delegating this authority to the voters as a deceitful cop-out that would benefit the rich and powerful and their backers in the United States and Europe. After their experience with Communist ideology it was natural for many people, particularly intellectuals, to view liberal democracy as the answer. Once confronted with the reality of how democracy was working in Russia, their interest in foreign ideas declined dramatically.

THE DARING combination of NATO expansion and growing interventionism further accentuated Russia's alienation from the West. Remarkably, NATO failed to consider how its dramatically different conduct would affect relations with Russia or world politics in general. With post–Cold War triumphalism increasingly seeping into conventional wisdom, most assumed that when the United States and major European powers wanted to do something in the international arena, they could impose their will without significant costs. Though this new NATO assertiveness was not deliberately directed against Russia, few within the alliance took seriously Moscow's concerns—which were met by most with either indifference or contemptuous disregard. Rarely if ever did U.S. leaders critically assess how they themselves would react if a powerful (and not even necessarily hostile) alliance sought to add Canada and Mexico to its ranks while excluding the United States.

The Yeltsin government was again a reluctant partner if not a willing collaborator in cultivating this sense of impunity. Radical reformers in the Yeltsin government, particularly Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, acted as if winning favor in Washington and Brussels was a

paramount Russian national interest. This may have been quite reassuring to NATO elites, but it inexorably led many Russians to view Kozyrev and others as quislings and moved Russian public opinion further in an anti-Western direction—meaning that any reassurance Kozyrev provided was false and short-lived.

Advocates of NATO expansion argued that Russia could not really object to the process. Neither Washington nor anyone else signed an agreement with Gorbachev or Yeltsin to limit NATO to its current membership, they said. And anyway, the central and eastern European countries themselves were asking to join. Beyond that, advocates said, expansion would actually make Russia more secure because new members under NATO's security umbrella would be less afraid of their former imperial master and would accordingly be better able to set aside their past grievances to begin new relationships with Moscow. Since Yeltsin was instrumental in achieving relatively peaceful independence for the Baltic states by refusing to allow Russian citizens to participate in any military action against them, some expected Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to be especially grateful. Nevertheless, all these arguments were either incomplete, superficial or just plain wrong.

It is true that the George H. W. Bush administration did not provide any formal guarantees that NATO would not expand further east. That was perfectly appropriate since neither Gorbachev nor Yeltsin asked for a legally binding agreement. Nevertheless, as their memoirs and other documents make clear, President Bush, James Baker and Brent Scowcroft may not have considered post-Communist Russia to be a superpower, but they did view it as a friendly power. They intended to treat Moscow with respect and dignity and to work to provide it what they saw as an appropriate place in the new European security architecture. This attitude discouraged Gorbachev and Yeltsin from insisting on legally binding guarantees.

With this in mind, the Clinton administration had every legal right to proceed with NATO expansion. What U.S. officials had no right to do was to think that they could move NATO's borders further and further east without changing Russia's perception of the West from friend to adversary. The first Bush administration had no plans to expand NATO and was hesitant to involve the United States in the emerging civil wars in the Balkans. Clinton-era NATO interventions in Bosnia (with Russia's reluctant consent) and Serbia (without Russia's consent or a United Nations mandate) could not but shape Moscow's views. The Iraq War and 2011 Libya intervention cemented NATO's transformation in Russian eyes from a nonthreatening organization to a military alliance prepared to act without a UN endorsement and in disregard of Russian perspectives around the globe.

Irrespective of NATO, Russia remained weak for some time, without real allies or friends, and eager to integrate itself into a world order dominated by the United States and Europe. Dmitri Medvedev's term as Russia's president was a last-gasp attempt to realize this goal, but even with Medvedev's more amiable leadership, NATO continued to dismiss efforts like Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's proposal to negotiate a European security treaty without much debate. Many in the West feared that it could create anxiety among some new members over NATO's security guarantees.

Yet if Russia was not a threat, as Western leaders insisted it was not, why would avoiding the Baltic states' anxiety be a higher priority than stabilizing U.S. and European security relations with Russia, a huge country with almost 150 million people and a massive nuclear arsenal? This is especially difficult to answer when the Baltic states themselves could not have felt particularly threatened since only one of them, Estonia, was prepared to spend 2 percent of its GDP on defense in line with NATO guidelines. Latvia was spending 1.3 percent and Lithuania 0.8 percent, all while pursuing polarizing anti-Russian polemics.

Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush ignored George Washington's famous warning in his Farewell Address about the perils of permanent alliances: "Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification." This should be "particularly alarming to the truly enlightened and independent patriot."

In the absence of a serious foreign-policy debate, few Americans understood what an ambitious project Washington was undertaking in allowing NATO's expansion and interventionism to proceed blindly until the alliance had incorporated most of Europe. Yet looking at the last two centuries of Europe's history, a nation or a group of nations has only attempted to dominate Europe three times. Napoleon Bonaparte, World War I's victorious allies and the Third Reich each tried and failed. Napoleon and Hitler were defeated by a counter coalition; the World War I allies created an unsustainable security architecture in Europe that contributed to the rise of Nazism and World War II. Moreover, while Westerners may believe that NATO's eastward expansion has been peaceful and voluntary, Russians see it as inseparable from NATO's European and global military exploits. How could bringing small new members into NATO and mollifying them outweigh the danger of provoking Russia's anti-Western militarism?

Even short of catastrophic scenarios like the Napoleonic Wars or World War I and World War II, setting the West and Russia on a collision course comes at a significant price. The most dramatic example is September 11, which might not have happened if the Clinton administration and the George W. Bush administration had worked with Russia as a strategic partner in confronting Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Despite Russian disillusionment with the United States during the 1990s, Vladimir Putin approached the Clinton administration with a suggestion for joint action against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in 1999. Russia, with its connections to Central Asia and strong ties with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, could have delivered a devastating blow against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in 2000, possibly disrupting their ability to plan a complex operation like the 9/11 attacks. Despite Al Qaeda already demonstrating its capability and determination by attacking two American embassies and the USS *Cole*, the Clinton administration refused this overture out of frustration with Russian defiance in the Balkans and perceived interference in Georgia, where Moscow claimed Chechen rebels were hiding. The price was September 11. Only after Al Qaeda killed three thousand Americans was the Bush administration prepared to work with Russia, which helped mobilize the Northern Alliance as an effective ground force against the Taliban.

Later, in 2013, another round of U.S.-Russian animosity damaged cooperation between the two countries' security services. Again angered by heavy-handed Russian policies in the North

Caucasus, the Obama administration was reluctant to exchange information about people from the region settling in the United States. As a result, Washington did not quite ask the right questions and Moscow did not quite volunteer complete answers, enabling the Tsarnaev brothers to carry out the Boston Marathon bombing. These disasters could easily be overshadowed if Russia decides that the United States is a defining threat and begins building its foreign policy around a zero-sum conflict, possibly even involving others, like North Korea.

EVIDENCE OF Russia's flaws under Putin is abundant and growing. In addition to restrictions on political freedom, there is pervasive corruption. Putin has launched a high-profile campaign against this traditional Russian evil, but so far those at the top remain immune. And as long as those close to the leader are untouchable, using their spouses, children and associates to engage in massive illegal self-enrichment, it is very difficult to persuade others to forswear what they see as their fair share.

A flexible attitude to the truth, natural to people with secret-service backgrounds, exposes Russia to legitimate criticism. Moscow's denial of military involvement in eastern Ukraine is a case in point. If Russia openly acknowledged—as the United States normally does—that it supports insurgents in the Donbass, it would be easier for the Kremlin to accept that it was a rebel surface-to-air missile that downed Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 in 2014. Moscow could remind the world of other such tragedies, including cases when the United States, Israel and even Ukraine mistakenly attacked civilian airliners. Russian officials could also argue that the fault lies with the Ukrainian side, because Kiev used its air force to attack its own citizens and the insurgents fired on the assumption that the airliner was a combat aircraft. Official denials made Russia's position nearly impossible to defend and raised questions about the credibility of Moscow's other foreign-policy pronouncements. The list of Russia's transgressions is long.

It is difficult to know whether Russia's hysterical anti-Western campaign and growing militarization have developed unstoppable momentum. But chances are that because of the country's economic constraints and the absence of credible allies, the Putin government may be open for business after the next U.S. presidential election. Kremlin officials have certainly learned that they cannot count on China to save their economy.

At a recent meeting of Russia's new Economic Council, chaired by Vladimir Putin, former finance minister and Putin-appointed Council vice chair Alexei Kudrin called for reducing geopolitical tensions in order to attract foreign investment that would allow the stagnant Russian economy to grow. Putin's response was noncommittal, blaming others while promising to protect Russian national interests. This fueled public discord among Putin's advisers about which direction to take.

The United States should explore whether a new beginning is possible. If there is a chance, it will not require one-sided concessions from the United States. What it will require is a first-ever serious discussion about post–Cold War U.S. interests and priorities around the world and a sober evaluation of how Russia fits into them.

In Ukraine, for example, Moscow clearly wants to interpret the Minsk agreements in a way that not only provides the Donbass with meaningful autonomy, but also allows regional governments

in eastern Ukraine to prevent the country from joining NATO. Many in Ukraine and their supporters in the West consider this an unacceptable concession. But why? Does the United States, or Western Europe, really want Ukraine in NATO? Does America even intend to permit Ukraine to join NATO? If not, why create the impression in Russia that this may be Washington's long-term objective?

Many say that without Ukraine Russia cannot be an empire. This is true, to a point. Conversely, however, Russia's elite and much of its public believes that Russia can never be secur if Ukraine becomes a hostile nation and particularly if it joins a hostile alliance. Russian leaders have already seen how NATO's new members have changed the character of the alliance in its dealings with Moscow. A NATO influenced by not only Poland and the Baltic states, but also Ukraine, may form an existential threat for Moscow. This in turn would place both Ukraine's and NATO's security in terrible jeopardy—a development that America should seek to avoid.

Relations between the two sides have deteriorated to dangerous levels. It's in the U.S. national interest to explore better relations with Russia from a position of strength, something that will require both patience and realism in acknowledging that the effort may not succeed. If Moscow refuses to oblige, Washington should do whatever is necessary to protect its interests. Since this is likely to be risky and costly, it should not be America's first choice.