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FOREIGN POLICY for the Next President

DECEMBER 2008

Thinking Strategically About Russia

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SUMMARY

- U.S.–Russian relations matter again.
- To succeed where Bush has failed, Obama needs to approach Russia strategically: enhancing cooperation where possible, mitigating conflict where necessary.
- To prevent new conflict and receive Moscow's cooperation, Washington needs to deal seriously with Russian concerns.
- Leave Russia's domestic politics to the Russians.
- To keep Ukraine whole and free, the EU integration way is *the* way. NATO has reached the safe limits of eastward expansion.
- To protect against missile threats, a pan-European TMD system—which includes Russia—is the best option.
- On Iran and Afghanistan, Russia should be treated as an equal partner.

The brief war in the Caucasus—resulting from Mikheil Saakashvili's assault on South Ossetia, which provoked Moscow's massive response—has suddenly put Russia back onto the United States' radar screen after a long absence. The specter of a renewed Cold War–style confrontation haunts many minds. But this analogy is wrong, and not just because most people would recoil from it. Today there is no ideological context, no Iron Curtain, and no central Washington–Moscow relationship for either capital, not to speak of the rest of the world. In other words, Georgia is no Germany, and Russia is no Soviet Union. Moreover, the global economy forms a world market, the Internet knows no borders, and people cross borders in ever-greater numbers. But to repudiate the Cold War parallel is not to minimize the problem. Relations between America and Russia are indeed very bad—and potentially dangerous—but in a different way.

The principal potential danger is the absence of rules for the relationship. As Russia has risen from its 1990s state of abject impotence, it has emulated the United States and its allies in using force. Russia has been particularly stung by the U.S. refusal to recognize the post-Soviet space as Moscow's backyard. Moscow's 2008 military campaign against Georgia borrowed a page from NATO's 1999 operation against Serbia, and another from the 2007–2008 Western recognition of Kosovo, in the face of Belgrade's protests. To deflect U.S. criticism of Moscow wanting to effect "regime change" in Tbilisi, the Russian am-

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bassador quipped that regime change was not a notion invented by Moscow. And the Kremlin closely studied the 2003–2005 "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, which it saw as U.S. geopolitical advances into the post-Soviet space. One day, it hopes to return the compliment.

In a speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Vladimir Putin complained that America respected no borders and sought to impose its law and order around the world. A year later, Russia took the crucial step of recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence from Georgia. Then Russian warships watched warily as the U.S. Navy unloaded humanitarian supplies in Georgian ports. Soon, two Russian Air Force bombers flew to Venezuela for training over the Caribbean. The Russian Navy sailed to South America in the fall.

Moscow is sending a message to Washington: Stop your geopolitical harassment, or we will follow suit. Now, U.S. global hegemony is directly challenged by Russia's regional great power ambitions. In the absence of agreed-on rules, each party has drawn its own redlines whose crossing would trigger direct action; for Russia, these include attacks on its forces and citizens, U.S. military bases in the CIS countries, and NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia.

This new situation is inherently unstable because of the two players' disparities. Russia's gross domestic product is a dozen times smaller than that of the United States, and the Russian defense budget is a puny 4 percent of America's. Moscow has virtually no allies; China would do nothing that might impair its steady rise. But Washington has largely repaired relations with Europe and found a new friend in India. Few in the United States would see Russia as a worthy opponent rather than a petro-state with an antique arsenal. For their part, the Russians see the United States as having passed its prime in global dominance, and they discount the relevance of the United States' overextended military might in this age of asymmetrical warfare and continued nuclear deterrence. Thus, when both sides see each other as weak and getting no stronger, they might even take reckless steps.

Against that background, the withering away of arms control is a major risk factor. After the George W. Bush administration's pullout from the Anti–Ballistic Missile Treaty, and its decision to deploy ballistic missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic, Russia suspended the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which had served as the basis for the continent's military security since the Cold War. The Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, which bans particular U.S. and Russian systems even as they are proliferating, is facing an uncertain future. The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, with its inspection provisions, will expire in 2009. The Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty, which runs until 2012, would then be unverifiable. Even as the accords of unlimited duration, such as the Anti–Ballistic Missile Treaty, are abrogated, those with a defined life span are being allowed to expire without progeny.

The general factors leading to a more adversarial U.S.–Russian relationship are converging on Ukraine, which is of utmost importance to Russian and European security. Ukraine's embattled president, Viktor Yushchenko, is highly suspicious of Russia and a strong proponent of NATO accession; his ex-ally turned bitter rival, the very popular prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, is at best ambivalent on the issue and leaning against; and the former adversary of both, the influential leader of the Regions Party, Viktor Yanukovych, is firmly against. President Yushchenko hopes to raise his low electoral rating by emphasizing the Russian threat. Right now, this does not get him too much traction, because only 20 percent of Ukrainians support NATO membership and 44 percent have sided with Russia in its war with Georgia.

The Ukrainian president, however, has decreed that the Russian Black Sea Fleet, anchored at Sevastopol, must notify Kiev of its movements in and out of Ukraine's waters and disclose its armaments, personnel, and precise mission. So far, Moscow has declined to comply, saying it will only be bound by bilateral agreements. But what if Kiev decides to enforce the presidential decree, stressing its sovereign rights? Will Moscow back off, or will it resist this attempt

to constrain its navy? Will the Ukrainians then try to use force to make the Russians behave? If shots are fired and a ship sinks, what will happen in the Sevastopol harbor, shared for now by the two navies? What will happen onshore, where Russian separatists are facing Ukrainian nationalists—and Crimean Tartars wait in the background? What orders would the U.S. Sixth Fleet receive? Would the Crimean crisis resemble the Cuban one? Would Medvedev, or Putin, back off as Khrushchev did in 1962? Or would that be impossible because of Russian public opinion or Crimea's proximity? That prospect reduces the recent Georgian war, its tragic losses notwithstanding, to sandbox play.

What Does Russia Want?

Seventeen years after the end of the Soviet Union, Russia's transformation is not complete. There are ups and downs, but fundamental changes are continuing—and though seen least where most Russia watchers focus, in the political system, even there, Russian authoritarianism thrives with the consent of the governed. The changes are most evident in the economy, including agriculture; in social life; and in the gradual recovery of urban centers outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg. This is not to claim that Russia today is anything but moderately authoritarian, that power and property do not go hand in hand, or that Russia's foreign policy does not challenge America's world dominance. The bitter irony is that Russia is becoming increasingly Westernized, even as it has ceased to be pro-Western.

There is nothing predetermined about Russia's changes and direction. The relevant divide is not between the country's few pro-Western liberals and its immobile autocratic establishment but between modernizing and traditionalist groups, both within and outside the establishment. Both groups want Russia to be powerful, but they disagree on the methods. Sometimes these groups conflict; more often, they compromise; occasionally, they do both. Putin, for example, moves back and forth between the two groups. Conflicts with neighbors, confrontation with the United States, and isolation from the West favor the traditionalists. But growing trade and investment, economic diversification and development, and the need to promote innovation and build institutions require the modernizers. It is striking that the war in the Caucasus was immediately followed by a plunge of the Russian stock exchange index, which soon suffered even more as part of the global fallout from the crisis on Wall Street. The message to Moscow is clear: War or peace, markets matter, and global interdependence is for real.

Those in Russia who want to replace the modernization agenda with mobilization will need to consider repeating the Soviet Union's trajectory, but at a faster pace and not necessarily with a soft landing. Paradoxically, those who want to compete with America need to realize that only a modernized, Westernized nation can hope to succeed, and that unlike in Tsarist and Soviet times, modernizing the military, administrative, or even industrial structures will not suffice. Successful innovation requires individual freedom and genuine openness to the world. Those who want a bigger share for Russia in the international system will surely notice that neither shrill anti-Americanism nor crude national egoism will go a long way. If Russia wants to be among the agents shaping the future, it will need to develop its own powers of attraction and formulate a compelling message larger than its national interest.

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What Has the United States Done Wrong?

When Putin was asked recently why Russia had failed to build strong relations with the West, he quipped, "Why has the West not succeeded in building relations with Russia?" He has at least half a point. Successive U.S. administrations have forfeited the chance, first, after communism's collapse, to integrate Russia into the West; then, in the wake of 9/11, to forge an alliance

to deal with the new dangers around the world; and ultimately, to treat Russia as a fellow great power, a partner in global governance. Instead, Russia has been successively treated as a limbless trunk of the defeated Soviet empire; a weakling and an international beggar; a petro-state not deserving its windfall profits; and a regional bully, first on probation, and then at large.

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Incredibly, the outgoing Bush administration, with its many former Soviet experts, has largely ignored Russia. The Bush–Putin personal connection has served as an excuse for the lack of focus on Russia. In the absence of a Russia strategy, Russia became merely an aspect of important American policies—such as the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the war on terror, and democracy promotion—that contradicted one another when presented in Moscow. In the absence of a consolidated policy approach, Russia has also become a soft target for several U.S. vested interests. Russia is hardly unique. Rather, it is an illustration of a more general attitude, and of the resulting inability of the U.S. leadership, Republican and Democrat alike, to rise to the occasion of America's unprecedented global moment.

In Russia's case, the salient feature of the American approach has been the view that a government is legitimate only if it is a democracy. Though this maxim does not really apply to America's key allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, or to its important commercial partners, such as China, others are fair game. Because Russia has rejected the role of junior partner to the United States and has relatively weak trade links to America, it cannot expect leniency from Washington. It has also had to bear the disappointment of those in America who had hoped that it would soon complete its transition by developing a democratic polity and a market economy and by charting a pro-Western foreign policy.

The practical effect of this de facto regime delegitimation has been the rejection of a range of Russian interests. Thus, Moscow's opposition to NATO enlargement was seen as atavistic; without the Soviet threat, NATO could not be construed as an enemy of Russia, and Moscow's wailings against NATO accepting new members (but not Russia) were interpreted as phantom pains of the long-severed imperial possessions. The Russian protests against treating the Serbs as the principal culprits of the Balkan wars were dismissed as arising out of kinship among Orthodox Slavs. And Moscow's helpless anger over the 1999 NATO seventy-eight-day air war against Serbia over Kosovo was called pathetic. Russia was shown that it was unable to block a United States–led military action, either in the Balkans or in Iraq, by using its veto right at the UN Security Council; the council, and the UN, would not be allowed to stand in the way of "just wars."

Even before 9/11, in a goodwill gesture, Putin ordered the dismantlement of the Russian intelligence-gathering facility in Cuba and of a naval facility in Vietnam. The United States treated this as a late recognition by the Kremlin of post-Soviet realities that did not merit reciprocity. Russia's help in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 was praised as useful but not decisive, and Moscow's acquiescence to the U.S. military presence at former Soviet airfields in Central Asia was seen as its only available option. The common front against terrorism forged in the fall of 2001 did not prevent Washington from then serving notice on Moscow within weeks about the imminent U.S. withdrawal from the Anti–Ballistic Missile Treaty. The only payoff to Russia was the toning down of U.S. official rhetoric against Moscow's own antiterrorist campaign in Chechnya.

Amid America's Iraq-inspired quest for democracy promotion, color revolutions in the former Soviet republics of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan were hailed not only as the triumph of the ordinary people over corrupt bureaucracies but also as fresh advances in decolonization. Ukraine, it was claimed, was finally independent now that a Western-oriented Orange coalition had replaced its Russian-speaking eastern elite.

For the Russians, however, the issue was not democracy—they did not think much of Georgia's, and soon discovered the opportunities offered by Ukraine's new pluralism—but U.S. geopolitical advances, evinced by American troops' presence and, more seriously, NATO membership.

From a seemingly timid beginning—Germany's 1990 reunification within NATO—the process of NATO enlargement has intensified to involve all the former Warsaw Pact countries, the three Baltic states, and half the states of the former Yugoslavia. Moscow has seen this as the "NATO-ization of European security," which has marginalized its own role, despite the signing in 1997 of the Russia-NATO Founding Act and the creation in 2002 of the NATO-Russia Council. NATO's decisions—such as waging military campaigns in Europe, new U.S. military deployments on the continent, and the admission of new members—were expressly protected against a "Russian veto." NATO members refused to establish formal links to the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, so as not to legitimize Moscow's regional role in Central Asia, and they balked at antidrug cooperation with Russia, for fear of undermining the Afghan economy and thus eroding the support for the Hamid Karzai government. In reality, the NATO–Russia partnership was reduced to technical cooperation.

For Moscow, NATO's expansion has three problematic levels. The first is the West's bad faith; Mikhail Gorbachev had been promised no further enlargement after Germany's reunification. The second level is the West's arrogance; both Yeltsin and Putin were rebuffed when they personally sought membership for Russia. Third, the new and especially prospective member states are seen by Moscow as Washington's pawns, ready to become platforms for the Pentagon. As the Russian leadership and military see such platforms proliferating in their vicinity—even as their own offers to construct a joint security system with the United States and its allies, such as theater missile defense in Europe, are finding no takers—they are drawing bleak conclusions.

Certainly, in the last decade, Russia has been admitted to the group of leading industrial nations; the United States and European Union have recognized its economy as market based; a "strategic" partnership has been proclaimed; its inclusion in summit meetings has become routine; and most important, people, ideas, and capital have moved across its borders. Today's situation does not in the least resemble 1948; if a parallel to the past could be drawn, it would be with 1908. In a world where countries are growing ever more interdependent, international rivalries are not governed by one code of conduct recognized by all the key players. Moscow's impetuous rebellion against the "unipolar world order" is symptomatic—even if other nations, like China, have much more patience. Thus the analogy to the post–World War II world is wrong; the era before World War I is more pertinent. A totally unnecessary conflict may be in the offing before most people recognize it.

What Can Be Done?

As the United States rebuilds its foreign policy, Russia merits sustained, comprehensive attention. Thus, Washington needs to think strategically about Moscow, not ideologically or theologically. This is no concession to Russia. A democratic tsar will not suddenly show up in the Kremlin. A pro–United States foreign policy cannot be expected from Moscow, where America's moral standing has plunged. And hoping that some disaster will throw the Russian people back into misery, toppling the current Russian regime and opening the way for a democratic revolution, is morally flawed and naive.

U.S. policy makers also need to recognize that the Russian political system is no threat to the United States and its allies—or to Russia's neighbors. Saakashvili was treated harshly not because Georgia had been moving toward democracy but because he decided to take the Russian-protected enclaves by force and attacked Russian soldiers. Moscow's problem with Kiev is NATO, not free elections or EU integration prospects. Russia has good relations with Germany and bad ones with Estonia, both of which are EU and NATO members, largely because Estonia discriminates against local ethnic Russians and glorifies local Nazi supporters who fought against the Soviets during World War II.

Russia's domestic politics are best left to the Russians themselves, especially because there is no other option. Capitalism will keep changing Russia, whose transformation will take generations, not decades. Russia's political system will also evolve. Americans need to be aware, however, that a more democratic Russia will not mean a more pliable Russia. If anything, a more advanced Russian polity, presiding over a more modern economy, will probably mean a more equal and demanding partner and a more effective competitor. The idea that the world's democracies are naturally junior allies of the United States was born of post–World War II exigencies and has little place in the world today, where strongly sovereign nations with broad national interests, such as Russia and China, are modernizing.

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Washington need not pursue relations with Russia's neighbors as if Russia did not exist. If that were the case, the United States would inevitably reach the point of choosing to go to war with Russia over such places as Sevastopol, or abandoning its clients and beating a humiliating retreat. The Bush administration has just demonstrated a mild version of this scenario with regard to Georgia. The next U.S. administration will need to recognize that NATO's expansion has reached safe limits, and that any move in the direction of Ukraine and Georgia is fraught with real danger.

The danger is not Russia's allegedly pathological expansionism, and a compromise solution is not Munich-like appeasement. In Ukraine's case, NATO membership touches the raw nerve of national identity. Whereas about 20 percent of the population see Russia as a historical oppressor, more than half see it as part of the extended family, which NATO would split. Unless there is unprovoked Russian aggression, these proportions are unlikely to change. Most Ukrainians want to be part of Europe, but they do not want to part, emotionally, with Russia—clearly favoring the long, arduous road toward the EU over the seemingly shorter route to NATO. This road is *the* way to keep Ukraine whole and free. A democratic alliance true to its principles would need to heed the popular will—and ensure that Yushchenko does not follow Saakashvili in provoking Russia's armed response.

In Georgia, of course, the situation is different. Most members of the elite and the population at large support NATO membership. But a Georgia in NATO still claiming ownership over Abkhazia and South Ossetia would turn those disputes into direct issues between NATO and Russia. There is hardly any doubt that, even before the recent war, almost the entire Abkhaz and Ossetian populations had rejected both Georgia and NATO. Under these circumstances, should NATO enter into an "all for one, one for all" compact with Tbilisi? A better way would be to engage in patient crisis management, rehabilitation, and eventual conflict resolution in the Caucasus, again with the European Union taking the lead.

The Georgia war has pushed forward the long-neglected European security agenda. It is no use repeating the old mantra that the end of the Cold War has made European security obsolete. Indeed, the instinct now is to reach for the Cold War toolbox: rearming Russia's nervous neighbors, deploying U.S. forces to Poland and possibly also Georgia and the Baltic states, giving a NATO membership action plan to Ukraine and Georgia, and terminating the NATO-Russia cooperation agreement and U.S.–Russian military exchanges. If such approaches became policy—and elements probably will—the result would be a Europe that is more tense but not more secure. To ensure security for the whole of Europe, there needs to be a different agenda.

This new agenda for European security would have three main items. The first would be resolution of the formerly frozen conflicts: in Kosovo (where not only the Serbs cannot rule the Albanians, but vice versa; the Serbian-populated Mitrovica enclave north of the Ibar River has stayed de facto outside Pristina's control);

Abkhazia (which cannot be expected to go back to Georgia, just as Kosovo will never again be ruled from Belgrade, but which does not need the Gali district with its overwhelming ethnic Georgian majority); South Ossetia (which once might have been evolving into a Russo–Georgian condominium but has become a true challenge to diplomats as a result of the August 2008 war); Moldova (where there is a chance now of a Russian-brokered unity agreement); and Nagorno Karabakh (which, if it explodes, will put the Caspian pipelines at risk).

The second item on the agenda would be conventional arms control: what to do about the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe after the West has refused to ratify its adapted version, which Russia did ratify (but it then withdrew from the original 1990 bloc-to-bloc version). The third item would be missile defense; will the United States revisit the Russian offer of Europe-wide theater missile defense or decide to proceed with deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic (and if the latter, will Russia be reassured by a permanent monitoring system)? (Strategic arms control is dealt with in another Carnegie Policy Brief, by Rose Gottemoeller.) And one could add a fourth item to the agenda: a trilateral exploratory dialogue on strategic arms issues among America, Russia, and China.

Beyond the European agenda, a strategic approach to U.S.–Russian relations needs to encompass the issues of the greater Middle East and terrorism. As supply routes to Afghanistan become riskier due to the developments in Pakistan, it is high time to revisit the northern route across Russia and Central Asia. On Iran and North Korea, the United States is of course free to apply unilateral military options, but a diplomatic solution would require cooperation with Russia as well as China. Indeed, it can be argued that Moscow's so-called foot-dragging on sanctions has kept the political option open with respect to Iran. But it would be Washington's choice to start treating Iran as a major regional player instead of a rogue state.

Finally, there is the issue of whether Russia can wield an energy "weapon." Nothing suggests that Russo–European energy dependence is anything other than mutual. If there has been an energy weapon, it was pre-2005 Gazprom selling its produce at a huge discount, with the Kremlin expecting beneficiary countries to pay the difference in kind. But since Ukraine has started to pay an internationally recognizable price for the gas it consumes, this leverage has evaporated. As they aptly say in Kiev, independence means no one is paying for you. What is needed is to stop pipeline wars and restart a high-level energy dialogue on the concerns of producer, consumer, and transit countries.

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Conclusion

The end of the Cold War has been widely—and wrongly—interpreted in the United States as a victory of the West resulting from President Ronald Reagan's arms buildup, Pope John Paul II's appeal, and the attrition sustained at the hands of the United States–backed Afghan resistance. These factors did matter, but ultimately Soviet Communism collapsed under its own weight, with its own citizens as its principal gravediggers. The idea that it may take two cold wars to solve the Russian problem, just as it took two world wars to solve the German one, may fit with America's experience, but it is misleading and dangerous—not least to the United States. A successful U.S. policy toward Russia must proceed from realities, not past myths or dreams for the future. This will require courage. But the recent developments in the Caucasus and beyond may constitute a moment of truth that could cleanse U.S. thinking on Russia and finally help produce a strategy worth the name. ■

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RESOURCES

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