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Russian Foreign Policy: Promise or Peril?

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I. Why our relationship with Russia is important?

- Our relationship with Russia constitutes one of our most important and challenging bilateral relations. The Clinton Administration has defined it as a "strategic partnership."
- We have a vital stake in seeing Russia become democratic, prosperous or at least reasonably stable. Instability in Russia can trigger a wave of chaos and conflict in neighboring countries.
- Russia is in possession of weapons of mass destruction. One of our key interests is to avoid/deter conflict/anarchy in a nation with thousands of nuclear warheads.

II. How does Russia view the West?

- Russians have dramatized what they perceive as a gap between a prosperous, confident United States and an impoverished Russia gripped by political paralysis and chafing under American heavy-handedness.
- Even a casual perusal of the Russian media evidences a profoundly disturbing phenomenon: Russian commentators, of whatever stripe, are hostile to American goals and policies. They routinely grouse about the unipolar nature of the existing international system and cite the evils of American hegemonism.
- What is profoundly disturbing and highly troubling in the long run is that many Russians appear to have lost the sense that it is communism and its legacy that are to be blamed for Moscow's current predicament. Rather, most Russians seem to equate reform and democracy with failure and misery.

III. The Evolving Context for Russian Foreign Policy

- In contrast to the Soviet period where Moscow's international endeavors were largely immune from domestic opinion, Russia's developing democracy has provided a context for domestic conditions to influence Russian foreign policy.

- Given Moscow's virtual economic and political collapse, foreign-policy related disputes have come to be viewed quite differently. Russia's economic problems have bred feelings of resentment and suspicion that the United States has deliberately undermined the Russian economy.
- The Russian political system has demonstrated considerable democratic resilience. Russians appear to have developed a real taste for the most basic rudiment of democracy: free, albeit by no means fair, elections.
- Another relevant feature of the Russian political landscape is the dearth of capable leaders at the national level and the absence of democratic mechanisms by which competent local and regional politicians can move up to the national scene.
- Overall institutional arrangements for dealing with foreign policy are flawed. The current situation is confusing and uncertain.
- Other important factors influencing Russian foreign policy are the opinions of the elite, a small segment of whom are preoccupied with international politics, and the vast majority of Russians who do not appear to have a strong interest in the world. Of all foreign policy-related issues, developments in the near abroad and the treatment of Russian minorities command the most attention.

IV. Key Russian Foreign Policy Issues

- One of Russia's foreign policy priorities is to retain its current diplomatic, military and economic influence in the near abroad.
- Moscow is also keenly interested in protecting the remaining vestiges of its "superpower" status, by emphasizing such issues as the need to maintain the current offense dominant nuclear environment and its role as one of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council.
- Russia's foreign policy is also concerned with bolstering its relations with key European countries, so as to position itself to exploit real or perceived fissures between Europe and the United States.
- Moscow is pursuing its own brand of triangular diplomacy with China, strongly reminiscent of America's "cold war" policy toward China.
- Another one of Russia's key foreign policy goals is to reshape the existing international environment, so as to weaken America's current geopolitical influence and transform the global system into a more multi-polar one.

V. The Putin Factor

- While Russia's key foreign policy priorities remain unchanged, Putin is certain to imbue Moscow's foreign policy with new vigor.
- Putin is also likely to feel that he needs to project a tough image and demonstrate some concrete foreign policy successes during the early phase of his presidency.
- He can be expected to be more deliberate and less impulsive, in his handling of key foreign policy decisions.