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RESET EXPECTATIONS RUSSIAN ASSESSMENTS OF U.S. POWER

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Russian perceptions of the United States and its role in the world provide a powerful lens not only for framing how Russia conceives its foreign and security policies—far more broadly than U.S.-Russia bilateral relations—but also for understanding deeply rooted notions of contemporary Russian identity and even its domestic political system. For most of the second half of the twentieth century the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a competitive struggle for global power and hegemony, and each country viewed its adversary as the principal “other” around which much of each country’s identity and foreign policy revolved. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a searing event for citizens of Russia as well as the other newly sovereign states of the region, yet for most policymakers and elites in Moscow old habits of measuring success or failure through a U.S.-centric prism have endured. Now, nearly 20 years past the Soviet collapse, perceptions of the United States probably remain more significant for Russia than for any other country in this study.

As in other countries in this study, the dominant paradigm for Russian government officials and political elite is realism with probably a higher relative weight for the value of economic and military indices of power and lower relative weight for factors of soft power. In the traditional Russian calculus (czarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet), it is not the power of attraction that dominates; instead, it is the power of coercion, typically through intimidation or buying support—a very hard-edged realism. When Westerners emphasize values such as human rights and democracy, the default Russian reaction is deep skepticism that their interlocutors, especially the Americans, are being disingenuous. U.S. promotion of democracy, liberal capitalism, a rules-based system of global governance, and the like is interpreted as a collection of ideological fig leaves designed to conceal the naked U.S. ambition to expand its own power and influence abroad.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union nearly 20 years ago, there has been a quite dynamic evolution in Moscow toward the role of U.S. power in the world. For a brief period that definitively concluded with the defeat of Russian liberal reformist parties in the December 1993 parliamentary elections, the United States was regarded as a model for Russian development, and key Russian government officials had high hopes for a “new world order” that would be comanaged by Washington and Moscow, with Russia even playing the role of junior partner. The defeat of the liberal reformers, caused principally by the economic crisis in the early 1990s, shifted Russian foreign policy to more traditional realist concepts of asserting national interests and expanding power and influence. Increasingly the U.S. liberal democratic model was viewed as, if not inappropriate for Russia, then at least needing to be introduced far more gradually with Russian traditions and values.



From 1993 to 2003, Russian foreign policy was dominated by great-power realists who were joined by many liberals disappointed with reform and the West. The leading figure in the Russian realist camp was Yevgeny M. Primakov, who served as foreign minister in the mid-to-late 1990s and briefly as prime minister after the August 1998 financial crisis. Primakov, both as a statesman and as a straightforward realist in the world of international affairs, is most likened to Henry Kissinger in the United States. His signature moment came in March 1999 when on a flight to Washington he learned of the U.S. launching of war against Serbia; he demanded that his plane not land in the United States but turn back to Moscow. Primakov is pragmatic and nonideological, but his most significant time in Russian politics came in the late 1990s when Russia's power was at its weakest and U.S. unipolar dominance, arguably, at its peak. Like many other nations in the world, Russia sought means to balance or, more correctly, contain U.S. unipolar hegemony. The United States was not viewed as malign, but as often misguided and overbearing. This perspective on the United States endured almost through the first term of Vladimir Putin's presidency.

For the purposes of this exercise, it is especially important to keep in mind the foreign policy conducted by Vladimir V. Putin during his first term as Russia's president because it sheds light on the current U.S.-Russian rapprochement and its potential path in the future. Putin is conventionally characterized as deeply opposed to U.S. interests. For some, their analysis is based on his authoritarian centralization of power; in other words, dictatorial rulers are inherently anti-American. For others, their analysis is based more on the rift in U.S.-Russian relations that was growing during Putin's second presidential term. In my view however, this characterization is flawed.

It is conveniently forgotten that in 2001–2002 Putin pursued his own version of a “reset” in U.S.-Russia relations, and his foreign policy orientation was at least as amenable to U.S. interests

as that of Dmitri A. Medvedev's presidency today. Russia's circumstances changed, but at least as important, Moscow's disappointment with the policies of the George W. Bush administration led to Putin's increasing willingness to oppose Washington on a number of issues. Russian public opinion grew more negative on the role of the United States, but this was fairly consistent with the rest of the world, including our NATO allies.

The period from 2003 to 2008 marked another shift in Russian foreign policy and Moscow's perception of U.S. power capacity and intentions. Russia's confidence about its own reemergence strengthened as economic growth accelerated. The watershed moment came in 2006 when Moscow paid off its Paris Club debt early, and this sense of financial sovereignty equated with a renewed emphasis on political sovereignty. Differences beginning in 2003 over the Yukos affair and especially over the series of "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan gave more sustenance to the argument that the United States sought to weaken Russia and thwart Moscow's interests in a comprehensive manner. Russian foreign policy remained embedded in a realist and pragmatic framework for the most part; the most significant change was the perception that Russian power was growing while the U.S. "unipolar moment" was receding into history. Putin's position moved from being a centrist power balancer with Western inclinations to being more steeped in efforts to appeal to Russian nationalism and more opposed to U.S. policy, especially in post-Soviet space.

This phase concluded in the second half of 2008 with the near concurrence of the Georgia War and the global financial crisis. Although the Georgia War was a shock, the global economic crisis has had a far more deep impact on Russian leadership and elite perceptions on Russian interests in the ongoing changing balance of power in the world. In short, Russian elites are more unsure about the capacity and durability of U.S. power but also less confident that the shifting global balance of power in which China appears to be the principal beneficiary redounds to Moscow's favor and thus how to respond to it. The almost knee-jerk inclination of the Russian leadership to identify the United States as the primary global threat to Russian interests on issues such as NATO expansion and missile defense has eroded. The policies of the Barack Obama administration have also helped to convince the Russian leadership that the United States does not seek to weaken Russia and that the role of U.S. power in the world is not counter to Russian interests.

Russia's Relative Strategic Decline

The demise of the Soviet Union in the wake of the loss of the Cold War against the United States and its allies in the second half of the twentieth century would appear to mark the most decisive setback for the control of Russian power over territory in modern history. Explaining why gets to the crux of the challenges of Moscow's current strategic environment. For the first time in its history since its emergence from the dark forests of Muscovy, Russia finds itself surrounded by states and political groupings that are economically, demographically, and politically more dynamic than itself.¹

The most obvious case is the rapid growth of China to the east. The juxtaposition of China's rise and Russia's fall over the past 30 years is the starkest in a short period during peacetime for any two neighboring great powers in modern history. To Russia's south, India has sprinted by

1. For an excellent articulation of this phenomenon, see Thomas Graham, "The Sources of Russian Insecurity," *Survival* 52, no. 1 (February–March 2010): pp. 55–74.

Russia in order to try to keep pace with its main peer competitor, China. While the Muslim world remains deeply cleaved, the power of political Islam is also exposing the vulnerabilities of Russia. The now more than half-century process of European economic and political union, a process that through ebbs and flows has moved inexorably forward, has proved itself a far more attractive magnet for influence in Russia's neighbors.

The bad news is that Russia has been in *relative* strategic decline for nearly three decades. The good news is that, unlike during the Soviet period, none of the great powers against which Moscow's power has declined relatively finds promotion of Russian weakness, let alone disintegration, remotely in its interests.

The United States in the Evolving Putin Narrative

During the years of the Putin era, from 2000 to present, Moscow's narrative of its own domestic experience since the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the emergence of a unipolar world dominated by the United States has been increasingly at odds with Washington's perspective over these events.² For Moscow the 1990s were spun as a modern-day Time of Troubles when state authority collapsed and foreigners exercised too much influence over Russian affairs to the detriment of the Russian state and people. Putin's goal was to restore the authority of the state and ultimately Russia's rightful place as a great power in the world. Political elites in Moscow were also deeply disappointed with the perception that the Bush administration failed to take Russian interests into account after Putin's decision in late September 2001 to fully support U.S.-led international coalition efforts to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan. The U.S.-Russia cooperation in Afghanistan in 2001 sparked once again discussions about a much broader and deeper security relationship between Moscow and Washington to an extent not heard since the collapse of the Soviet Union a decade before. Ironically, perhaps the international coalition succeeded too quickly in unseating the Taliban to allow for a more institutionalized security relationship to develop. Bush administration decisions later in the fall of 2001 to go through with the second round of NATO enlargement, including the Baltic States, as well as to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty symbolized for the Kremlin that, despite Russian cooperation on key security challenges, the United States would continue on a policy path in other areas Moscow long held to be against Russian interests.

While the U.S.-Russian relationship remained cordial and President George W. Bush had a successful trip to Russia in May 2002 during which the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) was signed, a bitter seed of unreciprocated concessions to the interests of Washington had been planted in the mind of Vladimir Putin and his colleagues. As the bilateral relationship began to deteriorate after the Iraq War, this bitterness on Moscow's part congealed into a lengthy list of grievances against the Bush administration that was repeatedly articulated by Kremlin officials and insiders to their U.S. counterparts for the next several years. The expression of deep frustration with the "arrogant unilateralism" of the United States became the dominant pathos from Moscow, especially during the second term of the Bush administration. At this time, especially with the renewed accent on democracy promotion as the fulcrum of U.S. foreign policy, Russian frustra-

2. See: Clifford Gaddy and Andrew C. Kuchins, "Putin's Plan," *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2008): pp. 117–129.

tion with Washington morphed into a deeper suspicion that the Bush administration was seeking actively to weaken Russia's position in the world.

"Regime transformers" in Washington experienced a euphoric burst of enthusiasm with the series of color revolutions in Eurasia in 2003–2005, the apparent weaknesses of the Putin government in the face of the tragic series of terrorist attacks culminating in the grisly horror of Beslan in September 2004, and then the tens of thousands of Russians demonstrating in big cities across the country in opposition to proposed welfare reform. This period marked the high point of Bush administration confidence as U.S. military power appeared triumphant in Afghanistan and Iraq and a new wave of democratization was apparently sweeping around the globe. There was a growing sense in Washington that the weakness of Putin's authoritarian rollback had been exposed and that certainly his government was on the wrong side of history.

The moment of optimism regarding regime transformation in Russia and the region proved effervescent as the momentum of color revolutions was derailed in Uzbekistan in May 2005 with President Islam Karimov's brutal suppression of the uprising in Andijan, a suppression that was quickly supported by Moscow and Beijing. By the spring of 2006, optimism about Putin's imminent demise was replaced by growing concern about Russia's oil-fueled economic resurgence.³ Putin's speech in February 2007 at the Munich Security Conference conveyed the notion that the United States, in its quest for unipolar global domination, had overextended itself geopolitically and the global balance of power was shifting in favor of Russia and other large emerging-market economies at the expense of the West.

Probably the most fundamental difference in the narratives of post–Cold War history boils down to this sense of the shift in balance of power, the international system becoming truly multipolar, and U.S. relative power being on the decline while Russia rises. To mix metaphors, the U.S. ship of state was slowly sinking while the Russian phoenix was rising from the ashes. For Moscow this disjuncture in perceptions probably was widest shortly after Dmitri Medvedev was inaugurated as president in May 2008, when the oil price hit its peak in July, and the financial crisis remained mostly confined to the United States. Although Washington acknowledged that Russia was resurgent, conventional wisdom held that Russia's longer-term prospects still looked relatively bleak as economic growth remained too dependent on commodities prices, demographic and health trends were extremely adverse, and the country's infrastructure was still decaying.⁴

Russian Views of the U.S. Role in the Global Order

President Vladimir Putin's infamous February 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference essentially made two points: (1) that the United States was behaving in an "egoistic" rather than a responsible manner in managing global affairs, and (2) an international system of global U.S. hegemony was evaporating and being replaced by genuine multipolarity. Most commentary focused on the first point and missed the import of the second, which Putin concisely summarized:

3. For one of the first such assessments in the mainstream press, see Andrew C. Kuchins, "Look Who's Back," *Wall Street Journal Europe*, May 9, 2006.

4. As vice president in July 2009 in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Joe Biden caused quite a stir when he made similar comments about Russia's vulnerabilities and challenges and then suggested this would lead Moscow to more readily support U.S. foreign policy initiatives. See Peter Spiegel, "Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to U.S.," *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124848246032580581.html>.

- The combined GDP measured in purchasing power parity of countries such as India and China is already greater than the GDP of the United States.
- A similar calculation of the GDPs of Brazil, Russia, India, and China (the BRIC countries) surpasses the total GDPs of the EU countries; and, according to experts, this gap will only increase in the future.
- There is no reason to doubt that the economic potential of the new centers of global economic growth will inevitably be converted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity.

Putin and his colleagues elaborated on this theme in a number of important speeches in 2007. The call for a “new international architecture” of global governance also became one of the campaign themes of the Russian parliamentary-presidential electoral cycle.⁵ Moscow essentially views many of the changes that have occurred since the late 1980s as illegitimate because Russia was too weak to assert its positions. In this narrative, the West, and mainly the United States, took undue advantage of Russian weakness through NATO expansion, Kosovo, promoting regime change (the color revolutions) on Russia’s borders, abandoning the ABM Treaty, and other policies.⁶

The Russian elite clearly view these Western moves in the 1990s as detrimental to Russia’s national interests. It is understandable to some extent that Russians are reveling in their resurgence, but too often this is manifested as “the Russia that can say no” rather than Russia cooperating to build a better world. The sometimes obstinate and sometimes cocky Russia was reflected in Putin’s personality as well as Russia’s rocket-like recovery during his presidency. Russian *schadenfreude* was also notable as Moscow watched the trials and travails of the United States in Iraq and in the global financial system, sparked by the subprime crisis.

The tensions between Russia and the West, and especially Moscow and Washington, became tragically evident during the August 2008 war in Georgia. The prevailing narratives in the United States and Russia regarding the original provocation for the war were almost diametrically opposed. Putin, with very flimsy evidence, even accused Washington of orchestrating the conflict, while President Bush castigated Russia for violating Georgia’s territorial integrity, behavior that is impermissible in the twenty-first century. Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov gave the Russian view in a speech in Moscow on September 1:

Should the United States and its allies choose to back the regime of Saakashvili who has learned nothing at all, it will be a mistake of historic magnitude. . . . America’s military aid to Saakashvili’s regime never became a leverage with his government. On the contrary, it encouraged this irresponsible and unpredictable regime to proceed along the road of escapades.

For the analytical task at hand, it is not the proximate causes or immediate consequences of this war but, rather, the implications for Russia’s future role in the evolving international system that are of interest. As Russian elites themselves discuss this issue, it should be noted how little they talk in terms of “public goods” and “norms.” Russians describe their foreign policy as ultimately pragmatic and interest driven. U.S. and European references to values and norms are received at best cynically but often with defensive hostility about U.S. and European “double standards.” The default interpretation in Russia of U.S. efforts to promote its values is to view them as hypocritical justifications for the promotion of U.S. interests—and, ultimately, influence and hegemony.

5. For more on this point, see Gaddy and Kuchins, “Putin’s Plan,” pp. 117–129.

6. *Ibid.*

Rather than norms and public goods, Russian leaders and political analysts frame Russia's terms of international cooperation as realpolitik bargains and trade-offs of interests.⁷ For example, if Washington wants Russia to take a stronger position to isolate Iran, then the United States is expected to compensate Moscow by halting NATO enlargement or deployment of missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. One of the most oft-repeated grievances is the U.S. betrayal of the gentleman's agreement supposedly struck between George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 to allow the unification of Germany as long as NATO would not expand and deploy new bases on the territory of former Warsaw Pact countries.⁸

Russian Perceptions of the United States during the Obama Administration

For several years until the autumn of 2008, the mainstream Russian view, as epitomized by Vladimir Putin, saw the United States in decline as economic troubles mounted and setbacks in Afghanistan and Iraq sapped U.S. power. Russia was on the rise, along with large emerging markets in line with the Goldman Sachs BRIC thesis,⁹ and a truly multipolar world was emerging. Despite the perception of U.S. decline, the Putin leadership still saw it useful for domestic political reasons to paint the United States as its main adversary seeking to weaken Russia. The Kremlin increasingly controlled the dissemination of this view through mass media, especially national TV networks, and it found a receptive audience in the Russian hinterland for this view. Indeed, this mainstream Russian view of the United States was not very different from how most countries in the world viewed the United States, including European allies of the United States.¹⁰

The dramatic impact of the global economic crisis on Russia in the fall of 2008 struck a blow to this narrative as the vulnerability of the Russian economic growth miracle of the past decade was exposed. The Russian economy was the hardest hit of all members of the Group of 20.¹¹ As the crisis was at its worst in late January 2009, the Obama administration took office. Very quickly the administration made its desire to improve relations with Russia public through Vice President Joseph Biden's speech at the 2009 Munich Security Conference where for the first time this policy goal was described as an effort to reset relations with Russia. As Bill Clinton had done with Boris

7. Interestingly, President Medvedev, in a major speech he gave in Berlin in June 2008, spoke out against consideration of such trade-offs as detrimental to Russia's interest; see "Speech to Political, Parliamentary, and Social Representatives [in Russian]," June 5, 2008, www.kremlin.ru/appears/2008/06/05/1923_type63374type63376type63377_202133.shtml. In reality, such trade-offs on major issues seem fairly rare in international relations. And in the case of perhaps the most significant such example during the Cold War, the U.S. withdrawal of nuclear forces in Turkey to resolve the Cuban missile crisis, we did not learn of this until decades afterward.

8. The incident shows the problem with such unwritten exchanges, since U.S. officials contest the Russian interpretation of this period.

9. Goldman Sachs has predicted that the BRIC countries are on a path to dominate the global economy by 2050.

10. See Anders Åslund and Andrew Kuchins, *The Russia Balance Sheet* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics and Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009), for a chapter on Russian public opinion survey research.

11. For a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the global economic crisis on Russia, see Anders Åslund, Sergei Guriev, and Andrew C. Kuchins, eds., *Russia after the Global Economic Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics and Center for Strategic and International Studies; Moscow: New Economic School, 2010).

Yeltsin and George W. Bush with Vladimir Putin, President Obama struck a strong personal bond with the new Russian president, Dmitri Medvedev. Russian elites were naturally skeptical of the Obama administration's intentions, and the dominant view was that it was the United States that needed to reset its policies on NATO enlargement, missile defense plans for Europe, and other issues in order to reverse the decline in the bilateral relationship.¹² Kremlin-connected analysts and government spokespersons continually expressed the view that the United States needed Russian cooperation far more than Russia needed support from Washington.

Despite the skepticism, the bilateral relationship between Washington and Moscow has steadily improved since the Obama administration took office. Reaching agreement on the new START treaty was the watershed moment in April 2010, but cooperation over the transit of goods to supply U.S. forces in Afghanistan and eventual agreement on a new round of sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program have also been significant markers of improved ties. Russian public opinion views of the United States have become much more positive, and negative images of the United States and its policies are presented in the Russian mass media with considerably less frequency.¹³ The implications of the relative decline of U.S. power in the world are viewed with more discernment, and there is more open discussion of the pros and cons of China's rise. There is also more open acknowledgement about the importance of the West as a partner in Russia's efforts to modernize its economy. In sum, a number of signs point to more realistic and more contentious views of the United States, its role in the world, and its implications for Russian interests.

The spring of 2010 marked a dramatic acceleration of the reset of not only U.S.-Russia relations but Russia's ties with Europe as well. The first watershed was the signing of the new START treaty in Prague on April 9, but this was accompanied by an increasing tide of data points that reduced the skepticism about the prospects for the Obama administration's efforts to improve ties with Moscow. These events include the Russian-Polish rapprochement over the World War II Katyn Forest massacre, the Russian-Norwegian border agreement over the Barents Sea, cooperation between Moscow and Washington over dealing with the public disturbances in Kyrgyzstan beginning in April, and others. The June United Nations Security Council resolution over a new and tougher round of sanctions on Iran marked another major step forward, and the positive Russian vote starkly contrasted with the negative vote on sanctions by NATO ally Turkey. Russia deepened its cooperation with the United States and its allies in Afghanistan, and the NATO summit in Lisbon included a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council that led to a number of new agreements with the alliance, including the effort to explore cooperation on missile defense. From Moscow's standpoint the year ended on a very positive note, with the U.S. Senate ratification of the new START treaty as well as the passage of the U.S.-Russia 123 Agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation.

This marked acceleration in the U.S.-Russian rapprochement in the second half of 2010 was a pleasant surprise and deserves serious consideration for explanation.¹⁴ My conclusion is twofold.

12. Sergei Lavrov, foreign minister of Russia (speech, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2009); when asked which policies Russia should revise to improve bilateral relations, Lavrov essentially responded "none."

13. "Russians Increasingly Positive about Relations with US – Poll," Interfax International Information Group, last modified July 8, 2010, <http://engforum.pravda.ru/showthread.php?289508-Russians-increasingly-positive-about-relations-with-US-poll&daysprune=-1>.

14. The author traveled to Russia three times in the latter part of 2010 and engaged in many discussions on this question with Russian analysts, government officials, foreign government officials, businessmen, and

One, as noted above, is that the global economic crisis had a deeply sobering impact on Russian elites and political leaders, which led to renewed efforts to integrate with the West to promote the modernization of Russia. The Russians were deeply skeptical of and opposed to the Obama administration's initial efforts to promote the so-called G-2 notion of joint U.S.-China cooperation as a pillar of global governance. But they are also very concerned about the rapid growth of China and its growing influence in Russia, especially in the Far East as well as in Central Asia, the Caspian, and even Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova—Russia's "zone of privileged interests."

The second key factor is not so much the Russian perception of U.S. power, but rather the perception of U.S. policies and intentions as they pertain to Russia. The most telling and likely the most important change regards U.S. policies toward Russia's near neighbors. The Bush administration's concerted efforts to admit Ukraine and Georgia into NATO were deeply unsettling. The perception of Washington's role in promoting the color revolutions of 2003–2005, and especially the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, struck a very deep wound in Vladimir Putin's capacity to trust his counterpart in the White House. The Bush administration's announcement in January 2007 about missile defense deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic hit right on Moscow's deepest insecurities about encroachment in its backyard, broken promises of NATO, and the erosion of Russia's nuclear deterrent. The perception of virtually unconstrained support for Mikhail Saakashvili's Georgia before and just after the August five-day war in 2008 provoked the deepest suspicions in Moscow of U.S. policy and intentions to undermine Russian interests.

Moscow was initially skeptical about Barack Obama's intentions and capacity to alter some of these Bush administration policies in Russia's neighborhood, but that skepticism has been melting. The question of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine is virtually off the table for the time being. The Obama administration did reverse the Bush administration's plans for ballistic missile defense in Europe. Most important from Moscow's perspective is that not only has the momentum for the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space completely reversed, but the Ukrainian and Kyrgyz presidential elections in 2010 contrasted dramatically with their predecessor elections in 2004–2005. In Ukraine, the Western-supported candidate, Yulia V. Tymoshenko, lost—as one would probably expect for a sitting prime minister in the midst of a deep economic recession—and the Russia-preferred candidate, Viktor F. Yanukovich, won. Then, three months later, Presidents Obama and Medvedev cooperated to alleviate deeper fallout from the unrest in Kyrgyzstan. All of these events and policies together have mitigated the Russian belief that the United States cannot be trusted and seeks to weaken the global position of the Russian Federation.

Conclusion

Like the U.S.-Russia relationship, Russian elite perceptions of U.S. power and role in the world have experienced great volatility in the past 20 years. How durable is the current Russian perception that not only is the United States less threatening but is pursuing policies far more accommodating to Russian interests? And because we are entering a new Russian (and American) presidential cycle in the coming year, to what extent does possible de facto leadership change in Moscow matter? There is no definitive answer to this question, but from reviewing the last ten years or so

diplomats. The trip in June was primarily to participate in the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, the September trip to participate in the Valdai Discussion Club, and the final trip in November for workshops and meetings related to the George Washington University project on emerging world powers. The following is a synthesis of these meetings and discussions.

since Vladimir Putin first became the Russian president, my conclusion is that U.S. policies will be a far more important factor in effecting Russian leader and elite views of the United States than who the next Russian president is. The Russian perspective on U.S. power and role in the world did not change during the last two years because Dmitri Medvedev replaced Vladimir Putin as president of Russia. The Russian perspective changed because of the impact of the global economic crisis and changes in Obama administration policies of greatest interest to Moscow.

Russian elites are unsure about the durability of U.S. power capacity, but they have seen the United States renew itself in the wake of global foreign and economic setbacks in, for example, the 1980s. Russians are as aware as anybody of the current fiscal challenges of the United States and the questions about whether the U.S. political system will be capable of managing to resolve them. They are also watching closely the political commitment of the United States to stabilize Afghanistan. If the United States manages progress on these domestic and foreign policy fronts and, more important, continues to pursue a pragmatic set of policies that accommodate some of Russia's core interests, then the current trend toward a more positive assessment of U.S. power and growing cooperation on a wide variety of issues will continue. In other words, we are the critical independent variable.