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A Less Ideological America

As the United States gets closer to electing its 44th president, there is a keen sense of interest in Russia in the outcome of a most thrilling race for the White House, but also a palpable feeling of detachment about the possible implications for Russian-U.S. relations. There is a consensus that, after eight years of George W. Bush, America will enter a period of major foreign policy adjustment, but Russia will not be at the heart of it. No one seriously expects a magical transformation of U.S. foreign policy, but there is a hope that the state of world affairs will make the next U.S. administration less ideological and more pragmatic.

Ideally, from a Russian perspective, the next administration will act on the basis of U.S. interests, avoiding slipping into the fundamentalism of democratic ayatollahs or the antiauthoritarian crusades of the new cold warriors. Having rejected any kind of ideology as an impediment and having embraced pragmatism themselves, Moscow sees Washington's talk of values as essentially disingenuous, thoroughly compromised by double standards, and serving the purpose of global expansionism. Thus, Russia's calls to the United States to restrain its ideological fervor are in fact calls to drop its pretense to hegemonic leadership.

This is not to say that Russia would welcome U.S. withdrawal into itself, which is unrealistic in any case. Moscow even accepts a degree of leadership coming from Washington, provided that it is enlightened. In this more ideal arrangement, the United States would be anything but hegemonic. It would no longer insist on its moral superiority and the universality of its values. It

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would make room for other major players and accept the plurality of values systems, abiding by the phrase "live and let live." Representing no rival ideology, Russia does not seek to supplant the U.S. system with a different one; it merely wants to make sure that the United States stays within its borders and respects the legitimacy of other regimes.

While acting on the basis of its own interests, the United States needs to recognize the interests of others. In an ideal world, the United States would become more globally democratic, practicing abroad what it practices at home, and Russia would practice at home the democracy that it preaches abroad. Whereas most Americans would probably wish Russia to change domestically and, as a consequence of that, its foreign policy, Russian concerns are almost exclusively with U.S. foreign and security policies, particularly where they touch on Russian interests.

Remember Russia

For their part, Russian officials claim that they seek a democratic world order, which is not exactly true. Their ideal is more a benign world oligarchy led jointly and cooperatively by several major powers. Moscow's support of such a global board of directors has been consistent, from the Big Three of World War II to the post–Cold War's Group of Eight (G-8). This arrangement is the core of international legitimacy as Moscow sees it. No longer a superpower fully sovereign in its half of the world, Russia advertises itself as a supporter of international law. When Moscow praises the United Nations, it is its permanent, veto-wielding seat on the Security Council that it prizes. Countries can be sanctioned, invaded, occupied, and dismembered but only on the basis of a consensus among the major powers formalized in a Security Council resolution. Russia does not mind the United States as a de facto chairman of the board—a *primus inter pares*—it just wants to be there as a member not to be ignored.

Ignoring Russia's interests is Moscow's biggest concern about Washington. A vision of a "world without Russia," almost taken for granted toward the end of the 1990s, and the freely given advice on how to transform Russia into a confederacy were the ideas that sent Russians riling about a Western conspiracy against them. The two events most frequently mentioned as the reasons for the cooling of Russian-U.S. relations during the Clinton administration—NATO's enlargement to include the countries of central and eastern Europe and the war against Yugoslavia over Kosovo—were not explicitly anti-Russian, but each totally ignored Moscow's protests.

Moscow felt that the Bush administration continued this practice when it withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, was reluctant to engage in meaningful arms control regime negotiations with Russia, and was willing

to deploy ballistic missile defense elements in Poland and the Czech Republic. The Kremlin would want the next U.S. administration to sit down to negotiate a new strategic arms control agreement replacing the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) I, due to expire in 2009. Ideally, Russia and the United States would also engage on building a theater missile defense system to protect against threats to Europe from the Middle East that would replace the proposed elements in Poland and the Czech Republic (the so-called Third Position Area). In addition, Russia would welcome U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), accession to the Fissile Materials Cut-Off Treaty, and a pledge not to weaponize outer space.

Russia is aware that it will not be at the heart of the coming U.S. foreign policy adjustment.

On conventional arms control, where it was Russia that suspended its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, Moscow wants the United States to ratify the adapted version of the document, which Russia has done, regardless of the situation in Moldova and Georgia, where Russia still keeps some forces that it had promised to withdraw. More generally, the former Soviet borderlands have become a major irritant in Russian-U.S. relations. If any single obstacle has prevented Moscow and Washington from cementing their alignment following the September 11 attacks into a durable alliance, it is this sharp disagreement about the status of the former Soviet states.

To put it bluntly, Moscow wants Washington to recognize the primacy of Russian interests across the entire post-Soviet space, with the exception of the Baltic states, which are members of the European Union and NATO. Russia clearly does not want to restore the Soviet Union or the czarist empire. It wants, however, to create a regime in which its interests would have precedence over those of any other country. This perspective relates to security issues above all. In particular, Russia wants the United States to drop plans to include Ukraine and Georgia in the Atlantic Alliance. Moscow also opposes the presence of U.S. military forces in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). It welcomed Uzbekistan's decision to evict the United States from the K2 air base and has joined China in calling for U.S. withdrawal from elsewhere in Central Asia, currently implying Kyrgyzstan.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, the Kremlin does not seek to turn the CIS, which formally comprises all of the ex-Soviet republics except for the Baltic states, into a bulwark of authoritarianism. Ideological motives are generally foreign to the Russian leadership. Moscow was not afraid of the democratic message per se of the Color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. Rather, what brought it to near panic was the fear that the revolutions, especially the Ukrai-

nian upheaval, were a dress rehearsal for an effort conceived, funded, and led by Washington for regime change in Moscow. When that paranoia eventually subsided, they came to be seen as operations designed to project U.S. influence into Eurasia with the aim of permanently weakening Russian power, especially as far as Ukraine was concerned, and gaining access to energy-rich countries around the Caspian Sea as well as the transit routes leading to the West, such as those in Georgia. Hence, Russia called for the United States to respect local traditions and patterns of relationships, which in reality amounted to a call for noninterference and recognition of Russia's primacy.

Reimagining Global Decisionmaking

The Kremlin calls the CIS its sphere of interests to avoid the discredited description of spheres of influence. This phrase is not merely a play on words, but a much looser, less exclusive concept. To illustrate, Moscow wants to be surrounded by a string of Finlands, not a bunch of Warsaw Pact states. Beyond that sphere, Moscow wishes that Washington would take a less strident approach toward global security issues. No friend of the spread of nuclear weapons, it fears the consequences of a U.S. preventive use of force almost as much as the implications of nuclear proliferation. Russia is very skeptical about what can be achieved concerning the nuclear programs of rogue states if the policy is all sticks and virtually no carrots. It also wants the United States to engage in consultations with the other major powers and work as a team with them on nuclear proliferation concerns, as on other issues.

> The next administration will ideally act on the basis of U.S. interests.

The six-party talks on North Korea are an example of such an approach. Russia wants this strategy to be extended to Iran and believes the United States should drop any notion of a regime change in Tehran and be prepared to give the Iranians security guarantees. In Afghanistan, Russians would favor more conventional arrangements with the various warlords and tribes rather than sweeping pro-democracy projects. Across the Middle East, Russia wishes that the United States would stop seeing the region in terms of black and white and be ready to engage with all influential actors, including Hamas and Hizballah. Modernization in the Muslim world, in the Russian view, is best facilitated carefully through a multitude of projects in economics, education, and trade that the locals come to see as their own rather than imposed on them from the West. Above all, refrain from the use of force except *in extremis*.

Russians view the world as going through a process of emancipation, defying domination by any one power or alliance. The Kremlin's concept of sovereign democracy first emphasizes that it sees itself as independent of any pole—Europe, China, and above all the United States. Moreover, it claims equality with each of them. The "democracy" element in the same phrase means, among other things, the rejection of outside interference in the Russian transformation, whether through preaching and mentoring or through support for the radical opposition and separatists.

Then-President Vladimir Putin's terms of engagement with the United States and the West as a whole, laid down in his 2007 Munich speech, could be summarized as follows: accept us as we are, treat us as equals, do business on the basis of give and take, expect no more bandwagoning from Russia.[1] Undercutting Russia on issues important to Moscow while seeking Russian cooperation on issues important to Washington just does not make sense. Cooperation is also a comprehensive exercise: if you want us at the landing, be sure you have us on the takeoff.

Moscow sees Washington's talk of values as essentially disingenuous.

Increasingly, Russia wants to be included in economic and financial decisionmaking. It does not like the continuation of the financial Group of Seven, in which Russia is not a full member. Not yet a member of the World Trade Organization, it rejects joining "at any cost." Russian agricultural producers in particular are up in arms against the "excessive and unfair" demands of Russia's trading partners. This opinion does not mean isolationism: Russia is very eager to accede to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a prestigious club. It has voiced concern over U.S.-European domination of the international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It wants the United States to recognize that the so-called Washington consensus is no longer adequate to the challenges that the world faces. It believes that the domination of the U.S. dollar will wane and even envisions the Russian ruble emerging as a regional reserve currency.

In the U.S.-Russian economic relationship, the Russians decry what they see as U.S. protectionism setting barriers to capital investments from the emerging markets, including Russia. A new administration could signal to Russian eyes that the United States is open for contemporary global business by welcoming foreign wealth funds and private acquisitions, declining to link trade agreements to foreign policy conditions and not attempting to legislate beyond its borders, and abolishing the 1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment, which denied most-favored-nation status to the Soviet Union and continues to deny it to

Russia, in protest against the USSR's restrictive emigration policies, at a time when some former Soviet Jews are returning to Russia. Additionally, Russians would like to see a United States that is easier for visitors to access.

The Russian-U.S. Relationship: A Work in Progress

Few Russians expect to see such an ideal America anytime soon. Individually, different trepidations in Russia accompany each candidate. Senator John McCain's (R-Ariz.) calls to kick Russia out of the G-8 still resonate in the Kremlin's ears, and some regard him as a latter-day version of President Ronald Reagan in his first term, combining harsh rhetoric with a major arms buildup. Yet, this prospect hardly instills fear in Moscow: the G-8 lockout is believed to be a nonstarter with U.S. allies. The expectation is thus that McCain, if elected, can only walk back from his more extreme statements on Russia. Besides, McCain's stance on nuclear reductions has been a surprisingly promising sign.

The Kremlin wants a sphere of interests, not influence—there is a difference.

A number of Russians see Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.) as the best choice for the United States, capable of leading the country in a much needed adjustment on a broad range of domestic and foreign policies. These people are nevertheless cautious about the implications of the Obama presidency for U.S.-Russian relations. Russian elites often tend to prefer Republicans not so much because they are believed to be less interested in human rights and democracy promotion, which is no longer true after the Bush administration, but rather because they believe Republicans have less of a domestic handicap on foreign policy and security issues. Being a former adversary and often regarded as problematic since the end of the Cold War, Russia is in a different position from that of U.S. allies. Although Obama has "won" public and elite support in Europe and Russia, this difference explains in part why the margin of his support in the latter is much slimmer. The Russians are nonetheless fully prepared to see whether Obama is a different kind of Democrat if he is elected.

More generally, quite a few Russians, among the elite and the general public, do believe rather deterministically that the peak of U.S. power and influence is over and the country is on a slow decline. Having themselves recently experienced a sudden and exceedingly brutal plunge from their own superpower summit and survived, some in Moscow feel they can share their newly acquired wisdom with their former U.S. archrivals. To a number of Americans, this proposition largely sounds preposterous; they see Russia, its oil riches

notwithstanding, as a country in continuing decline beset with a myriad of problems.

Moscow is definitely not looking for a renewed confrontation with the United States. It would like Washington to refrain from treating Russia's recovery as a threat demanding some kind of new containment policy, even while some fairly shrill noises emanate from some corners in Moscow that have apparently provoked precisely that kind of reaction. Russian views of the United States are a reflection of U.S. policies and of Russia's own far-from-finished transformation, old and new phobias, long-suppressed desires, universalist ambitions, and occasional *Schadenfreude*. Yet, it is a country that the United States should not ignore.

Russia is unlikely to become the United States' ally like Europe or Japan, but it is equally unlikely to emerge as a challenger seeking to topple the United States. More probably, Russia will be one of the pivotal countries in the twenty-first century whose eventual orientation will help shape the future global system. Its thoughts and aspirations must be taken with a grain of salt but are anything but irrelevant. A United States that takes time to bring itself to eye level with some of the other major independent players around the world may not immediately be ideal in its own eyes, but it might well become a more respected and effective leader as a result.

Note

1. Diplomacy and External Affairs, President of Russia, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 10, 2007, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml.