

# Modest Expectations

## Facing up to Our Russia Options

*Michael Mandelbaum*

The Obama Administration has made it an early priority of its foreign policy to improve relations with Russia. Vice President Joseph Biden called for the two countries to “press the reset button” on their relationship. Then the President sent a letter to Dmitri Medvedev, his opposite number in Moscow, suggesting that if Iran could be kept from getting nuclear weapons, the ballistic missile defense system the United States is planning to deploy in Eastern Europe, to which Russia objects, might not be necessary. Subsequently, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held a well-publicized meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

These initiatives, all of which took place in the Administration’s first fifty days, are sensible. Russia’s size, its history, its location and its endowment of natural resources give it influence over much of what the United States seeks to do in the world. The chances of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, for example, depend heavily on enlisting wholehearted Russian support for this purpose.

Moreover, relations between the two countries are worse than at any time since the beginning of the 1980s, with the Russian government actively hostile to the United States on several fronts. Russia has, for example, intensified its ties with America’s southern nemeses, Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela and the Castro brothers’

Cuba. It has apparently bribed the government of Kyrgyzstan to evict the United States from a base crucial to supplying American troops in Afghanistan. It has declined to provide the kind of support an effective policy toward Iran requires.

The nadir of Russian-American relations since the end of the Soviet Union came with Russia’s war against Georgia last August. Each country regards what happened as a wanton act of aggression against a small, beleaguered neighbor, but both sides disagree about who was the victim and who the aggressor. In Russian eyes, Georgia attacked South Ossetia, with the complicity of the United States, for the purpose of subjugating the non-Georgians in that territory, and Russia came to their rescue. Americans see the August events as a bullying Russian attack on its smaller, weaker, democratic neighbor.

To say the least, then, the Russian-American relationship is in need of repair. No matter how skillful and determined the efforts of the Obama Administration, however, no diplomatic breakthrough, no sweeping abolition of the current hostility, is possible in the near term. What is possible is modest cooperation on issues where the two countries’ interests overlap. In addition, the United States must avoid measures that make things worse, something that the past two U.S. presidents unfortunately failed to do.

Over the long term, establishing the kind of cordial, trusting relationship that the United States and Russia wanted after the end of the Cold War will require a change in the character of the Russian regime, a change that is not

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**Michael Mandelbaum** is *Christian A. Herter Professor of American Foreign Policy at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies.*



imminent and that neither the United States nor any other country can do much to bring about. A substantial improvement in Russian-American relations will also require a change in approach by the United States, based on a clearer recognition of the extent to which U.S. policies have contributed to the problem.

## What Went Wrong

The U.S.-Russia relationship deteriorated partly because of Russia's experience after the end of the Soviet Union. The country suffered a dizzying loss of international power and prestige, which some Russians found particularly painful. The economic developments of the early years of post-communism made many Russians poorer. For this, some of them wrongly blamed the West. In addition, more than a few Russians retained elements of the non-Western outlook on politics and the anti-Western approach to foreign policy that they had learned in the Soviet era. One of them, Vladimir Putin, became President of the country in 2000 and surrounded himself with like-minded members, current and former, of the security services. In recent years, a gusher of oil revenues has generated resources that their regime has used to win popularity at home and pursue assertive policies abroad.

Russia does not, however, bear all of the responsibility for the state of Russian-American relations, which had taken several wrong turns long before August 2008. The fateful turning point was the U.S.-driven decision in the mid-1990s to expand NATO eastward to include countries formerly under communist rule. The policy of expansion had three poisonous effects on relations with Russia, and these effects have become more toxic over time.

First, that policy broke the promise Soviet leaders believed they had received from their Western counterparts as the Cold War wound down that NATO would not extend its reach into what had been communist Europe. The result was to create festering doubts in the minds of Russians about the trustworthiness of the West.

Second, those doubts grew because American officials offered several different rationales for

the expansion, none of which made sense. On some occasions they described NATO membership for the formerly communist countries as a reward for becoming democracies. Why this was an appropriate basis for joining the alliance was never made clear, especially since undemocratic countries during the Cold War (Greece under the colonels, for example, and Turkey under military rule) had been members in good standing. On other occasions, NATO expansion was advertised as a way of promoting democracy where it had not yet fully taken hold. This made no sense because the political direction of the initial new entrants—Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic—was not in doubt. Moreover, if the United States had truly believed that a place in NATO guaranteed free elections and constitutional rights, the offer of membership should immediately have been extended to the largest formerly communist country, where the fate of democracy was of paramount importance and where its success was far from guaranteed: Russia. Instead, the Russians were told that they would never be invited to join.

The only coherent rationale for expanding NATO was to protect the East Europeans against Russia. Indeed, this was precisely the reason the East Europeans, who had no doubts about their own commitment to democratic governance, wanted to belong. It did not improve matters to have American officials tell the Russians that NATO expansion was not aimed at them when it obviously was.

The Russians objected publicly and frequently to expansion but their objections were ignored. They were ignored because the United States and its allies could afford to ignore them: Russia was too weak to stop the process. This was the basis for the third malignant effect of NATO expansion: It brought home to Russians the continuing relevance of one of the oldest rules of geopolitics. Its classic formulation appears in the dialogue between the Melians and the Athenians in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian Wars: The strong do what they will, while the weak suffer what they must.

NATO's Balkan Wars of the 1990s reinforced the point. Again over Russian objections, the United States twice attacked the Serbs, the Balkan people with the closest ties to Russia. The issues at stake had no connection

with any American strategic or economic interest, and the campaigns were initially conducted without the authorization of the United Nations—or, for that matter, of the Congress of the United States. If the Russians concluded that it was American policy after the Cold War for NATO to do whatever it wished, whenever it wished, wherever it wished, and that the principle underlying that policy was that might makes right, it cannot be said that they lacked evidence for such a conclusion.

The American decision to abrogate the 1972 Treaty prohibiting the deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems, and the plans to deploy elements of such a system in the Czech Republic and in Poland, have further worsened relations with Russia. The U.S. government justified these initiatives on the grounds that the political conditions in which the 1972 Treaty was signed—the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union—had disappeared, and that in the post-Cold War era the greatest threat to international security comes from the spread of nuclear weapons to dangerous regimes such as those of North Korea and Iran. Both assertions are true, and it is also true that, as Washington has repeatedly said, the ballistic missile system that it has proposed is designed to repel only the very modest missile attacks Iran and North Korea could hope to mount. The system could not protect against a large-scale Russian nuclear salvo and so does not affect Russia's deterrent capabilities or jeopardize Russia's status as a great nuclear power.

Still, the missile defense program has angered Russia because, like NATO expansion, the United States has proceeded with it without much regard to the wishes of the Russian government, demonstrating how little control Russia has over security initiatives in its own backyard. Like NATO expansion, too, ballistic missile defense promises no real strategic benefit to the United States. Despite the billions of dollars invested in it, there is no reason to be confident that the proposed system could defeat an actual attack.<sup>1</sup>

Because they have brought little or no benefit to the United States, to Western Europe or even to the new members of the Atlantic Alliance, the American policies that have antagonized Russia must be counted as failures.

NATO expansion in particular has also been a tragedy, because another, safer path was available in the wake of the Cold War that would have better served the interests of all countries involved.

## Common Security

The Cold War ended with a new kind of security system in place in Europe, one that I have elsewhere called a common security order.<sup>2</sup> It had three distinguishing features. Two were embodied in the remarkable and underappreciated arms control agreements concluded in the final years of the Cold War and the beginning of the post-Cold War period: defense dominance—the configuration of armed forces to make them suitable for defending but not attacking territory; and transparency—measures ensuring that each country knows precisely what armed forces all other countries have and what they are doing with them at all times.

The third defining feature was a commitment to resolve problems in a cooperative fashion, with all parties having a say. That is how the arms control agreements came about, in particular the complicated Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) accord, which involved all the countries of the continent. It reflected the spirit with which the United States, the Soviet Union and their respective allies ended their global rivalry and managed the non-violent collapse of communism in Europe. This spirit of cooperation also made possible the forging of the coalition that fought and won the first Gulf War.

A common security order did not and could not put an end to all political differences in Europe. But it did ensure that these were resolved peacefully, just as political conflicts are resolved peacefully within countries governed by democratic principles. This was the security

<sup>1</sup>See George N. Lewis and Theodore A. Postol, "The European missile defense folly", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (May/June 2008).

<sup>2</sup>See my *The Dawn of Peace in Europe* (Twentieth Century Fund, 1996) and *The Ideas That Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy and Free Markets in the Twenty-first Century* (PublicAffairs, 2002), chapter 4.

order to which Russia expected to belong in the post-Cold War era, and, given the way the Cold War had ended, had every reason to expect to belong. Instead, by expanding NATO and excluding the largest country in Europe from it, the Clinton Administration destroyed the framework of common security.

That Administration constantly invoked history to justify and celebrate its foreign policies, but by discarding common security it ignored something that it should have learned from the international history of the modern era. The immediate post-Cold War period was the fourth occasion on which, following the end of a great war, the European political and military order had to be reconstructed—the other three being the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the aftermaths of the two World Wars in 1918 and 1945. Because these occasions have so powerfully influenced subsequent events, historians have devoted considerable attention to them over the years. While the historians have certainly not reached complete agreement on the proper understanding of any of them, one pattern has been widely recognized.

When a great war ends, the victors do better to integrate their wartime adversaries than to alienate them. Integration was the policy pursued toward France after 1815 and Germany and Japan after 1945, and that policy brought peace with the former foes. By contrast, the post-World War I settlement alienated Germany and paved the way for another terrible war two decades later. NATO expansion followed this unhappy precedent. Some of the leaders who gathered in Paris in 1918 to remake Europe tried to forge a settlement acceptable to the defeated Germans, but the war had been so costly in blood and treasure for the winning countries that their publics insisted on imposing terms that the Germans were bound to resent and ultimately to resist. In the wake of the first World War the victorious powers alienated Germany because their hands were tied. The Clinton Administration has no such excuse for having alienated Russia in the same way in the wake of the Cold War.

Has the construction of a common security system in Europe been rendered impossible by the events of the past dozen years and Russia's response to them? President Dmitri Medvedev

has declared that his country is entitled to "a region of privileged interest" encompassing the countries on its border. This sounds very much like a commitment to dividing 21<sup>st</sup>-century Europe, as it was so often divided in the past, into spheres of influence, with the strongest countries exercising political and military control over their neighbors.

Yet Europe is not necessarily doomed to another era of great power rivalry of this kind. What, after all, can Medvedev really mean by a "privileged sphere"? The Russian government will certainly not impose communism on the nations on Russia's borders, as the Soviet Union did, since it is not about to impose communism on Russia itself. Nor will Moscow be able to expand to the borders the Soviet Union had, especially without an ideological basis for a contemporary empire. Indeed, with the average Russian's relatively short life expectancy and low fertility rate causing the population to fall by 700,000 each year, Russian power is likely to decline rather than increase in the years ahead.

Russia will continue to tower over its immediate neighbors and might like to choose their governments for them, as it did in the past. But if the Kremlin imagines it can do so, it might reflect on Russia's own recent history. It was the most potent of all modern political sentiments—nationalism—that brought the Soviet Union to an end, and it is nationalism that makes empire and traditional spheres of influence, which were common features of international politics for centuries, all but extinct today. Moscow can surely make trouble using ethnic Russians in neighboring countries by exploiting this very sentiment, but it cannot govern or dominate those countries as the Soviet Union did.

In retrospect, the war against Georgia does not loom as the first stage of a campaign of imperial expansion. While Russia certainly contributed to the political tension between the two countries, the preponderance of evidence suggests that Georgia, not Russia, struck first. The non-Georgians on whose behalf Russia intervened, the Ossetians and the Abkhaz, welcomed Russian protection against Georgia. And Russian troops eventually withdrew from the positions they had occupied during the course of the war that were located in Georgia proper. It is true that in the wake of the war

Russia recognized the sovereign independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but only Nicaragua has since followed suit.

What, then, do the Russians want that is actually within their power to get? They want neighboring countries to be non-threatening at the least, and friendly if possible. They want to have a say in decisions on international issues that affect them. And they surely do not want to have a military alliance at their doorstep from which they are excluded. These are conditions any country would desire.

The third of these conditions means that, to end Russia's estrangement from the West and to recreate the lost common security order in Europe, NATO must eventually either include Russia or give way to a new and more inclusive security system. Measures of this kind will not, however, come soon. The character of the present Russian regime makes them impossible.

## The Russian Regime

Edward Lucas, a seasoned Moscow hand and the author of *A New Cold War?* (2008), one of the best books on the new Russia, has called that country's political system a "fascist kleptocracy."<sup>3</sup> Given the scale over the past decade of what is sometimes delicately termed the "transfer of assets" from greedy, undeserving, but in some cases economically competent businessmen known as oligarchs to greedy, undeserving, and in all cases economically incompetent current and former officials of the security services known as *siloviki*, the noun "kleptocracy" seems fair enough. But the adjective goes too far.

Russia has no concentration camps, no plans to conquer Europe, no intention of subduing or murdering non-Russians. Vladimir Putin



**Still not fascism: A Russian police officer threatens protestors with a baton during a march in St. Petersburg.**

is not Hitler or Stalin or even Brezhnev. Neither, however, is he Gorbachev or Yeltsin, his two predecessors who were more interested in democratic reforms and peaceful relations with Russia's neighbors than he has shown himself to be. The Russian government is not fascist, but it is bad enough.

It has steadily restricted democratic practices and concentrated effective power in the hands of a small Kremlin elite. The Russian regime is also massively corrupt, which leads the government to hide what it does so that the public will not see where the money is going. This reinforces the tendency toward autocracy because the rulers wish to stay in power in order to continue to enrich themselves. And if the ruling group has done well in the Putin era, the regime's critics have done badly. A disturbing number have been murdered in mysterious circumstances, with the government somehow unable to find their killers.

<sup>3</sup>Lucas, "To Russia With Love", *Guardian*, September 3, 2008.

The increasingly dictatorial character of the Russian government does not mean that the United States cannot do business with it. To the contrary, successive American governments, beginning during World War II, managed to cooperate with the far worse Soviet regime when the interests of the two countries overlapped. The undemocratic nature of the Russian government does mean, however, that it lacks the qualities necessary for full participation in a system of common security: an unshakeable commitment to political liberty, free elections, transparent governmental procedures and peaceful relations with all its neighbors.

While far from totalitarian, the present Russian government shares with its communist and czarist predecessors an absence of working democratic institutions. It has nevertheless also been, at least until recently, a popular regime. Although Putin and his colleagues have not permitted genuinely free and fair elections, the evidence of opinion polls suggests that, had recent elections been free, the ruling elite would still have won them. Neither of these two defining features of the Russian government in 2009—autocracy and popularity—is destined to persist indefinitely, however: The key to changing both, the basis for the hope that Russia can evolve politically in a democratic direction, is the Russian economy.

Putin's popularity rests on the prosperity that Russia has enjoyed since he came to power, and that prosperity has been almost entirely the result of the rise in the revenues from Russia's large oil and gas reserves. The plunge in the international oil price in the second half of 2008 reversed Russia's economic fortunes, and the severe economic downturn that began in the fall of that year aggravated the troubles. The Russian stock market lost 70 percent of its value, capital fled the country, the value of the ruble dropped, and the government used up a large part of its dollar reserves to rescue large Russian firms from their Western creditors.

The economic events of the last quarter of 2008 demonstrated that Russian prosperity had everything to do with the pattern of world commodity prices and nothing to do with the efforts of Vladimir Putin, that his government was incapable of coping with the problems the downturn created, and that the regime had done

nothing to equip Russia for economic growth in the absence of plentiful supplies of energy and high international energy prices. These lessons undercut the presumption on which the Putin regime rests: namely, that autocracy and prosperity go hand in hand in Russia, indeed that the first is necessary for the second.

Insofar as the Russian people absorb these lessons, the regime's grip on power will weaken. If it does, the consequences for Russian foreign policy are not likely to be benign in the short run. Beyond prosperity, the regime has relied on nationalism to supply it with political legitimacy. The worse the country does economically, the more Putin and his colleagues will emphasize their defense of Russian national interests against what they will claim are the predatory designs of the country's external adversaries, especially the United States.

If the crash of 2008 may help to undercut authoritarian rule in Russia in the immediate future, the growth and operations of a working market economy can encourage democratic institutions and practices to flourish there over the long term. This is a pattern many other countries have followed. Historically, free-market economies have helped nurture democratic political systems, and have done so in several ways.<sup>4</sup>

A fully functioning free-market system is not guaranteed to take root in Russia, but the country has made an impressive start in building one since the collapse of communism. Nor does a free-market economy always lead to a political democracy, but historically the tendency is a pronounced one.

The cultivation of the institutions of the market and of the democratic practices that would make Russia eligible to join a common security system must be the work of the Russians themselves. There is little that others can do to help bring them about, with one exception. Reducing Russia's revenues from oil would curb the power of the present anti-democratic elite. This requires reducing oil consumption, which in turn requires raising the price of gasoline through a high floor price for oil, high taxes on gasoline, or

<sup>4</sup>Detailed in my *Democracy's Good Name: The Rise and Risks of the World's Most Popular Form of Government* (PublicAffairs, 2007), especially chapter 3.

both. These measures would encourage conservation and the development of alternative fuels. Europe and Japan already have high gasoline taxes. The United States does not.

Even if market institutions put down deep roots in Russia, and even with the desirable Western energy policies, the Russian regime will not become a Western-style democracy soon. The Obama Administration will therefore have to deal with the kind of government that Russia has now. How should it do so?

## What Is to Be Done?

The United States should attempt to reach concrete agreements with the Russian government that serve the interests of both sides. During the Cold War, the area most ripe for such agreements was arms control, and so it is now. The two governments should attempt to negotiate formal lower limits on strategic nuclear weapons and a mutual relaxation of their alert status. In relations with Russia, even more important than what the new Administration should do is what it should not do. It should not proceed with the planned ballistic missile defense system deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic but instead defer them while exploring whether a more effective system can be built and whether a cooperative approach to missile defense, which has occasionally been suggested by the Russian government, is feasible.

Nor should the Obama Administration move to admit Georgia to NATO, as various American officials and political figures promised to do in the wake of the August 2008 war. The Russian government has made clear its opposition to such a measure, and on this issue, unfortunately, as well as on the related question of NATO membership for Ukraine, the United States has no good options. The West European members of the alliance, particularly France and Germany, will veto the admission of either country. If the United States presses their cases, the result could be a Transatlantic dispute even more acrimonious than the one provoked by the U.S. decision to attack Iraq. Of course, the United States could give Georgia a unilateral guarantee, as it does, for example, to South Korea. Such a guarantee, in view of

the events of August 2008, would have to be accompanied by preparations to mount an active defense of that country, which would revive the military standoff of the Cold War. Today, however, it seems fair to wonder from where the requisite forces would come, and to doubt that the American public would be willing to authorize deploying any forces at all on behalf of Georgia against Russia.

The inclusion of Ukraine in NATO would be even more problematical than Georgian membership. Ukraine is far larger and would require a much bigger Western military force for its defense. But Russia could do grave damage to Ukraine without firing a shot, by stirring up nationalist sentiment among ethnic Russians in the Crimean peninsula, where it is already strong, and in the largely Russian Donbass region in the eastern part of the country. Bringing Ukraine into NATO could set in motion a series of events that could end by tearing apart that European country of more than fifty million people.

Yet declining to extend NATO farther east or failing to offer unilateral American guarantees would undercut the American rhetoric of solidarity with Georgia, thus amounting to a political defeat, a retreat in the face of what American officials have branded Russian aggression. It would also violate the pledge, often repeated by the past two American Administrations, that no deserving European country will be left out of NATO. Still, as with ballistic missile defense, the best course for the United States on further NATO expansion, despite the political costs, is deferral. Without stating that neither Georgia nor Ukraine can ever join the alliance, Washington should put off the question of membership to the future, while urging the European Union to offer closer association to both countries.

This agenda is a modest one, something less than a full-scale "reset" of the Russian-American relationship. But given the damage that American policies since the mid-1990s have done to that relationship, and given the nature of the Russian regime, nothing more ambitious is possible now. In dealing with Russia in 2009 the Obama Administration should take as its guiding principle a variant of the supreme obligation of the physician: First, and above all, do no further harm. 🌐