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# Delusions in US-Russian Relations

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## PERSPECTIVE

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# Delusions in US-Russian Relations

By Pavel Felgenhauer

Russo-American relations have known so many ups and downs that they resemble a roller coaster. The pre-1973 détente collapsed into a global confrontation with wars by proxy in Central America, Africa and an all but direct US-USSR military standoff in Afghanistan. The “end of the Cold War” in the late 1980s and the ensuing warm relations, which almost resulted in an alliance between Moscow and Washington in the first half of the 1990s, ended in acute acrimony over NATO expansion and the conflict in Kosovo. Another attempt to build an axis after 9/11, an alliance in the war against a presumed common enemy—terrorism—has in the last several months deteriorated into what many commentators call the worst state of Russo-American relations in 20 years (since the aborted summit between Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in Reykjavik in October 1986 on arms control).

During the time when Communism ruled in Moscow, the inability of the United States and Russia to build a stable, mutually-beneficial relationship could be explained by ideological differences. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the acute ideological divide largely seemed to have disappeared and Russia officially pledged its commitment to democracy and a market economy, but the relationship appears to have become even more wobbly.

In the run-up to the St. Petersburg G8 Summit last July, the administrations of Presidents George Bush and Vladimir Putin evidently tried to iron out differences over Iran, North Korea and Russia’s WTO accession in the tradition of what former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger used to call “realpolitik.” The Iran and North Korea nuclear issues are among Washington’s main foreign policy concerns, while the Kremlin

wants very much to conclude its WTO accession. Hours before the beginning of the summit, Russian Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin told reporters that an agreement had been reached on foreign access to the Russian financial market, that a protocol with the US on Russia's WTO admission would be signed during or just before the G8 summit, and that Russia's formal accession to the organization would follow in a couple of months.

Of course, no protocol was signed and this perceived public humiliation infuriated the Russian élite and the Kremlin. The American explanation of the delay, that there was no sense in signing a deal that might be knocked down by Congress, which must remove Russia from the Jackson-Vanik amendment for it to enter into the WTO, was not accepted as valid. In Moscow, Putin's Kremlin can order the country's legislature to vote into law virtually anything, and even in the 1990s, President Boris Yeltsin's administration could, in most cases, bribe the Duma into voting as requested on issues deemed serious.

Vyacheslav Nikonov—a Kremlin-connected political strategist of Putin's ruling party United Russia—lamented after the St. Petersburg summit: "We have realized, they will never allow us into the WTO and must build our policy in accordance with that." After the G8 Summit, Russo-American relations took a nosedive that is continuing, encouraged by constant mutual misunderstandings in military, political and economic matters.

A meeting on August 27 in Fairbanks, Alaska, between Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Ivanov, was planned as a somewhat informal, friendly get-together that could keep military-to-military relations on an even keel, while WTO accession and other outstanding problems were being hammered out by trade officials and diplomats. The scheme seemed to work—until the joint final press conference, when Rumsfeld suddenly advanced a plan, opposed by some in Congress, to convert some Navy Trident long-range ballistic missiles from a nuclear to a conventional role for potential use against terrorist targets anywhere in the world.

Ivanov expressed his reservations and argued that “there are different solutions,” such as the use of cruise missiles with conventional warheads that would not be mistaken for a possible nuclear strike. Rumsfeld responded: “We would be happy to see the Russian government decide to do the same thing.” Later he added: “I hope my friend Sergei takes that home and discusses it and calls me up on the phone and says he thinks that’s a terrific idea.” As reported by AP: Otherwise the news conference “was harmonious.”

Ivanov was not thrilled. Instead, our Defense Ministry suddenly called off US-Russian military exercises that were scheduled to take place during September in the Nizhny Novgorod oblast. Russo-NATO peacekeeping exercises that were preplanned for September in the Pskov oblast also were cancelled at the last moment.

The official reason for the sudden cancellation of previously agreed joint military exercises was blamed on a legal technicality—the absence of legislation allowing the presence of foreign troops on Russian territory. However, in previous years, the absence of such legislation had not prevented similar military games. A Duma Defense Committee staffer told me last month that they were ready to pass the required legislation into law any time, but were not given the go-ahead by the government.

A high-ranking US diplomat told me that during the talks in Fairbanks, the Trident conversion plan was not discussed at all. It was only during the press conference that Rumsfeld suddenly began to speak out, embarrassing Ivanov, who could not immediately contact aides while facing journalists, and who was unsure of the proposal’s meaning or what to say about it.

Rumsfeld’s “shock and awe” approach sent diplomats and generals in Moscow into a scramble. Ten days after Fairbanks, a high-ranking Russian Foreign Ministry official begged me to tell him whether I had any idea about what the Americans actually intended to achieve with the unexpected Trident conversion plan. Sadly, I could not offer a comprehensive explanation.

Ivanov believed that he had been intentionally embarrassed and the Russian military and diplomats assumed that the US was planning some deception to cheat on agreed-upon nuclear arms deployments. Since the exact nature of the presumed American “sham” was not fully clear, the worst possible scenarios were assumed. Russo-American military-to-military relations deteriorated dramatically.

A month after Fairbanks, on September 27, four Russian military intelligence officers were arrested in Georgia, charged with espionage. On October 2, the men were released and sent to Moscow. A high-ranking US diplomat told me that Washington, fearful that the consequences of the Russo-Georgian standoff might escalate into a military conflict, had been pressing the Georgians to release them. However, the Kremlin did not appreciate the efforts that got the alleged Russian spies extricated.

On October 2, Bush phoned Putin, apparently to solicit moderation in the dispute with Georgia, but was rebuffed. The Kremlin press service released an official statement after Bush’s phone call about “the unacceptability” of intervention by “third parties” in the fray. Pro-Kremlin commentators and the government-controlled media in Moscow were more explicit, accusing the US of provoking the entire spy scandal to eliminate Russian influence in the Transcaucasus region, while the apparent Washington-induced release of the officers was interpreted as evidence that the Saakashvili regime was an American puppet. (Another popular version circulated in Moscow: The US ordered the Russian officers’ release in order to give Bush a pretext to intervene directly in the conflict.)

Apparently it has never been fully understood in Washington how decisive the issue of actual material control of Russia’s putative “sphere of influence” is. The détente of the 1970s collapsed with the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, which Russian leaders believed was a legitimate defense of our “sphere of influence” against US intrusions, while the rest of the world considered it a blatant aggression.

The “strategic partnership” of the early 1990s collapsed because of the beginning of the process of NATO expansion and the NATO-led attack on Yugoslavia. The latest attempt

at alliance in the War on Terror after 9/11 is now in tatters because of the presumed intrusion of the US and the West into our backyard—the CIS.

The ruling élite in Moscow believes that any major stabilization and improvement of relations with the West must take into account Russia's "legitimate interests"—meaning control of populations and landmasses. Today, as a hundred years ago, the foundation of any alliance or major mutual understanding is presumed in Russia to require a comprehensive settlement of territorial "sphere of influence" problems.

In August 1993, Defense Minister Grachev said at a meeting in the Russian General Staff: "The present economic and political situation in the CIS countries raises hopes that soon we all will unite again. First into an economic, and then into a military and political union. So we must keep our military presence in the CIS and hold on to the old Soviet frontiers."

General Pavel Grachev was ousted as Defense Minister in June 1996, but the above statement from 1993 sounds as if it had been uttered in 2006 by one of Putin's associates, or by Putin himself. Russia continues to maintain military infrastructure or combat troops in all of the CIS countries. Russian troops continue to remain in Georgia and Moldova against the explicitly expressed will of the local governments and against pledges given by Yeltsin in Istanbul in 1999 at an OSCE summit. Russia also has sustained, and in some cases increased, its military presence in Central Asia.

Western nations and militaries in most cases view foreign peacekeeping operations as a costly distraction of men and resources: The earlier the mission ends, the better. Russian CIS peacekeeping missions resemble, in essence, the Syrian peacekeeping deployment in Lebanon from 1976 until 2005: Their goal is to stay as long as possible, to use their deployment to exert covert influence and to leave only when kicked out.

Peacekeeping operations in the CIS are seen as instruments with which to promote Russia's main strategic aim—to increase and consolidate Moscow's military and political

influence. Any resolution of the so-called “frozen” ethnic/separatist conflicts within the CIS that could lead to the withdrawal of Russian troops is viewed as unacceptable.

The Kremlin’s interpretation of a true “sphere of influence” definitely involves, today as before, the limited sovereignty of states under Russian control. In 2003, the Kremlin promoted a peace plan of the Transdniestr conflict that envisaged a reunited confederate Moldova that would have neither a Defense Ministry nor a regular state army, but that instead would have a permanent Russian military presence. The eventual rejection of this plan by Kishinev created serious and lasting tensions with Moscow. Within the Kremlin, it was believed that Western intrigues by NATO, the EU and the OSCE had caused the failure of this so-called “Dmitri Kozak plan” to reunite Moldova under Russian supremacy.

Today the Kremlin, Foreign and Defense Ministries, Duma deputies and other officials, openly discuss the upcoming recognition of the independence and possible future annexation of the self-proclaimed states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdniestr. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian peacekeeping efforts have lost any pretense of impartiality. At the same time, the Kremlin is supporting anti-Saakashvili exiles and opponents such as the former Georgian security chief Igor Georgadze (who is accused of masterminding the failed assassination of Eduard Shevardnadze in 1996), in an attempt to install a weak pro-Moscow regime in Tbilisi.

The mirage of a new union to replace the old Soviet one has obsessed the ruling élite in Moscow, and the military, diplomatic and security chiefs of the 1990s and continues to do so now. This aspiration of revenge and restoration is perhaps the main item of “continuity” in Russian policy over the last decade. Of course, it is well understood that it is impossible fully to recreate the old, great Soviet Union, but some “integration of the CIS” under Moscow’s leadership and domination into something resembling the EU, or even a more integrated structure was, and is, a primary policy goal that dominated the 1990s and continues to dominate Russia’s economic and national security decision-making today.

Russia's ruling class always has believed that control of vast territories is key to political survival. During the détente of the 1970s, Moscow wanted "strategic parity" with the US. What we meant by that, in essence, was: Give us our half of the globe and keep out. In the 1990s, NATO expansion incorporating former Soviet republics was called by many in Moscow "a red line," on which the West must never tread.

After 9/11, Putin put forward what he believed was a decent, modest and straightforward offer: An alliance with the US and the West in the War on Terror in exchange for the CIS to be recognized as our undisputed sphere of influence. Putin openly acknowledged that the three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania no longer fall into our aspired "sphere." As a gesture of good will, Putin closed Russian military bases in Cuba and Vietnam and accepted without much public distress the denunciation of the 1972 ABM treaty, which for decades Moscow had been defending frantically as "the backbone of international stability."

Moscow could have offered other concessions; Putin was ready to bargain and trade horses in good faith. Arms control, Iran and other issues are important, but they are secondary to the "sphere"—the undisputed control of "our people," our resources and lands. With the CIS under its thumb in the future, Russia could recreate itself into an empire. Without the CIS, it is forever doomed to the role of a second-class power.

The US and the West did, in fact, move half-way in our direction: The brutal war in Chechnya, the suppression of democracy and press freedoms in Russia were accepted tacitly. Putin got his "sphere," but a significantly reduced one: only the territory of the Russian Federation, instead of the entire CIS. This has been seen by many as treachery: The West gobbled up our concessions and gave nothing in return. The growing anti-Western, anti-American paranoia in Russia has a firm material base in the present and is not merely a vestige of the Cold War, as is sometimes assumed in the West.



Dealing with Russia is never an easy task, but ignoring the essence of the underlying problems is perilous. Putin and Ivanov are not “friends” or “partners,” they are not somehow members of a pro-Western elite which was lost in the woods, but has returned to join the happy family. Incorrect assumptions only exacerbate existing difficulties.

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