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Is Russia now an enemy, neutral, irrelevant to U.S. strategic interests, or a possible partner with shared concerns?

STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

From the Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict at the Hoover Institution

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Military History in Contemporary Conflict

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Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

Strategika

Strategika is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.

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America-Russia: The Bearable Weight of History

By Edward N. Luttwak

Two centuries of official diplomatic relations between the United States and the Czarist and then the Soviet empires; a rather longer span of private and commercial relations between Americans and Russians, in small part also as Bering Strait neighbors; a peripheral U.S. military intervention on Russian soil in 1918-1920; an intense World War II alliance two decades later immediately followed by almost half a century of harsh global confrontation while the Soviet Empire lasted; and twenty-three years of variegated dealings with Russian rulers, all should condition U.S.-Russian relations in important ways. Anglo-American relations are so conditioned, and U.S.-French relations, and U.S.-Japanese relations, and U.S.-Chinese relations, and so on; in all of them, antecedents are not merely invoked rhetorically or legalistically but actually impinge on every-day dealings, by silently setting constraints, by honoring precedents, norms, and expectations, even by imposing taboos.

But American-Russian relations are different–they are conditioned by the sharply asymmetrical governance of the two sides which can displace all other considerations when it comes to high-visibility political issues (i.e., the most important issues most of the time). While American dealings with the Russian Federation and its peoples are the sum total of a myriad reactions and initiatives by an infinity of individuals and institutions, Russian dealings with the United States and its citizens on high-visibility issues primarily reflect Vladimir Putin's ad hoc decisions and pro tempore policies. Hence for the United States, the Russian Federation government is at once an enemy, a neutral on some issues, and a weary or peripheral or even an essential partner, depending on Putin's instantaneous preferences.

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That is how it came about that the Russian Federation came to the rescue the President of the United States personally, and the viability of his Administration, this last September, by swiftly forcing the Assad regime of Syria to give up its chemical weapons entirely, just as President Obama was about to stake his own authority and the credibility of his Administration on Congressional approval for the use of force, which was by no means assured, and which would have required a majority to vote as if he himself would never have voted, if Obama were still a senator. For the Russian Federation the alternative was to stand by impotently while the United States bombed Russia's only ally in the world–a perfectly good reason for Putin to act as he did.

It was not the Russian Federation that made the decision, but Vladimir Putin entirely and exclusively, within the context of his personal politics, in which the justification for his own autocratic power proceeds from his systematic, multi-media portrayal of the Russian people as beleaguered by a great variety of infinitely malevolent enemies, and whose security and welfare therefore require his own vigilant, authoritarian rule. In the long run China could fulfill the role of chief enemy very well–there are already recurrent (and baseless) demographic panics over eastern Siberia–but for the time being, even in their diminished condition, Russians accept only the United States in that role, alongside lesser enemies as varied as the European Union (now trying to steal the Ukraine), and bands of Wahabi jihadists. Accordingly Putin's own favored broadcaster to the world, the closely directed RT global television channel, systematically depicts the United States as both a failed state beset by incurable socio-economic travails, and also as a persistent, all-round enemy of Russia and the Russian people, ever ready to use every possible

instrument from strategic bombing to supposedly altruistic NGOs to impoverish, weaken, and humiliate the Russian people.

It follows that the decision to rescue the Obama Administration from its cruel predicament could have gone the other way. Putin could have calculated that his own personal political authority would be better enhanced by the collapse of Obama's in the wake of a Congressional refusal; or else, in the event of Congressional approval, that the justification for his authoritarian rule would be greatly strengthened by the spectacle of chronically aggressive Americans attacking Russia's ally Syria, alongside their own murderous jihadi allies. Either way, there would have been no Russian intervention.

The larger meaning of the episode is that in regard to all matters that Putin cares to decide (i.e., the most important matters at least from his point of view), Russo-American relations are ahistorical, or rather unhistorical in a fundamental way–anything may happen at any time, with no precedents, norms, expectations, or taboos to stand in the way. That too is a consequence of autocracy.

Another consequence of Putin's politics is of course the futility of any US attempts to "reset" relations with the Russian Government. If Putin's politics were to change, he would do the resetting all by himself.

Two things stand apart from this unhistorical relationship, and which are therefore historically conditioned in all the usual ways: American relations with Russia and its peoples (i.e., the sum total of the reactions and initiatives of American institutions and individuals that relate directly, or impinge in some significant way, on Russia and the Russians). For all their infinite variety, they can be characterized very simply: they are utterly subversive, continuously corrosive of Putin's authority, an ever-present threat to his power. That is inevitable: America's loud and undisci-

plined existence is itself a permanent, most powerful threat to every authoritarian custom, system or culture, from the institution of the family to Islam, and of course the Russian as well as the Chinese political systems.

Another, and much larger thing that is not determined by Putin's autocracy is the entire, multilateral complex of U.S.-Russian strategic relations, of which Putin only controls the Russian end of the strictly bilateral part. Strategy is stronger than politics for this reason also–it is inherently, if implicitly, multilateral. A prime example is Russia's unwitting role as America's ally against China at two removes, because it is still India's chief supplier of armaments, and its joint-venture partner in the development of the intended future tactical aircraft of the Russian as well as Indian air force, the so-called 5th generation successor of the latest Sukhoi PAK-FA. Regardless of the state of U.S.-Indian relations–successive Indian governments continue to expect immediate and unstinting U.S. strategic support if threatened by China, while they themselves remain entirely unwilling to directly support the U.S. in any of its ventures–the Russo-Indian connection favors U.S. strategic interests because China will not be able import that aircraft as it imported its predecessors (still by far the most effective fighters in Chinese service). It also favors U.S. strategic interests much more broadly, by setting limits on Russo-Chinese strategic cooperation–which the Chinese side would certainly want to broaden.

This week's sensational news that the Japanese government has agreed to set aside its claim to the "Northern territories" (a handful of small islands), to discuss strategic cooperation with Russia in a substantive way, and that the Russians took the initiative in pressing for an early meeting, could open the way for a much more important Russo-American alliance, only once removed.

More prosaic, but certainly more important in their totality, are the many cooperative strands in the multilateral complex of U.S.-Russian strategic relations, including those that started in Soviet days, notably efforts to impede the acquisition of nuclear weapons by third parties. In regard

to all matters into which Putin chooses not to intrude, the weight of history is indeed manifest by way of precedents, norms and expectations, and even taboos. By contrast, the intensely adversarial stance mandated by Putin's politics, as well as left-over Cold War suspicions on both sides, clearly impede purely bilateral attempts at cooperation, for example to exchange Intelligence on terrorists, as the Boston Marathon outrage indicates.

Yet if China's regime endures, highly improbable in the long run, less so while we still live, and the entirety of global strategic relations are therefore recast by the Sino-American confrontation, Russia will once again necessarily become America's ally, and not China's.

Strategy is stronger than politics–just as the Czars were forced to side with subversive democracies against their fellow monarchs and cousins, and Stalin could not persevere as Hitler's ally and was forced instead to become the ally of the hateful British empire, so the relentless shift in the Sino-Russian balance of power imposes an anti-China alignment. Last week's first-ever Russo-Japanese strategic dialogue is perhaps an anticipation of things to come, and it is most revealing that cooperative strategic talks between Japanese and Russians are fully congruent with the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance. There are other, less favorable anticipations of things to come, notably Germany's new tendency to abstain from American-led initiatives in general, and its lobbying for a relaxation of the European Union's arms embargo in particular. In the safe lee of interposed Russia from any possible Chinese invasion, unwilling to assume responsibilities in the wider world beyond Europe, German leaders view China not as a potential threat, but rather as a a highly desirable market, for weapons as well if possible (they are vigorously lobbying fellow Europeans to lift the embargo). And it is not only those well-shielded that may go that way: South Korea most notably, is quite likely to side with Beijing rather than Washington, partly because of an undeniable cultural affinity, and intensely profitable economic relations, but also because deep internal divisions mandate emotional stances to foreign powers which transmute friends into enemies and vice versa, thus precluding strategic competence.

Because strategy is stronger than politics, whenever conflict, or much more often, the anticipation of possible conflict opens the door to strategic logic, the latter prevails not merely on politics (once driving "right-wing" Nixon to Mao's bedside) but also on the entire weight of history that politics conveys, with its precedents, norms, expectations, and taboos. Between that detraction and Putin's autocracy there is much to make Russo-American relations unhistorical, with present and future outranking the past we may remember too well. And in that future, one may most easily see a convergence between Washington and Moscow to contain Beijing–which requires no greater closeness between Americans in all their variety and Russia's regime than there was with China (at the peak of Maoist extremism) when Washington and Beijing converged in the 1970s to contain the Soviet Union.

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From Russia, With Spite

By Ralph Peters

A fundamental problem we have in understanding the Russian penchant for self-destructive behavior is that Americans have never been jealous of other nations. Yet, jealousy is a major strategic factor (and not the least important one exciting Islamist extremism) and has been through the ages, whether we examine the eras of dynasties, empires or faltering democracies. With our vision confined by the narrow cult of "objective" analysis preached by twentieth-century academics and reinforced by Washington's taste for the seemingly quantifiable and readily explicable, we have ignored the primary role of emotion, of fervor, in world affairs: From the classical age to our own, few states have gone to war based upon rational analysis, nor do "scientific" formulae reliably determine outcomes.

Simultaneously buffoonish and adept, Vladimir Putin befuddles our foreign-policy establishment. We cannot understand why he would act against what we perceive as Russia's best interests or needlessly humiliate an American president eager to make one-sided concessions to Moscow. Washington sages will not entertain the simple fact that Putin enjoys beating the diplomatic daylights out of our president–and otherwise responds emotionally to a range of foreign-policy matters. While Putin is certainly capable of cold-blooded (and sometimes brilliant) thinking, he's also intuitive, impulsive and sadistic–a character from Dostoevsky, not from Tolstoy. Putin is a classic schoolyard bully who sees President Obama as the nerdy kid with thick glasses and an armful of books. Putin delights in knocking the books to the pavement and bloodying our president's nose, well aware that the president will still cough up his lunch money in the pathetic hope of making friends (add in ferocious Russian racism and the beating becomes almost a psychological necessity–Putin finds it a personal affront to have to deal with a non-white American president).

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Yet, Westerners who view Putin as a mere thug dangerously underestimate the man. Putin has incredible strength of will (one could not travel the distance he has without it) and understands his own people as few American leaders today understand their fellow citizens. He may be the only major world leader in our time who is touched, if darkly, with genius–certainly, he had a crucial insight that eluded the great dictators of the last century: Putin grasped that human beings are not perfectible and need to blow off steam. So, where earlier strongmen bashed down doors to investigate private lives, Putin made a brilliant functional compact with his people: They can say or largely do whatever they like behind their front doors, but once they step through those doors into the street, they need to render unto Caesar (and "Czar" or "Tsar" is, indeed, derived from "Caesar").

Why this focus on one individual, when the question posed is whether Russia is an enemy, neutral, irrelevant or a potential partner? (The answer to that query is "It depends…") Because the czar is Russia to a degree that eludes our theories, and Putin is a czar. The relationship between czar and narod, the people, isn't merely authoritarian, but mystical–even when the czar is a former mid-level KGB bureaucrat with an amusing taste for selfies. And the Russkaya dusha, the alternately effervescent and benighted Russian soul that haunts the country's literature, is very dark when drawn onto the international stage. Nor is this merely a matter of paranoia–which is definitely endemic within "all the Russias." Russia's attitude toward the United States is best captured in an old folk parable, told with many variations but always with the same ending:

A poor Russian peasant's neighbor has a cow, but the peasant himself has none. Every day the peasant has to walk by his neighbor's field, where he sees that cow. He admires the cow, even adores it, envying the animal to the point of obsession. He even dreams about the cow at night.

One day, the peasant goes into the forest to cut wood–and he finds a sprite bound to a tree with bonds that only a mortal can undo. The sprite promises the peasant that, if he frees her, she will grant him any one wish. So he unties her…and says, "Kill my neighbor's cow."

Anyone who has dealt with Russians–as I have, in the Kremlin and in back alleys–has known the feeling that his Russian interlocutor would lop off his arm to deprive the American of a finger.

The tragedy–which in true Russian spirit often veers into farce–is that Russia and the United States face many of the same threats and challenges: Islamist fanaticism, the rise of China, nuclear proliferation, the inflow of narcotics from abroad, and many lesser concerns. Yet, cooperation on these matters, by Russia's choice, is limited or non-existent–even though each of these issues poses a more direct threat to Russia than to us.

Russia doesn't really fear us–that's hogwash. But Russians are infernally jealous of our position in the world, of our wealth, success and attractiveness as a system and a culture. Even as the United States longs to divest itself of the de facto empire it doesn't want, the Russian will to empire remains ferocious, and Moscow reacts to its formerly Soviet neighbors with all the spite and fury of a jilted spouse. We see the Kremlin as unreasonable, while Moscow views Washington as simultaneously naïve and devious (Russians can't believe we're really as stupid as our international behavior suggests–there is always, always, always a conspiracy hidden somewhere).

Still, the guilt is not exclusively on the Russian side. The current U.S. administration, especially, cannot ever admit to a mistake–that Russia, on the opposite side of an issue, might be right now and then (as in Syria, where Putin warned early on of the rise of anti-Western jihadis wherever the regime lost power).

Nonetheless, there are occasional chances for cooperation. The destruction of Syrian chemical weapons, should it actually come to pass, would benefit Russia even more than the United States, so there's some hope for continued cooperation on that issue (Russia has already experienced the use of poison gas by extremists). We seek the elimination of chemical weapons, and Russia doesn't want them in Islamist (for instance, Chechen or Daghestani) hands. The danger is so immediate it facilitated a deal (albeit one with a number of tentative parts).

We also must beware of bad deals, of treaties for the sake of treaties, such as President Obama's last Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Moscow, which sacrificed important American dual-use platforms, while the Russians gave up old junk they didn't want anyway. Deals made in political desperation rarely wear well.

And patience–that most un-American virtue–is essential in dealing with Russia. Putin's Achilles heel is his poor grasp of economics, and Russia, though currently solvent, faces a bleak future as global energy sources diversify and expand. The military Putin wants is already unaffordable, and, outside of a few showcase city centers, Russia remains an impoverished land. Putin prefers wealth from limited sources kept in a few hands--the easier to control the boyari–but the price has been a catastrophic failure to diversify the economy.

Another respect in which Washington exacerbated the worst qualities in the Russian temperament was the starry-eyed illusions with which Washington intellectuals approached Moscow in the early- to mid-1990s. Russians do not understand generosity; they understand evident strength. Dealing with Moscow is best done on a quid pro quo basis, not on the basis of give-aways of any kind. It is unlikely that the U.S. and Russia will become close allies in our lifetimes, but there look to be points of strategic convergence and we need not be enemies. We should appear willing, but never appear weak. In the end, though, it's up to Russia to deal with its own geostrategic neuroses and psychoses.

Meanwhile, Putin's Russia bears an uncanny resemblance to the Russia of a century ago, on the eve of the Great War: An autocratic government facilitates the concentration of wealth in favored hands and much of it is squandered abroad with jaw-dropping ostentation. Meanwhile, an anemic middle-class struggles to function within a corrupt system, and the common people continue to live in squalor.

This is not meant to predict a revolution, but to underscore how little in Russia changes, revolution or not. Russians never defeated the Communist system–they merely outlasted it. Now Putin is a near-perfect fit to rule the linguistic homeland of Nikolai Gogol.

We sprint and exhaust ourselves, until the Russian peasant stumbles past us.

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Russian Revival

By Kiron Skinner

At the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union had military ties with Iraq, Libya, Syria, and South Yemen. President Anwar Sadat expelled thousands of Soviet troops and military advisers from Egypt in 1972 and turned to the United States for a strategic alliance. In 1979, the U.S.-brokered peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was signed; it marked the first time that an Arab country had recognized Israel. In addition, the United States had a network of security and military ties throughout the Middle East that allowed it to emerge as the peace and power broker in the region. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has maintained its status as the dominant great power.

The Obama administration, however, seeks to reverse decades of U.S. diplomacy and security arrangements in the Middle East by simply withdrawing. In doing so, it is creating a regional power vacuum that Russia appears eager to fill.

During his second month in the Oval Office, President Obama announced that U.S. combat forces would exit Iraq in August 2010 and the remaining forces would be withdrawn by the end of 2011. In June 2011, he declared that 10,000 U.S. troops would leave Afghanistan, with the drawdown continuing until most U.S. forces are out of the country by the end of 2014.

Last month, National Security Adviser Susan Rice discussed the administration's new Middle East doctrine, which has three main priorities: to achieve tangible results in Israel-Palestinian negotiations; to secure a nuclear-weapons-free Iran; and to reduce the conflict in Syria. This new doctrine holds that military strength will be used only if aggression in the Middle East threatens undefined national interests, and it seemingly downgrades bilateral relations with Egypt and

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Saudi Arabia, long-standing pillars of U.S. Middle East policy.[1]

Thus, it is no surprise that President Vladimir Putin appears eager to rekindle relations with Egypt, a country with which the Soviet Union had close ties in the 1950s and 1960s. While the Obama administration has refused to denounce the Mohammed Morsi-led government, which fell in July, and has frozen part of its military aid to Egypt, Putin has derided Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood and has endorsed the rebellion. On October 27, the Sunday Times (London) reported that Putin may visit Egypt.[2] Could a deal for Russia's use of Egypt's Mediterranean ports be in the making?

Readily accepted by the White House, the removal of chemical weapons initiated by Putin "reinforces the stability of the Assad regime, a key Russian ally, secures Russia's navy continued access to the port of Tartus, and bolsters Syria's main regional ally, Iran, which also happens to be an important strategic partner," notes Ilan Berman, a leading Russia and Middle East specialist.[3] It simply doesn't get any better than this for Russia.

1. Elliott Abrams, "Obama's 'New' Middle East Policy: 'Modesty' or Pullback?" Pressure Points (Council on Foreign Relations), October 27, 2013; Mike Landler, "Rice Offers a More Modest Strategy for Mideast," New York Times, October 26, 2013; and Tom Porter, "Obama Adopts Pragmatic Strategy in Major Middle East Policy Shift," International Business Times, October 27, 2013.

2. Uzi Mahnaimi, Toby Harnden, and Bel Trew, "Putin cosies up to Cairo as US cools," The Sunday Times (London), October 27, 2013.

3. Quoted in Kathryn Jean Lopez, "The End of Russia," National Review Online (http://www.nationalreview.com/article/360461/end-russia-interview), October 7, 2013.

The Geneva talks between the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany and Iran may have a low probability of producing assurances of a non-nuclear Iran. They are worthwhile, however, because high-level communications with Iran are needed. Diplomatic and military initiatives that thwart the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah axis of global terrorism ought to be at the forefront of any discussions with Syria or Iran. Here again, the U.S. has abdicated leadership.

The U.S. pullback in the Middle East is as troubling for Saudi Arabia as it is for Egypt. Historically, the Saudis have been a crucial ally for the U.S. despite their history of encouraging U.S. support of jihadists such as the mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s and calling for support of Syrian rebels, some of whom are anti-Western. Riyadh's decision to decline membership on the UN Security Council appears to be a reaction to inconsistent U.S. policies toward the Syrian crisis and reflects displeasure with the direction of the P5+1 talks with Iran, its chief regional adversary, on its nuclear capabilities.[4] Saudi Arabia, along with Israel, is watching developments in the region with skepticism and confusion about how the U.S. will proceed.

Facilitating negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians is a sound idea even though near-term success is unlikely. These talks will be overshadowed, however, not only by immediate military exigencies throughout North Africa and the Middle East but also by America's retreat from its leadership role.

Russia has a growing problem with active Islamists in its own territory and in its near abroad neighbors, which is exacerbated by its unwillingness to absorb and tolerate its Muslim communities. In the arena of combatting terrorism, the United States and Russia could be natural allies.

4. F. Gregory Gause III, "Will Nuclear Talks With Iran Provoke A Crisis In U.S.-Saudi Ties?" Brookings Institution (http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/iran-at-saban/posts/2013/10/14-saudi-iran-rivalry-nuclear-deal), October 14, 2013.

That possibility may fade, however, if Russia becomes a regional hegemon while Washington turns away from the Middle East.

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Russia is Russia — Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

By Victor Davis Hanson

Russia has never been a friend of the U.S.–as opposed to a somewhat opportunistic and valuable temporary ally–usually in reaction to the bellicosity of Germany. In the past, when German is divided, impotent, recovering from war, or integrated within Western Europe, Russia is likely to be estranged from or irrelevant to the U.S. When Berlin is ascendant in a provocative fashion, then Moscow and Washington somehow find convenient and ephemeral common interests.

In normal times, Russia's age-old geostrategic rivalry over Eurasia with America's European partners, its relative isolation from the currents of U.S. immigration and cultural heritage, and its embrace of authoritarianism have all precluded close relations. That it is a huge country with unlimited natural potential has traditionally excited futurists, dating from the 19th century, who predicted a shared Russian- and American-run world.

After the Cold War, no such bipolarity proved to be the norm, not only because we have few genuine commonalities, but also due to the fact that constitutional government has never worked well in Russia. Indeed, by Western standards, it is now a near failed state–demographically, politically, and economically.

Will that change? There are certainly in the present some avenues of common concern–the threat of radical Islam especially. Germany has not yet translated its huge financial clout into political, much less military power, but nothing is forever, and it may do so in the decades ahead. Nuclear non-proliferation should be another joint worry, given that Russia has all sorts of unstable nuclear powers near or on its borders, from North Korea and Pakistan to China and India. It surely does not need a proximate nuclear Iran.

Unfortunately the Obama administration combines the two most unfortunate attributes in any foreign policy of dealing with Vladimir Putin and the present Russian authoritarians–loud nagging lectures about human rights married with a weak profile abroad. It seems almost a Russian national characteristic to despise foreign do-gooders who posture without power. Putin does not like lecturers and does not like weaklings. Obama is both. Putin would probably deal in a more constructive fashion with an American president who kept quiet and kept strong, even if reminding Putin to keep out of others' business abroad, and by tacit agreement to mind his own at home as well.

Our policy should be to let Russia be Russia where it is in our interests–if organizing a sort of Orthodox league in the eastern Mediterranean to help Cyprus, Greece, Israel, and the Balkans to buffer Turkish and Islamic power, or to be a counter to China at opportune times. Otherwise, we should stay strong and quiet and do not boast about wanting something done that we cannot or will not do ourselves.

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Russia's Honor Comes at America's Expense

By Bruce S. Thornton

Like the Muslim Middle East, Russia is a constant reminder that the traditional motivators of state action like honor and revenge are alive and well, no matter how much a postmodern West regards them as primitive avatars of the benighted underdeveloped.

Before the 1917 Revolution, the Russian psyche was plagued by a cultural inferiority only exacerbated by Westernization of her elites. A major point of pride–Russia's self-proclaimed historical role as the "Third Rome" defending Christianity from Muslim imperialist aggression–meant little to Europeans bent on secularizing their own civilizations. To these bien pensants, as Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz put it, believers like the Russians were "shamans or witch doctors from savage tribes whom one humors until one can dress them in trousers and send them to school."

The Communist Revolution, for all its horrendous costs, made Russia a global power, particularly after the Russians thwarted Nazi Germany's mighty Wehrmacht when it invaded Mother Russia in World War II. Russians may have been spied on, thrown into gulags, tortured, executed, and subject to a material existence akin to an underdeveloped country's, but they could now strut on the postwar world stage as a superpower, putting the first man into orbit, and dueling across the globe with its American rival while the European countries that once looked down on them trembled beneath America's protection, even as their own intellectuals openly cheered the Soviets on and scorned their American defenders.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, after an initial euphoria of promised democracy, prosperity, and freedom, was a humiliation for many Russians, who now found themselves in a geopolitical limbo between the West and the Third World, the subject of Western supercilious commentary

criticizing their economic corruption, democracy deficit, and death-spiral demographics. Only a nuclear stockpile and oil reserves kept them from sinking lower in the hierarchy of nations.

This is the context for understanding the popularity of Vladimir Putin and his aggressive foreign policy. His macho public persona, disregard for diplomatic pieties, and intimidating bluster have restored Russian honor by making the arrogant Cold War victors once more take Russia seriously. He has gratified the self-regard of the Russians who, seeing a hedonistic, Godless West, warm to his sermons about the importance of Christianity and the degeneracy of a civilization that countenances abominations like open homosexuality and gay marriage. Once more Russia is the righteous nation standing up for Christ in a world of heathens.

Moreover, Russian revanchist pride is further inflated by watching their strongman push around the leader of the remaining superpower, as Putin has bullied Barack Obama. His serial humiliations of Obama have additionally expanded Russian influence in the Middle East, and restored its prestige as a global player and power broker. Back home corruption may be rampant, civil liberties trampled on, and the economy the playground of political cronies and kleptocratic oligarchs, but at least Russia has the world's attention, behaving globally with boldness and vigor while America retreats, cringes, and appeases.

As long as Putin's geopolitical behavior enhances Russia's prestige, it will remain a rival to America's interests, for much of that prestige depends on reversing the humiliation of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of the American colossus. At this point, cooperation or friendship with the United States will not serve that purpose, no matter how many material advantages and opportunities are lost.

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Discussion Questions

Is Russia now an enemy, neutral, irrelevant to U.S. strategic interests, or a possible partner with shared concerns?

1. Does Vladimir Putin represent typical Russian views toward the U.S., or is his confrontationist agenda largely his own?

2. Are there enough areas of Common Ground with Russia to forge a new U.S.-Russia partnership?

3. Should Russia's internal politics continue to sour U.S.-Russian relations?

4. What are the chances of a Russian "spring" that would bring Russia firmly into the Western fold?

STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

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