

Russia's and America's Intertwined Fates

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Slightly more than four decades ago, George F. Kennan, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, inquired, “What sort of Russia would we like to see before us?”¹ In seeking to answer his own question Kennan also asked, “How should we, as Americans, conduct ourselves in order to promote the realization of such a Russia?”

Kennan responded by arguing that America should look for a Russia that will have a government which “would be tolerant, communicative, and forthright in its relations with other states and peoples.” At home, “the exercise of government authority will stop short of that fairly plain line beyond which lies totalitarianism.” Specific forms of economic and political organization, Kennan continued, must be “forged mainly in the fire of practice not in the vacuum of theory.” In other words, a system that advances toward dignity and enlightenment along a path worked out by Russians themselves.

To achieve these goals, Kennan counseled patience, persistence, and engagement. America must recognize that change of such historic import could only come in time and with occasional setbacks. America nonetheless should not shrink from its stated goal of encouraging the emergence of this new Russia. In the end, Kennan concluded, “Of one thing we may be sure: no great and enduring change in the spirit and practice of government in Russia will ever come about primarily through foreign inspiration or advice. To be genuine, to be enduring, and to be worth the hopeful welcome of other peoples such a change would have to flow from the initiatives and efforts of the Russians themselves.”

These reflections are more compelling today than they were in 1951 as the moment for decision in Russia has arrived. The Clinton administration confronts many of the same dilemmas regarding the “Russian Question” as those set forth by Kennan over forty years ago. How can the United States fashion a policy that favors movement toward a democratic political system and a market economy in Russia—while not choosing any single “correct” path for Russia? How can the United States demonstrate “engagement” without squandering resources in pursuit of a Russia that may take years to come into being? How do American actions accomplish enough to encourage positive developments without interfering so much as to be either domineer-

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ing or wasteful?

American policy must be at once optimistic and sober. The United States must recognize the real achievements of the Russian people over the past decade, while simultaneously acknowledging the many obstacles that still stand in the path of lasting political and economic change.

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On the positive side, Russia now enjoys a degree of freedom rare in its history—in the press, on the streets, and in houses of worship. Boris Yeltsin is Russia's first democratically elected president and confronts no credible alternatives for power. Economic behavior has

changed substantially over the past year—with some twenty million families obtaining title to small plots of land for gardening or housing during 1992 alone.

On the negative side, old-line Communist *apparatchiki* have dug in for prolonged bureaucratic guerrilla warfare against any and all movement toward the marketplace which undermines their own stranglehold over the Russian economy. A xenophobic right-wing nationalist movement is simultaneously gaining visibility and perhaps real political strength. Environmental degradation on a biblical scale demands organizational and financial resources that simply do not exist.

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Why Should Americans Care?

The Russian story of the past decade has been an historical epic without a clear story line. Its very complexity prompts many Americans to ask why the United States simply does not just let the Russians sort out the mess they themselves created. In the end, however, the outcome of this saga is too important to Americans—and their children and grandchildren—to permit disengagement. The future of Russia will shape the future of America. Indeed, a variety of factors point toward continuing American involvement in shaping Russia's future.

As a base line, Russia's permanent seat and veto on the United Nations' Security Council represents a power that can advance or frustrate U.S. policies throughout the world. Recent concern over waning Russian support for U.S.-backed U.N. initiatives brings this strength into a more clear focus.

Next, of course, are the nuclear weapons. Russia—even in some truncated form—remains the world's second largest nuclear arsenal. The United States retains an acute interest in insuring that the weapons now under Russian

control remain that way, and that a renewed threat of nuclear confrontation with Russia not emerge in the future. The nuclear agenda has at least two major dimensions. First, the United States is directly concerned with adherence to fulfillment of the START I and START II nuclear reduction treaties. Attainment of the provisions of these agreements would insure that Russia and other treaty signatories dismantle those weapons of mass destruction which represent a direct threat to the United States. Second, the United States must act to insure that weapons, nuclear materials, and technology currently in Russian—and CIS—hands not drift to other states. The consequences of continued nuclear confrontation with Russia or any other nation would seem self-evident.

A favorable outcome to current Russian political and economic reform serves the geopolitical interests of the United States in many ways. Russia remains the earth's largest single nation in terms of size

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and, like only the United States, is placed to participate in both European and Pacific Basin affairs. Russia's sheer size has strengthened its historic role as a European power for at least the past three centuries, and it is likely to do so in the future. A German-Russian entente, for example, would dramatically alter the course of European development; a Russian alliance with either China or Korea, on the other hand, would force a recalculation of East Asian political, economic, and strategic alignments. Thus, American geopolitical calculations must continue to take Russia into account. The emergence of a tolerant, communicative, and forthright Russia could dramatically ease international demands on the United States.

The economic rewards for the United States arising from successful reform in Russia are perhaps less apparent at the moment. Over the long run, however, the United States has an enormous economic stake in Russia's future. In an era of competing trade blocs, Russia represents a vast, populous market for American goods, an educated labor force for American companies, and a valuable source of precious natural resources.

An economically viable Russia would represent an asset for the United States even if the attention of American industry focused primarily on partners in our own Western Hemisphere. This also would be the case should Asian and European investors outstrip American activity in Russia itself. There would remain numerous opportunities for mutually beneficial economic relations between the United States and Russia provided standard and predictable international economic and legal practices can be followed.

These practical concerns may not be as significant in the end as the less-tangible advances won in a realm harder to measure—that of striving toward

an ideal. The United States has always represented the material manifestation of some of humankind's most lofty ideals. American freedoms of the political and economic marketplace are not mere abstractions. They represent a distinctive approach to social organization that elevates the individual to the center of human endeavor.

The United States has pursued and promoted its democratic ideals for over two centuries because Americans firmly believe not only in their moral correctness, but also in their practical effectiveness. Americans view democracy and the market as an ultimately more successful way of arranging political and economic life than more despotic forms of governance. The current reforms in Russia represent the single most important attempt at the end of the twentieth century to move a society toward the tolerance and openness that Americans equate with national health and social well-being.

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The United States must itself be tolerant, however—tolerant of distinctively Russian answers to basic questions of political and economic organization. Americans will be sorely disappointed in expecting Russia “to look just like us.” No matter the path chosen, Russia's success or failure in moving toward a more tolerant and communicative state will be taken as evidence of the applicability of democratic values to human affairs beyond the small North Atlantic region.

The Western allies dedicated themselves to advancing democratic values for nearly a half-century. This involves hundreds of foregone social investments, thousands of lives, and billions of dollars during the Cold War era, all of which will have been squandered should the West in general and the United States in particular withdraw from Russian affairs prematurely.

Russian national interests will not always converge with those of the United States. Differences between these two great nations will remain, and competition in some arenas may become intense. Pursuit of different national interests by a democratic and market-oriented Russian state would lead to a far more benign competition for the United States than that engendered by an authoritarian and xenophobic Russian regime. Russia is simply too large, the range of possible Russian futures too broad, and the American stake in the success of reform too high for policy-makers in Washington to walk away.

It is important to emphasize that all the benefits that would accrue to the United States would be shared with Russia itself. Strident Russian nationalists vociferously complain about the sale or abandonment of their nation's interests in order to advance those of their enemies. There should be little doubt that the United States would benefit in incalculable ways from a

prolonged partnership with a vibrant and secure Russia. Yet Russia would benefit even more. The triumph of reform would create a “win-win” situation for both Russia and the United States. The ultimate objective of American engagement with Russia must be to secure a more fulfilling future for the peoples of both nations.

What About the Other Successor States?

Many observers question the wisdom of assisting Russia at the seeming expense of the other post-Soviet successor states. Their concerns deserve a response, as the fate of all the Soviet successor states is of importance to the United States.

Russia alone has the capacity either to nurture democracy and a market economy throughout the region, or, alternatively, to destroy all other reform efforts in a violent eruption or fit of retrenchment that would inevitably poison the entire central Eurasian plain. Russia is the largest, most heavily armed, populated, and resource-laden state to emerge from the collapse of the

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Soviet Union. It shares international borders—and potential for border disputes—with eight of the other fourteen Newly Independent States (NIS). Russians constitute a major minority population in many of the neighboring states—an “imperial minority” that has experienced severe psychological dislocation in the wake of imperial collapse. The Russian ruble—though crippled—remains legal tender in much of the region. Nearly every NIS country depends on Russia for energy resources and, in some instances, for markets. Russia's collapse would undermine stability throughout the region, while its economic success could serve as the engine for recovery everywhere.

The centrality of Russia is not shared by the other post-Soviet successor states and Baltic republics. The future of democracy in Kyrgyzstan has only marginal bearing on the future of Estonia, nor can civil war in Georgia spawn a similar conflict in Kazakhstan. Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, as nuclear powers, retain a strategic importance that is surpassed only by that of Russia. Chaos in one state may spill over into its neighbors. Yet policies seeking to shape the development of the central Eurasian states will have but marginal impact unless Russia is included. No other state has Russia's potential for positive or negative influence.

Recognizing Russia's pivotal role, American policy-makers must recall that each successor state to the former Soviet Union is an independent and

sovereign entity that demands attention in its own right. With the possible exception of Ukraine, all of the other NIS states place rather modest demands on the outside world. The cost of supporting assistance programs for all of the remaining states in the region is marginal within the larger context of international aid. The United States should welcome the emergence of democratic and market-oriented regimes throughout the region—and should do everything that it can to insure the success of all such regimes. Supporting reform in Russia should never be seen as an excuse for not supporting parallel efforts elsewhere. The point here is a slightly different one. Ignoring Russia will only insure the failure of political and economic reform in the other countries of the NIS.

The United States similarly must exercise caution in dealing with governments in the region that would seek to play local interests off against those of a neighbor. Just as there is no reason for the United States not to support all reform-minded regimes throughout the region, there is no excuse for permitting American policy to become hostage to disputes among the newly independent Eurasian states. The United States should be able to encourage the emergence of democratic regimes in both Russia and Ukraine, for example, despite whatever conflicts may exist between the two. Failure to maintain neutrality in regional conflicts will eventually undermine whatever advances have been made toward economic and political reform in all the NIS. The danger of a nationalist backlash will be particularly acute in embittered and affronted states that feel slighted by American policy.

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movement toward reform to an abrupt end in all the post-Soviet successor states as well as in the Baltic republics. Recognizing the centrality of Russia, the United States must approach each state in the region as an independent entity worthy or unworthy of assistance in its own right. American policy must correspondingly avoid involvement in the many disputes sure to arise throughout the region. The Clinton administration must chart flexible and reactive policies that demonstrate patience, persistence, and engagement toward all the states in the region.

Russia remains, in the end, the determining force for the entire central Eurasian region. A vital and productive Russia can serve as a catalyst for democratic and market-oriented transitions throughout the former Soviet Union. An embittered, impoverished, aggressive Russia would likely bring any

Assessment of the Current Situation

The broad outlines of a major policy debate over Russia have emerged in Washington, D.C. In the most general terms, the contours of the new debate pits pessimists against optimists.

Some analysts have become very pessimistic about the pace and direction of political and economic change in Russia. By their lights (albeit paraphrased here somewhat simplistically), Russia is on the brink of coming apart. Ethnic and regional tensions are growing, while economic reform may be faltering. The tumultuous and at times bloody showdown between legislature and executive, center and region, has undermined prospects for democratic governance. Given the possibility of continuing chaos, attempts to prop up Russia with Western assistance can have little practical impact and would hardly win friends among the ultra-nationalists who are sure to come to power. To do so would be folly.

Others, again to state a complex position in rather simplistic terms, view the emergence of regional power centers within Russia as a sign of decentralization and democratization rather than disintegration. A powerful, primal energy has been released throughout Russia, it is argued, with private economic activity springing up from below. While all decisions and actions may not conform to our own preferences, the combination of reform from below and an increasingly coherent arena for political action at the top are viewed as signs of a genuine revolution in Russia—one with which the United States in particular should be engaged in every possible way. To do otherwise would be folly.

What is at stake in this dispute is not necessarily a disagreement over empirical reality, but rather, radically differing assessments of the context within which that reality has become embedded—and strikingly different estimations of the value that should be attached to this or that variable. Such differences are critical for any understanding of how best to proceed, because adherents on both sides frequently argue as if they are in possession of Truth. This divergence of interpretation is readily apparent in discussions of Moscow's relations with its periphery.

Russia's provinces have garnered unprecedented freedom of action over the past several years. Provincial leaders—even in areas dominated by ethnic Russians—regularly ignore instructions and laws emanating from Moscow. Local managers pursue their own private interests with impunity. For the pessimists, local action is a sure sign of disintegration. Unbridled regionalism, growing national separatism among non-Russians, an absence of institutions and even broadly accepted rules of the game combine to create an atmosphere of lawlessness which compels a backlash response—a nativist fascism only slightly disguised behind appeals for civil order. For the optimists, regionalization is a sign of a genuine departure from centuries of hyper-centralization and autocracy. Democracy can only exist within Russia when

the center finally relinquishes the prerogatives of power to individual citizens through the devolution of authority to the provinces.

Such profound disagreement among analysts—both Russian and American—reflects the volatility of political and economic life that appears to lurch from one crisis to the next without any internal logic or regulation. Any possible outcome appears plausible, to the dismay of those who prefer predictability to uncertainty.

The volatility of Russian politics extends beyond vacillation over appropriate legislative and institutional arrangements. Speaking at Washington's Kennan Institute, Russian pollster Boris Grushin set forth five clusters of public opinion that have emerged within Russia, ranging from xenophobic nationalist fascists to pro-Western democratic radicals.² These various and competing opinions are engaged in a bitter struggle for the Russian soul. The volatility of Russia at the moment, Grushin continued, lies in the fact that all five opinion clusters co-exist within each and every Russian. The same individual can turn from a committed Westernizer into a raving nationalist and back again depending upon outside stimulus. This kind of opinion climate is obviously subject to influence through skillful political leadership and action (or inaction) from abroad. Put otherwise, the future course of events in Russia is more responsive to outside persuasion—for good or for ill—than Russia's history of resisting such influences might lead one to expect.

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In the end, the pessimists remain convinced that the democratic and market experiments now taking place in Russia are doomed to failure because they have never succeeded in the past. Drawing lessons from Russian history, these analysts trace the course of current events to an inevitable reimposition of an

authoritarian regime. But the very volatility of the current moment suggests that other outcomes are, indeed, possible. Soviet history and Russian history have not moved along well-worn paths over the past decade. A newly empowered, educated, and informed population has consistently pursued a revolution that is, in fact, unprecedented in the Russian experience. The present is precisely that historic moment when all can be changed. Effective leadership can encourage a vast majority of Russians to chose from among the more tolerant and open opinion clusters described by Boris Grushin. Regional autonomy can produce a more diverse and variegated Russian reality in which some corners of the land will be able to pursue democratic and entrepreneurial goals. This is a time, in short, when history need not repeat itself.

What Can the United States Do?

American policy must encourage the emergence of a tolerant, communicative, and forthright Russia that would be both democratic and productive at home and act responsibly abroad. No single set of policies will achieve this goal. The Clinton administration must coordinate a number of activities in four rather distinct arenas: strategic relations, economic assistance, political reform, and psychological support. Recognizing that the pace of progress toward achieving lasting change in each arena will vary, it will be important for the United States to pursue its goals in each domain both independently and in a coordinated fashion. Impediments to success in one area should not justify reversal of policies in another; breakthroughs in a third should not lessen pursuit of legitimate American demands in the fourth.

The value of distinguishing among various aspects of reform cannot be overstated. Progress toward implementation of provisions in the START I and START II agreements will be of benefit to the United States no matter what regime is in power in the other signatory states. The United States must simultaneously commit itself to supporting a broad transition toward both the introduction of market-oriented reforms in the Russian economy as well as the deepening of democratic conduct of political affairs. Progress in each of these areas is likely to be sporadic, with reform efforts stalling along one dimension even as progress is being made elsewhere.

It would not be effective to abandon sensible and reasonable standards of behavior in the strategic realm—or to invest valuable resources in absurd economic strategies—simply to “promote Russian democracy.” A policy that would limit American engagement in Russia's economic or political transformations due to setbacks on strategic issues would be similarly shortsighted. Carrots offered in one area may not necessarily elicit behavioral change in another given the complexity of multidimensional transition in Russia and the other newly independent states. Explicit linkage among areas runs the risk of undermining overall progress toward a more tolerant and communicative Russian state even as difficulties are encountered in one policy area or another.

The subtlety and versatility of response required to achieve these policy objectives has not been a hallmark of United States foreign policy in the past. New institutional arrangements may be a prerequisite to insure sufficient coordination and flexibility in the action of American public and private agencies. The appointment of Strobe Talbott to coordinate United States policies toward Russia and the other states of the former Soviet Union is an important first step in this direction. This office is intended to add consistency to the activities of various American public and private agencies, international organizations, as well as government partners from other G-7

nations engaged in providing assistance to the Russian government.

Active coordination of American initiatives toward Russia with those of other nations is imperative. Responsibility for such efforts has been largely abrogated as national governments have turned to international organizations poorly suited for the task at hand.

The International Monetary Fund, to cite but a single example, has real strength in developing macroeconomic reform programs. Yet, macroeconomic restructuring is but a single dimension of the Russian transition. The Fund has shown little sensitivity to the multitude of political and psychological factors shaping Russia today—nor should the Fund have been expected to be sensitive to these issues. No single international organization has the breadth of experience to deal with the Russian reform in its totality, while several, including the IMF, must be involved in discrete policy areas. The United States must accept its overall leadership responsibilities by confronting the problems of Russian reform in direct consultation with other partner nations and organizations.

The agenda for U.S.-Russian **strategic relations** has been established by the START I and II agreements. American policy must seek to insure strict adherence to the provisions of those agreements in the coming months and years. Compliance mechanisms and verification procedures are in place and must be enforced with vigor.

The United States faces a more difficult task in the **economic sphere** as the parameters of appropriate involvement have yet to be established. The Russian government has failed to pursue sensible macroeconomic policies tenaciously. Continuing disagreement among differing political factions has combined with intense struggle over the allocation of power among various branches of government to obstruct the formulation of a coherent national economic policy. On the Western side, promised credits and assistance payments have been meager and, in some instances, illusory. Suspicion is growing on both sides. Americans increasingly perceive Russia as an economic sinkhole capable of absorbing enormous sums of money with little discernable return. Russians, for their part, increasingly perceive the United States as having promised much and having delivered little.

The United States must work with its allies to establish a basket of economic assistance that will be sufficiently credible to capture the attention of an increasingly cynical Russian leadership. While form (visibility) will be as important as substance, these programs should be designed to promote both macroeconomic stabilization and economic development.

The Russian government must implement predictable and enforceable ownership rights, adopt reasonable taxation policies, and begin to move toward a system of law in economic relations. Russian agencies must comply with standard accounting and reporting practices employed in large-scale

international assistance programs. American payments and credits should be linked to progress in these areas.

The task in **political reform** is primarily one of information sharing, and should continue regardless of difficulties encountered in relations over strategic and economic issues. Russians lack the conceptual framework—indeed, given the constant borrowing of English words, even the very vocabulary—required for the conduct of democratic governance. The collapse of the Soviet Union has posed the most fundamental questions of political organization. Should the Russian state be centralized, federal, or confederational? What is the appropriate balance between the legislative and executive branches? At what point does the public's right to know come into conflict with a government's right to confidentiality? Russians must define their own answers to these and other questions at the heart of democratic politics.

The United States and other democratic nations can best assist Russians in their quest for new solutions to the quandaries of governance by sharing information and experience based on our own customs and traditions. American policies should encourage programs designed to familiarize the Russian citizenry and officials at all levels with democratic institutional and legal arrangements elsewhere. Official and unofficial exchange programs, study abroad programs, and Peace Corps activities can advance American interests in this area.

A balancing of objectives is required once again. The United States should move to support a variety of political forces that are compatible with economic and political reform. Such support should not be intended or designed to dictate a particular set of solutions to various Russian political dilemmas. Rather, it must be shaped

to make explicit American distaste for authoritarian, xenophobic, fascistic groups and leaders that are emerging on the right wing of the Russian political scene. Otherwise, the United States must recognize that Russian forms of government, institutional arrangements, and perceived national interests may vary from familiar patterns in the West. U.S. policy-makers must simultaneously be prepared to criticize forcefully practices in Russia and the other NIS countries which run counter to internationally accepted standards of behavior (such as the denial of rights of citizenship on the basis of ethnicity, confessional belief, or political opinion).

At its core, the current Russian crisis has a **psychological dimension** as

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well as political and economic aspects. Russian national identity developed in conjunction with the growth of Empire beginning in the 18th century. This experience contrasts with that of Britain and France, for example, where imperial conquest followed the emergence of a strong national sense of self. As a consequence, the collapse of the Russian and Soviet Empire during 1989-1992 carried with it a breakdown of national identity. The resulting psychological trauma must be addressed if Russia is to avoid a period of embittered and aggressive nationalist politics at home and abroad.

The United States can respond to Russia's psychological needs quickly and at little cost. American leaders must seek to assure Russians from all ranks of society that the United States is genuinely supportive of a democratic, tolerant, market-oriented Russian polity. An important task at the moment must be bicultural interpretation rather than high diplomacy.

Embassy personnel and visiting U.S. officials should be encouraged to leave the warm confines of hard currency hotels, restaurants, and former Communist Party meeting rooms to venture out into the streets, subway stations, and pedestrian underpasses of Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as into the provinces of Russia. These are the venues of the new economic activity that hold the key to Russia's future. Newspapers, vouchers, books, clothing, food, sex, alcohol—life, in a word—can be seen like never before in Russia. United States government officials should be urged to patronize shops and restaurants that offer services in rubles—and hence are enterprises oriented toward Russian customers. Visits to regional centers, excursions to successful private shops, factories, and farms across the vast expanse of Russia would signal continuing interest in the outcome of reform while demanding only marginal expenditures of material resources. American visibility in this distinctly Russian world would communicate a new level of U.S. engagement in Russia's future.

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A more visible American presence runs the danger of identifying forces for change in Russia and the other newly independent states too closely with foreign interests. Such an identification would be counterproductive if outside support of reform is insufficient to produce

meaningful results. It will not prove fatal to the reform process if the population perceives tangible improvements in everyday life. Quite the opposite, Western involvement in Russian affairs will only encourage further movement toward a tolerant and communicative state if its involvement supports Russian revival in some meaningful way. American good will

accompanied by perceptible achievement will only isolate the Russian Right over the long run.

Concluding Observations

Each of these four arenas of engagement extends far beyond Moscow's Ring Road. Many of the most noteworthy and positive developments of the past year have occurred in provincial Russia. American public and private sector engagement must take place directly with local and regional officials, institutions, entrepreneurs, students, and citizens more broadly. Such an approach may offend some Russian Federation officials in Moscow—even some who adhere to American positions on other questions—but that may be as healthy as it is inevitable. Official “Moscow” needs to feel less self-important.

Patience, persistence, and engagement, as George Kennan advised more than four decades ago, should be the primary attributes of American policy toward Russia— together with flexibility and coordination. Russia has an historic opportunity to chart its own distinct form of political democracy and market economy. The United States has much to gain from this transformation—too much to hesitate now, at this critical juncture in Russia's transition from a totalitarian past.

Notes

¹George F. Kennan, “America and the Russian Future,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (April 1951), pp. 351-370.

²“Public Opinion Polls Not the Full Story,” *Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies Meeting Report*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (November 1992).