

Can We Help Russia Become a Good Neighbor?

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Melians, in response to the Athenians: “Is it not certain that you will make enemies of all states who are at present neutral, when they see what is happening here and naturally conclude that in course of time you will attack them too? Does not this mean that you are strengthening the enemies you have already and are forcing others to become your enemies even against their intentions?”

—Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*
Rex Warner Translation

At the beginning of September 1993, Vladimir Lukin, Russia's ambassador to the United States, outlined three distinct positions among the Russian political class on how Moscow should deal with the fourteen former Soviet republics that have become independent countries. Lukin identifies the first as “neo-isolationism,” which he says represents a “logical continuation of that radical democratic romanticism” which informed so much of Russian behavior immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This view holds that Russia should withdraw whenever and wherever the non-Russians request it. According to Lukin, this view is not sustainable both because it would leave the 25 million Russians abroad to their fate and because it would undercut Russia's national interests in these regions.

The second position, which Lukin calls “the national-patriotic variant for the resolution of the problems of the CIS,” seeks to restore in one form or another “a Russian-Soviet empire.” Such a policy, Lukin suggests, is “unthinkable” for both technical and political reasons. Technically, Moscow simply can't afford the price of such an effort; and politically, any effort to restore the empire would leave Russia more isolated than it was during the Cold War. Moreover, he continues, such a policy would be “incompatible with the preservation of democracy in Russia.”

The third position, which Lukin himself advocates, calls for the establishment of a system of “good neighborly relations” between Russia and the former Soviet republics. Such relations, he argues, would not consist simply of “good abstract relations between neighbors (as many [Russians] appear to think) but rather:

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an extremely precise system of mutual obligations between a large state and its smaller neighbors who will receive guarantees of security in exchange for [their] recognition of the special interests and influence of the 'large neighbor,' proportional to its geographic propinquity and its strategic and economic weight.

Lukin continues that such an approach has its roots in and has been approved by "international (and particularly American) practice."¹

In this brief essay, I want to provide some preliminary answers to three questions that Lukin's proposed policy line raises: First, how applicable is the American "good neighbor" policy for the post-Soviet space? Second, does Russian behavior thus far suggest that such a model already informs Moscow's policy in what many Russians insist on calling the "near abroad"? And third, and most important, can the West in general and the United States in particular do anything to promote good and mutually beneficial relations between Russia and her new neighbors?

Neighbors, Good, Bad, and Otherwise

One of the most striking developments and serious challenges to Russians is that they now live in a new and very different country with a new and very diverse set of neighbors. While Russians formed half of the population of the Soviet Union and were never encouraged to view the USSR as uniquely theirs, they now form more than 80 percent of the population of a new country and obviously believe that, however it is ultimately defined, this new entity will be their own state just as many of their neighbors are defining themselves as nation-states.

But it is the transformation of Russia's international environment that is the most important fact here, one with three major implications: First, the loss of the fourteen non-Russian countries has transformed the ethnic security map of Russian elites: they simply must deal with new bilateral relationships that did not exist before, relationships that have a national or even nationalist dimension. Second, because these states emerged out of the Soviet Union, their existence represents a continuing challenge to the self-definition of many Russians and especially of the national elites who had dominated that earlier entity, forcibly shattering what was understood as the proper barrier between foreign and domestic policy. And third, because of the speed of this change and because of the possibility that it is not yet over, Russians are having to cope with the "loss" not only of prestige and territory but also of ethnic Russian populations cut off as it were in foreign states.

This combination of circumstances—that the neighbors emerged out of an old pre-existing state that was dominated by Russians, the close integration of all the Eurasian space economically and politically, and the presence of large numbers of ethnic Russians and other groups who have traditionally looked to Russians

for cultural leadership and protection—is fundamentally different than the situation in which the United States found itself with respect to Latin America when the policy of “good neighborly relations” that Lukin cites was articulated. And it is precisely these linkages and differences which make any effort by Russia to insist on such relationships highly problematic. Even if the elites in the fourteen new countries are forced by circumstances to agree with Moscow's desire to reintegrate the space on this basis, the populations, who have not entirely forgotten what Russians did within the old Soviet space, are unlikely to be willing to accept this. Anti-Russian attitudes are likely to grow as a result, and the efforts of Moscow to be a “good neighbor” along Lukin's proposed lines are therefore likely to be counterproductive and to force Russia's hand in dangerous ways.²

Consequently, while there is a certain logic in Lukin's argument and while seeking good neighborly relations is better than seeking a renewed empire, his recommended approach—and it is worth noting that many in the Yeltsin government appear to agree with these ideas—is likely to have unintended consequences that will force Russia either to project additional power or

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to withdraw. And that dynamic is complicated further by the very different situations in and possibilities of the various non-Russian countries to stand up to Russian power or to resist Moscow's desire for closer integration.

An Unfortunate Record

Boris Yeltsin came to power as one of the most pro-non-Russian Russian leaders of all time. He supported the independence of the Baltic countries early on and the independence of the other countries on the periphery in a consistent way during Gorbachev's time and at the time of the setting up of the Commonwealth of Independent States. More than that, he even told non-Russian groups *within* the Russian Federation that they should “take as much independence as they could handle.” Indeed, without Yeltsin's support, the demise of the Soviet empire would have been more problematic and certainly more bloody. Unfortunately, over the past year, Yeltsin—both for his own reasons and under pressure from other groups in Russian society—has shifted his position or has been unable to stop others.³

Over the past year, Moscow or its representatives have used military force and economic leverage to strengthen Moscow's hand in the “near abroad.” Not unimportantly, Moscow's greatest pressure has been on those former republics—

Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—which showed the least willingness to participate in a Russian-dominated commonwealth. Moscow has applied the least pressure on those former republics—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—that the United States and the West generally have made clear are not part of the proper zone of Russian influence.

No one doubts that Russia has special interests and concerns in all these countries, but to recognize this is not the same thing as giving a blank check to all of Russia's pressures against these countries.⁴ Consequently, we can only be disturbed by what Russia has done in many instances.

What Must We Do?

To date, the United States and the West generally have made three fundamental mistakes which have contributed to making the problem of Russia's relationship with her neighbors worse rather than better.

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First, we have not taken the independence of the non-Russian countries seriously and have not treated them as genuinely independent states. In many cases, our involvement is exhausted by the presence of an embassy; but that presence is undercut by our contin-

uing support of the CIS—which undermines the independence of these states and contributes to a Russian sense that it can restore a more imperial arrangement—and our almost exclusive focus on Russia. Obviously, Russia is the most important country in the region, but we should recognize that everything we hope for in Russia—democracy, free markets, and so on—will be impossible if Russia becomes an empire again.

Second, we have inverted the traditional concern of the United States with foreign countries when it comes to Russia. Instead of being concerned about how Russia behaves internationally, we have been insistent on dictating how Russia should behave at home. That in turn has had three consequences: first, it has meant that as long as Russia does what we like at home, we have been reluctant to criticize any of its pressures on its neighbors, a pattern that sends an unfortunate signal; second, we have virtually forced Yeltsin to demonstrate his independence of us by behaving more thuggishly in the “near abroad” than would otherwise be the case, particularly since the issue of Russian minority rights abroad is an issue which unites most of the Russian political spectrum; and third, we have called into question the meaning of the international state system and the alliance structures by suggesting that domestic affairs within the U.S. and within foreign countries are vastly more important to us than foreign policy. That in turn means that more and more countries will seek to go it alone, as

Ukraine already is on the question of nuclear weapons.

Third, we have failed to articulate a clear policy on regional cooperation and to push Russian elites in the direction of building truly good neighborly relations with their new neighbors. We have not suggested the many ways countries can cooperate without a large one simply dominating its neighbors. These lessons have been forced on us in recent years, and we should pass them along as Russia seeks to become a better neighbor with its new ones.

Obviously, my preferences are that we reverse ourselves on these three issues. That will not be easy and will become even more difficult with time. But if Russia is to be integrated into the West as a democratic and market-oriented society, it will have to give up its imperial pretensions and learn to live with its neighbors as real countries, albeit very different ones. And it will not be able to do that until and unless the West takes the fourteen countries of the “near abroad” just as seriously as it takes other countries around the world. If we fail to do that, the Melian dialogue cited at the head of this article is likely to return with force and to undercut both Russia and the possibilities of peace in the future.

Notes

¹ Vladimir Lukin, «Rossiya—v dalnikh i bliznikh krugakh,» *Segodnya*, 3 September 1993.

² That is the dangerous conclusion that the Gorbachev Foundation reached in a study earlier this year (see «Russkiye v `blizhnem zarubezhye,» *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 7 September 1993). The scholars in this study group warned against the use of force by Russia in the “near abroad” but concluded that Moscow’s hand was likely to be forced by the worsening relations among the new states: “Let us consider the following hypothetical example. The Russian population of the north of Estonia proclaims itself an autonomous republic (the law on aliens, adopted by the Estonian Parliament, has already pushed them toward this). Immediately will arise unofficial ties with the populations of Leningrad and Pskov *oblasti*, military men will be sympathetic to these Russians, and border guards will close their eyes to the transfer of weapons. Mass demonstrations will begin in defense of our brothers and the government will not be able to remain indifferent to this explosion of patriotism.”

³ The question of what Yeltsin is responsible for and what he is not responsible for is a most significant one. If Yeltsin is to be credited with all the good things that Moscow does but absolved from responsibility for all bad things, then we must acknowledge that he is not in control of his government. But if he is in charge, then he must take responsibility for both. It is an interesting and open question as to which of these two options is the more frightening. Unfortunately, most Western observers seem to want to give him credit for the good and absolve him from the bad without thinking about the implications of such an approach.

⁴ For a critical appreciation of this, see Alexei G. Arbatov, “Russia’s Foreign Policy Alternatives,” *International Security* Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 5-43; and John P. Hannah, “The (Russian) Empire Strikes Back,” *The New York Times*, 27 October 1993. See also my “Russia and Its Neighbors,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 90 (Spring 1993).