

Losing Russia

The Costs of Renewed Confrontation

Dimitri K. Simes

FACED WITH threats from al Qaeda and Iran and increasing instability in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States does not need new enemies. Yet its relationship with Russia is worsening by the day. The rhetoric on both sides is heating up, security agreements are in jeopardy, and Washington and Moscow increasingly look at each other through the old Cold War prism.

Although Russia's newfound assertiveness and heavy-handed conduct at home and abroad have been the major causes of mutual disillusionment, the United States bears considerable responsibility for the slow disintegration of the relationship as well. Moscow's maladies, mistakes, and misdeeds are not an alibi for U.S. policymakers, who made fundamental errors in managing Russia's transition from an expansionist communist empire to a more traditional great power.

Underlying the United States' mishandling of Russia is the conventional wisdom in Washington, which holds that the Reagan administration won the Cold War largely on its own. But this is not what happened, and it is certainly not the way most Russians view the demise of the Soviet state. Washington's self-congratulatory historical narrative lies at the core of its subsequent failures in dealing with Moscow in the post-Cold War era.

Washington's crucial error lay in its propensity to treat post-Soviet Russia as a defeated enemy. The United States and the West did win

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the Cold War, but victory for one side does not necessarily mean defeat for the other. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and their advisers believed that they had all joined the United States' side as victors in the Cold War. They gradually concluded that communism was bad for the Soviet Union, and especially Russia. In their view, they did not need outside pressure in order to act in their country's best interest.

Despite numerous opportunities for strategic cooperation over the past 16 years, Washington's diplomatic behavior has left the unmistakable impression that making Russia a strategic partner has never been a major priority. The administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush assumed that when they needed Russian cooperation, they could secure it without special effort or accommodation. The Clinton administration in particular appeared to view Russia like postwar Germany or Japan—as a country that could be forced to follow U.S. policies and would eventually learn to like them. They seemed to forget that Russia had not been occupied by U.S. soldiers or devastated by atomic bombs. Russia was transformed, not defeated. This profoundly shaped its responses to the United States.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Russia has not acted like a client state, a reliable ally, or a true friend—but nor has it behaved like an enemy, much less an enemy with global ambitions and a hostile and messianic ideology. Yet the risk that Russia may join the ranks of U.S. adversaries is very real today. To avoid such an outcome, Washington must understand where it has gone wrong—and take appropriate steps today to reverse the downward spiral.

DEATH OF AN EMPIRE

MISUNDERSTANDINGS and misrepresentations of the end of the Cold War have been significant factors in fueling misguided U.S. policies toward Russia. Although Washington played an important role in hastening the fall of the Soviet empire, reformers in Moscow deserve far more credit than they generally receive.

Indeed, in the late 1980s, it was far from inevitable that the Soviet Union or even the Eastern bloc would collapse. Gorbachev entered office in 1985 with the goal of eliminating problems that Leonid

Brezhnev's administration had already recognized—namely, military overstretch in Afghanistan and Africa and excessive defense spending that was crippling the Soviet economy—and with a desire to enhance the Soviet Union's power and prestige.

His dramatic reduction of Soviet subsidies for states in the Eastern bloc, his withdrawal of support for old-line Warsaw Pact regimes, and perestroika created totally new political dynamics in Eastern Europe and led to the largely peaceful disintegration of various communist regimes and the weakening of Moscow's influence in the region. Ronald Reagan contributed to this process by increasing the pressure on the Kremlin, but it was Gorbachev, not the White House, who ended the Soviet empire.

U.S. influence played even less of a role in bringing about the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The George H. W. Bush administration supported the independence of the Baltic republics and communicated to Gorbachev that cracking down on legally elected

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separatist governments would jeopardize U.S.-Soviet relations. But by allowing pro-independence parties to compete and win in relatively free elections and refusing to use security forces decisively to remove them, Gorbachev virtually assured that the Baltic states would leave the Soviet Union. Russia itself delivered the final blow, by demanding institutional status equal to the other union

republics. Gorbachev told the Politburo that permitting the change would spell "the end of the empire." And it did. After the failed reactionary coup attempt in August 1991, Gorbachev could not stop Yeltsin—and the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine—from dismantling the Soviet Union.

The Reagan and first Bush administrations understood the dangers of a crumbling superpower and managed the Soviet Union's decline with an impressive combination of empathy and toughness. They treated Gorbachev respectfully but without making substantive concessions at the expense of U.S. interests. This included promptly rejecting Gorbachev's increasingly desperate requests for massive economic assistance, because there was no good reason for the United

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States to help him save the Soviet empire. But when the first Bush administration rejected Soviet appeals not to launch an attack against Saddam Hussein after Iraq invaded Kuwait, the White House worked hard to pay proper heed to Gorbachev and not “rub his nose in it,” as former Secretary of State James Baker put it. As a result, the United States was able to simultaneously defeat Saddam and maintain close cooperation with the Soviet Union, largely on Washington’s terms.

If the George H. W. Bush administration can be criticized for anything, it is for failing to provide swift economic help to the democratic government of the newly independent Russia in 1992. Observing the transition closely, former President Richard Nixon pointed out that a major aid package could stop the economic free fall and help anchor Russia in the West for years to come. Bush, however, was in a weak position to take a daring stand in helping Russia. By this time, he was fighting a losing battle with candidate Bill Clinton, who was attacking him for being preoccupied with foreign policy at the expense of the U.S. economy.

Despite his focus on domestic issues during the campaign, Clinton came into office with a desire to help Russia. The administration arranged significant financial assistance for Moscow, primarily through the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As late as 1996, Clinton was so eager to praise Yeltsin that he even compared Yeltsin’s decision to use military force against separatists in Chechnya to Abraham Lincoln’s leadership in the American Civil War.

The Clinton administration’s greatest failure was its decision to take advantage of Russia’s weakness. The administration tried to get as



much as possible for the United States politically, economically, and in terms of security in Europe and the former Soviet Union before Russia recovered from the tumultuous transition. Former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott has also revealed that U.S. officials even exploited Yeltsin's excessive drinking during face-to-face negotiations. Many Russians believed that the Clinton administration was doing the same with Russia writ large. The problem was that Russia eventually did sober up, and it remembered the night before angrily and selectively.

EAT YOUR SPINACH

BEHIND THE façade of friendship, Clinton administration officials expected the Kremlin to accept the United States' definition of Russia's national interests. They believed that Moscow's preferences could be safely ignored if they did not align with Washington's goals. Russia had a ruined economy and a collapsing military, and it acted like a defeated country in many ways. Unlike other European colonial empires that had withdrawn from former possessions, Moscow made no effort to negotiate for the protection of its economic and security interests in Eastern Europe or the former Soviet states on its way out. Inside Russia, meanwhile, Yeltsin's radical reformers often welcomed IMF and U.S. pressure as justification for the harsh and hugely unpopular monetary policies they had advocated on their own.

Soon, however, even Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev—known in Russia as Mr. Yes for accommodating the West—became frustrated with the Clinton administration's tough love. As he told Talbott, who served as ambassador at large to the newly independent states from 1993 to 1994, "It's bad enough having you people tell us what you're going to do whether we like it or not. Don't add insult to injury by also telling us that it's in our interests to obey your orders."

But such pleas fell on deaf ears in Washington, where this arrogant approach was becoming increasingly popular. Talbott and his aides referred to it as the spinach treatment: a paternalistic Uncle Sam fed Russian leaders policies that Washington deemed healthy, no matter how unappetizing these policies seemed in Moscow. As Talbott adviser Victoria Nuland put it, "The more you tell them it's good for them, the more they gag." By sending the message that Russia should not

have an independent foreign policy—or even an independent domestic one—the Clinton administration generated much resentment. This neocolonial approach went hand in hand with IMF recommendations that most economists now agree were ill suited to Russia and so painful for the population that they could never have been implemented democratically. However, Yeltsin’s radical reformers were only too happy to impose them without popular consent.

At the time, former President Nixon, as well as a number of prominent U.S. business leaders and Russia specialists, recognized the folly of the U.S. approach and urged compromise between Yeltsin and the more conservative Duma. Nixon was disturbed when Russian officials told him that the United States had expressed its willingness to condone the Yeltsin administration’s decision to take “resolute” steps against the Duma so long as the Kremlin accelerated economic reforms.

Nixon warned that “encouraging departures from democracy in a country with such an autocratic tradition as Russia’s is like trying to put out a fire with combustible materials.” Moreover, he argued that acting on Washington’s “fatally flawed assumption” that Russia was not and would not be a world power for some time would imperil peace and endanger democracy in the region.

Although Clinton met with Nixon, he ignored this advice and disregarded Yeltsin’s worst excesses. A stalemate between Yeltsin and the Duma and Yeltsin’s unconstitutional decree dissolving the body soon followed, ultimately leading to violence and tanks shelling the parliament building. After the episode, Yeltsin forced through a new constitution granting Russia’s president sweeping powers at the expense of the parliament. This



move consolidated the first Russian president's hold on power and laid the foundation for his drift toward authoritarianism. The appointment of Vladimir Putin—then the head of Russia's post-KGB intelligence service, the FSB—as prime minister and then as acting president was a natural outcome of Washington's reckless encouragement of Yeltsin's authoritarian tendencies.

Other aspects of the Clinton administration's foreign policy further heightened Russia's resentment. NATO expansion—especially the first wave, which involved the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland—was not a big problem in and of itself. Most Russians were prepared to accept NATO enlargement as an unhappy but unthreatening development—until the 1999 Kosovo crisis. When NATO went to war against Serbia, despite strong Russian objections and without approval from the UN Security Council, the Russian elite and the Russian people quickly came to the conclusion that they had been profoundly misled and that NATO remained directed against them. Great powers—particularly great powers in decline—do not appreciate such demonstrations of their irrelevance.

Notwithstanding Russian anger over Kosovo, in late 1999, Putin, then prime minister, made a major overture to the United States just after ordering troops into Chechnya. He was troubled by Chechen connections with al Qaeda and the fact that Taliban-run Afghanistan was the only country to have established diplomatic relations with Chechnya. Motivated by these security interests, rather than any newfound love for the United States, Putin suggested that Moscow and Washington cooperate against al Qaeda and the Taliban. This initiative came after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the 1998 bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, by which time the Clinton administration had more than enough information to understand the mortal danger the United States faced from Islamic fundamentalists.

But Clinton and his advisers, frustrated with Russian defiance in the Balkans and the removal of reformers from key posts in Moscow, ignored this overture. They increasingly saw Russia not as a potential partner but as a nostalgic, dysfunctional, financially weak power at whose expense the United States should make whatever gains it could. Thus they sought to cement the results of the Soviet Union's

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disintegration by bringing as many post-Soviet states as possible under Washington's wing. They pressed Georgia to participate in building the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, running from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean and bypassing Russia. They encouraged Georgia's opportunistic president, Eduard Shevardnadze, to seek NATO membership and urged U.S. embassies in Central Asia to work against Russian influence in the region. Finally, they dismissed Putin's call for U.S.-Russian counterterrorist collaboration as desperate neoimperialism and an attempt to reestablish Russia's waning influence in Central Asia. What the Clinton administration did not appreciate, however, was that it was also giving away a historic opportunity to put al Qaeda and the Taliban on the defensive, destroy their bases, and potentially disrupt their ability to launch major operations. Only after nearly 3,000 U.S. citizens were killed on September 11, 2001, did this cooperation finally begin.

FROM SOUL MATES TO RIVALS

WHEN GEORGE W. BUSH came to power in January 2001, eight months after Putin became president of Russia, his administration faced a new group of relatively unknown Russian officials. Keen to differentiate its policy from Clinton's, the Bush team did not see Russia as a priority; many of its members saw Moscow as corrupt and undemocratic—and weak. Although this assessment was accurate, the Bush administration lacked the strategic foresight to reach out to Moscow. Bush and Putin did develop good personal chemistry, however. When they first met, at a June 2001 summit in Slovenia, Bush famously vouched for Putin's soul and democratic convictions.

The events of September 11, 2001, dramatically changed Washington's attitude toward Moscow and prompted a strong outpouring of emotional support for the United States in Russia. Putin reiterated his long-standing offer of support against al Qaeda and the Taliban; he granted overflight rights across Russian territory, endorsed the establishment of U.S. bases in Central Asia, and, perhaps most important, facilitated access to a readily available Russian-armed and Russian-trained military force in Afghanistan: the Northern Alliance. Of course, he had Russia's own interests in mind; to Putin, it was a blessing that

the United States had joined the fight against Islamist terrorism. Like many other alliances, U.S.-Russian cooperation on counterterrorism came into existence because of shared fundamental interests, not a common ideology or mutual sympathy.

Despite this newfound cooperation, relations remained strained in other areas. Bush's announcement in December 2001 that the United States would withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, one of the last remaining symbols of Russia's former superpower status, further wounded the Kremlin's pride. Likewise, Russian animosity toward NATO only grew after the alliance incorporated the three Baltic states, two of which—Estonia and Latvia—had unresolved disputes with Russia relating principally to the treatment of ethnic Russian minorities.

At roughly the same time, Ukraine became a source of major tension. From Russia's perspective, U.S. support for Viktor Yushchenko's Orange Revolution was not just about promoting democracy; it was also about undermining Russia's influence in a neighboring state that had joined the Russian empire voluntarily in the seventeenth century and that had both significant cultural ties with Russia and a large Russian population. Moreover, in Moscow's view, contemporary Ukraine's border—drawn by Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev as an administrative frontier between Soviet provinces—stretched far beyond historical Ukraine's outer limits, incorporating millions of Russians and creating ethnic, linguistic, and political tensions. The Bush administration's approach to Ukraine—namely, its pressure on a divided Ukraine to request NATO membership and its financial support for nongovernmental organizations actively assisting pro-Yushchenko political parties—has fueled Moscow's concerns that the United States is pursuing a neocontainment policy. Few Bush administration officials or members of Congress considered the implications of challenging Russia in an area so central to its national interests and on an issue so emotionally charged.

Georgia soon became another battleground. President Mikheil Saakashvili has been seeking to use Western support, particularly from the United States, as his principal tool in reestablishing Georgian sovereignty over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where Russian-backed separatists have fought for independence from Georgia since the early 1990s. And Saakashvili has not just been

demanding the return of the two Georgian enclaves; he has been openly positioning himself as the leading regional advocate of “color revolutions” and the overthrow of leaders sympathetic to Moscow. He has portrayed himself as a champion of democracy and an eager supporter of U.S. foreign policy, going so far as to send Georgian troops to Iraq in 2004 as part of the coalition force. The fact that he was elected with 96 percent of the vote—a suspiciously high number—along with his control of parliament and Georgian television, has provoked little concern outside the country. Nor has the arbitrary prosecution of business leaders and political rivals. When Zurab Zhvania—Georgia’s popular prime minister and the only remaining political counterweight to Saakashvili—died in 2005 under mysterious circumstances involving an alleged gas leak, members of his family publicly rejected the government’s account of the incident with a clear implication that they believed Saakashvili’s regime had been involved. But in contrast to U.S. concern over the murder of Russian opposition figures, no one in Washington seemed to notice.

In fact, the Bush administration and influential politicians in both parties have routinely supported Saakashvili against Russia, notwithstanding his transgressions. The United States has urged him on several occasions to control his temper and avoid provoking open military confrontation with Russia, but it is clear that Washington has adopted Georgia as its main client in the region. The United States has provided equipment and training to the Georgian military, enabling Saakashvili to take a harder line toward Russia; Georgian forces have gone so far as to detain and publicly humiliate Russian military personnel deployed as peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Georgia proper.

Of course, Russia’s conduct vis-à-vis Georgia has been far from exemplary. Moscow has granted Russian citizenship to most residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and has imposed economic sanctions against Georgia, often on dubious grounds. And Russian peacekeepers in the area are clearly there to limit Georgia’s ability to rule the two regions. But this blind U.S. support for Saakashvili contributes to a sense in Moscow that the United States is pursuing policies aimed at

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undermining what remains of Russia's drastically reduced regional influence. The sense in the Kremlin is that the United States cares about using democracy as an instrument to embarrass and isolate Putin more than it cares about democracy itself.

DEALING WITH A RESURGENT RUSSIA

DESPITE THESE growing tensions, Russia has not yet become a U.S. adversary. There is still a chance to stop further deterioration of the relationship. This will require a clearheaded evaluation of U.S. objectives in the region and an examination of the many areas where U.S. and Russian interests converge—especially counterterrorism and nonproliferation. It will also require careful management of situations such as the nuclear standoff in Iran, where the two countries' goals are similar but their tactical preferences diverge. Most important, the United States must recognize that it no longer enjoys unlimited leverage over Russia. Today, Washington simply cannot force its will on Moscow as it did in the 1990s.

The Bush administration and key congressional voices have reasonably suggested that counterterrorism and nonproliferation should be the defining issues in the U.S.-Russian relationship. Stability in Russia—still home to thousands of nuclear weapons—and the post-Soviet states is also a key priority. Moscow's support for sanctions—and, when necessary, the use of force—against rogue states and terrorist groups would be extremely helpful to Washington.

The United States has an interest in spreading democratic governance throughout the region, but it would be far-fetched to expect the Putin government to support U.S. democracy-promotion efforts. Washington must continue to ensure that no one, including Moscow, interferes with the rights of others to choose a democratic form of government or make independent foreign policy decisions. But it must recognize that it has limited leverage at its disposal to achieve this goal. With high energy prices, sound fiscal policies, and tamed oligarchs, the Putin regime no longer needs international loans or economic assistance and has no trouble attracting major foreign investment despite growing tension with Western governments. Within Russia, relative stability, prosperity, and a new sense of dignity have

tempered popular disillusionment with growing state control and the heavy-handed manipulation of the political process.

The overwhelmingly negative public image of the United States and its Western allies—carefully sustained by the Russian government—sharply limits the United States’ ability to develop a con-

stituency inclined to accept its advice on Russia’s domestic affairs. In the current climate, Washington cannot hope to do much more than convey strongly to Russia that repression is incompatible with long-term partnership with the United States. To make matters worse, the power of the United States’ moral example has been damaged. Moreover, suspicion of U.S. intentions runs so deep that Moscow reflexively views even decisions not directed against Russia, such as the deployment of antimissile systems in the Czech Republic and Poland, with extreme apprehension.

Meanwhile, as Moscow looks westward with suspicion, Russia’s use of its energy for political purposes has angered Western governments, not to mention its energy-dependent neighbors. Russia clearly sets different energy prices for its friends; government officials and executives of the state-controlled oil company Gazprom have occasionally displayed both bravado and satisfaction in threatening to penalize those who resist, such as Georgia and Ukraine. But on a fundamental level, Russia is simply rewarding those who enter into special political and economic arrangements with it by offering them below-market prices for Russian energy resources. Russia grudgingly accepts the Atlanticist choices of its neighbors but refuses to subsidize them. Also, it is somewhat disingenuous for the United States to respond to Russia’s political use of energy with self-righteous indignation considering that no



country introduces economic sanctions more frequently or enthusiastically than the United States.

U.S. commentators often accuse Russia of intransigence on Kosovo, but Moscow's public position is that it will accept any agreement negotiated by Serbia and Kosovo. There is no evidence that Russia has discouraged Serbia from reaching a deal with Kosovo; on the contrary, there have even been some hints that Moscow may abstain from voting on a UN Security Council resolution recognizing Kosovo's independence in the absence of a settlement with Belgrade. If unrecognized territories from the former Soviet Union, especially Abkhazia and South Ossetia, could likewise become independent without the consent of the states from which they seek to break away, Moscow would benefit. Many in Russia would not mind Kosovo's becoming a precedent for unrecognized post-Soviet territories, most of which are eager for independence leading to integration with Russia.

A variety of other foreign policy disagreements have exacerbated tensions further. It is true that Russia did not support the United States' decision to invade Iraq, but nor did key NATO allies such as France and Germany. Russia has supplied conventional weapons to some nations the United States considers hostile, such as Iran, Syria, and Venezuela, but it does so on a commercial basis and within the limits of international law. The United States may understandably view this as provocative, but many Russians would express similar feelings about U.S. arms transfers to Georgia. And although Russia has not gone as far as the United States and Europe would like when it comes to disciplining Iran and North Korea, Moscow has gradually come to support sanctions against both countries.

These numerous disagreements do not mean that Russia is an enemy. After all, Russia has not supported al Qaeda or any other terrorist group at war with the United States and no longer promotes a rival ideology with the goal of world domination. Nor has it invaded or threatened to invade its neighbors. Finally, Russia has opted not to foment separatism in Ukraine, despite the existence there of a large and vocal Russian minority population. Putin and his advisers accept that the United States is the most powerful nation in the world and that provoking it needlessly makes little sense.

But they are no longer willing to adjust their behavior to fit U.S. preferences, particularly at the expense of their own interests.

A BLUEPRINT FOR COOPERATION

WORKING CONSTRUCTIVELY with Russia does not mean nominating Putin for the Nobel Peace Prize or inviting him to address a joint session of Congress. Nor is anyone encouraging Russia to join NATO or welcoming it as a great democratic friend. What Washington must do is work with Russia to advance essential U.S. interests in the same way that the United States works with other important nondemocratic states, such as China, Kazakhstan, and Saudi Arabia. This means avoiding both misplaced affection and the unrealistic sense that the United States can take other countries for granted without consequences. Few deny that such cooperation should be pursued, but Washington's naive and self-serving conventional wisdom holds that the United States can secure Russia's cooperation in areas important to the United States while maintaining complete freedom to ignore Russian priorities. U.S. officials believe that Moscow should uncritically support Washington against Iran and Islamist terrorists on the theory that Russia also considers them threats. However, this argument ignores the fact that Russia views the Iranian threat very differently. Although Russia does not want a nuclear-armed Iran, it does not feel the same sense of urgency over the issue and may be satisfied with intrusive inspections preventing industrial-scale uranium enrichment. Expecting Russia to accommodate the United States on Iran without regard to U.S. policy on other issues is the functional equivalent of expecting Iraqis to welcome the U.S. and coalition troops as liberators in that it fundamentally ignores the other side's perspective on U.S. actions.

With this in mind, the United States should be firm in its relations with Russia and should make clear that Iran, nonproliferation, and terrorism are defining issues in the bilateral relationship. Similarly, Washington should communicate to Moscow that aggression against a NATO member or the unprovoked use of force against any other state would do profound damage to the relationship. The United States should also demonstrate with words and deeds that it will oppose any

effort to re-create the Soviet Union. In economic affairs, Washington should signal very clearly that manipulation of the law to seize assets that were legally acquired by foreign energy companies will have serious consequences, including restrictions on Russian access to U.S. and Western downstream markets and damage to Russia's reputation that would limit not only investment and transfers of technology but also Western companies' support for engagement with Russia. Finally, the United States should not be deterred by Russian objections to placing missile defense systems in the Czech Republic and Poland. Rather, in Henry Kissinger's formulation, Washington should keep the deployments limited to their "stated objective of overcoming rogue state threats" and combine them with an agreement on specific steps designed to reassure Moscow that the program has nothing to do with a hypothetical war against Russia.

The good news is that although Russia is disillusioned with the United States and Europe, it is so far not eager to enter into an alliance against the West. The Russian people do not want to risk their new prosperity—and Russia's elites are loath to give up their Swiss bank accounts, London mansions, and Mediterranean vacations. Although Russia is seeking greater military cooperation with China, Beijing does not seem eager to start a fight with Washington either. At the moment, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—which promotes cooperation among China, Russia, and the Central Asian states—is a debating club rather than a genuine security alliance.

But if the current U.S.-Russian relationship deteriorates further, it will not bode well for the United States and would be even worse for Russia. The Russian general staff is lobbying to add a military dimension to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and some top officials are beginning to champion the idea of a foreign policy realignment directed against the West. There are also quite a few countries, such as Iran and Venezuela, urging Russia to work with China to play a leading role in balancing the United States economically, politically, and militarily. And post-Soviet states such as Georgia, which are adept at playing the United States and Russia off against each other, could act in ways that escalate tensions. Putin's stage management of Moscow's succession in order to maintain a dominant role for himself makes a major foreign policy shift in Russia unlikely.

But new Russian leaders could have their own ideas—and their own ambitions—and political uncertainty or economic problems could tempt them to exploit nationalist sentiments to build legitimacy.

If relations worsen, the UN Security Council may no longer be available—due to a Russian veto—even occasionally, to provide legitimacy for U.S. military actions or to impose meaningful sanctions on rogue states. Enemies of the United States could be emboldened by new sources of military hardware in Russia, and political and security protection from Moscow. International terrorists could find new sanctuaries in Russia or the states it protects. And the collapse of U.S.-Russian relations could give China much greater flexibility in dealing with the United States. It would not be a new Cold War, because Russia will not be a global rival and is unlikely to be the prime mover in confronting the United States. But it would provide incentives and cover for others to confront Washington, with potentially catastrophic results.

It would be reckless and shortsighted to push Russia in that direction by repeating the errors of the past, rather than working to avoid the dangerous consequences of a renewed U.S.-Russian confrontation. But ultimately, Moscow will have to make its own decisions. Given the Kremlin's history of poor policy choices, a clash may come whether Washington likes it or not. And should that happen, the United States must approach this rivalry with greater realism and determination than it has displayed in its halfhearted attempts at partnership. 🌐