Russia Leaves the West

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THE END OF THE AFFAIR

As President Vladimir Putin prepares to host the summit of the G-8 (the group of eight highly industrialized nations) in St. Petersburg in July, it is hardly a secret that relations between Russia and the West have begun to fray. After more than a decade of talk about Russia's "integration" into the West and a "strategic partnership" between Moscow and Washington, U.S. and European officials are now publicly voicing their concern over Russia's domestic political situation and its relations with the former Soviet republics. In a May 4 speech in Lithuania, for example, U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney accused the Kremlin of "unfairly restricting citizens' rights" and using its energy resources as "tools of intimidation and blackmail."

Even as these critics express their dismay, they continue to assume that if they speak loudly and insistently, Russia will heed them and change its ways. Unfortunately, they are looking for change in the wrong place. It is true, as they charge, that Putin has recently clamped down on dissent throughout Russia and cracked down on separatists in Chechnya, but more important changes have come in Russia's foreign policy. Until recently, Russia saw itself as Pluto in the Western solar system, very far from the center but still fundamentally a part of it. Now it has left that orbit entirely: Russia's leaders have given up on becoming part of the West and have started creating their own Moscow-centered system.

The Kremlin's new approach to foreign policy assumes that as a big country, Russia is essentially friendless; no great power wants a strong Russia, which would be a formidable competitor, and many want a

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weak Russia that they could exploit and manipulate. Accordingly, Russia has a choice between accepting subservience and reasserting its status as a great power, thereby claiming its rightful place in the world alongside the United States and China rather than settling for the company of Brazil and India.

The United States and Europe can protest this change in Russia's foreign policy all they want, but it will not make any difference. They must recognize that the terms of Western-Russian interaction, conceptualized at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse 15 years ago and more or less unchanged since, have shifted fundamentally. The old paradigm is lost, and it is time to start looking for a new one.

A HALF-OPEN DOOR

The West deserves some of the blame for the shift in Russian foreign policy. The sudden collapse of Soviet power and the speed of German reunification took the United States and Europe by surprise. European governments, led by France, responded by transforming the European Community into a more tightly knit European Union (EU), while deferring the question of what to do about Eastern Europe and Russia. Washington, meanwhile, focused on managing the ever-weakening Soviet Union and rejoicing in its victory in the Cold War, neglecting to define a strategy for post-Soviet Russia. President George H. W. Bush's "new world order," articulated when the Soviet Union still existed, asked only that the Soviets stop their meddling around the globe. Only later did policymakers start thinking about organizing a true post–Cold War order, and when they did, their approach to handling post-Soviet Russia almost guaranteed failure.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, Western governments created a multitude of partnerships with their former communist adversaries in an effort to project their values and influence beyond the ruins of the wall. They hoped that some countries would quickly join Europe, now "whole and free," while others would gravitate toward it more slowly. The conflict in the Balkans dampened this early enthusiasm and demonstrated the United States' aloofness and Europe's weakness in the face of the forces released by the end of the superpower confrontation.

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Stormy weather ahead? Vladimir Putin, George W. Bush, and Lyudmila Putin, Moscow, May 9, 2005

From the beginning of the post–Cold War era, the West saw Russia as a special case. Armed with nuclear weapons, its great-power mentality shaken but unbroken, and just too big, Russia would be granted privileged treatment but no real prospect of membership in either NATO or the EU. The door to the West would officially remain open, but the idea of Russia's actually entering through it remained unthinkable. The hope was that Russia would gradually transform itself, with Western assistance, into a democratic polity and a market economy. In the meantime, what was important was that Russia would pursue a generally pro-Western foreign policy.

Moscow found such an offer unacceptable. It was only willing to consider joining the West if it was given something like co-chairmanship of the Western club—or at the very least membership in its Politburo. Russian leaders were not willing to follow the guidance coming from Washington and Brussels or to accept the same rules that its former Soviet satellites were following. Thus, despite all of the talk about Russia's integration into Western institutions, the project was stillborn from the beginning. It was just a matter of time before that reality became obvious to both sides.

As other former Warsaw Pact countries were being drawn into the expanding West, Russia, considered too important to ignore, was offered

new arrangements, but it was still kept at arm's length. Bringing Russia into the G-7 (to make it the G-8) was intended to tie Moscow to the West politically and to socialize its leaders. The NATO-Russia Council was supposed to harmonize security agendas and to promote military reform in Russia. The EU-Russia "common spaces" were designed to "Europeanize" Russia economically and socially and associate it with Europe politically. The Council of Europe, to which Russia was admitted while the first Chechen war still unresolved, was supposed to promote Western values and norms in Russia.

These arrangements did not so much fail as grossly underperform. The G-8 is still the old G-7 plus Russia, even though Russia technically has equal status with the other countries (except when the finance ministers meet). The NATO-Russia Council is merely a low-key technical-cooperation workshop operating at NATO's side. The EU-Russia road maps for the creation of the "common spaces," meant to enhance cooperation on the basis of greater mutual compatibility, offer only a set of very general objectives with no hard commitments that just paper over a growing gap. The Council of Europe, especially its Parliamentary Assembly, has turned into an oratorical battleground between Russian lawmakers and their European counterparts on Chechnya and other human rights issues. (Moscow has even threatened to halve its contribution to the council's budget if the criticism does not cease.) Even the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, which date from the Cold War, are floundering. Russia has chosen to ignore the former, which it accuses of political meddling in post-Soviet states, and has indicated that it might withdraw from the key provisions of the latter, which Moscow believes place unfair constraints on the Russian forces. So much for integration with the West.

After 9/11, Putin took the opportunity to offer the White House a deal. Russia was prepared to trade acceptance of U.S. global leadership for the United States' recognition of its role as a major ally, endowed with a special (that is, hegemonic) responsibility for the former Soviet space. That sweeping offer, obviously made from a position of weakness, was rejected by Washington, which was only prepared to discuss with Moscow the "rules of the road" in the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

The Kremlin gave Westpolitik another try by joining the "coalition of the unwilling" at the time of the Iraq war. By joining the major European powers in opposing the U.S. invasion, Moscow hoped to enter the Western system through the European door and create a Russo-German-French axis to counterbalance Washington and London. Russia failed again. A new anti-American entente did not materialize; situational agreement with Moscow (and disagreement with Washington) could not overcome the fundamental character of transatlantic relations.

Instead, transatlantic and European institutions continued to enlarge to the east, taking in the remaining former Warsaw Pact and Council for Mutual Economic Assistance countries and the Baltic states. With the entry of Poland and the Baltics into the EU, the EU's overall approach became even more alarming for Moscow. At the same time, both the United States and Europe began supporting regime change from within and geopolitical reorientation in Russia's borderlands, most notably in Ukraine and Georgia, thus projecting their power of attraction beyond the former Soviet border into the CIS. The concept of "the near abroad," which Moscow used in the 1990s to justify its hegemony over the new states on Russia's periphery, was suddenly revived—only now there were two versions of it, one from the perspective of Moscow, the other from the perspective of Brussels, both of which were claiming the same territory. From 2003 to 2005, for the first time since 1991, Moscow's relations with both parts of the West—the United States and Europe—soured at the same time.

PARADIGM LOST

TOWARD THE end of Putin's first presidential term, in 2004, Western governments finally concluded that Russia was not going to turn democratic in the foreseeable future. In their view, Russia no longer belonged to the same group as Poland, or even Ukraine. Reluctantly, they put Russia into the same slot as China, even while still hoping—improbably, perhaps—to make the most of the partnership established in a happier era.

But the changes on the Russian side went beyond domestic politics and had broad implications. For two decades prior to 2005, Russia

had been continuously retreating in the realm of international politics. The "color revolutions" in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan made it clear that even the post-Soviet space—an area where Moscow was still dominant and felt more or less at ease—was starting to disintegrate. In late 2004 and early 2005, in the wake of the Beslan school hostage crisis and the Ukrainian election fiasco, the self-confidence of the Putin government hit an all-time low.

Astonishingly, the Kremlin bounced back—and very quickly. Lessons were learned, new resources mobilized, and morale restored, all helped along mightily by high oil and gas prices. At first, Moscow acted cautiously, still somewhat unsure of itself. It joined Beijing in calling for the withdrawal of the U.S. military from Central Asia. Then, toward the end of 2005, it boldly embraced Uzbekistan as a formal ally, and the year ended with a dispute with Ukraine over gas supplies. The Kremlin did not hesitate to take on the post-Soviet republics' "beacon of democracy."

In the past year, Russia has begun acting like the great power it was in tsarist times. It conducted its first-ever military exercises with China and a smaller one with India. It ended gas subsidies for its former Soviet neighbors and cut off supplies to Ukraine when Kiev balked at a 400 percent price increase. It welcomed Hamas leaders to Moscow after the United States and the EU declared that they would not talk to them and offered financial support to the Palestinians even as the Americans and the Europeans were cutting off or suspending theirs. Russia has squarely rejected placing Iran under sanctions for its uranium-enrichment activities and has declared that its nuclear energy cooperation and arms trade with Tehran will continue and that the Russian armed forces would stay neutral should the United States decide to attack Iran.

Having left the Western orbit, Russia is also working to create its own solar system. For the first time since the unraveling of the Soviet Union, Moscow is treating the former Soviet republics as a priority. It has started promoting Russian economic expansion in the CIS in an effort both to obtain lucrative assets and to enhance its political influence.

Facing what it sees as an emerging new world—which features a new version of great-power nationalism—the Russian leadership

exudes confidence. Beyond the former Soviet space, Russia sees U.S. influence gradually waning and considers the EU as an economic, but not a political or military, unit that will remain self-absorbed for a while. Moscow admires China's progress and, careful but not fearful of its giant neighbor, is cooperating ever more closely with Beijing; it considers the more distant India unproblematic.

Part of the reason for Moscow's confidence is Russia's much-improved financial situation and the consolidation of power in the hands of the ruling circle. High energy prices have resulted in a huge surplus in Russia's coffers, which has allowed the Kremlin to build the third-largest currency reserves in the world, set aside over $50 billion in a domestic "stabilization fund," and start repaying its foreign debts ahead of schedule. With the standard of living in Russia rising, the political opposition marginalized, and government authority recentralized, the Kremlin has grown assertive and occasionally arrogant. The humility of the post-Soviet period has passed: Russians have made it clear that their domestic politics is no one else's business—Vladislav Surkov, Putin's chief-political-officer-cum-ideologue, often emphasizes that the country is a "sovereign democracy"—and Russian leaders have begun playing hardball in the world arena.

FROM IRONCLADS TO OIL RIGS

IN THE LATE nineteenth century, Russia's success was said to rest on its army and its navy; today, its success rests on its oil and gas. Energy is a key resource that should be exploited while prices are high, but it is also an effective political weapon, although one to be handled with care. So far, Moscow has done the right thing—ending energy subsidies to the former Soviet republics—but in the wrong way. Rather than reforming the energy relationship with Ukraine in a steady and open manner, for example, Russia's state-controlled energy company, Gazprom, resorted to an eleventh-hour pressure tactic, which seemed like blackmail and made Russia look like a threat to global energy security.

To the extent that the Russian ruling elite cares about the West, it cares about economics, particularly the markets for oil and gas. The elite was overjoyed by Gazprom's steep rise in capitalization in early

January 2006, which it took as vindication of its hard-line policies toward Ukraine. It wants Russian corporate giants to become transnational, and Gazprom is one of the world's biggest corporations. In several industries, including energy, metals, and chemicals, Russian national champions are looking to compete for places in the top ten.

By and large, however, Russian leaders do not care much about acceptance by the West; even the Soviet Union worried more about its image. Officials in Moscow privately enjoy Senator John McCain's thunderous statements about kicking Russia out of the G-8 because they know it is not going to happen and they take pleasure in the supposed impotence of serious adversaries. Public relations and lobbying are simply not high on the Kremlin's agenda. GR—government relations—is considered more important than PR. Russia's engaging former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder for a gas pipeline project and wooing Donald Evans, the former U.S. commerce secretary, for an oil job are just two stunning examples of this approach. Russia, the Kremlin believes, will get bad press in the West almost no matter what it does, so why bother?

All of this promises serious tension, and even conflict, between Russia and the West, although nothing like a return to the Cold War. There is no ideological antagonism, since today's Russia lacks a state ideology. And in a number of important areas—including fighting Islamist radicalism—there will be cooperation. On others issues, such as the rise of China and energy security, there will be some cooperation, but Russia will hardly side with the West as a matter of course. In the test case of Iran, when push comes to shove, Moscow would prefer to see Tehran pursue its nuclear program, even if it is imperfectly safeguarded, than a U.S. attack to stop it. Whereas the Iraq war led the Kremlin away from the White House and into the arms of l'Elysée, a war on Iran is likely to push Moscow further away from both Washington and Brussels—and into the arms of Beijing.

NEITHER WITH US NOR AGAINST US

THE WEST needs to rethink the fundamentals of its approach to Russia. Russia's domestic transformation will not follow the course of, say, Poland's: modernizing Russia by means of EU integration will

not be an option. Nor will Russia adopt the French approach: an occasionally dissenting but solidly Euro-Atlantic foreign and security policy. Nor should the West be banking on a historical shortcut: no democratic, pro-Western tsar will suddenly emerge from some color revolution to hitch Russia to the U.S.-EU wagon.

On the other hand, Russia today is not, and is not likely to become, a second Soviet Union. It is not a revanchist and imperialist aggressor bent on reabsorbing its former provinces. It is not a rogue state, nor a natural ally of those states that may be called rogues. A Sino-Russian alliance against the United States could only occur as a result of exceptionally shortsighted and foolish policies on Washington's part. Today's Russia may not be pro-Western, but neither is it anti-Western.

In light of Russia's new foreign policy, the West needs to calm down and take Russia for what it is: a major outside player that is neither an eternal foe nor an automatic friend. Western leaders must disabuse themselves of the notion that by preaching values one can actually plant them. Russia will continue to change, but at its own pace. The key drivers of that change must be the growth of capitalism at home and openness to the outside world. The West needs to adopt an issue-based approach when dealing with the Russian government, but it should not expect Moscow always to follow its lead. Engaging Russia is over, and engaging with Russia, where possible and desirable, must be based on mutual self-interest. Most important, Western leaders have to avoid wishful thinking when trying to embrace either a Kremlin ruler or a liberal opposition figure.

Looking ahead, the current complications are likely to get worse in the near and medium term. The G-8 summit in St. Petersburg will be accompanied by intense criticism of Kremlin policies in the Western media. Russia's World Trade Organization accession process has already slowed down as a result of U.S. and EU demands. Kosovo's coming formal independence from Serbia will be taken up by Russia as a model for resolving the stalemated conflicts in Georgia and Moldova, where the West is insisting on territorial unity and Moscow is supporting the separatist enclaves. On the all-important issue of Iran, Russia will continue essentially to share Western goals while opposing Western (and especially U.S.) hard-line policies.

Tension will culminate in 2008, the year of the Russian and U.S. presidential elections. Supreme power will likely be transferred from the current incumbent to another member of the ruling circle in Moscow, and this anointment will be legitimized in a national election. (There are other scenarios, of course—ranging from Putin's running for a third term to a union with Belarus—but they seem less probable at the moment.) Thus, the real question will be not about the Russian election but about the reaction to that election in the West, and above all in the United States. Will it be pronounced free but not fair, as before? Or neither free nor fair? Declaring the post-2008 Russian leadership illegitimate could push the U.S.-Russian relationship from cool estrangement to real alienation. And all of this would be happening in the midst of the U.S. presidential campaign and could coincide with Ukraine's taking an important step toward joining NATO.

With U.S.-Russian relations at their lowest point—and the Kremlin at its most confident—since 1991, Washington must recognize that frustrated Russia-bashing is futile. It must understand that positive change in Russia can only come from within and that economic realities, rather than democratic ideals, will be the vehicle for that change. And most important, as president and CEO of the international system, the United States must do everything it can to ensure that the system does not once again succumb to dangerous and destabilizing great-power rivalry.