The Long-Term Direction Of Russia's Relations With The West

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One of the most hopeful developments to come out of the terrorist attack on September 11 on the United States has been an apparently major shift in Russian foreign policy towards the West and a greater openness of the West, specifically the United States, towards Russia. For all of us whose lives have been dominated, until recently, by the Cold War, any move of Russia toward closer relations with the West has to be greeted. The questions I wish to address today are:

- how great has been the evolution in relations between Russia and the West?
- why has it happened?
- what are the prospects for the future?

The changes in the policies of each side toward the other, and the gains both sides have apparently made have been extensive:

For example, during the Afghan campaign Russia:

- provided intelligence
- it persuaded the formerly Soviet Central Asian republics to open their territories to allied troops
- it made its own bases in the region available
- it thinned out its troops in the Balkans

Russia abandoned its opposition to the abrogation of the ABM treaty by the United States Instead, the two countries concluded a Nuclear Arms Treaty ostensibly reducing the stockpiles of strategic nuclear weapons in Russian and American hands by two thirds.

NATO and Russia worked together to overcome Russia's boycott, since the Kosovo crisis, of the NATO Russia Permanent Joint Council, by replacing it with the NATO-Russia Joint Council.

Russia has downplayed its opposition to the enlargement of NATO.
Both the EU and the US have granted Russia "market economy status".
The EU has found a solution to facilitate travel between Russia and its exclave of Kaliningrad after the EU accepts Poland and the Baltic States as members in 2004.

Russia voted in favour of the UN Security Council Resolution on Iraq.

In order to determine the solidity of what has happened and the prospects for the future, we should look briefly at the history of Western-Russian relations, and specifically US- Russian relations, in the decade following the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In the early years, both Russia and the United States were under strong domestic pressure to make progress in their relations with each other. Yeltsin sought a deep partnership with the West, and especially the United States, because he wanted to consolidate his power and to get Western assistance for his reforms. He also hoped that, by in accepting the West's point of view on a whole range of foreign policy issues, he would receive counter-concessions.

Clinton wanted to reduce his defence budget so as to finance his domestic priorities.

By the time that Putin came to power, the Russians had come to the conclusion that they had received little for their efforts to accommodate the West. After having accepted the reunification of Germany, which had been difficult enough, the Russians had then been shocked when the West had taken Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic into NATO. The eastward expansion of NATO amounted, in their eyes, to a trespass in their sphere of influence; it was contrary to certain assurances that the Russians thought they had received at the moment of the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact; and it was emblematic of the decline in Russian influence in the world.

Since the days of Thucydides we have known that states view growing power of their neighbours as a matter of grave concern. The NATO attack on Yugoslavia added to that concern because it suggested that NATO was not a purely defensive alliance.

In addition, many of the Russian conservatives considered that the prescriptions for economic reform dispensed by Western countries and Western institutions were an attempt to ruin the Russian economy.

Putin came in, not as a Westernizer, as had Yeltsin, but as a nationalist, determined to make Russia strong and to restore Russia's standing in the world.

The West, and especially many in the United States, was also shocked by the role that Russia had played in the Kosovo conflict in supporting Milosevic. In addition, many American critics of Clinton's policy of close relations with Yeltsin believed that Russian policy in Chechnya adopted by the incoming Putin, coupled with Russia's sales of dangerous weapons and technologies to rogue states, justified a US disengagement from Russia. Bush came to power determined to take a different line with Russia from that of Clinton.

The change of approach in the two countries led to a serious chill in relations. Putin embarked on a series of visits to Russia's old friends, China, North Korea, Iran, Libya, Cuba and Vietnam. With China, Putin concluded in July 2001 a friendship treaty, which

stopped just short of being an alliance and was clearly aimed at the United States. Russia declared invalid a previous secret undertaking it had made to the United States that it would suspend arms sales to Iran. During Putin's visit to Beijing in 2000, one triumphant Russian official crowed to Western reporters that Russians had plenty of friends in China, India, Iran Iraq and the former Yugoslavia If NATO and the EU overlooked Russia's interests in such places as Kosovo and Eastern Europe.

The trouble was that there was little economic gain to be obtained from most of these old friends and they were not of much use in opposing US plans to develop an anti-missile defence system or NATO plans to enlarge. Furthermore, it was Russian sales of weapons and technology to dodgy states that had been one of the motivating forces behind the US desire for a missile shield. Besides this, Russian diplomacy was doing little to further Russia's desire for closer economic relations with the West. In addition, the Russians did not trust the Chinese.

Bush, for his part, made it clear before he assumed office that he was not prepared to visit Russia or China before he had seen all his friends and allies. He dropped Clinton's efforts to amend the ABM treaty, and announced his intention of abrogating it. He took advantage of the Robert Hanssen affair, in April 2001 to expel over fifty Russian diplomats, the largest such expulsion since the Cold War.

The attack on the United States on 11 09 allowed Putin to break the log-jam he faced in his relations with the US and the West.

The Bush administration had been rediscovering the usefulness of Russia beyond the fight with al-Qaeda:

- Russia, as the world's third largest producer of oil and with the largest reserves of gas, offered the US an alternative to Saudi Arabia.
- Russia's under-policed stockpile of atomic warheads, fissile material, and its mounds of nuclear garbage provided a target for potential terrorists.
- Russia's relations with the three members of the axis of evil could be useful to the US.

The shift in US perceptions of Russia, coupled with the efforts of the two countries to repair their relations that I described at the beginning of my remarks, meant that by the time of Bush's visit to Russia last summer, the Economist could comment that American relations with Russia were better than at any time since WW II, while those with Europe were as bad as they had ever been.

The history of the last ten years is useful, because it brings out the principal elements that are likely to influence the future course of relations between Russia and the West:

The first element is that economic co-operation with the West offers Russia the only hope it has of recovering its economic strength. The Chinese have little to offer and the Russians do not trust them. In fact, one of the factors that have propelled Russia to

embark on its reforms since the days of Gorbachev has been fear of China. Siberia, and the Far Eastern Region of Russia, with a population of about 37 million, sit atop one billion Chinese. The Far-Eastern Region alone, with about seven million people, borders Chinese provinces with 120 million. Moreover, the Chinese are seeping across the border; there are already an estimated 2.5 million Chinese immigrants in the Russian borderlands.

The Russians do not fear the West. They resent it. They resent for being overbearing, patronizing, and for taking advantage of Russia's decline.

The second factor of continuity with the past decade is that the present state, and likely future direction of East-West relations, provide ample food for nourishing this resentment. Many of the gestures made by the Russians since the attack of 11 September amount to, in their eyes at least, concessions for which they have received little from the West:

- It is difficult to see the Nuclear Arms Treaty as much more than a fig-leaf that allowed Putin to swallow the demise of the ABM Treaty.

- It is not yet clear whether the Russians will be any happier with the NATO-Russia Council than they were with the body it replaced, the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council. The Russians complained, with some justification, that there were never any serious discussions in the latter body, since all the decisions had been taken beforehand among NATO members.

- Then there is the further expansion of NATO to be decided at the Prague Summit, plus the expansion eastward of the EU that has already been approved.

- Furthermore, the Russians suspect that, on the basis of statements emanating from the Bush administration about extending the network of US bases around the world, that the new US military presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia may become permanent. They fear that this presence will reinforce American efforts to build pipelines skirting Russia to bring the hydrocarbon deposits in Central Asia and the Caspian Basin to the market.

- Finally, Russian hopes of joining the WTO in 2003 are bound to be disappointed. There are too many hurdles to overcome. Russian banks, insurance companies, car makers and farmers want lengthy periods of protection. Foreign governments will not accept subsidized energy. The Russian customs service is arbitrary. Russia is good at passing laws but not at implementing them. Membership in the WTO is therefore not likely, at the earliest, before the middle of the decade.

Since Putin embarked on his new policy towards the United States and the West against the advice of the Russian political and military elite, and since the public opinion polls on relations with the United States are ambiguous, Putin's ability to carry out his westward policy will depend very much on his own popularity. As it is, his efforts are

often frustrated by an uncomprehending, if not hostile, establishment. Putin's popular support is very high for the moment, but both the war in Chechnya and a possible down-turn in the economy could cause it to decline by the time of the presidential elections in 2004.

The third element of continuity in East-West relations is that Russian conduct in Chechnya, and Russian sales of weapons and technology to rogue states could lead once again to Western disillusionment with Russia.

A further issue that has the potential to cause a negative reaction in the West is Russian treatment of the other former Soviet Republics. In October 1999, when Putin was still Prime Minister, he signed into law a National Security Council paper calling for the creation of one economic space of the former Soviet Republics. In the pursuit of this goal, Russia has applied political, economic, or military pressure on pressure on Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, among other republics. At some point, Russia's bullying tactics are likely to become well known and provoke a reaction in the West.

The process of integrating Russia is likely to be long because of the political and economic backwardness of the country. Russia is a poor, semi-authoritarian country:

- Its economy is barely larger that that of Switzerland.
- Its share of global trade is less than 2%, about that of Spain, and less than half of that of Canada.
- Its share of FDI is below that of Chile or Thailand.
- Its manufactured exports amount to little more than guns, and vodka. Those bits of Russian industry that do sell well abroad, such as steel and chemicals, rely on artificially low energy prices.

An analysis that has just appeared, (Treisman, Daniel, "How different is Putin's Russia?" Foreign Affairs, November-December 2002) indicates that Putin's Russia is less reformed and less stable than its image in the West would suggest. On the economic side, Putin has been able to do little to curb the power of the oligarchs. In fact, capital is becoming even more concentrated.

Certainly, the lack of serious economic reforms places its degree of economic liberty, according to Freedom House and the Heritage Foundation, at the same level as that of such countries of the region as Albania, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Macedonia. Its standing on the corruption index of Transparency International puts it in company with Cote d'Ivoire, Tanzania, India and Zimbabwe.

There is also the political side. Putin's efforts to reform Russia's federal system and to invigorate the role of the Central government have had less effect than expected. Corruption seems to have become more wide-spread; crime has increased. Putin has given Russia increased stability, but often at the cost of becoming more authoritarian. Putin has weakened the independence of the judiciary. He has gone on the offensive against critical independent media outlets. He has limited the powers of independent trade unions, political parties, and NGOs. He has weakened the upper house of parliament.

According to Freedom House's Democratization Index, the degree of democracy in Russia has been seriously eroded over the last five years, putting Russia in a worse position than Ukraine, Bosnia, Georgia, Moldova, Albania, and Yugoslavia. The only formerly Soviet Republics that have less democracy are Belarus, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Because of Russia's limited degree of press freedom, Reporters without Borders places it in the 121st position out of 139 countries, in the company of Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Iran.

While the glacial pace of reform in Russia has been contrary to some of the extravagant expectations that were raised at the time of the fall of communism, we were wrong to expect faster progress. No country can jump over its own shadow, or escape from its own history. The change of political culture from authoritarianism to pluralism has always been a difficult one to make, as the history of Western Europe in the last century demonstrates. The jump for Russia is even greater, for Russia was only obliquely affected by the gradual evolution of Western culture from authoritarianism to pluralism in the course of the last four hundred years. Furthermore, Russia has no useful historical memory of a market economy.

The evolution in Russia's Political and economic culture, therefore, is likely to be halting. What will emerge, furthermore, will probably be different from European models. Samuel Huntington in his study, "The Clash of Civilizations," has observed that it is not easy for a country to change its civilizational identity, which is what Russia is attempting to do. A possible parallel may be drawn with Turkey, which, eighty years after the Attaturk revolution, remains, at best, a very authoritarian democracy, with a highly imperfect market economy.

What all of these factors mean for Russia's relations with the West is that rapprochement is likely to proceed at best slowly, with many detours. While Russia does not have much choice in the long run, but to continue to seek integration with the West, there will be times when it will feel constrained to go its own way. We, for our part, must show persistence, and wisdom in seeking to develop relations with Russia and encourage reform. However imperfect the Russian reality may be, a Russia increasingly entwined with the West is to be preferred to an unstable, impoverished country, nursing resentments, and in conflict with its neighbours.