U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN AN AGE OF AMERICAN TRIUMPHALISM

An Interview with Stephen F. Cohen

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He spoke with Johan Kharabi of the *Journal of International Affairs* about the U.S. approach to Russia since the end of the Soviet Union, the role of history in shaping Russia's future, and the dangerous lack of debate within U.S. policy-making circles.

***Journal**: The world recently commemorated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. How has this event been received in Russia?*

Cohen: For Russians, the more important date is this March, which marks 25 years since Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and began the reforms he called *perestroika*. There will be very conflicting opinions in the Russian press about what happened to the nation in the past 25 years. The angriest view will lament the loss of the Soviet Union, which many Russians still do.

In that connection, something that has happened repeatedly in Russian history is now unfolding again. Modernization has been a political goal for centuries and it has almost always involved the same issue: Do we do it evolutionarily or through a revolutionary transformation imposed from above? This debate and political struggle are now under way again. The from-above, or "leap," model is historically associated with Peter the Great and Stalin, and is non-democratic in nature. Indeed, the result has always been to greatly empower the state at the

expense of the people. The alternative model in Russian history is associated with Alexander II, who in the 19th century freed the serfs and began legal and local political reform, giving Russians more freedom and initiative. We could say he tried to modernize or liberalize Tsarism. The other evolutionary example was Lenin, who introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the early 1920s, which sought to modernize the country by re-introducing market relations and limited political initiatives. Stalin overthrew NEP in 1929 for an economic leap he later termed, rightly in my view, "Revolution from Above."

Nearly sixty years later, Gorbachev and his people attempted to modernize the Soviet Union by dismantling the Stalinist system with the consent of the people and, for the first time, with democracy as the driving force of the modernization process. Under Gorbachev, modernization therefore meant both political and economic modernization. After the Soviet Union ended in 1991, Yeltsin continued Gorbachev's democratization in some respects but his policies resulted in the beginning of Russia's de-democratization, which in the United States is usually, and incorrectly, attributed to his successor, Putin. The way Yeltsin abolished the Soviet Union, like a thief in the night, was not constitutional or democratic. There was no referendum on it. If you want to create democracy, you do not abolish the only state and homeland most people had ever known with the stroke of a pen, without consulting them. Yeltsin could have done what Gorbachev had done in March 1991—hold a referendum on the Union. Yeltsin might have won it, ending the Soviet Union consensually and without the widespread bitterness that remains today, and the 15 republics would have gone their own ways. Then, in October 1993, Yeltsin used tanks to abolish a parliament popularly elected in 1990 when Russia was still part of the Soviet Union. This too was a Russian tradition—the destruction of a legislature in a nation with a long history of overwhelming executive power but without a tradition of strong, independent legislatures. Russia has a parliament today, the Duma, but it is neither.

When Yeltsin began his own effort to modernize Russia, in the early 1990s, he resorted to a kind of shock therapy. When Yeltsin adopted this new version of a transformation imposed from above—partly on the advice of Americans like Jeffrey Sachs, Larry Summers, and many others, (it wasn't Harvard's finest or wisest moment)—he may not have known that he was resorting to a dangerous Russian tradition. Unlike Gorbachev, who knew Russia's history of catastrophic modernizations from above, Yeltsin and his western advisers knew little of it or were uninterested in the inherent political dangers. I don't want to suggest that Yeltsin was like Stalin, but his disregard for evolutionary change was in the same tradition, and in fact many Russians died unnecessarily, or prematurely, as a result of shock therapy. So did, very nearly, Russia's democratization.

Now, the modernization debate has broken out anew because Russia's political class realizes that the country's infrastructures have disintegrated very badly since 1991 and that the nation cannot continue to live on energy exports, no matter what world prices might be. The ongoing debate over how to diversify the economy is again a debate over how to modernize more generally and, thus, a struggle over Russia's future. That is why we are witnessing a "Stalinist Renaissance," the rehabilitation and restoration of Stalin's reputation as a great statesman, though it is little understood in the United States. This neo-Stalinist outlook comes mainly from the Communist Party and ultra-state nationalists, but it has a broad popular base and it is forcing the major politicians to do what they don't want to do, which is to state publicly their position on the nation's Stalinist past, especially the 1930s and Stalin's modernization revolution.

***Journal**: Where do Medvedev and Putin stand on this modernization debate?*

Cohen: Medvedev is positioning himself to represent evolutionary modernization or what some of his supporters are calling democratic modernization. Putin is more associated with the so-called state corporations he has sponsored. His supporters argue those corporations can spur modernization by the state, both as investor and consumer, pointing to the example of the Asian tigers. Putin is no Stalinist—that's a misperception—he too has spoken critically of Stalin's rule. But Putin is very much a representative of the "strong state" outlook, in which Stalin remains an important historical symbol. Medvedev, on the other hand, thirteen years younger than Putin, has said he was strongly influenced by Gorbachev's anti-Stalinism in the late 1980s. As yet, there has been no direct conflict between Putin and Medvedev on the modernization issue, only speeches with different emphases and historical references. But the debate and struggle are just beginning, and the relative political fortunes of both leaders are very much at stake.

What worries me is that U.S. policy toward Russia is abetting the neo-Stalinist side. Those people constantly remind Russia that in the 1930s Stalin used an impending foreign threat as the justification for an imposed, non-democratic modernization. Then the neo-Stalinists draw a parallel with today's NATO expansion to Russia's borders. Every time NATO takes in another former Warsaw Bloc country or former Soviet republic, or threatens to do so, the neo-Stalinist modernizers grow in strength. The Soviet Union lost 26.5 million people in World War II, a loss with enormous policy implications today. And when both the political elite and ordinary Russians see NATO encamping in the Baltics, approaching Georgia and Ukraine, encircling Russia militarily, it stirs that remembrance and strengthens the popular base for another modernization without democracy. For

the first time in decades there may be officially sanctioned images of Stalin on Red Square this year during the May 9 commemoration of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany.

***Journal**: What opportunities exist for re-democratization in Russia?*

Cohen: The main obstacle to democratization in Russia is not—contrary to American political and media opinion—Vladimir Putin or the KGB, or any single leader or institution. It's the way the nation's most valuable state economic and financial assets were "privatized" between 1991 and 1996. The idea of state or commonly owned property was not just a communist idea; it was a Russian idea, with origins long before 1917. The Soviet state property fell into the hands of a relatively small group of insiders—not just the billionaires we call oligarchs—and created an extremely wealthy class very quickly.

Polls show that a majority of Russians still think that property was taken and is held illegitimately. The people who own that property and who are part of the ruling elite, will never permit free elections or a freely elected parliament, knowing that such elections and such a truly representative legislature would endanger their property, endangering them personally, as well as their families. For evidence, look no further than how they have moved their families and their assets abroad.

Vladislav Surkov, a top aide to both Putin and Medvedev, referred to the existing elite as an "offshore aristocracy." It's a remarkably evocative formulation. By moving their assets and families abroad, the very rich show that their first loyalty is not to Russia and its future. Surkov said Russia needs its own real national bourgeoisie, which links its own future to Russia's future. There is much truth in what he said. After all, you can't modernize Russia by buying English soccer teams or American NBA teams.

The essence of democracy anywhere is a free representative parliament—however badly it may work. You can't have this without free elections, but the Russian elite that holds vast property and controls part of the political system will never permit free elections as long as it fears for its wealth. The United States, by supporting Yeltsin's privatization policies, was deeply complicit in the way that property was acquired. The Clinton administration and outside advisers called it a transition to a market economy and cheered it, and Americans went to Russia to guide the process. They unknowingly created a kind of firewall against democracy. Thoughtful Russians understand this conflict between ill-gained property and the lack of democracy. Some have proposed solutions, such as a one time super tax on this property, which would go into pensions, healthcare, and education in order to create a new social contract. According to this proposal, the people would forgive

the rich and acknowledge their property as legitimate, and then their resentments would diminish over time, making democratization again possible. Social justice is a profound Russian belief. Without it, there will be no Russian democracy.

***Journal**: Despite the failure of the 1990s, do proponents of western-style liberalism remain a formidable force in Russia?*

Cohen: They barely exist at high levels. From 1991 to 1994, they were perhaps the strongest faction in the Russian government due to the carry-over of Gorbachev's westernism and the belief of Yeltsin's political team that the United States was its true political partner and would provide generous financial assistance. Then came the calamities of the 1990s associated with shock therapy, which Russians thought had "Made in America" written on it—not an unreasonable belief since they saw legions of American economists and other advisers encamped in Russia. I published a book, *Failed Crusade*, about the consequences of this ill-conceived U.S. policy and behavior.

Thinking in Russia about its relationship with the West has become more diverse. I simplify a bit, but there are essentially three groups. One says, "We are Eurasian; our civilization, our security, and our future are not with the West." These political forces advocate minimal relations with the West. They are not urging a new Iron Curtain, but are arguing that Russia cannot stake its national or economic security on the West. Russia, they say, tried that in the 1990s and the early 2000s and was exploited and cheated. Its territory was endangered, promises were broken, and the country was left in ruins.

Then there are those who still argue that historically Russia has been backward mainly because its citizens have not been given western-style political and economic freedoms and that the country's future lies in the West—in western models, alliances, and economic integration. To attain this, they hope for partnership with the United States, which they think still exemplifies the West. By the way, this small and diminishing group is the only one that still welcomes U.S. "democracy promotion" in Russia—its funds and crusaders.

The most interesting group emerging in Russia today, I think, is the one that says, "We are a Eurasian country, but that means we are in Europe and in Asia, and the United States is not a European country." Their perceived western ally is Germany. It is often forgotten that, though Russia and Germany fought two wars in the 20th century, between those wars they had close relationships, along with a cultural affinity dating back to Tsarist times. That relationship is re-emerging. Look at German Chancellor Merkel. She came to power as an anti-Russian—she grew up in Communist East Berlin—but has emerged as one of Putin's strongest

European partners.

Germany does not want to be an American protégé. Germany is beholden to Moscow for reuniting it in 1990-91: It wasn't the United States that made reunification possible, it was the Kremlin leader, Gorbachev. The economic relationship between Berlin and Moscow is strong and growing. Russia is providing some 40 percent of Germany's energy. They are building new pipelines together, and neither liked Ukraine's disruption of supplies through its existing pipelines. Indeed, it was Berlin that blocked Bush's attempt to bring Ukraine into NATO. This emerging Moscow-Berlin relationship, verging on an alliance, is one of the most important new bilateral relationships in the world, and almost no one in this country is paying any attention to it. In fact, for Moscow, Berlin and Beijing—its new Eurasian relationships—are more important than Washington, though Washington seems not to have noticed.

Russia's relations with China are closer and more conflict-free than they have been for many years. The Sino-Russian relationship is bolstered by the fact that China is one of the largest consumers of Russian armaments, but there is more. Russia needs manufactured goods from China, and hopes to export grain there, and China needs Russia's energy. Add the emerging Moscow-Berlin relationship, and you see how an enlightened Eurasianism makes sense to many people in Moscow. It seems to be paying off. I would say Putin's foreign policy attitude is: "Yes, we would be happy to have a real partnership with the United States, but Washington doesn't want that kind of relationship with us. And when the United States tells us we don't have options, it is uninformed." Economically, Putin is right. In terms of corporate investment, the United States is not a major player in Russia. Those countries I just mentioned are the big players. But Washington continues to behave as though Russia needs us, while Moscow establishes long-term energy and other economic relations with China, Germany, and other European countries.

Journal: *This leads us to foreign policy. What is behind the deterioration of Russian-U.S. relations in recent years, in your opinion?*

Cohen: There have been, I think, four major conflicting issues since the end of the Soviet Union between the United States and Russia that have generated what I treat in my recent book, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives*, as a new, or renewed, cold war. It began with a conflicting understanding of how the last Cold War ended. Historically, it is very clear how and when it ended. President Reagan declared when he left office in January 1989, "The Cold War is over." That was almost three years before the end of the Soviet Union itself, and he credited himself and Gorbachev. The first President Bush and Soviet President Gorbachev then declared, at Malta

in 1989 and later, that the Cold War had ended and that they were wrapping it up. In 1990-91, this seemed to be true: Russia essentially sided with the United States in the first Gulf war against Saddam Hussein, and Bush did not intervene in Eastern Europe when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. Gorbachev accepted the reunification of Germany. It appeared that the former Cold War rivals were now cooperating in solving major problems, from the Persian Gulf to Berlin.

Then the Soviet Union disappeared, and suddenly Washington essentially proclaimed, "We won the Cold War by defeating the Soviet Union." It was a completely different and untrue narrative. The first person to trot out this nonsense was the first president Bush, who feared losing re-election to Clinton in 1992 and wanted to claim victory for himself in the Cold War. This triumphalist view then became axiomatic in Washington and the Clinton administration turned it into an American ideology and national narrative. It meant that the United States had won the Cold War and Russia had lost it, which implied an analogy with defeated Germany and Japan after World War II, when we told those countries what they could and couldn't do for more than a generation. Washington tried to do the same with post-Soviet Russia and that fateful triuphalist mindset created four major conflicts that still exist.

First, we assumed we could and should instruct Russia on how to create a market economy and democracy, which Washington and legions of American crusaders tried to do in the 1990s. The reality is that Russians themselves know how to do both. More eligible voters have voted in Russian presidential elections than vote in ours. When Gorbachev began democratization in the late 1980s, Russians responded in enormous numbers and positively to the opportunity to participate in democracy—not only to vote, but to attend debates and rallies, and argue as citizens. Furthermore, Russians have been buying and selling on the black and gray markets for decades, so they understand market economies. It was arrogance on our part, and the advice we gave was bad. Yet the notion persists—it's now called democracy promotion—that every American president must actively throw his support to who we think are democrats in Russia. This not only creates hostility between America and Russia's elites and people, but it is self-defeating. No good has ever come of it.

The second conflict involves NATO expansion eastward, which was for Moscow a broken American promise. No matter what former U.S. officials now say, Gorbachev was told by Bush and Baker in 1990-91 that if he agreed to a reunified Germany in NATO, the alliance would not move, in Baker's words, "one inch to the east." When Clinton expanded NATO eastward, for Russia he had broken a solemn promise involving its national security. That was only the beginning. The triumphalist notion that, "we won the Cold War," seemed to make Washington

think it had the right to break any promise to Moscow.

Americans forget, for example, that after 11 September 2001 Putin did more to help the second President Bush defeat the Taliban on the ground in Afghanistan than did any NATO country. Russia gave us intelligence, over-flight rights, and the Northern Alliance—its fighting force in Afghanistan, which saved American lives. Putin assumed that in return, after ten years, a real partnership with Washington would result. And what did the second President Bush do? He expanded NATO a second time and withdrew unilaterally from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, which Moscow regarded as the bedrock of its nuclear security. The Kremlin had done all this for us on the assumption of finally attaining a partnership and equality, and therefore felt, as Putin and Medvedev have said, "deceived and betrayed."

The third post-1991 conflict is stated like a mantra by American policymakers: Russia cannot have the sphere of influence it wants in the former Soviet territories. This issue, the fundamental, underlying conflict in U.S.-Russian relations, needs to be rethought and openly discussed. The United States had and has spheres of influence. We had the Monroe Doctrine in Latin America and tacitly cling to it even today. More to the point, the expansion of NATO is, of course, an expansion of the American sphere of influence, which brings America's military, political, and economic might to new member countries. Certainly, this has been the case since the 1990s, as NATO expanded across the former Soviet bloc, from Germany to the Baltic nations. All of these countries are now part of the U.S. sphere of influence, though Washington doesn't openly use this expression.

So American policy is this: The United States can have spheres of influence but Russia cannot, not even in its own security neighborhood. Moscow understands this, and has reacted predictably. If U.S. policymakers and their accommodating media really care about American national security, which requires fulsome Russian cooperation in many areas, they would rethink this presumption. Instead, leaders like Senator McCain and Vice President Biden repeatedly visit Tblisi and Kiev to declare that Russia is not entitled to influence in those capitals while trying to tug those governments into NATO.

Unless we want a new, full-scale cold war with Russia, we must ask what Moscow actually wants in former Soviet republics like Georgia and Ukraine. There are, of course, Russian political forces that would like to restore them to their Soviet status under Moscow's hegemony. But for the Kremlin leadership, from Putin to Medvedev, their essential demand is an absence of pro-American military bases and governments in those neighboring countries. In a word, that they not become members of NATO. Is that unreasonable? Imagine Washington's reaction if pro-Russian bases and governments suddenly began appearing in America's

sphere, from Latin America and Mexico to Canada. Of course, there has been no such discussion in the United States.

And that has created the fourth major conflict with Russia since 1991: Moscow's perception that U.S. policy has been based on an unrelenting, triumphalist double standard, as it has been. Washington can break solemn promises, but Moscow cannot. The United States can have large and expanding spheres of influence, but Russia can have none. Moscow is told to make its vast energy reserves available to all countries at fair-market prices, except to those governments Washington has recruited or is currently recruiting into NATO, such as the Baltics, Ukraine, and Georgia, which Moscow should supply at sharply below-market prices. Moscow is asked to support Washington's perceived national interests in Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan, but without considering that Moscow may have legitimately different security or economic interests in those places. And so it goes.

***Journal**: What have been the consequences of this attitude toward Russia?*

Cohen: I think we've had an omen: the so-called "Russian-Georgian" war in August 2008. It's called the "Russian-Georgian" war, but was also a proxy American-Russian war. Washington created Saakashvili's Georgian regime and continues to support it. Washington created his fighting force and supplied it with American military minders. American leaders were in Tblisi in the days and weeks leading up to the war. Georgia fired the first shots, as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has confirmed. And since then Washington and the mainstream U.S. media have made excuses for what Georgia did by blaming Russia.

What they should be focusing on instead is that this was the first ever American-Russian proxy war on Russia's own borders, potentially the most dangerous moment in American-Russian relations since the Cuban Missile Crisis. What would have happened, for example, if an American with or near Saakashvili's forces had been killed by the Russians? There would have been clamor in the United States for military retaliation. Or if Moscow thought, as it seemed to have at first, that the Georgian attack on South Ossetia would be backed by NATO forces if necessary? In July 2009, President Obama went to Moscow and told President Medvedev that Russia was a co-equal great power with legitimate national interests, implying that Washington's reckless policy that led to the Georgian war would end. A few days later, an American warship sailed into a Georgian port. Moscow wondered who sent it, and who is running current U.S. policy.

Journal: *Is the current U.S. policy toward Russia putting us in greater danger than during the Cold War?*

Cohen: The real concern I have with this "we won the Cold War" triumphalism is the mythology that we are safer today than we were when the Soviet Union existed. Though it is blasphemous to say so, we are not safer for several reasons, one being that the Soviet state kept the lid on very dangerous things. The Soviet Union was in control of its nuclear and related arsenals. Post-Soviet Russia is 'sorta' in control, but 'sorta' is not enough. There is no margin for error.

Reagan's goal in the 1980s was not to end the Soviet Union, but to turn it into a permanent partner of the United States. He came very close to achieving that and deserves enormous credit. He did what had to be done by meeting Gorbachev half-way. But since 1991, the arrogance of American policymaking toward Russia has either kept the Cold War from being fully ended or started a new one. The greatest threats to our national security still reside in Russia. This is not because it's communist, but because it is laden with all these nuclear, chemical, and biological devices—that's the threat. The reaction of the second Bush administration was to junk decades of safe-guarding agreements with Moscow. It was the first time in modern times that we have had no nuclear control reduction agreement with the Russians. What should worry us every day and night is the triumphalist notion that nuclear war is no longer possible. It is now possible in even more ways than before, especially accidental ones. Meanwhile, the former Soviet territories remain a Wal-Mart of dirty material and know-how. If terrorists ever explode a dirty device in the United States, even a small one, the material is likely to come from the former Soviet Union.

The Nunn-Lugar Act (1992) was the best program Congress ever enacted to help Russia secure its nuclear material and know-how, a major contribution to American national security. But no one in Washington connects the dots. Take Senator Lugar himself. He seems not to understand that we need Russia's complete cooperation to make his own legislation fully successful, but he repeatedly speaks undiplomatically, even in ugly ways, about Russia's leaders, thereby limiting their cooperation and undermining his own legacy. In other words, to have a nuclear relationship with Russia that will secure our national security, we must have a fully cooperative, trusting political relationship with Moscow. That's why all the talk about a replacement for the expired START agreement, which Obama has been having trouble reaching with the Kremlin, is half-witted. Even if the two sides agree, and even if the Senate and Russian Duma ratify a new treaty, the agreement will be unstable because the political relationship is bad and growing worse. Evidently, no one in the Administration, Congress, or the mainstream media, or, I

should add in the think tanks, can connect these dots.

***Journal**: How has the lack of political cooperation affected other areas of U.S.-Russian relations?*

Cohen: The same is true regarding Iran and Afghanistan. If Washington wants Moscow's cooperation toward Iran, it needs to understand Russia's special problems. Iran has never caused Russia harm. It is not going to join NATO. It's a large neighboring nation that is not part of America's sphere of influence. Second, Russia has 20-25 million Islamic citizens of its own. Iran has done nothing to agitate them against Moscow's secular authority. The Kremlin fought two wars in its Islamic republic of Chechnya. Iran did nothing to support the Chechens. So, Russia's beholden to Iran in this regard, not to mention their important economic relationships. In other words, U.S. policymakers have to understand that Russia's essential national interests in Iran, and elsewhere, may not be identical to Washington's due to its different geopolitical realities.

***Journal**: Would Russia like to see a new regime in Iran?*

Cohen: They don't want a pro-American regime in Iran. But they've grown increasingly weary of the current Iranian government, which has not kept its word to Moscow on several occasions. Moscow is just as worried about Iran's nuclear intentions as we are. Indeed, Russia—no less than us—doesn't want Iran to develop a nuclear capability, if only because Iran is much closer to Russia and would not need an inter-continental missile to threaten its territory. Moscow therefore has compelling reasons for not wanting a nuclear-armed Iran but it needs the United States to understand its different geopolitical circumstances. In particular, as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov repeatedly stresses, Russia, unlike the United States, is located at the crossroads of civilizations that are in an increasingly antagonistic relationship. Great diplomats begin by understanding the other side's problems. I don't recall a recent American president or secretary of state demonstrating this kind of awareness of Russia's circumstances. Instead, they've told Moscow: "We have a problem and if you don't help us solve it, you are behaving like the Cold War is not over." When Russia doesn't agree, we say they are still thinking in zero-sum terms.

Whatever the explanation, Washington's mind set regarding post-Soviet Russia has gravely jeopardized our national security since 1991. Even the kind of Cold War understandings Washington had with Brezhnev's Soviet Union, which protected our national security, are now absent. Gorbachev, Reagan, and the first President

Bush gave us a historic chance to end the long Cold War and its risks. The chance was lost in the 1990s in Washington, not in Moscow, and never regained. That's the historical truth, like it or not.

***Journal**: Russia wants the United States and NATO to remain in Afghanistan—*

Cohen: Moscow doesn't want us to leave but it thinks Obama is repeating the mistakes the Soviet Union made there by sending more troops to fight an essentially unwinnable war. Former Soviet officials regret not having focused on building Afghanistan's infrastructure, on eliminating terrorists by giving people a better life, on securing the cities and making them bastions of modernization. The cities can be defended—the mountains and villages cannot.

Neither Russia nor the United States wants Iran to get a deliverable nuclear weapon. Neither wants an extremist government in power in Afghanistan, but Moscow is more deeply alarmed by the flow of opium from Afghanistan westward across Russia. Drug addiction and HIV in Russia have increased dramatically. The country is awash in cheap heroin. It has become a national security threat. Moscow wants this flow stopped or at least reduced, and believes U.S. tactics in Afghanistan are abetting it. The Russians also worry about what kind of regime the United States intends to install in Kabul. I think they want some kind of coalition government that will represent Russia's interests.

The kind of war Obama is fighting in Afghanistan is not winnable—it's folly. But Moscow could help the United States reduce the number of Americans and Afghans killed there. Russians know the country well, but at the moment they feel their interests are not being heeded. Their main concern is not the Taliban, it's the poppy trade, and the spread of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia. Here too we need Russia's maximum cooperation, but, as with Iran, it is not possible without much more political understanding and trust. The present Cold War-like relationship makes all this impossible and it is true in other regions as well, including the Middle East.

***Journal**: The February 2010 election in Ukraine saw Viktor Yanukovych elected President. In terms of the United States' relations with Russia's neighbors, does the election change anything?*

Cohen: Yes, of course, but how much it changes now depends significantly on Washington. The Kremlin learned a lesson five years ago when its heavy-handed approach to Ukraine backfired and resulted in the American-backed, so-called Orange Revolution. Its leader, Yushchenko, was a calamity for the American

project but more so for ordinary Ukrainians. They rejected him. He got 5 percent in the first round of this presidential election. Our hero of Ukraine was rejected by 95 percent of the country five years later. The new president, Yanukovych, wants to take a middle course between Russia and the United States. He understands that his political future and Ukraine's depend on moving Ukraine toward Russia, but not too close. This will take diplomatic skill, and if the Kremlin has any sense, it will not make it hard for him.

The question is what the Obama administration and the strong pro-Ukraine lobby in Washington will do. Both Georgia, which will eventually restore relations with Moscow, and Ukraine are major defeats for long-standing U.S. policy. Will the proponents of the policy of expanding America's sphere of influence now stand down or continue it, as they have in their words and deeds in connection with Georgia since the war? For the moment, their leading representatives, like Biden, Richard Holbrooke, and McCain are silent about Ukraine. Let's hope they are re-thinking their follies. Ordinary Ukrainians and Georgians have only experienced more economic misery and political instability from these Washington projects in their countries. As for Kiev, I hope the Obama administration backs off and lets Yanukovych try to do what he can to help his people. My guess is that the Kremlin will see that its in its interest to help him in this respect—with regard to energy prices, for example. Indeed, if Washington promises to never put military bases on Russia's borders, and Russia in return promises to respect the political sovereignty of these former Soviet republics, the governments of Ukraine and Georgia could turn their attention and resources to the economic needs of their people instead of focusing on the military build-ups and political conflicts required to join NATO.

***Journal**: Keeping in mind the crucial debate over modernization going on in Moscow today, what would be the impact of a new American policy toward Russia along the lines you propose?*

Cohen: We can affect the ongoing debates and struggles in Russia by our approach. If we approach Russia as an equal nation, in a cooperative manner, in a non-military way, we will help the forces there arguing for a democratic, or at least non-Stalinist modernization. If we, on the other hand, keep approaching Moscow as though it's a defeated power, with closed fists in the form of NATO, as though Russia has no legitimate security concerns in its neighborhood, U.S. policy will give credence to the alarms and prognoses of the authoritarian modernizers. By the way, the same issue existed in American policy circles in the 1970s and 1980s. U.S. cold warriors said we (the pro-détente advocates) were wrong in insisting that their policy hurt would-be Soviet reformers. Gorbachev proved us right. He made

it clear that he couldn't carry out fundamental reform at home unless Reagan met him halfway. Reagan's greatness was that he did so. As early as 1986, less than a year after Gorbachev came to power, Reagan met him in Reykjavik, where they almost agreed to abolish all nuclear weapons. They didn't, but Gorbachev was able to return home and tell his powerful opponents, "You see, Reagan is a man we can work with." The linkage became abundantly clear. While Gorbachev was introducing democracy at home, he and Reagan for the first time abolished an entire category of nuclear weapons. That's how a new, wiser U.S. policy can really enhance our national security—and the world's.

***Journal**: Does such a shift in U.S. policy seem likely under the Obama Administration?*

Cohen: I'm not optimistic. Look at President Obama's foreign policy team. Virtually every one of them comes from the Clinton era or the Clinton administration, which began this disastrous policy. As a senator, Biden was deeply involved in NATO expansion, and in both the Georgian and Ukrainian projects. Obama's national security adviser, General James Jones, was head of NATO when it expanded. Michael McFaul, who heads the Russian section of the National Security Council, was a leading pro-democracy crusader in the 1990s. There is not a single dissenter, not one person who was in opposition to the policy in the 1990s who has a high-level foreign policy job in the Obama administration. I don't see anyone near Obama who will or can tell him, "Mr. President, we need a new policy toward Russia, the clock is ticking, and only you, the president, can bring it about." But it isn't fair to blame Obama alone. No other American leader has proposed a new policy.

***Journal**: Let's focus on the idea that underlies this discussion: that there is an absence of debate about issues surrounding Russia and the United States.*

Cohen: There is virtually no serious discourse about contemporary Russia underway in the United States today—not in public policy circles, not in the media, very little in academic life. Certainly, there is no substantive debate. That is in sharp contrast to when I entered the public debate in the 1970s, writing about policy for newspapers and appearing on television and radio. At that time, as I said before, the debate was between advocates of détente, those who wanted to do something to diminish the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, and the cold warriors. There were organized lobby groups on both sides. And the media would almost always solicit both points of view.

That ended—and I'm not entirely sure why it ended—about the time the Soviet Union ended, when one point of view began to prevail in Washington and it was embraced by editors and producers—what I call the triumphalist point of view. People who shared my view either died, retired, got sick of it, or were simply excluded from the public discourse. Now, the discourse is dominated by a single policy outlook on Russia, though it has its moderate and extreme proponents. It is a disservice to President Obama to have to make Russian policy in the absence of public debate, especially since there appears to be no dissenters, still less heretics, around him. When Reagan decided to become the greatest détente-ist of our time, a heretic in the eyes of many of his long time supporters, in 1985-88 he and Secretary of State Schultz were opposed by many members of his administration, party and much of the media. But for all Obama's talk about having a "team of rivals," he has surrounded himself with like-minded people.

Oddly, during the Cold War—and this is the anomaly—we had more substantive debate about American policy toward Russia and about what was going on inside Russia than we have today. You might have thought it would be the opposite. It's very discouraging because the situation is every bit as dangerous as it was during the Cold War. Why has no one protested, for instance, that NATO expansion has re-militarized our relations with Russia just as they were during the Cold War, while the American diplomacy that once secured us has vanished? That is, during the Cold War, the dangers were recognized, they were debated, policy choices were given to Congress, to the president, and to the media. Today, no alternatives are being presented, while the dangers grow.

For some reason, it was easier to get public and political attention for alternative policies when Russia called itself communist. People who used to blame communism for what they didn't like about Russia now blame Russian tradition—but the accusations are the same: Russia is inherently imperialistic, aggressive, autocratic and anti-democratic. This is false, and is even a kind of ethnic slur toward Russians. Russia's political elite has much to answer for, but so do Washington policymakers. Some will say that I am anti-American or pro-Russian, as they have in the past. I have learned to disregard these comments as remnants of the McCarthy years. People like me, who claim to be knowledgeable intellectuals—not shouting heads on cable television—should not be like cooks preparing recipes for popular tastes. Our mission is to try to learn, understand, and speak the truth as best we can. Others will say, more kindly, that I am naïve about what kind of U.S.-Russian relationship is possible. But who would have predicted what Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan accomplished in the 1980s, or that it would be so quickly lost? ♔