

U.S.-Russia Relations:

U.S.-Russia Partnership: a Casualty of War?

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Once again the U.S.-Russia strategic partnership is enduring a rocky patch. The war in Iraq has created serious discord in the bilateral relationship. The vicissitudes in U.S.-Russian relations have become a recurring pattern for these erstwhile Cold War enemies, who are now seeking to cooperate in the post-Sept. 11 strategic landscape. The launching of the war against Iraq is seen in the U.S. as part of the global war against terrorism. Russian leaders have thus far been eager to cooperate with the U.S. in fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Many in Russia, however, see the attack on Iraq as part of an effort by the U.S. to monopolize the world petroleum markets and further its political and economic domination of the globe.

Despite speculation at the beginning of the year by many that Moscow would give tacit consent to U.S. actions in Iraq, the Russian leadership threatened a veto in the UN Security Council and warned against an attack. Now that the dye has been cast, the Russian leadership is unlikely to do much more than simply state its disagreement with the war. Nevertheless, many are left wondering whether this will do irreparable damage to a budding strategic partnership that is quite fragile. In spite of a small, but vocal opposition among conservative groups in Russia, President Vladimir Putin had made an extra effort to back the U.S. since the Sept. 2001 terrorist attacks. This column questioned in April-June 2002 (see "Growing Expectations: How Far Can Rapprochement be Carried Forward?" *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 4, No. 2, July 2002) how far Putin could go with his *rapprochement* with Washington before his domestic political standing was endangered. Given the upcoming Duma elections at the end of this year and the presidential election early next year, it appears that Putin has finally drawn the line at how far he will cooperate with the U.S.

Conflicting Viewpoints in Russia

Early in the year it appeared that Russia was prepared to support the U.S. as Russia's top leadership called for immediate Iraqi disarmament. In November of last year, Russia supported UN Resolution 1441, which called on Iraq to submit to weapons inspections or face the threat of forced compliance. In late January, Putin announced just hours ahead of U.S. President George W. Bush's State of the Union address that Moscow would toughen its line on Iraq should Baghdad fail to come clean on its weapons program. He

also admitted the Kremlin did not want a confrontation with Washington over Iraq, prompting the influential daily *Kommersant* to assert that for Russia, “America is more important than Iraq.” Nevertheless, opposition to military action against Iraq surfaced within the Russian government soon thereafter. The Russian Foreign Ministry was the first to openly state its opposition to “aggressive” U.S. policy against Iraq. Even as Putin came out in personal support of a strong UN resolution forcing Iraq to submit to inspections, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov began criticizing the harsh stance taken by the Bush administration against Iraq. Putin, though clearly against unilateral U.S. military action in Iraq, in the beginning maintained a fairly low profile, even into February when he visited Paris as the personal guest of French President Jacques Chirac, the most vocal critic of the U.S. within the UN Security Council. Putin also visited German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, another vocal critic of Bush administration policies in the Middle East. Putin and his presidential staff seemed to be using Foreign Minister Ivanov as a sounding board both internationally and within Russia itself. It became clear that a good majority of Russians were against any U.S. military action in Iraq without UN blessing. In a major televised interview on Feb. 21, Putin warned about a “growing aggressiveness of influential forces in certain countries.” This seems to have been the turning point in Putin’s official stance toward the U.S.

Soon, much of the Russian press which had been vacillating also came out against U.S. “unilateralism.” Even the daily *Kommersant*, which had only a few weeks prior warned that Iraq was not worth sowing discord with Washington, made an about face and issued a pointed analysis concerning the statement by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage that the U.S. would have no objection to Russian airstrikes against terrorist bases in Georgia, and explained that the U.S. only deigned to give consent to bomb Georgia, because it would soon be bombing Iraq. The article noted that “Russia has no need to bomb Georgia now, and the Americans know it.” A number of influential analysts in Russia explained that many Russians were tiring of the domineering attitude of the Bush administration, and argued that Russia thus far had received little for its support of the U.S. in Central Asia and elsewhere in the war against terrorism. Moscow’s goodwill to Washington has not been reciprocated, a claim made by many. They argue that Russia has shared vital intelligence with the CIA concerning North Korea, has withdrawn from communication facilities in Cuba, and from the naval base at Cam Rahn Bay in Vietnam, but has received very little in return. In fact, the U.S. Congress is still clinging stubbornly to the Jackson-Vanik trade law, which dates to the dark days of the Cold War and prevents Russia from permanent normal trade relations status with the U.S. One such analyst stated, “Most countries are irked at U.S. leadership and the demonstrative haughtiness with which the Republican administration is affirming its leadership.” The daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* warned that a U.S. attack on Iraq could give terrorism a “moral justification.”

But other analysts in Russia have been warning of the serious downside of continuing to oppose the U.S. over Iraq. They argue that Vladimir Putin has painstakingly spent three years building the strategic partnership with the U.S. They warn that by openly criticizing the U.S. the Russian government is sabotaging its own interests. Most important for Russia, many point out, is the estimated \$8-\$10 billion in debt that Iraq owes Russia and

the contracts that many Russian oil firms have signed in Iraq over the years. If Russia does not back the U.S., some have stated, then it will lose any chance of recouping this debt or having its contracts honored. In yet another demonstration of the divide among Russia's analysts, another article in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* warned that Russia should "not cross a line [i.e., veto a U.S.-sponsored resolution in the United Nations] which it cannot cross back over." In an article in the *Moscow Times* two analysts urged the Russian government to take this opportunity of trans-Atlantic discord to become the "next Great Britain," the ally of first choice for the U.S. Russia's wealthiest oligarch, Yukos chairman Mikhail Khodorkovsky, urged the government to back the U.S., saying that strategic and economic cooperation with the U.S. is the only realistic option for Russia. One analyst wrote that though jackal diplomacy (i.e., moving in after the United States makes the kill) may be distasteful, "it would be the height of stupidity to quarrel with America over Iraq."

The Russian presidential chief of staff and a powerful Kremlin insider (a holdover, in fact, from the Yeltsin administration), Alexander Voloshin, was dispatched to Washington in late February to meet with National Security Advisor Condeleezza Rice. His mission was deemed important enough in Washington that he was able to meet with President Bush, as well. What exactly Voloshin discussed with his hosts is unknown. Informed speculation, however, insisted that Voloshin was seeking a deal that assured Russia a place at the energy table in a postwar Iraq. Judging by the reaction of the Russian government not long thereafter, the visit must not have been much of a success. In early March, the Russian government announced that it would block any U.S.-sponsored resolution in the United Nations authorizing force against Iraq, thus staying in line with France and Germany.

Putin Draws the Line

What brought about this new resolve within the Russian government to oppose the U.S.? Putin has a number of motivations in opposing the U.S. over Iraq. Among these motivations are economic, diplomatic, political, and strategic factors. Russia stands to lose economically by not backing the U.S., but it must be remembered that Russia's main creditor over the last decade has been Germany. Although Putin has carefully cultivated relations with Washington, he continues to maintain Russia's special relationship with Berlin. The Franco-German factor also cannot be discounted in terms of Russia's future membership in the European Union. Additionally, Russian leaders are not keen on seeing the UN become a rubber-stamp organization for unilateral U.S. actions overseas. As one Russian daily stated, "Russia's main diplomatic goal has been upholding the authority of the UN Security Council, one of the few international institutions where Moscow wields considerable [diplomatic] influence."

Domestic politics are probably the strongest motivating factor for Putin to maintain a distance from U.S. policy in Iraq. Duma elections will be held later this year, which is no doubt the motivating factor behind the Duma decision to delay the ratification of the START Treaty – a move which many Russian analysts consider the equivalent of Russia shooting itself in the foot. Russia's presidential election is slated for early next year. Putin

has been seen as perhaps overly accommodating to the U.S. in his three years in office (much like Mikhail Gorbachev). If he is to face criticism for this, he can point to Iraq as a case where he did not buckle to Washington.

Putin also needs to take into account the Muslim factor in Russia. More than 20 million people of Islamic faith reside in Russia (whose population is approximately 145 million). Contrary to popular belief in the West, these Muslims do not all reside in the Caucasus or along the border with the Central Asia republics. In fact, a great number of them reside in the Volga heartland, east of Moscow. This is a factor that no Russian politician can afford to overlook. If Russia's Muslims were to express outrage over policy in Iraq, it could have reverberations in Moscow. Russian insistence on maintaining Chechnya in the fold is based in part on the argument that if Chechnya is allowed to secede, then other republics within the Russian Federation (such as the overwhelmingly Muslim republic of Tartarstan in the Volga heartland) might also want to leave. Indeed, the Muslim concentration in the Volga heartland has been a major factor in the formation of Russian policy since the early 1990s.

Perhaps a final factor in the Putin calculus is simple pride. Some reports have suggested that the Bush administration has threatened to withhold economic assistance, block Russian membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), and desist from giving Russia a role in postwar Iraq if it continues to oppose the U.S. President Putin would surely have a hard time swallowing what the *Moscow Times* has referred to as "blackmail." Putin has probably tired of being seen as a major accommodator to the U.S., and hence his decision to draw the line.

Will Washington Turn Moscow Away?

As the war in Iraq unfolds and as U.S. forces moved ever closer to Baghdad, Moscow began to change its tune somewhat. In early April, both Putin and Foreign Minister Ivanov stressed the importance of the bilateral relationship, and insisted that the relationship will continue to live and grow even through difficult times. It is clear that Putin does not want the United States and Russia to have a major falling out. But how will Washington respond?

The Bush administration issued demarches to the Kremlin on several occasions due to the findings that a Russian company had delivered to Iraq GPS-jamming technology, antitank missiles, and night-vision goggles. *The New York Times* also issued a strong denunciation of Russia's actions. Washington is also perturbed by Russia's failure to curb its public condemnations, in spite of what it might be saying behind closed doors. American pundits also point out that Russia is being hypocritical in that it is itself engaged in a war against terrorists in Chechnya, is killing many civilians, and yet its nightly news broadcasts show mainly wounded Iraqi women and children. The so-called referendum in Chechnya has also been ridiculed in the United States. The results (88 percent approval) were seen a mirror of the so-called elections in the Soviet Union. The real damage to the bilateral relationship caused by Russia's stance can best be assessed by the postwar role Russia takes in Iraq. If Russian companies are shut out of energy

contracts, then we can surmise that Washington took note of Moscow's commentary and was not happy.

The East Asian Strategic Situation

The war in Iraq dominated the U.S.-Russian relationship during the first quarter of the year. As such, there has been little interaction between the two countries in Northeast Asia. Beijing has clearly stated its opposition to the war, but it has taken a much more low-key role than Moscow, which is surprising given China's increasing dependence on Middle Eastern oil. China seems to have taken a stance more like the one many assumed Russia would in the beginning. Japan, on the other hand, has taken a strong stance in support of U.S. actions in the Persian Gulf. Japan seems to have taken a lesson from the first Gulf War and does not want to be seen as a reluctant supporter in the U.S. It also wants to keep the U.S. engaged on the Korean Peninsula, where Tokyo's own security is threatened.

The North Korean nuclear crisis dominates the strategic situation in East Asia and the U.S. and Russia seem to have disagreements here as well. Moscow, which has always wanted a role at the Korean negotiating table is now urging the U.S. to conduct bilateral negotiations with North Korea. China has taken the same position. The U.S., meanwhile, insists on Chinese assistance in convincing Pyongyang to give up its nuclear program. Washington seems ambivalent about the participation of Moscow on the Korean Peninsula. In any case, after a visit late last year to Pyongyang by a senior Russian Foreign Ministry official, Kim Jong-il also seems ambivalent about having Russia at the table.

The U.S. attack on Iraq might have marked the death knell for the short-lived U.S.-Russian strategic partnership and the beginning of frigid relations. Much of this depends on how U.S. diplomats and politicians carry out the peace in Iraq, and on the results of Russia's Duma and presidential elections.

Chronology of U.S.-Russia Relations January-March 2003

Jan. 14, 2003: U.S. President George W. Bush signs special orders to release more than \$310 million in frozen funds to help Russia secure or eliminate nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. The president's orders free more than \$150 million to build a facility to destroy chemical munitions in Shchuch'ye, Russia.

Jan. 14, 2003: Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov says in an interview that Russia could collaborate with the U.S. in building a missile defense system under certain conditions.

Jan. 17, 2003: A group of congressional Democrats outline a proposal to eliminate the provisions of the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which Congress passed in 1974 preventing Russia from achieving permanent normal trade status.

Jan. 21, 2003: Russian Defense Minister Ivanov is interviewed on Al-Jazeera TV and concedes that Russia has come under U.S. pressure to abandon nuclear cooperation with Iran. Ivanov says that Russia would continue cooperating with Iran and that two new nuclear reactors would be built in that country.

Jan. 23-24, 2003: On a visit to Moscow U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage says that Russia should not rule out the possibility of preventive strikes on Chechen terrorists, even those on Georgian territory. “A country that believes in preventive strikes will find it difficult to criticize another country for doing the same.”

Jan. 26, 2003: U.S. Secretary of Commerce Donald Evans meets with Russian Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref in Davos, Switzerland. Evans promises his personal support to Russia in tackling current bilateral trade problems.

Jan. 27, 2003: The *New York Times* reports that sometime in the early 1990s, Russian SVR agents had installed secret nuclear detection equipment inside the Russian Embassy in the North Korean capital Pyongyang at the request of the Central Intelligence Agency. The equipment was designed to pick up emissions of the isotope krypton, which would signal that North Korea had resumed plutonium reprocessing at its Yongbyon nuclear reactor.

Jan. 28, 2003: In an interview with *Itogi* magazine Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov says U.S. plans to develop and deploy a national missile defense system should not present an obstacle in bilateral ties between Moscow and Washington, a reversal of the previous Russian position.

Feb. 3, 2003: The Bush administration announces that it will cut the aid Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union will receive under the Freedom Support Act. The allocation for Russia will fall to \$73 million from \$148 million.

Feb. 9-11, 2003: Russian President Vladimir Putin conducts a three-day state visit to Paris and meets with French President Jacques Chirac. The two announce their opposition to U.S. plans to impose a deadline on Iraq that would lead to military strikes.

Feb. 20, 2003: Secretary of State Colin Powell announces U.S. plans to blacklist three Chechen groups suspected of the attack on a Moscow theater in October 2002.

Feb. 21, 2003: In a nationwide television interview President Putin states that he is very concerned about the “breakdown” of the balance of power in the world and the “growing aggressiveness of influential forces in certain countries.”

Feb. 24, 2003: U.S. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton meets with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Georgii Mamedov for talks on global strategic security and nonproliferation.

Feb. 24, 2003: Russian Presidential Chief of Staff Aleksandr Voloshin travels to Washington, D.C. and meets with National Security Advisor Condeleezza Rice to discuss the Iraq situation. President Bush steps in for a short visit.

Feb. 28, 2003: The State Department officially announces that it is imposing sanctions on three rebel groups in the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya because of their involvement in terrorism, including participation in an attack on a Moscow theater.

March 4, 2003: GAO releases report highly critical of the Cooperation Threat Reduction program, also known as the Nunn-Lugar program on U.S.-Russian bilateral nonproliferation efforts.

March 5, 2003: Russia joins with France and Germany in pledging to block any UN resolution authorizing war in Iraq.

March 7, 2003: In a powerful bipartisan endorsement for improved relations with Russia, the U.S. Senate unanimously approves a treaty that would cut active U.S. and Russian long-range nuclear warheads by two-thirds.

March 7, 2003: On Russian TV, FM Ivanov warns against a “unilateral” U.S. decision to go to war. Ivanov states, “That would be a violation of the United Nations Charter.”

March 10, 2003: Sen. Richard Lugar, Indiana Republican, introduces a bill that would repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment if passed into law, allowing Russia permanent normal trading status with the U.S.

March 11, 2003: Russian Minister of Atomic Energy Alexander Rumyantsev and Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham sign three agreements in Vienna, under which Russia will shut down three of its nuclear reactors. The agreements include a provision on financing Russian projects on building new conventional power facilities in Seversk and Zheleznogorsk, the communities in which nuclear reactors are to be shut down.

March 12, 2003: U.S. Ambassador to Russia Alexander Vershbow warns that Russian opposition to U.S. policy in Iraq could cause serious damage to U.S.-Russian relations.

March 23, 2003: U.S. accuses Russian technicians in Iraq of attempting to help set up and operate a system that interferes with U.S. global positioning technology used to guide coalition missiles and aircraft.

March 24, 2003: President Bush telephones President Putin to strongly condemn the supply by a Russian firm to Iraq of jamming technology, antitank missiles, and night-vision goggles.

March 26, 2003: Addressing the Duma, Russian FM Ivanov harshly criticizes U.S. actions in Iraq in terms, according to some, “not heard since the end of the Cold War.”