

THE GREAT RUSSIA DEBATE

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In May 2005, *Newsweek* reported that the White House had decided to refrain from pressuring Russia over the expanding democracy deficit in the former Soviet Union because America needed Russian support against Iranian and North Korean nuclear proliferation.¹ The report served to underscore a line of thinking that has, quite unexpectedly, emerged to animate U.S. policy toward Russia: that the attainment of strategic goals should override the pursuit of Russian democratization.

That school of thought is known as Realism, and its emergence is both unexpected and alarming. It directly contradicts the Bush administration's own stated policy of campaigning for democratization throughout the world, and of formulating policies toward other states on the basis of their adherence to (or deviation from) a universal norm of democratic governance.² It also clashes headlong with the European Union's declared goals of fostering the integration of a democratic Russia.³

Proponents of the Realist approach describe their position as one of expediency. They argue that when values triumph over interests in U.S. foreign policy, policy cannot attain its strategic goals. But is such a stance truly desirable for Washington? Is there in fact a contradiction between strategic engagement in support of interests and values such as democratization, and does one need to be subordinated to the other?



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The Realist perspective

The main advocates of the new Realism find their home at the journal *The National Interest*, which is published by the Washington-based Nixon Center. Its luminaries—which include Nixon Center President Dmitri Simes, *The National Interest* editor Nikolas Gvosdev, Anatol Lieven of the New America Foundation and John Hulsman of the Heritage Foundation—advocate prudence in harmonizing the ends and means of foreign policy, with the accompanying idea that pursuing values beyond our capacity is neither sound policy nor moral. Instead, they propose a supposedly rational approach based on a hierarchy of interests and rooted in the understanding that not all global problems can be solved, least of all unilaterally by America. Pursuing moral values in foreign policy, therefore, must be justified not only on their merits, but also on the basis of their costs.⁴ Therefore the criterion for evaluating U.S. or other policies is their results, not their motives.⁵

Much of this argument is insightful, incisive, even felicitous. When it comes to Russia, however, it stakes out an untenable, and deeply troubling, position—embracing major states and sacrificing the interests of smaller ones to that engagement.

For example, far from being critical of Russia's recent, anti-democratic drift, Realists have embraced it as a necessary prerequisite for stable governance. Lieven, for example, has argued that “[f]or the foreseeable future only a semi-authoritarian government such as [President Vladimir] Putin's can keep Russia moving in the right direction. If Putin weren't there we'd soon miss him.”⁶

Indeed, the idea of Putin's “managed pluralism” is fêted as the appro-

priate and most beneficial regime for Russia and one that deserves American support.⁷ Similarly, proponents of Realism argue that the United States should invest more in cooperation with Russia rather than heeding complaints by smaller states like Georgia about Russian imperialism. For, they hint darkly, new leaders like Mikheil Saakashvili seek to drive a wedge between Russia and America and encourage calls for democratization throughout the CIS, including Russia, with the goal of fostering a state of siege in Russo-American relations.⁸

Neither do they shy away from the logical culmination of this argument, namely that Russia should be recognized as the dominant power of Eurasia and be allowed to enforce its own version of that dominance there. Indeed, Simes and Gvosdev have written that,

No matter what the pundits may say, neither the United States nor Europe is prepared to undertake the massive effort to displace Russia as Eurasia's economic and political center of gravity.⁹

Lieven goes still further and states that even if Russia were to integrate into the West, “it can only be integrated to a limited extent and well short of full membership.”¹⁰ Therefore, according to him, how Russia governs itself is less important than progress on the agenda of security issues between Moscow and Washington.¹¹

Russian resistance

Quite understandably, such sentiments are music to more than a few Russian ears. After all, Russia claims for itself an exceptional role in world politics. The belief, advanced by many in Moscow, that state survival is tied to a neo-imperial reunifica-

tion of a post-Soviet economic, if not political, space eloquently shows that Russia and its elites still think of the Russian state as very much an imperial project.

Examples of this perspective abound. Anatoly Chubais, head of Russia's UES electricity conglomerate, has openly urged Russia to construct its relationship with the CIS on the basis of a program of "liberal empire," using energy as a tool. Without such dominance, Chubais has posited, Russia cannot remain a great power—or even survive as a state.¹²

President Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov have publicly embraced similar views. Ivanov, for one, has publicly stated that Russia reserves the right to intervene preemptively in the CIS to settle disputes that cannot be resolved through negotiation, or where Russian interests or the Russian diaspora is threatened.¹³ Putin has taken a similar tack, declaring that, because pipelines carrying oil and natural gas to the West were built by the Soviet Union, it is in Russia's national interest and prerogative to maintain them even when they are beyond Russia's borders.¹⁴

In recent months, these views have been reinforced and amplified by a growing sense of geopolitical siege. The "Orange," "Rose," and "Tulip" revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan have generated a veritable hysteria in Moscow that the CIA, together with American and European NGOs, is launching a conspiracy against Russia's efforts to build a "sovereign democracy." For example, in the summer of 2005, Vladislav Surkov, Deputy Chief of Putin's presidential administration, gave a secret speech explicitly accusing the non-governmental organization Freedom House of essentially being an extension of the CIA.¹⁵

Surkov, like other CIS leaders such as former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, clearly believes that democratic revolutions in CIS states are orchestrated conspiracies against Russia and threats to the stability of the Russian state itself.¹⁶

Russia, moreover, is translating these fears into policy. Recent evidence suggests that the Kremlin is mobilizing a decisive effort to gain allies and to compel a retraction of America's global influence, particularly in areas critical to Russia, like the CIS. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov has explicitly articulated an updated version of the Brezhnev doctrine's concept of diminished sovereignty for Central Asian states. From his perspective, "[t]he countries of the region are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)," and if they are "making a decision about hosting new bases on their territory, they should take into account the interests of Russia and coordinate this decision with our country."¹⁷ Ivanov's counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, concurs. Lavrov has said that CIS regimes that are "disloyal" to Moscow could face the use of "every conceivable economic pressure tactic."¹⁸

The implications for cooperation with the United States are profound. Today, Washington and Moscow face a series of common challenges—among them terrorism, proliferation, and the rise of China. However, the drift away from democracy and toward an authoritarian (some would say neo-Tsarist, if not neo-Soviet) political model in Russia is by now universally acknowledged. And, since autocracy and empire have historically gone together in Russian history, this drift has aided and abetted an increasingly overt imperial concept of the state.¹⁹

That this model is inherently dysfunctional and sub-optimizing is clear. It cannot meet the most urgent challenges to Russian society: economic development, declining demography, and crises in health, including the HIV/AIDS epidemic. To be a secure, democratic, prosperous state that realizes its own self-proclaimed goal of being fully integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures, Russia must repudiate imperialism. It must do so for its own good, not ours. The continuing “lure of something exotic on the peripheries” endangers the security of Moscow’s neighbors, Russian democracy, and Russia’s own integrity and security. And, to maintain that imperial concept of a neo-Tsarist state, Russia must indulge in policies (in places like Ukraine and the entire former Soviet Union) that are ultimately unsustainable and destabilizing to its entire neighborhood.

Today, Washington must simultaneously engage Russia over Iran, North Korea, Ukraine, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Belarus, the Baltic states and the democratization agenda throughout the former Soviet Union. Pursuit of the latter goal should not be coercive and heavy-handed, but there are ample diplomatic tools for doing exactly that. While there will often be a tactical tension between strategic engagement and the pursuit of a values-based or values-influenced foreign policy, sound leadership can and should endeavor to overcome and reconcile those tensions.

Furthermore, the demand that states observe human rights is by now an acknowledged cornerstone of today’s international order. It is a paramount strategic interest of any viable global system. Consequently, the demand for good governance is now embodied in a broad legal and political consensus recognized the world over.

The West’s growing engagement with the Caucasus, Ukraine and Central Asia thus resides in moral and strategic interests that are inextricably tied to a generation of development of both the international order and international law. U.S. power intrudes ever more along Russia’s borders both because of the security challenges posed by Russian imperialism and adventurism after 1992 and because of the shared threats that we, Russia, and those states all face. But that intrusion is also rooted in the internationally and legally recognized global demand for democratization based on a “good governance paradigm,” making democratization a test of a state’s legitimacy and sovereignty.²⁰

Today, Russia cannot meet this standard. Indeed, it increasingly regresses from it, and resists it politically. Furthermore, by its policies it tries to ensure that the states that it wishes to dominate in the CIS follow suit.

The case for (Russian) democracy

The fundamental strategic problem with Russian foreign policy is Moscow’s own unrealism in assuming that erecting an empire answers its security needs and is a sustainable (or even necessary) priority. Russia is even less ready, willing, and able than the West to undertake the reconstruction and development of the CIS. Instead, its policies entail exploiting and stunting the economic and political growth of these countries to preserve its exclusive sphere of influence—a reality regional leaders understand very well, even if Realist thinkers like Simes, Gvosdev, and Lieven do not.

As this imperialism competes against U.S. strategic interests and threatens to destabilize much of the former USSR, the unmistakable drift toward authoritarian and imperial modes of rule calls into question the fundamental rationale and justification for “Realism,” which emphasizes strategic engagement over democratization. The problem with such a policy is that how Russia governs itself decisively shapes its foreign policy. Just as autocracy in Russia connotes a system of power that is not bound by law or institution, it also sketches a situation whereby Russia is not bound by its previous agreements (For example, to remove bases from Moldova and Georgia). Such a state need not answer to anyone for its foreign policy actions, and can conduct an imperial policy in its borderlands with an openly exclusionary bent. Realism thus accepts as a best case conclusion the fact that Russia is not a European power and will not abide by European “acquis” such as democracy and human rights, or truly free markets.

Indeed, the supposed benefits of this outlook are already evaporating. It has long been clear that whatever cooperation we achieve with Russia will be limited at best, and that Russia opposes more than it supports American international objectives. This fact alone calls into question the utility of a policy of silence concerning violations of the democratization agenda that Russia has committed itself to observing in international treaties and accords.

In fact, many recent Russian initiatives—selling arms to Syria, Venezuela, Iran, and China; providing nuclear reactors to Iran; supporting North Korea; and attacking Western military presence and support for democracy throughout the CIS—sig-

nify the persistence of a fundamentally anti-American and anti-Western policy orientation. Others may argue alternatively that on several issues crucial for Washington, Russia, whatever its objectives, simply lacks the capacity to render effective cooperation. If this is the case, we do nobody any favors (least of all Russia) by pretending that Russia is more significant and powerful than it really is. For that merely encourages more obstreperous neo-imperial behavior by Russian elites who then believe that their country’s internal political structure, an inherently imperial one that drives it to subject its neighbors to that tendency, is unimportant to America.

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Given these realities, there is a legitimate basis for scrutinizing Russia’s undemocratic practices and placing them on our—and our allies’—agenda with Moscow. Shirking those obligations, or proclaiming democratization for everyone except Russia and the CIS as a “non-negotiable” value of American foreign policy gains America nothing, while cheapening and compromising our good name and policies by exposing the administration to charges of hypocrisy.

The simultaneous pursuit of values and of interests must be based on real capabilities and, as regards Russia, on a common approach with our European and other allies. Securing the Caucasus and Central Asia is in both American and Russian inter-

ests. It also is in European interests, as both NATO and the EU have now acknowledged.²¹ This recognition must be translated into a common agenda reflecting genuine consideration of Russian objectives and priorities.²² But those interests cannot amount to the perpetual destabilization of regions whose importance for Europe and America are growing.

Ultimately, Russia can have security and prosperity, or it can have empire. It cannot have both. And if it really wants partnership with—and a real voice within—Western security organizations, it cannot have an illiberal empire cut off from Western influence.



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