

What Will Obama Bring to Moscow?

An appeal to U.S. experts by Lilia Shevtsova, Lev Gudkov, Igor Klyamkin, and Georgy Satarov

We have read with great interest the work of American experts who have written a number of reports with recommendations for President Barack Obama and the U.S. Congress regarding America's relationship with Russia. We believe that these American initiatives contain numerous constructive ideas. At the same time, however, we are concerned by our colleagues' estimation of the situation in Russia itself and the course it is following, and thus about their proposals for normalizing relations between the United States and Russia.

We object to the basic proposition reflected in the majority of these new American reports, which call for a return to *Realpolitik*. The authors believe that the worsening of Russian-American relations was caused by Washington's insistence on "tying policies to values," while ignoring Russia's interests and humiliating Russia through American unilateralism. As a result, they argue, America needs to reject this values-based approach to Russia and build a new relationship based on "common interests and common threats."¹ Russian interests, they write, must be taken more fully into account. This argument, however, hinges on how we understand the term "Russian interests". We believe that Russia's interests lie in the creation of a democratic system of governance based on the rule of law. And we believe that only movement in this direction can guarantee a truly fruitful dialogue between Russia and America.

However, it appears to us that our American colleagues accept Russian official positions at face value, without any critical reflection. Thus, the crisis in Russian-American relations at the end of the Bush and Putin administrations is blamed first and foremost on Washington's efforts to teach Russia about democracy. Observing the relationship from Russian shores, we see a very different situation: America has ignored the problems of democracy and civil society in Russia. American "realists" today are essentially calling for the new U.S. President to treat Russia as a country that is in principle incapable of democratic transformation.

¹ Thomas Graham, *Resurgent Russia and U.S. Purposes, A Century Report*; *The Right Direction for U.S. Policy toward Russia, A Report* from the Commission on U.S. Policy toward Russia, co-chairs Chuck Hagel and Gary Hart, Director Dmitri Simes.

It would be ridiculous to deny that there are anti-democratic and paternalistic feelings in Russia. But it would be equally inappropriate to assume that such feelings are ubiquitous. The majority of Russian adults (approximately 63-65%) would like to see the establishment of democracy and the rule of law. They are opposed by the ruling elite, for whom the development of democratic institutions presents a direct threat to their power and privilege. The members of this elite are more than ready to integrate into the Western world, but only on an individual basis; they will do everything in their power to ‘protect’ the rest of Russian society from the perils of such integration.

We are not calling on our colleagues to become neo-conservatives and to “promote” democracy in Russia. Such efforts are counterproductive and can only serve to discredit Russian democrats, helping the propaganda machine to color them as a “fifth column” from the West. But we do not understand how one can hope for cooperation with Russia while ignoring the country’s internal development and the principles on which the state functions.

It is likewise surprising that our American colleagues do not see the internal contradictions within their own arguments. One well-respected expert, who handled relations with Moscow during the Bush Administration, writes that Russia’s national interests include being “a great power”, “maintaining itself as the dominant influence in the former-Soviet space” and “constraining the United States”. But he goes on to argue that “Nothing in Russia’s understanding of its interests precludes close cooperation with the United States on a wide range of issues critical to American security and prosperity”.

² This sort of logic is frustrating. How can we build a Russian-American relationship based on “common threats” if Russia’s leaders see their primary threat as NATO, NATO expansion and American influence in the former-Soviet space? We doubt that Washington sees these phenomena as threats to its own security.

These sorts of assumptions about Russia’s national interests simply reproduce the Kremlin’s own interpretation. But Russian society sees its national interests in somewhat different terms. Opinion polling shows that Russians are interested in making their country more open to the outside world, creating the conditions for a more effective economy. They want to limit governmental abuse and corruption and create an

² Tomas Graham, op.cit.

independent judiciary. These preferences are also shared by the business and cultural elite, who understand that the Kremlin's authoritarian path is a dead end. And so we suggest that American experts clarify whose interests they have in mind when they speak of Russian national interests: those of Russia itself, or simply those of the current political regime.

American realists recommend that Obama “[respect] Russian sovereignty, history and traditions and [recognize] that Russian society will evolve at its own pace.”³ It is hard to object. But we hope that our American colleagues understand Russian “traditions” differently than the Kremlin propaganda machine, which has ever so subtly replaced “autocracy” with the term “sovereign democracy”. It is difficult to understand why they recommend that the Administration avoid talking with the Russian leadership about human rights and the obligations that Russia took upon itself when it joined the G8. Such recommendations only serve to reinforce notions, popular not only in Moscow, that many, granted not all, influential Washington “realists” are in fact simply lobbyists for the corrupted Russian elite.

We likewise have difficulty understanding the assertion that “if relations between the two countries were more extensive” – covering issues including disarmament, Iran, Afghanistan and others – then “mutual understanding and confidence would be greater.” If that is so, then why have attempts to “diversify” the relationship failed in the past?

We are convinced that the trust of which all of our American colleagues write will emerge only when there is closer alignment regarding how the two countries seek to structure their societies and states, and not from negotiations on disarmament or other foreign-policy agenda items. Moreover, we believe that such negotiations will be successful only if they are based on trust, which in turn stems from a shared worldview.

This, of course, is not to say that we are opposed to a strategic dialogue between America and Russia on security or trade. But we believe to be erroneous the notion that such dialogue in and of itself can form the basis for stable partnership between systems built on mutually exclusive principles. We favor a realistic view of reality, of which *Realpolitik* is devoid.

³ Ibid.

The American realists repeatedly quote the father of containment doctrine, George Kennan, who wrote at the dawn of the Cold War with respect to Russia, “The ways by which peoples advance toward dignity and enlightenment in government are things that constitute the deepest and most intimate processes of national life. There is nothing less understandable to foreigners, nothing in which foreign interference can do less good.” But if the authors believe that half a century later they remain unable to understand what is happening in Russia, or don’t even know whether the current Russian regime is advancing toward dignity and enlightenment, what can we say about the prospects for the programs that they propose to their own government?

The respected authors seem to be operating under the illusion that the changes of face in the Kremlin and the White House, and the appointment of “senior officials ... holding trust and confidence to oversee and manage the relationship” to act as presidential “point persons”, can somehow facilitate cooperation.⁴ Again, this is a fairly peculiar view of foreign policy, devoid of the context of its systemic and domestic roots.

The American experts make other statements that are surprising to hear from residents of a democratic society. Thus, they write that America should “establish a government-to-government dialogue on Russia’s neighborhood, with a view to developing confidence-building measures.”⁵ To clarify, this refers to a bilateral Russian-American dialogue on the fate of the Russia’s neighbors and, evidently, on the ways in which America and Russia may be allowed to influence this region. Is this not reminiscent of an attempt to return to the days of Yalta? If so, our American friends can forget about garnering any warm feelings in the former communist states of the region.

Reading the proposals of the American realists, it is hard to avoid the impression that they have somehow had a meeting of minds with Russia’s nationalists. To wit, Russian nationalists are at pains to prove that Ukraine is not and cannot be an independent state. And now, our American colleagues write, “Ukraine occupies a special place in Russian thought: it is the cradle of Russian civilization and an essential element

⁴ Thomas Pickering, Let’s Go to the Moon and Mars Together, The Moscow Times, August 8, 2008; Thomas Graham, op. cit;

⁵The Right Direction for U.S. Policy toward Russia,

of Russia's own national identity.”⁶ It is hard to distinguish this statement from that of Russian nationalist rhetoric.

Similarly questionable is their proposal to “Finlandize” Ukraine. The concept of ‘Finlandization’ (imposed international neutrality) arose in the midst of a standoff between two inimical military blocs, NATO and the Warsaw Pact. But if we are returning to the past, and NATO again will face off against the Organization for Collective Security or the Shanghai Treaty Organization, how can we talk about cooperation between America and Russia? The “Finlandization” of today’s Ukraine would mean condemning the country indefinitely to its current status quo, lacking in stable institutions and rent by unceasing political confrontation, turning the country into a constant source of instability. Such a scenario would be to the liking of those who support Russian authoritarianism, and probably no one else. Does Ukraine not have a say in its future?

Even if the Obama Administration were to take the advice of the American realists, we doubt that Russian-American relations would evolve into stable cooperation. We believe that the strategy of realism is a form of idealism, based on a belief in the power of personalities and the possibility of win-win deals with the Kremlin. It remains unclear why the Russian authorities would take part in the realization of America’s plans, if the Russian regime’s very survival and legitimacy are based on anti-Americanism and neo-imperialism. That is why the current Russian regime will always find common cause more easily with Iran, even more recently Venezuela, and other traditionalist regimes than with the United States. It is arm in arm with such political cousins that Moscow hopes to “contain” America. We are convinced that if the American side takes the realist approach, its efforts to improve relations with Moscow will lead only to more mutual disappointment and, possibly, to a new crisis in the relationship.

It is precisely this that we want to avoid. Sour relations with America always limit the space for liberalism within Russia. We start from the position that Russia dearly needs to expand all sorts of ties with the United States and the West as a whole. But such cooperation must not come at the price of America’s refusal to understand what is happening in Russia itself. More importantly, it must certainly not come at the price of political and moral opportunism, allowing Washington to turn a blind eye to the

⁶ Thomas Graham, *op. cit.*

fundamental nature of the Russian political system and to ‘repackage’ old concepts of tactical maneuvering as a new foreign-policy strategy.

We do agree with a number of the ideas proposed by the American writers. Thus, we welcome Strobe Talbott’s idea that the West “should create conditions that will, over time, convince the Russians that their post-Marxist, post-Soviet, Hobbesian experiment is, in fact, unrealistic. It simply won’t work.”⁷ But for some reason the majority of our American colleagues seek to make it easier for the Russian elite to remain ensconced inside their customary and psychologically comforting Hobbesian microcosm.

It may be that American experts have turned towards realism, having lost faith in Russia’s ability to liberalize and in their own ability to affect liberalization in Russia. Undoubtedly, the creation of an international environment that would favor Russian modernization is a long and difficult process. And, of course, they will be told that Russian modernization is a riddle for the Russians to solve. And that is true. Transforming Russia is our task. We recognize that this is a task at which Russia’s liberal forces are failing. But the task will be made that much more difficult if American experts will serve as the “conservators” of Russian authoritarian traditionalism. We are dealing with a system that condemns Russian society to degradation. What is more, by facilitating the preservation of the current Russian power structure, the policies of realism will only increase the chances of Russia’s eventual disintegration, which would have dramatic consequences for the world as a whole.

We are opposed to isolating Russia. Here we are of one mind with Kissinger and Schultz and other authoritative American voices. Relations with Russia in today’s world cannot be reduced to the false dichotomy of isolation or cooperation with (and, thus, enabling of) an authoritarian regime. The contemporary toolkit of international policy allows the West to construct a policy of cooperation with Russia that does not simultaneously exclude various forms of influence that would support the modernization of Russian society. The West need not limit itself to maintaining the position of Russia’s corrupt elite.

While supporting Senator John Kerry’s call for a new thinking on American-Russian relations, we nevertheless disagree with his thesis that “our attempts at more

⁷ Strobe Talbott, The Weizsacker Lecture , Berlin, February 9, 2009

constructive relations [with Russia] will fail if we condition them on resolving our differences first.” We believe that a new relationship between America and Russia is all the more doomed to failure if we leave to one side attempts to understand that which divides us. And because President Obama is seen around the world – including in Russian society – as heralding new ways of thinking, we expect that America will show us new ways of thinking in its understanding of Russia and in its relations with Russia.

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