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The Coming U.S.-Russian Train Wreck – Is Israel Caught in the Middle?

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- Russia is in the midst of two overlapping political games: the Duma and presidential election cycle of December 2007-March 2008, and a real power struggle between competing pro-Putin factions over the architecture of the next Russian regime. Every move the Putin Administration makes today is dictated by the desire to shape Russia's future internal power structure.
- For the last four years, the Kremlin has steadfastly allowed its once-close ties with Washington to decay. Keeping the relationship with Washington in a simmering crisis and inventing an imaginary "American enemy" is creating much needed legitimacy for the current Russian leadership.
- Many foreign policy initiatives undertaken by former presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin are often viewed today in Moscow as treasonous or at least as harmful to Russia's vital interests. Current Bush Administration policies, such as democracy promotion, are viewed as part of a sinister plot to undermine the Russian government through a series of "orange revolutions."
- The current elites define Russia's strategic goals as being in opposition to the United States and its policies; and in de-facto alliance with the Muslim world, particularly Iran and Syria, as well as with China. The Kremlin is reaching out to anti-status quo players such as Hugo Chavez, and is convinced that Russia is culturally distinct from "the West."
- The Moscow propaganda machine is only a step away from putting Israel on the "short list" of designated enemies. After all, the memory of fighting Zionism and promoting official anti-Semitism is fresh in the minds of the post-Soviet elites, and relations with the rich and fanatically anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli ayatollahs are cozy for many.

- Israel is located on the fault line between the secular West and the Muslim East. In addition to confrontation with the Palestinians, the wider Sunni Arab world, and the Iranians, Jerusalem's relationship with Moscow may deteriorate if Russia continues to treat Israel as an American satellite state.

The Failed U.S.-Russian Talks

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was in Moscow last week to convince President Vladimir Putin of the dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran. Putin's visit to Teheran was billed as a success by both the Russian and Iranian sides. The Russian president stressed dialogue and diplomacy with the ayatollahs' regime, and opposed a new round of UN Security Council sanctions promoted by the United States.

Olmert's task in Moscow, however, is almost insurmountable. Israel is seeking to exercise diplomatic influence on a Russia that is going through the beginning of an internal upheaval which makes it a far less cooperative partner on sensitive foreign policy issues, including the challenge of proliferation. When Secretary of State Rice and Secretary of Defense Gates visited Moscow on October 12-13, 2007, the U.S. discovered the same problem.

Russia today is in the midst of two overlapping political games: the Duma and presidential election cycle of December 2007-March 2008, and a real power struggle between competing pro-Putin factions over the architecture of the next Russian regime.¹

Every move the Putin Administration makes is dictated by the desire to shape Russia's future internal power structure and to set the course for the country's foreign and security affairs in general, and its relationship with the United States in particular.

Even before the U.S.-Russian talks started, President Putin made Rice and Gates wait for him for 40 minutes – a deliberate diplomatic slight. Greeting the two senior U.S. cabinet members, Putin made a mockery of the U.S. missile defense plan, saying that the U.S. may one day put such an ABM system on the Moon. He came out adamantly against U.S. deployment of the European component of the global ballistic missile defense. "The one thing on which I would like to focus attention is that in the process of these difficult negotiations we hope that you will not force through previous agreements with eastern European countries," the ITAR-TASS news agency quoted him as telling Rice and Gates. Putin has threatened to pull Russia out of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty which was signed by Reagan and Gorbachev in 1987, eliminating the Russian SS-20 missiles and U.S. Pershing-2 missiles deployed in Europe. Russia is also threatening to pull out of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty which limits its military posture from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

Keeping the relationship with Washington in a simmering crisis and inventing an imaginary “American enemy” is creating much needed legitimacy for the current Russian leadership, which now has only Putin’s personal popularity as its political base.

The image of Russia surrounded by enemies is absolutely necessary for today’s Russian ruling class, composed of senior secret police officers, as it positions itself in the eyes of the people as the saviors and defenders of Mother Russia. This approach has venerable roots in Russian history, harking back to the Romanov police state of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then, the monarchy busily promoted the fight against “the enemies within,” including the Jews, and “the enemies without,” such as the British Empire, the superpower of the day. This was done in order to delay democratic reforms and justify the outrageous privileges of the nobility and the court.

One hundred years later, little has changed. Senator Dick Lugar (R-IN), the well-respected former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has warned that time may be running out for the two nuclear powers to put their diplomatic house in order: “This visit provides the last best opportunity to lay the foundation for bold initiatives and to seize the high ground by establishing a legacy for Presidents Bush and Putin. I strongly recommend that the Secretaries and their Russian counterparts introduce a new package of initiatives. These initiatives relate to three bold security challenges: (1) nonproliferation and nuclear energy partnership; (2) progress in arms control; and (3) missile defense cooperation.”²

Unfortunately, Lugar’s pragmatic rationalism may not be heeded in Moscow. For the last four years, the Kremlin has steadfastly allowed its once-close ties with Washington to decay. Putin set the tone in a February 2007 Munich speech, which at times eerily resembled a mirror image of Winston Churchill’s Fulton, Missouri, 1946 Cold War oratory.³

The Roots of Russian Foreign Policy

Moscow’s chilling rhetoric has quickly acquired specific military target sets. Before the June 2007 G-8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany, Putin issued an unprecedented threat to retarget Russia’s nuclear missiles at Europe in response to U.S. plans to deploy elements of its global missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic. In doing so, Putin was returning to the Soviet strategic posture that predated the efforts of American President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to finally end the Cold War.

At the St. Petersburg Economic Summit in June 2007, Putin suddenly called for revising the global economic architecture, including the World Trade Organization (WTO). This unprecedented and dangerous initiative reflects the current anti-status quo mindset in Moscow.

The old Soviet obsession – that Russia’s fate, its cosmic goal, is to fight “American imperialism” – remains undiluted, even fifteen years after the collapse of communism, a tragic position for Russia, Europe, and the rest of the world.

Russia's foreign strategy is driven by military and security elites who view their country as the direct heir to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and understand its role as America's principal counterbalance on the world scene. There was no significant changing of the guard in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union when it comes to Russia's foreign and defense policy-makers, in sharp contrast to the turnover that occurred in the fields of business and economics.

To a great degree, contemporary Russian rhetoric has come full circle and resembles that which permeated the Soviet agenda before former president Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) began to transform the USSR. In fact, many foreign policy initiatives undertaken by Gorbachev and Russian President Boris Yeltsin – such as ending the occupation of Eastern Europe, signing the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) arms control treaty and the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, recognizing the former Soviet republics as independent states, and acquiescing to NATO enlargement – are often viewed today in Moscow as treasonous or at least as harmful to Russia's vital interests. Current Bush Administration policies, such as democracy promotion, are viewed as part of a sinister plot to undermine the Russian government through a series of “orange revolutions.”

Despite the fact that tens of thousands of Russians have been killed by Muslim extremists in Afghanistan and in Chechnya, as well as in terror attacks in Russia's cities, the U.S. remains Russia's obsession, its “principal adversary.”

The current elites define Russia's strategic goals as being in opposition to the United States and its policies; and in de-facto alliance with the Muslim world, particularly Iran and Syria, as well as with China. The Kremlin is reaching out to anti-status quo players such as Hugo Chavez, and is convinced that Russia is culturally distinct from “the West.”

Missile Defense, Proliferation, Treaties

On the table in Moscow were a number of vital security issues. According to Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Daniel Fried, Russian and U.S. experts have met twice to discuss the post-START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) regime which must be in place by 2009, when the current START Treaty expires. Russia wants to make the post-START regime, which will limit the number of deliverable strategic nuclear weapons on each side to a 1,700-2,200 ceiling, a binding international treaty. The U.S. for a while exhibited reluctance to commit through treaties and preferred a political memorandum instead. The Russians, not trusting the U.S. enough to go this route, have refused.

The U.S. and Russia are also stuck on the major issue of the Conventional Forces Europe (CFE) Treaty. The agreement as it currently stands freezes the numbers of Russian forces and equipment along the Baltic borders, in Belarus, and on the Russian-Polish border in the Kaliningrad exclave. The CFE Treaty also limits the numbers of Russian forces deployed in

the permanently simmering North Caucasus. Russia claims that the Western parties to the CFE Treaty neither ratified it nor abide by it, and, as a result, Russia wants to renounce the treaty. It has set a deadline – December 12 – for withdrawal.⁴

A massive stumbling block is also the central Europe-based U.S. anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense, primarily intended to intercept possible future Iranian missiles. A senior Russian official in charge of defense and military technology told the author that the U.S. will install the Czech Republic-based radar to spy on Russian territory to the Urals. This same official does not believe Iran will ever develop nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). However, he recognized that Iran may be only 18 months away from producing enough fissile material to arm an atomic bomb. Thus, as Iran already possesses medium-range missiles capable of hitting parts of Europe and all of the Middle East, the deployment in Poland and the Czech Republic makes a lot of sense. Paradoxically, the Russian intent to modify the INF Treaty has to do with recognition that Iran may obtain intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) capable of reaching the majority of Russian cities, and could arm them with nuclear warheads. This would require Moscow to recreate an IRBM arsenal to maintain a balance of power with Teheran.

Putin has proposed substituting an old Russian radar tracking station in Gabala, Azerbaijan, and a modern one in Armavir in southern Russia for the Polish and Czech ABM systems. These offers may be accepted by the U.S., provided central European deployment is still on the table. But Moscow will most likely reject that deployment.

Again, Senator Lugar, quoting Henry Kissinger, was optimistic:

Concerns over the impact of a limited, regional missile defense system in central Europe directed at rogue states can evolve into productive discussions over a more global approach to defenses against nuclear attacks. Henry Kissinger has suggested that President Putin's initiative to link NATO and Russian warning systems was one of those initiatives easy to disparage on technical grounds but also one that allows us to "imagine a genuinely global approach to the specter of nuclear proliferation, which has until now been treated largely through national policies. If the countries involved link their strategies on the nonproliferation issue, a new framework for a host of other issues will come about."

President Putin's proposal is not a new concept. In fact, it is surprisingly similar to the strategic vision that Ronald Reagan laid out more than two decades ago... While the utilization of former Soviet radar stations may or may not assist in tracking missiles fired from rogue states, sharing information gathered by U.S. and NATO systems with Russia, and possibly linking radar and early warning systems, would be useful in ensuring transparency and reaffirming our cooperative approach.

The U.S. and Russia should also consider the establishment of jointly manned radar facilities and exchanges of early-warning data. They might also consider

joint threat assessments as well as undertaking bilateral discussions on options for missile defense cooperation. Lastly, we might consider placing Russian liaison officers at U.S. missile defense tracking sites in exchange for U.S. officers in Russian strategic command centers. The transparency gained from such steps would be useful in offering reassurances that these radars are not meant for spying on Russia.⁵

However, Senator Lugar may have missed the explicit lack of Russian trust of American intentions at the highest level; the absence of a desire to work together with the Americans; and a wealth of accumulated disappointment in Washington with Russia's domestic and foreign policies.

Finally, a contentious issue is Western demands for the independence of Kosovo, where Russia is supporting its historic allies the Serbs and opposing independence for the Muslim Albanians. Kosovo, a province of Serbia, has been under UN-NATO administration since 1999, when a 78-day NATO-led air campaign stopped the Serbian atrocities against ethnic Albanians. Russia sided with the Serbs to oppose any immediate independence for Kosovo.

Russia is also using Kosovo to assert its primacy on the international stage. Most recently, Russia threatened to veto and rejected a draft UN resolution – supported by the U.S., the EU and the ethnic Albanians and opposed by most Serbs – that, if adopted, would give Kosovo supervised independence and extensive self-government.⁶

Russia may have at least some rational justifications for its intransigence. Moscow does not want the UN to recognize a new country created by separatists after a NATO military operation which was not endorsed by the UN to begin with. It also resents the imposition of border changes in post-World War II Europe against Russia's clearly stated position. Nor does it want to see a former Muslim autonomy (Kosovo) tearing apart its mother country (Serbia), while the international community recognizes the resulting border changes. Parallels to Russia's own autonomous entities, especially in the North Caucasus where Chechens are fighting for independence with increasingly radical Islamist overtones, may be too close for comfort.

As a retaliatory measure, Moscow has threatened to apply the precedent of Kosovo independence to justify recognizing the independence of Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia – Moscow-supported secessionist statelets seeking to undermine the sovereignty of Moldova and Georgia, respectively. This recognition could perpetuate conflicts in the Caucasus for decades to come.

But in the unlikely case that Kosovo is resolved to Russia's liking, the Kremlin may well cast about for a new flashpoint. It could be the Arctic Ocean, where it has launched a territorial claim to an area five times larger than Europe. Or Ukraine. Or Georgia.

The current Russian elite feels more comfortable in confrontation with the U.S. than in peace. "The U.S. is not a friend. It is more like an enemy," a senior Russian politician recently told me. Russian leaders say they believe that the U.S. and the UK are behind

every evil in the world, from supporting Chechens Islamists to the mysterious poisoning of former security services defector Alexander Litvinenko in London with a rare radioactive isotope. Today, unfortunately, it is Moscow which is often behaving in an unfriendly manner.

The Moscow propaganda machine is only a step away from putting Israel on the “short list” of designated enemies. After all, the memory of fighting Zionism and promoting official anti-Semitism is fresh in the minds of the post-Soviet elites, and relations with the rich and fanatically anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli ayatollahs are cozy for many.

Conclusions

My recent participation in a four-hour discussion with President Putin in Sochi as part of the Valday Club annual meeting made me more pessimistic than ever as to whether U.S.-Russian relations can be mended. “What can be done to move relations between Russia and the U.S. away from hysterical rhetoric and back to a pragmatic discussion of disagreements?” I asked the Russian leader. “Just recognize that our position is just,” was the answer.

At another meeting, a well-known Russian foreign policy hand asked how American Jewish organizations view Moscow’s increasing arms sales to Iran and Syria. “Very negatively,” I replied. “Do they understand that this is only...” “What?” I interrupted, “Nothing personal? Only business?” “Exactly,” he responded, apparently oblivious to the Godfather cultural reference.

Arms sales are but one item in Moscow’s full array of modern international relations tools: from public diplomacy, to weapons sales backed up by the ample credit lines of an energy superpower; from putting former and possibly current political leaders on the petrodollar payroll, to strategic information operations (SIOs) aimed at depicting America as an out-of-control hyper-power and a threat to the international community, to coddling terrorist organizations. In the words of one incisive observer, “Russia has left the West.”

The United States should take steps to send Russia a message that it will not be bullied, and it will robustly defend its vital national security interests. The U.S. should clarify that it would prefer seeing Russia as an ally, but will not shrink from a confrontation if Moscow imposes one.

There are a number of important steps Washington needs to take. First, the U.S. should geographically diversify its sources of energy. It should take steps to diminish dependence on oil by boosting alternative sources of liquid transportation fuels. These include oil sands and shale from North America, sugar cane ethanol, and other competitive fuels.

Second, the U.S. should maintain its dominant position in the Persian Gulf while bolstering relations with pro-Western regimes there. The U.S. should cooperatively enhance the security of the Arab oil-producing states in the Gulf against both Iran and *jihadi* extremists.

Third, the U.S. should build bridges to potential Russian allies to prevent the emergence of anti-American blocs, expanding to the former Soviet Union states of Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Armenia.

Fourth, the U.S. should create a global coalition of energy consumers to oppose oil and gas cartels and to apply market principles to the natural gas industry.

Fifth, the U.S. should continue dialogue and cooperation with Russia to demonstrate to the Russian elites that the United States has much to offer Russia – in health care, business and economic relations, science, and education.

Finally, the U.S. must reach over the heads of the Russian leadership to the people of Russia through a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy via the Internet, international broadcasters, visitor programs, and exchanges, to debunk the myth that the U.S. is hostile to Russia. The U.S. may reach out to the Russian-language talent which is currently available in Israel to get help in broadcasting and communications.

History and geography have condemned Israel to live on the frontlines. Israel is located on the fault line between the secular West and the Muslim East. In addition to confrontation with the Palestinians, the wider Sunni Arab world, and the Iranians, Jerusalem's relationship with Moscow may deteriorate if Russia continues to treat Israel as an American satellite state. If things go wrong, Russia may amplify existing threats to Israeli security. However, if Israel devises and practices a foreign policy that serves Israeli national interests and relies on Israel's ample security and defense capabilities, the survival of the country and the people can be ensured for the long term.

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Notes

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