

foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center
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U.S.-Russian Relations: Avoiding a Cold Peace

The end of the cold war left U.S.-Russian relations in a state of volatile ambiguity. Once implacable enemies, the two countries had to quickly work out new principles upon which to base their relationship. The result has been a tragicomedy of tepid cooperation, mild saber-rattling, and missed opportunities.

After the demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Bush administration immediately reached out to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, promising aid, encouraging liberal economic and political reforms, and negotiating new security arrangements. During this honeymoon period from 1992 to mid-1993, a group of “Atlanticists” under the leadership of Foreign Minister

Key Points

- The Russian military is a shadow of its former self.
- After initially accepting U.S. dictates, Russia has begun to define its own national interests.
- The Clinton administration has attempted to lock Russia into second-class status.

Andrei Kozyrev steered Russia toward accommodation and cooperation with the West. Russia followed U.S. policy on high-technology transfers (cancelling several lucrative deals that the U.S. opposed), accepted a junior role in resolving the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, and acceded to stringent economic requirements in order to receive foreign aid.

At the same time, Russia radically altered its cold war security structure. It completed an extraordinary withdrawal from Europe and most of the former Soviet republics. Arms control treaties reduced Russia’s nuclear component by 25-50 percent from Soviet levels and cut conventional forces by 50 percent. The Russian military budget, once comparable to that of the U.S., now stands at 10 percent of Soviet levels in the late 1980s.

But Russia’s accommodation to Western interests has not earned the country expected aid and investment flows, a stable economy, or a full-fledged place at the international table. Instead, it has brought aggressive Western encroachment on its markets, its security perimeters, and its internal political and economic affairs. Increasingly, Russians across the political spectrum have gravitated toward a more pragmatic “Russia First” position that asserts Russian interests in its own sphere of influence and a more demonstrative role in

the international realm.

To reflect this new consensus, the Russian government revised its Gorbachev-era military doctrine in November 1993, reneging on its policy of no-first-use of nuclear weapons (after protracted U.S. failure to reciprocate) and prioritizing the protection of the rights of ethnic Russians in neighboring states. Invoking the cause of federal unity, Russia invaded the southern territory of Chechnya in December 1994, killing thousands of civilians, spreading disinformation through the media, violating human rights on a vast scale and revealing the deteriorating state of its own military. Yevgeny Primakov has replaced Andrei Kozyrev as foreign minister, and the “Atlanticist” tendency has been largely discredited. For the past three years, U.S.-Russian relations have cooled considerably and the two countries have sparred over NATO expansion, arms control negotiations, and policy toward the former Yugoslavia.

Despite the ups and downs of U.S.-Russian relations, the Clinton administration has continued to tout Yeltsin as Russia’s best hope for reform. Clinton, along with European leaders such as Helmut Kohl, supported the Yeltsin camp in both the 1995 parliamentary and 1996 presidential elections. Washington has also scaled down its criticisms of Russia’s human rights record—in Chechnya, in Moldova—for fear of undermining Yeltsin’s domestic support.

Conservative critics of the Clinton policy have advised capitalizing on Russia’s weakness. Senator Richard Lugar, for instance, has argued for a “tough rivalry” instead of a partnership; former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski has advocated balancing Russian power through strategic support of other countries in the region, such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

U.S. policy toward Russia thus wavers between two poles—misguided engagement and irresponsible containment—embracing elements of both.

The Clinton administration has mishandled policy toward the drifting Russian superpower. It has linked reform too exclusively to the political fortunes of the increasingly dictatorial and seriously ill Boris Yeltsin, has supported a string of untenable economic policies, missed several unprecedented opportunities for arms control and disarmament, and implicitly endorsed a powersharing arrangement that allows Russia virtually free rein in its shrunken sphere of influence.

The Clinton administration has bent over backwards to portray Boris Yeltsin as a bulwark against communism and nationalism. This policy of focusing support on Yeltsin has several defects. When the Russian president has strayed from the democratic paths—in the 1993 storming of the parliament and in his repeated reliance on decrees—the Clinton administration has been trapped into overt or implicit support of authoritarian policies. The administration encouraged Yeltsin when he concentrated power in the presidential apparatus through a new Russian constitution. And the U.S. certified as democratic the 1996 presidential elections in which the Yeltsin camp blatantly manipulated the media and used state funds—as much as \$11 billion, according to one estimate—to influence the electorate. Because the Clinton administration has forgiven Yeltsin all his sins, the Russian president has felt confident that he won't risk U.S. censure when straying from the democratic path.

In the economic realm, Washington has promised a lot and delivered a lot less. The U.S. pledged \$24 billion in 1992 and \$28 billion in 1993, much of which was never delivered. What did arrive, moreover, has flowed largely into private sector development (the "Enterprise Funds") and has thus ended up in the pockets of the well-connected or, because of large-scale capital flight, in overseas bank accounts (in Russia, privatization is nicknamed *prikhvatizatsiya*—grabbing—because it amounts to little more than state-sanctioned robbery).

Through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and the Export-Import Bank, the administration has focused on helping U.S. businesses extract Russian resources such as oil, natural gas, diamonds, and gold. This brand of structural adjustment profits U.S. businesses and their Russian corporate partners but does little to rebuild Russia's productive capacity or provide jobs for the growing number of Russian unemployed (see *In Focus: Restructuring Eastern European Economies*).

Washington has also advocated free trade policies that seek to eliminate barriers to U.S. imports. Russia has rapidly opened up to the West—imports grew from 14 to 39 percent of retail trade from 1990 to 1994. With few markets in the West or the East and a declining share of the domestic market, Russian industries have suffered a precipitous decline.

The Russian standard of living has also fallen dramatically. The divide between rich and poor has widened, the social safety net cannot provide for the increasing numbers of poor and sick, life expectancy has declined alarmingly, and the U.S. (because it champions these "liberal" trade reforms) has become associated with painful austerity and inequitable economic change.

On foreign policy issues, the Clinton administration has implicitly endorsed two separate spheres of influence. It has pursued its own foreign policy initiatives (bombing Iraq, implementing the Dayton Accords) without paying much attention to Russian objections. On the other hand, it has downplayed criticism of Russian conduct in Chechnya and has largely uncritically accepted Russian "peacekeeping" operations in Tajikistan, Moldova, Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Nor has Washington facilitated Russia's entrance into the decision making apparatus of key international organizations such as the G-7 (the seven largest economic powers) and the International Monetary Fund. The division of the world into spheres of influence—where power supercedes principle—undercuts commitments to human rights or non-intervention. The treatment of Russia as a "junior partner" has only encouraged the growth of a politics of resentment in Russia that in turn feeds various political extremisms.

But perhaps the greatest failure of Clinton's Russia policy lies in the realm of arms control and disarmament. The Clinton administration delayed pushing START II through Congress. At the Moscow Summit in April 1996, nuclear arms control wasn't on the agenda. If START II—which mandates steep reductions in the respective nuclear arsenals—had been ratified earlier by the U.S. Senate, this strong signal of U.S. commitment to the disarmament process would have prodded the Russian Duma toward an earlier ratification.

Key Problems

- The Clinton administration has tied itself too closely with the increasingly authoritarian Yeltsin government.
- The U.S. has not capitalized on several excellent disarmament opportunities.
- The U.S. has promoted economic and political policies that have devastated Russian society.

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Although the United States and Russia have descended into a period of mutual wariness, the relationship has by no means completely soured. The U.S. government can take several pragmatic steps to build trust: re-energizing the arms control process, helping anchor Russia firmly in both regional and international security mechanisms, and assisting in rebuilding Russia's economy. The U.S. must also criticize Russian policies that violate human rights and the peace and security of the region.

On the arms control and disarmament front, the U.S. should not only ratify START II, but also increase aid to the Strategic Offensive Arms Elimination program so that Russia can implement a treaty that may cost it as much as \$7.5 billion (the Department of Defense has so far offered only \$160 million). The U.S. should not strengthen the anti-arms control lobby in Russia by first

demanding reductions and then refusing to help pay for the destruction of the weapons. If and when START II comes into effect, the U.S. should match future arms reductions that Russia is forced to make for economic reasons. Such a policy of mutual unilateral initiatives—modeled on the removal of tactical weapons from Europe in 1991— would save time and money, and build considerable trust.

Key Recommendations

- Provide the aid necessary to enable Russia to sign SALT II and comply with its provisions.
- Engage Russia on global issues.
- Support sustainable economic development.
- Promote political pluralism and civil society.

The U.S. should also:

- Stop threatening to build an antiballistic missile system (abrogating the ABM Treaty).
- Stop the Energy Department from designing new nuclear weapons (undermining the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty).
- Allow Russia to change its flank limits under the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty.
- Work closely with Russia on measures to decrease global arms transfers (Russian arms exports rose from 4 percent to 17 percent in 1995; U.S. arms exports remained on top at 43 percent).
- Back away from its pledge to expand NATO.

The Clinton administration should engage Russia on global issues not as a junior partner but as a Eurasian power. One example would be to encourage Russia's participation in the four-power talks on the fate of the Korean peninsula.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has developed detailed proposals on peacemaking, confidence building, and normalizing relations among all the participants in the process. By "internationalizing" Russia on the basis of consistent principles of human rights and nonaggression, the U.S. would avoid a division into spheres of influence and preserve the capacity to challenge Russia on human rights violations (in Chechnya, for example).

In the economic realm, the U.S. should stop pouring money into the black hole of Russian privatization. It should target the revitalization of Russian industry and allow Russia to nurture these industries, where necessary, with sensible trade policies.

The Defense Demilitarization Enterprise Fund is a critical tool for helping convert Russia's military industries into productive enterprises. Like OPIC, however, these funds should concentrate less on profits for U.S. businesses and consultants and more on rebuilding Russia's industrial capacity.

Particular attention should be paid to defense conversion at the local and regional levels. But the U.S. must seriously undertake a program of conversion at home, or Russian demilitarization will appear unfairly unilateral.

Additionally, the Clinton administration must not base its support for Russian reform on a single political actor—the Yeltsin camp. The U.S. should adhere to principles, not parties, in its dealings with other countries.

Washington has supported several excellent projects that strengthen Russia's civil society, such as funding Internews independent television and training an independent judiciary. By putting more money into these projects, the U.S. can better promote a pluralist politics that will long outlive Boris Yeltsin.

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